THE DISSIDENT CROSS:

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND POLITICAL CONFRONTATION IN CUBA

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THE DISSIDENT CROSS:
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Abstract

by

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A great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on the role of the Catholic Church in leading the fight against authoritarianism in Latin America and elsewhere. However, there has been relatively less attention paid to how confrontational church strategies have changed over time. Focusing on the contemporary case of the Cuban Catholic Church, I use evidence gathered from extensive fieldwork in Cuba to create a new set of definitions that distinguishes between strategies of direct and indirect confrontation, and in so doing offer a new framework for comparative theory about religion and contentious politics.

I build a new paradigm for comparing confrontational church strategies by articulating new definitions and offering a theory about what conditions and factors lead to the adoption of certain confrontational strategies. Placing the Cuban Church in comparative analysis with the national churches of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Poland, and Venezuela, I argue that a combination of regime type, institutional church reforms, and the world-historical time period during which the church began
its contentious activities have a direct influence on the church’s choice of confrontational strategy.

This dissertation constitutes a comprehensive examination of the Cuban Catholic Church based on original research conducted in Cuba, a case for which few political scientists have devoted rigorous academic attention, especially for comparative study. The arguments and evidence presented here demonstrate not only the importance of the institutional independence of the Cuban Catholic Church and its innovative confrontational strategy for the development of dissident movements in Cuba, but how vital the church and its laity will be in the building of democratic institutions and a democratic political culture should Cuba transition toward democracy in the near future.
For Grandma

For Mom, Dad, and Lauren

For Osvaldo, Yoelxy, Erick, Darren, Maraya,

Christine, Anthony, Fred, and David

For all my family and friends

Para mi ahijado, Gabriel Alejandro
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACYC: La Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba (Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba)

CEBs: Comunidades Eclesial de Base (Ecclesial Base Communities)

CELAM: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Latin American Episcopal Conference)

C OCC: Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Cuba (Conference of Cuban Catholic Bishops)

DESR: Departamento de Estudios Socio-Religiosos (Department of Socio-Religious Studies)

ENEC: Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano (Cuban National Ecclesial Conference)

MCD: Movimiento Cristiano Demócrato (Christian Democratic Movement)

MLC: Movimiento de Liberación Cristiana (Christian Liberation Movement)

OUA: Organización de Unidad Abakuá (United Abakuá Organization)

PCC: Partido Comunista de Cuba (Cuban Communist Party)

PIC: Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color)

REC: Reflexión Eclesial Cubana (Cuban Ecclesial Reflection)
CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

“Don’t be afraid to open your hearts to Christ, let Him enter into your lives, into your families, into your society, so that all of this can be renovated.”


Every church and diocese in Havana is strewn with photos, posters, and other references to Pope John Paul II’s 1998 visit to Cuba. Often these posters include short printed quotes from the sermons he delivered during his 5-day stay in Cuba, like one that adorns a wall in the Office of the Canciller of the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Havana: “No tengais miedo!” (“Don’t be afraid!”). These messages, inspirationally recalling a glorious week in the history of the Cuban Catholic Church when if only for a brief moment Catholicism and Cuban national identity seemed indistinguishable, are meant to validate the mission currently undertaken by Cuban church officials – the one that originally persuaded the Vatican to arrange a papal visit to Cuba, the one that now makes the Catholic Church the institutional foundation and primary symbol of contentious collective action on the island. The lasting sentiment is one of defiance, of a church that has come out from the shadows to assert
itself in a society that once outcasted its believers and to confront a government that once persecuted its leaders – of a church no longer afraid.

Around the globe, religious institutions and religiously based social movements often mobilize opponents of authoritarian regimes. At times these movements may precipitate transitions to democracy, and at others, transitions to a different authoritarian regime. What accounts for when they are successful in mobilizing opponents, and what predictions can we generate about the impact of religiously-based contention on politics and society in transitional settings? This dissertation takes up these questions in a study of religion and politics in Cuba. Specifically, it asks three questions: What factors propelled the Cuban Catholic Church into its current position as the institutional foundation and primary symbol of contentious collective action in Cuban society? How does the Cuban Church interact with the Cuban government and dissident social movements while protecting its own interests? What does the repositioning of the Cuban Church’s social space and its elevated political importance signify for the future of Cuban politics?

A great deal of scholarly attention has focused on the role of the Catholic Church in leading the fight against authoritarianism and communism in many Latin American and Eastern European countries, a direction that in Latin America at least prompted these churches to leave their traditional, conservative roles behind and move in a more politically progressive direction. In Latin America today, while most national churches find themselves dealing primarily with challenges associated with
democracy, pluralism, and the secularization of culture, some still face the challenge of confronting authoritarian regimes. While scholars have debated the factors that led some national churches to move into opposition while others remained loyal to authoritarian states, there has been relatively less attention paid to (1) the timing of this shift, (2) its extent – that is, how far are churches willing to go in engaging in contentious politics – and (3) the range of possible consequences that follow from different patterns of religiously based contention and mobilization.

By focusing on the contemporary case of the Cuban Catholic Church, a church that took a very long time to become confrontational but that now stands at the forefront of political contention and civil organization in the only communist country in Latin America, I raise a series of questions and propose a theoretical framework that may shed light on contentious churches and transition politics more broadly. The Cuban case offers an opportunity to ask a new set of questions: I ask what particular challenges face the Catholic Church when dealing with authoritarian regimes that make confrontation more or less likely, what social and political conditions cause a church to change or adapt its strategies of contention – the strategies by which a church may preserve its corporate interests while behaving confrontationally – and what difference it makes for the church, for civil society, and for the democratization process if the church plays a role in opposing a dictatorship. This project analyzes the fundamental causes that have driven the Cuban Catholic Church into a contentious relationship with the Cuban government, the nature of the interactions between the church, the government, and civil society, and the potential influence of
religion and religious institutions in the future development of Cuban politics. To
analyze the factors that influence a church’s strategy of confrontation, I also place the
Cuban Catholic Church in comparative perspective with other churches that have
confronted authoritarian regimes. This analysis facilitates not only a better
understanding of the Cuban Catholic Church but of how and why church-based
contention has changed from the initial experiences of contentious church action
following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

1.1 The Arguments

I make five main arguments. First, I argue that a political opportunity opened
in the early 1990s that allowed the Cuban Catholic Church to adopt a confrontational
posture in a favorable environment. The causes of this development can be traced to
the structural reconfiguration of both Cuba’s international position and its domestic
political environment, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and
extended through the revolutionary regime’s worst economic crisis during the 1990s.
The Cuban Catholic Church strongly condemned the course taken by the new
revolutionary regime from 1959-1962, and was subsequently marginalized by the
regime while suffering severe losses to its clergy, its faithful on the island, and its
institutional resources. Though Cuban church leaders harbored a contentious
sentiment toward the revolutionary government since its inception, it was not until the
regime found itself in a weakened position 30 years later that church leaders chose to
act confrontationally. By choosing to act contentiously in favorable environments,
the Cuban Church has displayed a cautious approach to contention, its strategy varying with corresponding changes to the prevailing political environment.

Second, the Cuban Catholic Church has created a social doctrine that emphasizes the individual to counter the collective-oriented national ideology of the state. Forming a religio-cultural meaning system that I term Christian individualism, the Cuban Church has been forming their laity in a democratic political culture and has established a cultural connection with dissident reformers while positioning itself in opposition to the nationalist social project of the Revolution. Church leaders are teaching their laity to think of themselves as autonomous beings, their dignity bestowed by God, and charged with a Christian social duty to act in defense of themselves, their families, and their society. The Cuban Church’s political culture offers a stark alternative to the official state ideology, in which social and political unity in defense of the Revolution is prioritized over the interests and ambitions of the individual.

Thirdly, I argue that the Cuban Church’s politically contentious strategy can be characterized as one of indirect confrontation. Cuban church leaders have sought to create a strategy that simultaneously serves its corporate, moral, and political interests. Though offering broad solidarity with dissident activists, the Cuban Church has not explicitly aligned itself with any dissident group that might put its institutional integrity in danger. Rather, it recognizes with solidarity the overall aims of the dissidents, such as peaceful political reform and a broader extension of human
rights. Furthermore, while maintaining this distance from dissident social movements, church leaders do not directly criticize the Cuban government, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), or iconic political figures like Fidel and Raul Castro. Instead, certain features of authoritarian rule are criticized, including the lack of political pluralism, the state-controlled economy that eliminates private property, and the absence of a nongovernmental civil society. Cuban church leaders are promoting a democratic political culture within their temples without calling for the outright downfall of the government. Yet, they call on their laity to stay active in the political life of the nation. In this way the Cuban Church is outsourcing dissidence to laypersons that are called upon to act as part of their Christian social duty. This strategy is meant to insulate the church from charges that it is conspiring against the Cuban government. By choosing to indirectly confront the state, it is promoting a Christian morality, mobilizing its faithful to engage in political activities, and protecting its institutional integrity.

I conceptualize indirect confrontation as a comprehensive political strategy that can be defined across a series of actions and positions that rests on how the leaders of a religious organization behave toward (a) the regime and (b) the primary social opposition. The Cuban Church is not, of course, the first church to challenge an authoritarian regime. In a separate chapter I place the Cuban Catholic Church in comparative perspective with other churches that have confronted authoritarian regimes. I examine the cases of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Poland, and Venezuela to illustrate my arguments about churches and contention under authoritarian regimes of
the left and right given certain conditions of competition and the church’s relationship with the primary social opposition. After determining the church’s strategy toward the regime in each of my cases, I make my fourth argument, that a combination of regime type and the world-historical time period during which the church began its contentious activities have a direct influence on the church’s choice of confrontational strategy. Churches that became confrontational under right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s would be more likely to pursue strategies of direct confrontation than churches facing leftist authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, which were more likely to pursue strategies of indirect confrontation. This is so because the influence of the Second Vatican Council and the rise of liberation theology, a leftist ideology, led many national churches into directly confrontational relationships with right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s. The Vatican’s turn toward more conservative politics under the papacy of John Paul II did not eliminate contentious relationships between church and state, but it did lead churches to pursue strategies closer to indirect confrontation, especially against leftist authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finally, I argue that political mobilization along religious lines in Cuba could further polarize race relations. Catholicism and Santería are the two religious systems that have the largest numbers of followers and the most prominent roles in Cuban culture and society. Historically, Catholic identity has been tied almost exclusively to white or Hispano-Cubans, while the popular support of Santería lies in the black or Afro-Cuban community. Yet, practicing Catholics remain a distinct minority in
Cuban society, overwhelmingly outnumbered by non-believers and followers of Santería and other religions. The Cuban Church refuses to recognize Santería as a religion, a stance that has increased animosity toward the church not only amongst followers of Santería but the great majority of Cubans who although non-practicing consider the orishas (the deities of Santería) as integral components of the spiritual identity of the nation. Cuba is unique amongst the Latin American countries that were colonized by the Spanish or Portuguese as the one country where the largest religious competitor to Catholicism is a polytheist, nonhierarchical religious system of African origin rather than an evangelical or protestant denomination of Christianity. Mobilizing dissident activity around Catholicism at once acknowledges the racial divide and may serve to deepen it between anti-government and pro- or neutral- government social forces, an unintended consequence of church strategy with alarming portents for the future of Cuban politics.

A church that responds to changing opportunity structures and carefully chooses its methods of confrontation can be characterized as a strategically oppositional institution. The Cuban Catholic Church has become an innovator in church strategy in a region where the once hegemonic social influence of the Catholic Church has eroded significantly. It operates rationally through the rubric of contention, going as far as the prevailing political climate will allow without risking government encroachment. Cuban church leaders have demonstrated a willingness to respond to changes in the domestic political climate as well as international forces that have impacted events on the island, by both intensifying their contentious
behavior at opportune moments and moderating such behavior when the government exerts more control over social activities.

In an authoritarian environment with high risks for acting confrontationally, the Cuban Catholic Church has acted as an intermediary between changing social conditions and social movement formation, using its contentious actions and institutional autonomy to inspire social mobilization. In Cuba, the emergence of religiously-oriented dissident organizations resulted from a top-down process that began with the church response to the new environment. In effect, the church responses to the political opportunity structure facilitated the formation and mobilization of Christian social movements, formed within a broader institutional movement led by the church.

Acting cautiously within the realm of contentious politics to protect its interests is behaviorally consistent with the church first reacting contentiously in a politically opportune time. The overall aim of the Cuban Church has been to formulate a strategy that collectively serves its corporate, moral, and political interests, rather than allowing disparate concerns to pull church strategies in different directions. It has become symbolically associated with many dissident movements and assisted their activities but has not explicitly aligned itself with or endorsed a specific organization, demonstrating that the church’s institutional interests will supersede its willingness to assist political movements.
1.2 Methodology and Fieldwork Description

This project is structured as an in-depth study of religion and politics in Cuba, with a focus on the Cuban Catholic Church and its role not only as a religious institution but as a political actor in Cuban society. The Cuban Catholic Church is treated as a corporate institution that operates with respect to the opportunities and constraints of the historical, cultural, and political context that surrounds it. Threatened with obsoletion by the dominant political and social ideology throughout the history of the Cuban revolution, Cuban church leaders have formulated an individualist social doctrine that challenges the collective-oriented official ideology and have capitalized on the opportunities afforded the church to strengthen its institutional standing in the eyes of its faithful while positioning itself in opposition to the state. Its political strategy, described here as one of indirect confrontation, is based on protecting certain interests while responding rationally to changes in the political, economic, and social environments in which it operates.

While the central focus of this study is the political role of the Cuban Catholic Church, appreciating the church’s political mission first requires a comprehensive understanding of its religious mission. To accomplish this I combine a scientific approach with a historical approach to examining this understudied case, to gain not only a better understanding of the evolution of the Cuban Catholic Church but of the different environments that influenced its trajectory. It certainly became apparent during my discussions with the direct participants of this narrative that they themselves considered the historical heritage of the church and the whole of its
relationship to the current regime as having a significant bearing on current events. These individuals consistently interpreted their faith and the mission of their church as formed and informed by the unique social and political experiences of their country. The initial experience of revolution and the subsequent nationalization of Catholic schools and hospitals, along with the flight of many Catholic priests and Catholic faithful from the country, the persecution of some and retreat into silence of others, has not left the minds of church leaders. Their stance in opposition to the government is not only a response to current conditions but to what they consider to be past injustices.

The Cuban Catholic Church is the central institution under study in this dissertation. I am chiefly interested in how the church interacts with on one hand the revolutionary Cuban government, and on the other Cuba’s network of dissident social movements. Another concern is how Cuban church leaders interact with the community of priests and followers that make up the Santería religion, a set of relations that has been steadily deteriorating since the early 1990s. Following is a brief description of these key actors, focusing on their ideological dispositions and strategic considerations:

(1). The Cuban Catholic Church never tried to incorporate the Marxist doctrine of the revolutionary government into its pastoral teachings. It has since the early 1990s sought to promote a liberal-democratic political culture along with the traditionally conservative social positions of the international Church on issues such as abortion and marriage. The Cuban Church seeks to indirectly confront the regime
through the use of contentious rhetoric and works to assist dissidents without risking government encroachment on the institutional integrity of the church. Indeed, the institutional autonomy of the Church is one of its most important assets, however, its social influence faces limitations imposed by the low number of practicing Catholics in Cuba and its lack of access to mainstream media. Finding innovative ways to overcome these constraints remains a central aim of church strategy.

(2). The Cuban government has been headed by Fidel Castro since the inception of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Illnesses kept Fidel Castro from continuing as President of the Council of State in 2008, a post to which the Cuban National Assembly elected his brother Raul Castro. The Cuban Communist Party (PCC) remains the only legal political party in Cuba. Throughout its history the revolutionary Cuban government has experienced few internal challenges to its authority. It aims to quell all dissident activity through physical punishment (ie. arrests and harassment) and ideologically delegitimizing dissidence by pointing out the social achievements of the Revolution and calling attention to dissident ties with the US government. However, the government does not want to overextend its power by pushing the population toward widespread discontent.

(3). Dissident social movements began to form in Cuba in the early 1970s, with their presence increasing significantly in the 1990s. They have worked to mobilize sympathetic members of the population for peaceful political reform (through the distribution of reports of political repression and organizing petitions for reforms) while hoping to minimize arrests and refusing to resort to violence. These civil activists (many of them Catholic laypersons) found a social ally in the Catholic
Church and have increasingly tied their organizations to Catholic symbols. In fact, all the dissident organizations in Cuba that have received international media attention are in some way associated with Catholicism and/or the Cuban Catholic Church. Such organizations include the Christian Liberation Movement, the Christian Democratic Movement, the Varela Project, and the Ladies in White.

(4). *Santería* is an Afro-Cuban religion that has its roots in the mystical Yoruba traditions of West Africa. The vast majority of believers are Cuban blacks, who as a group benefited greatly from the social policies of the revolutionary government (albeit primarily due to their class position, rather than their race). In the early 1990s the Cuban government launched a campaign to extend substantial economic and political support to the religion and helped establish *la Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba* (Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba – ACYC) as an official center for state-sponsored *babalao*s (the priests of Santería), academics, and followers of Santería. Though the Catholic Church refuses to recognize Santería as a religion, it has grown rapidly and even non-followers will pay respects to the *orishas*, who have powerful symbolic personas in Cuban mythology.

A large part of the arguments of this dissertation are based on what is considered contentious in Cuban political discourse. The Cuban government demands an unwavering loyalty to the regime and the socialist goals of the revolution. All written, printed, and televised media in Cuba is published, recorded, and controlled by state-run agencies. The only institution that privately prints its own public statements, newsletters, and magazines is the Cuban Catholic Church.
Because the writings and homilies of the Cuban Church do not support government ideology, Catholic magazines and letters are only sold and distributed within the church parishes, in effect creating not only a physical space apart but an ideological space apart from the regime. The Cuban Church’s acknowledgement of the importance of political participation as well as its formulation of a new political culture based on individual autonomy and democratic principles places it outside the domain of what the revolutionary regime deems legitimate in Cuban politics. My analysis of the Cuban Church’s theology, social doctrine, and its political inclinations establishes the cultural connection with the dissident movements and the ideological divide with the Cuban government. I also examine the rhetoric of church officials and Catholic laity in church publications for transitions from apolitical or appeasing statements to more contentious ones, in which church officials question, critique, or denounce government ideology, policies, or specific actions.

My research is based primarily on interviews I conducted with members of the Catholic Church in Cuba during three trips, in March of 2004, October of 2005, and from March to May of 2006. However, I began to cultivate my relationships with Cubans during yearly trips starting in 1999, including a semester spent at the University of Havana in 2001. These relationships proved integral to my research and opened doors that would otherwise be closed to foreign visitors. The connections I made through the University of Havana as well as during a Notre Dame-sponsored trip with Fr. Robert Pelton in March of 2004 facilitated a large portion of my interviews. Completing research in Cuba while dealing with political themes and
questions can be a hazardous process and it must be handled with great care, especially when conducted by an American citizen. Survey research is impossible. Interviewing political dissidents (who if not imprisoned are usually under government surveillance) is troublesome for both the researcher and interviewee, and has led to some foreigners being expelled from the country. Furthermore, it can be difficult discussing political ideas and concepts that are not part of, in fact are prohibited from, all public and national discourse. Yet, for the impassioned researcher who makes a personal investment in the people of Cuba and forges relationships based on trust and mutual understanding, academic investigations can bear fruit. I am truly indebted to the members of the Cuban Catholic Church who took time out of their schedules to speak frankly with me about a wide range of social, cultural, and political topics. I collected additional information from published and unpublished church documents, pastoral letters, official statements, and religious magazines, much of which provided to me personally by church officials.

My 15 extensive interviews in Cuba all took place in the respective parishes, diocese, offices, or residences of the interviewees and normally lasted roughly an hour in length. Among the members of the Cuban Catholic Church that agreed to be interviewed were the Auxiliary Bishop of Havana, Mons. Alfredo Petit; the Chancellor of the Catholic Church, Mons. Ramón Suárez Polcari; and the Adjunct Secretary of the Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Cuba (Conference of Cuban Catholic Bishops - COCC), Mons. Jose Felix Pérez Riera. I interviewed Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino (the Cuban Catholic Church’s lone Cardinal) in 2004 and
exchanged written correspondence with him in 2006. I also interviewed Fr. Teodoro Becerril of La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Carmen in Havana and Fr. Fernando De la Vega of El Parroco de Montserrat in Havana; the lawyer of the COCC, Rolando Suárez; and the directors of two Catholic magazines, Orlando Márquez of *Palabra Nueva* and Roberto Veiga González of *Espacio Laical*.

In my interviews with church officials I used a semi-structured set of questions centering on the nature and quality of their interactions with the government, dissident civil actors, their own laity, and with the followers of the Santería religion. I also asked officials about their views of and/or participation in key events and conferences such as the 1986 *Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano* (Cuban National Ecclesial Conference – ENEC), the writing of the 1993 pastoral letter *El amor todo lo espera* (Love Waits for Everyone), and the 1998 papal visit. Finally, I questioned officials on the influence of politics on the religious mission of the church, the compatibility or lack thereof of the church’s social doctrine with revolutionary socialism, and the future direction of the Cuban Catholic Church in Cuban politics and society.

The key information I sought from these interviews centered on how specific officials responded to the collapse of the Soviet Union, how the political environment changed as a result of the ensuing economic crisis, what the nature of interactions is between church leaders, government officials, and dissident actors, and what the interviewees feel the role of the Cuban Church is and/or should be in the sphere of
Cuban politics. My goals were to discover whether or not the Cuban bishops were consciously waiting for the right moment to assume a confrontational posture against the Castro regime, how unified the hierarchy has been in making decisions about political acts and aiding the dissidents, and how politically contentious church leaders feel the Cuban Church should be as they pursue a political mission alongside a religious mission.

I was fortunate enough not only to interview the late Dr. Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla, Cuba’s foremost scholar of the sociology of religion and former director of the Departamento de Estudios Socioreligiosos (Department of Socio-Religious Studies - DESR), a state-run research institution, but I was invited to take a 4-week intensive course on religion and politics in Cuba with Dr. Calzadilla and Dr. Ramón Torreira, also of the DESR, in the spring of 2006. This individualized course was not only highly informative but gave me a comprehensive sense of how religion and the Catholic Church specifically are treated by government-sponsored Cuban scholars. My studies opened avenues for interviews with other scholars from the University of Havana and the Havana research center La Casa de las Américas.

Finally, two esteemed individuals I was extremely privileged to interview that provided essential insights into the relationship of the Cuban Church to the Cuban government and the international Church respectively, were Dorita Pérez, the Director of the Office of Religious Subjects of the PCC in Havana, and Mons. Luigi Bonazzi, Papal Nuncio to the Vatican in Cuba.
1.3 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical foundations to the arguments of the dissertation. I begin by examining different analyses of confrontational churches in Latin America after the 1968 Medellín bishops’ conference and in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Soviet socialist camp. I argue that the standard explanations for church behavior – the institutionalist, the ideational, and the rational choice models – while providing important frameworks for addressing the puzzle of church contention in Cuba, cannot in isolation explain why the Cuban Catholic Church engages in contentious political behavior when it does, and why it has assumed a strategy of indirect confrontation. I also briefly review the small body of literature that has looked into the question of religion and politics in Cuba to see where the gaps are in that literature and how this project aims to address them.

In addition to insights provided by the institutionalist, ideational, and rational-choice models, I use elements of social movement theory, organizational theory, and cultural explanations to establish the framework for addressing this puzzle. I begin by arguing that the demise of the Soviet Union rearranged Cuba’s domestic political arena and its economy in a favorable way for the Cuban Church. I then explain (1) how the Cuban Church has formulated a strategy of indirect confrontation that collectively serves its corporate, moral, and political interests, (2) how it interacts with the Cuban government and (3) how it treats dissident civil actors. The Cuban Church is seeking to create a Christian individualist counter-culture to the dominant, collectivist ideology that will prepare its faithful for a future democratic setting. In
this chapter I compare the differences between a strategy of direct confrontation and one of indirect confrontation on a number of different ideological positions and church actions. I argue that a moderate strategy of indirect confrontation helps promote this culture while protecting the church’s institutional autonomy, contributing both to building the church’s current social standing amongst Cubans unsympathetic to the revolutionary project and positioning the Cuban Catholic Church to be an active player in a transitional setting where moderate actors make the kind of political compromises that lead to democratization. Finally, I argue that for historical and cultural reasons unique to Cuban society, the Cuban Church has not reached out to Cuba’s black population and has risked forming a racial and religious cleavage that could lead to new forms of social conflict.

Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of the evolving role of the Catholic Church in Cuban society throughout the island’s history, and how its current role marks a sharp contrast from the historically elite position of the Catholic Church in Cuba and its traditional role as a conservative advocate of the status quo. Rather than offering a comprehensive history, I focus on the historical factors and critical events that have had a direct influence on the way the Cuban Church has interacted with the revolutionary government, as well as Cuba’s dissident civil society and the international Catholic Church. I examine causes of the Cuban Church’s entry into contentious politics and the important events that have marked the Cuban Church’s confrontational relationship with the revolutionary Cuban government. Using evidence from my field research, I focus on linking church actions to changes in the
political and economic environment in Cuba and the behavior of the other key actors by constructing a chronology of changing strategies and critical events that reflect changes in church behavior. This chapter demonstrates that the Cuban Church’s initial response to the Soviet Union collapse of entering into contentious politics was not an isolated incident, but part of a broader strategy of carefully monitoring the prevailing political, economic, and social environments as it protects its interests.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of the Christian Individualist philosophy and political culture the Cuban Church is promoting to counter the state ideology. Through sermons and the publication of religious magazines, church leaders and laypeople are seeking to build a democratic political culture that challenges Marxist ideology, promotes a Christian worldview, and prepares the faithful for a transition to democracy. This chapter is meant to bring the reader into the present day and describe who Cuban church leaders are (framed as the structure of the church), what their message is (Christian individualism), and how they impart it to the Cuban people (primarily through the publication of Catholic magazines). Included in this chapter are a detailed description of the Cuban Church hierarchy, the COCC, and the different commissions it has set up to assist in the task of evangelization; the functions and services the Cuban Church performs in Cuban society (including the health services it provides through the Christian relief organization Caritas); and the content and distribution of religious magazines. I also examine how Cuban church leaders have used church doctrine to address their social reality and how the church hierarchy polices its own officials.
Chapter 5 examines the nature of the Cuban Church’s interactions with other actors in Cuban society and how church interests affect these relationships. The overall aim of the Cuban Church has been to formulate a strategy that collectively serves its corporate, moral, and political interests, rather than allowing disparate concerns to pull church strategies in different directions. Its political stance is one of *indirect confrontation* with the revolutionary regime, meaning that in advocating for peaceful political reform it will criticize policies and actions without calling for regime change or the removal of government officials. It has become symbolically associated with many dissident movements and assisted their activities but has not explicitly aligned itself with or endorsed a specific organization. This demonstrates that the church has its own interests that supersede its willingness to assist political movements. Information gathered from interviews and church publications illustrates how church leaders view the mission of the church, the primacy of evangelization, the importance of maintaining independence, and the intersection of religion and politics.

In chapter 6 I extend my analysis to five cases of national Catholic churches that were subject to the challenges of authoritarianism. I chose the Catholic churches of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Poland, and Venezuela to include a wide range of experiences between churches and authoritarian states and to highlight the general, comparative importance of the problem of the Cuban Church’s contentious stance against the Cuban government. These cases are analyzed to see how critical events affect the entry of the church into contentious action, why certain strategies of
contention were chosen, and what a contentious strategy signified for the church in a post-transition setting. The purpose of this chapter is not only to establish a comparative context for the political behavior of the Cuban Church but to determine what factors make national Catholic churches more or less likely to pursue strategies of direct or indirect confrontation.

Chapter 7 examines the consequences of the church’s new political role for the Santería religion and race relations in Cuba. Catholic identity has been tied almost exclusively to white or Hispano-Cubans, while the popular support of Santería lies in the black or Afro-Cuban community. Heightened tensions have developed between these two religious systems since Catholic church leaders became confrontational and the Cuban government began actively promoting the Santería religion. Growing animosity may eventually divide Cuban society along racial and religious lines in a future transitional setting.

Chapter 8 closes the dissertation by speculating on the future consequences of the Cuban Church’s new political role for the development of civil society, race relations, and the potential functions of the Cuban Church in a transitional setting. If democratic change is broadly embraced across all sections of the population after a transition, the church will not suffer from its present association with dissidence. It will be positioned to act as a mediator in social conflicts, as the Catholic Church has acted in other post-transition societies. However, the least desirable result of these trends would be a divisive period of social and political conflict between two groups.
distinguished by race and religion. Thus, in following its cultural and institutional interests, the seemingly rational behavior of the Cuban Catholic Church under communist government could at its worst result in an irrational and disruptive outcome in a democratic setting.

This chapter also offers a summary of the empirical contributions made by this dissertation, centered on the Cuban case, and of the theoretical contributions offered to the field of comparative politics. This dissertation is unique in recent comparative politics scholarship in that it based primarily on original field research conducted in Cuba while it was still under the leadership of Fidel Castro’s regime. The interviews used in this study were conducted in Cuba, with its participants speaking in a revolutionary Cuban context, with all its political, social, and cultural pressures, constructs, and discursive cadences. One of the difficult tasks in interpreting what the interviewees were saying (and by extension one of the most valuable elements of this dissertation) was to stay aware of the myriad of pressures imposed by conducting research in a Cuban context, the one in which the members of the Cuban Catholic Church must operate.

For the field of comparative politics, this dissertation creates a new paradigm for thinking about the confrontational strategies of religious organizations and, in arguing what factors influence the development of those strategies, distinguishes authoritarian regimes amongst left-wing and right-wing regimes and adds the crucial variable of world-historical time as a factor as churches formulate their
confrontational strategies. My conclusion also begins a discussion of what future projects could be developed as an extension of the empirical and theoretical contributions made in this dissertation.

This project seeks to go beyond what has been offered in the existing literature on religion in Cuba by envisioning a new political role for the Cuban Church and examining its implications for the development of Cuba’s civil society and for the evolution of Cuban politics as a whole. Placed in a comparative perspective, this examination of the Cuban case will extend the scope of analysis of existing social science research by explaining the nature of church-state relations in an important and understudied case and contributing to the discipline of political science an explanation that accounts for strategies of indirect confrontation between church and state in contemporary societies. This study details the Cuban Church’s political proclivities, the strategies of the church hierarchy, and its interactions with government and dissident actors, thus uncovering the inner-workings of an important, politically-active religious institution and its relationships with a burgeoning civil society operating under the rule of a communist regime. Furthermore, a discussion of the competitive pressures created by the rising influence of Santería during the time period under study and its effects on the church behavior demonstrates how religious leaders respond to pressures created by influential, culturally-distinct social groups. Finally, in distinguishing between strategies of direct and indirect confrontation, this project will offer a new theoretical framework for comparative theory about religion and contentious politics.
CHAPTER 2:
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND ARGUMENTS

It is my hope that this dissertation finds a place within the extraordinary body
of political science literature that has examined the intersection of religion and
politics and, more specifically, the role of the Catholic Church in confronting
authoritarian regimes in Latin America and elsewhere. The case of Cuba has been
conspicuously absent from the seminal texts of this literature due to, I believe, two
factors: first, the marked difficulty in getting access to the island and its political and
religious leaders for the purpose of conducting independent academic research,
especially on subjects of a highly politicized nature; second, the Cuban Catholic
Church itself remained isolated from the developments in theology and the Catholic
Church’s role in politics that were occurring in Latin America following the Second
Vatican Council. Evidenced by the absence of any significant presence or input of
Cuban church leaders from the crucial Latin American bishops’ conferences in
Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979, the Cuban Church seemed to many observers
an insignificant church, lacking in innovation, and passive in the face of the
government-led ideological and social transformations on the island.
2.1 The Literature on Religion and Politics in Cuba

Scholars who have studied the post-revolutionary Cuban Catholic Church have focused on its marginalization by the Castro regime, the corresponding growth of the Santería religion, the repression suffered by the church and religious followers at the hands of the state during the initial decades of the revolutionary period, and especially the Cuban Church’s retreat into traditional policies and behavior following the Cuban Revolution, a retreat that made it less open and innovative than most other Latin American churches (Crahan 1979, 1985; Kirk 1989; Kirk and McKenna 1999). Scholars have disagreed about the vitality of the church in Cuban society and its future implications for church-state accommodation and contention. For Crahan (1985), the Cuban Church on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union was a marginalized, stagnant church, one whose leaders had failed “to have articulated a vision of the role of the church in the context of a socialist Cuba” which rendered Catholicism “largely irrelevant” (1985: 340). Kirk (1989) countered that by 1985 religion had become “respectable” in Marxist Cuba, and identified the root causes of the Cuban Church’s problems as the failure to develop a real Cuban identity, having been a bulwark of “hispanismo” for all of its history. He envisioned a coming rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the Cuban government signaling the beginning of a new chapter in Castro’s Cuba.

The image of a moribund church was severely challenged, of course, by the 1998 papal visit, a visit that in the eyes of the contributors to Stevens-Arroyo (2002) reinvigorated the popular expression of Catholicism on the island and legitimated the
Cuban Church’s efforts to engage and fortify Cuba’s civil society. Although Kirk’s analysis correctly predicted the coming of this new chapter, the ensuing period has been characterized not by rapprochement but by contention, a development that the largely descriptive literature on Cuba could not anticipate. Scholars who have recently examined civil society and social and political control in Cuba (Aguirre 2002; Davies 2000) have not brought religion into their analyses. Crahan (2005) observed that in the absence of secular alternatives to the revolutionary regime, religion and the Cuban Catholic Church has the potential to occupy an oppositional space in Cuban society. Yet, the literature on Cuba has not yet systematically examined the factors that have driven the Cuban Catholic Church into a contentious relationship with the Castro regime, much less the nature of its interactions with civil society or the government.

Cuban scholars on the island, however, writing from distinctly pro-government perspectives, have acknowledged the political and social divide between the Cuban Catholic Church and the Cuban government. Alonso (1998) views the 1998 papal visit as a seminal moment for church-state relations and one that led to a greater mutual understanding and “maturing” of relations that had deteriorated after the 1993 publication of the contentious pastoral letter *El amor todo lo espera*. Calzadilla (2003) emphasizes the low degree of social influence possessed by Cuban church leaders, contributing to the image of the Cuban Catholic Church as an elitist church, and has connected revived religious fervor in Cuba not as causally attributable to changes within the church but rather to a new social attitude in line
with official government positions. While these scholars have made rigorous academic analyses of the subject and offered richly descriptive and substantive detail, for political as much as academic reasons they have not given enough attention to the effects of repressive state actions against the Cuban Catholic Church (when analyzing church-state relations) or looked extensively at the relationship of church leaders with lay activists.

My analysis takes these existing assessments a step further, by examining the degree to which the Cuban Church has, since in the 1990s, sought to occupy a political space, one that is confrontational to the Cuban regime. I argue that the marginalization of religion by the Castro regime (described by Crahan) fed into a contentious sentiment already brewing within the Cuban Church (rather than the accommodative one described by Kirk) that led it to challenge the regime at the appropriate opportunity rather than to seek rapprochement. I also use my own field research to analyze the Church’s confrontational strategy, how interactions take place amongst church, state, and civil society actors in Cuba, how Cuban Church leaders view their own history and their role in Cuban politics and society, and what this new role will signify for the political and social future of Cuba. Finally, by placing the Cuban case in comparative perspective, I examine how and why church-based contention has changed from the initial experiences of contentious church action following the Second Vatican Council.
2.2 Leading Theoretical Perspectives on Contentious Church Action

Before beginning an elaboration of my arguments, it is worth reviewing the leading political science perspectives on contentious church action, as these perspectives shaped the theoretical underpinnings of my arguments and were the lens through which I began analyzing the Cuban Catholic Church. While most scholars who study the Catholic Church in Latin America are now focusing on the challenges that have come with democratization and increasing pluralism in Latin American societies, the dominant approaches that were used to explain church responses to authoritarianism are useful starting points for addressing the puzzle of the Cuban Catholic Church’s late entry into contention against a rigidly authoritarian government. Three key paradigms in the literature sought to explain the phenomenon of contentious church action: the (1) institutional, (2) ideational, and (3) religious economy approaches.

The Catholic Church in Latin America underwent profound changes in its religious, social, and political worldview in the 1960s, a decade marked by two seminal conferences that spurred the theological transformations that undergirded these changes: the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the CELAM conference at Medellín (1968). The Latin American Church in many countries expressed a new commitment to mobilize the poor to struggle for their own liberation, began emphasizing the need for broader social and economic rights, and sought to become “the voice of the voiceless” to the marginalized and oppressed sectors of society. It was the era of liberation theology, an eclectic outlook that in some forms blended
elements of Marxist class struggle with a Christian view of social justice and political activism. Not only were new relationships forged with grassroots activists in ecclesial base communities (CEBs), but a new confrontational posture was assumed vis-à-vis the state, especially in countries where right-wing militaristic governments took power. Church leaders became forceful advocates for the defense of human rights and a return to democratic rule. A similar process occurred in certain Eastern European communist countries where Catholicism was the dominant religion. For example, the anti-communist activists of the Solidarity movement in Poland forged a symbolic association with and sought refuge within the Catholic Church, which used its powerful social influence to mediate between dissident activists and the state.

Scholars who used the traditional institutional approach analyzed these developments by focusing on the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and its corporate interests. They argued that the Catholic Church, like any organization with a strong bureaucracy and entrenched hierarchy, takes its cues from the top leadership and follows a conservative agenda, though it may at times act to defend its institutional interests when threatened by external forces. For example, B. Smith (1982) argued that the Chilean Catholic Church’s confrontational stance against the Pinochet dictatorship was motivated by institutional self-defense. The Chilean Church, as all national churches that are part of the corporate international institution that is the Catholic Church, has certain resources (including moral prestige, a highly developed organizational structure, and contacts with a number of groups outside the country) that enabled it to play different roles in the politics of the Frei, Allende, and
Pinochet regimes. When the oppressive tactics of the Pinochet regime turned on the church, the hierarchy responded by repositioning itself as the center of social opposition and the human rights movement. Smith convincingly maintained throughout his work that any forays into politics by the church would be limited by the demands of its religious mission. The perspective throughout the political science texts that follow the institutional approach is that of a church acting as a cohesive institution, with its decisions originating from the top leadership. However, the primary weaknesses of this theoretical tradition lay in the tendency to equate the church with its hierarchy and ignore the power of broad shifts in church theology, of changes in the perceptions and actions of church members at the grassroots level, and of the resulting conflicts that occur between different sectors within the church itself.

Scholars began emphasizing ideational factors to show how the Catholic Church, so long viewed as a stagnant corporate institution, could transform itself so rapidly. The emergence of progressive sectors of the church following Medellin made it difficult to view the church only in terms of the hierarchy and its institutional interests. Competing theological ideas and understandings of the church’s role in society and politics pushed national episcopates in divergent paths, at times toward greater confrontation with the state and at others toward acquiescence and alliance. Political battles centered not only on the institutional integrity of the church but on class conflict and competing visions of what church theology and pastoral approaches should be. Mainwaring (1986) argued that church interests must be connected to ideas as much as institutional factors: “The way the Church intervenes in politics
depends fundamentally on the way it perceives its religious mission. This approach dictates attention to Church goals as understood by the leaders, and hence also to doctrine and theology.\textsuperscript{1} The collected works in Mainwaring and Wilde (1989) demonstrated that the church could no longer simply be assumed to act as a unified, corporate organization. Competing groups within the church vied for power and influence, often motivated by different ideological visions. Countering arguments that explained changes in church-state relations simply as a result of institutional self-defense, Mainwaring (1989) argues, “It was not simply that repression generated progressive Church change throughout Latin America. In some cases, notably Argentina and Uruguay, repressive military regimes wiped out progressive pockets of the church without provoking any significant response from the hierarchy; indeed, in Argentina, the hierarchy helped legitimize the military government.”\textsuperscript{2}

Complementing this theoretical approach, C. Smith (1991) argued that the principle variable explaining the new direction of church activists was the development of a new insurgent consciousness.

Gill (1998) reexamined the Latin American experience and argued that national churches that became progressive and confrontational towards authoritarian regimes did so out of perceived competitive pressures from Protestant groups. Gill’s religious economy thesis argues that the nature of the religious market (either


monopolistic or competitive), rather than changes in ideational worldviews, had the greatest impact in shifting the church’s pastoral and political strategies. According to this approach, the Catholic Church in Latin America adjusts its traditional role when it needs to compete with and/or accommodate Protestant sects. Countries facing relatively small competitive pressures from evangelical Protestants and spiritualist groups allowed the persistence of predominantly pro-authoritarian or neutral episcopacies such as that of Argentina. Gill argued that the Chilean church’s extremely vocal stance developed out of perceived competition from both socialists and Protestants:

Chile was one of the first Latin American countries to develop both a strong socialist movement and a substantial evangelical Protestant population. To compete with these challenges, the Chilean hierarchy developed extensive pastoral projects aimed at serving the working class and the poor. As the success of these projects rested on the Church’s credible commitment to the lower classes, the episcopacy found it necessary to publicly denounce the abuses of the Pinochet regime.3

Although Gill’s work has been criticized for his characterization of the pro- or anti-authoritarian stances of several national churches and the veracity of his predictions concerning the correlation between religious competition and heightened religious practice (along with a multitude of other issues), the religious economy thesis remains a theoretical approach to be reckoned with in the field of religion and politics.

As with most debates in the field of political science, it can safely be said that there is truth to be found alongside a host of theoretical concerns in each of these competing approaches. In this dissertation, I assume certain elements of these theories in my arguments about the Cuban Catholic Church: broadly stated, the Cuban Catholic Church does act to defend its institutional interests, it is motivated by powerful ideas, and it is responsive to competitive pressures from other religious groups. However, rather than focusing on what factors led some national churches to move into opposition while others remained loyal to authoritarian states, I focus in this study on the timing of the Cuban Church’s entry into contentious politics, its strategies of contention, and the unintended consequences that follow from different patterns of religiously based contention and mobilization. In 1959 the Cuban Catholic Church – widely regarded as a conservative, elitist church – found itself surrounded in the throes of a sweeping, leftist revolution. After a short period of direct confrontation, church leaders entered a self-described period of “silence” amidst continuous revolutionary political, economic, social, and cultural changes. In the 1990s, Cuban church leaders formed a new contentious strategy meant to protect the church while staying on the side of the opposition.

What accounts for when a church does not enter into an alliance with an authoritarian regime, yet does not confront it either? How did the church’s early experiences influence the development of its later confrontational strategy? What interests are served by its particular strategy of contention? What is the philosophical worldview offered by the church to counter the dominant ideology? I combine
aspects from the previously mentioned traditional approaches with elements of social movement theory, organizational theory, and cultural studies to answer these questions and elucidate the Cuban Catholic Church’s primary interests and its strategy of indirect confrontation, and to explain the Church’s behavior in the social and political milieu of communist Cuba. Using the Cuban Church as the primary case study, I also apply my conception of directly and indirectly confrontational church strategies to a spectrum of additional cases to determine the likelihood of a church choosing a particular strategy over the other.

2.3 Church Interests

In this study I use the term “national church” to refer to Catholic churches that exist and serve populations contained within national geographically-defined boundaries. The “national church” is close but not interchangeable with the national episcopate – for example, the whole of a national church’s strategy often includes the actions of priests and other church members (though they may be directed by cardinals and bishops). Some may object that the concept of “national churches” obscures the fact that there is one, universal, international Catholic Church. However, the concept of “national churches” does have useful academic utility: a national church addresses a particular national reality and is responsive to the demands of its particular society. It must abide by or choose to challenge the laws and institutional arrangements constructed by national governments and more specifically, in the cases analyzed in this study, authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, in my discussions with church leaders in Cuba, it was apparent that they thought of
themselves as members of “la Iglesia Cubana” (the Cuban Church), a distinct institutional entity though it still was part of the universal, international Catholic Church. La Iglesia Cubana possesses its own history, culture, and socio-religious context that makes it distinct from the experiences of other national churches. It is useful then to think of national churches as subset organizations of the larger organization that is the one Catholic Church.

When discussing the “Cuban Church,” I am essentially referring to the national episcopate as the decision and policy-making body of the national Cuban Catholic Church, which to a considerable degree commands the obedience of priests and religious in Cuba. No critical ruptures or divisions are apparent in the Cuban Church, at least in the public manifestations of the behavior of church officials (as opposed to the Nicaraguan Church during the years of Sandinista rule, a church I argue later in this study that was a church divided between the hierarchy and the popular grassroots sectors). Being a relatively small episcopal conference, the Cuban Church projects a great deal of internal unity, though, as later chapters make clear, there are some bishops that would prefer the Cuban Church adopt a more aggressive strategy vis-à-vis the Cuban government. These views, however, rarely are disclosed in public statements, sermons, and conferences.

Making the behavior of the Cuban Catholic Church the focal point of this study requires an elaboration of church interests. I argue that though defining church interests alone cannot generate predictions about what strategy of contention the
church will pursue, the Cuban Church’s strategy of contention has been formulated in part to collectively serve its primary interests, which I separate into three categories: (1) institutional, (2) moral, and (3) political. Of the three, assigning political interests to a religious organization like a national Catholic church may seem the most controversial. Yet, the Cuban Catholic Church, like all national Catholic churches, is part of a well-established international organization in possession of a philosophical worldview that is attentive to a wide spectrum of political issues and the functioning of political systems in general. To call it a political organization would constitute a severe oversight of the centrality of its religious mission, yet to ignore the importance of politics in the ideas and actions of church leaders, officials, and activists would be an equally egregious error. Church leaders are not often fond of recognizing the political interests of the Catholic Church, yet observation, experience, and analysis all point to the presence of a political agenda within the Catholic Church, one that may differ across regional, national, and/or intra-organizational boundaries, but that remains tangible nonetheless.

In Cuba, the current strategy of church leaders has been formulated over time to serve interests that contribute to the survival of the church as an autonomous institution, the expansion of its faithful, the promotion of its moral values and social doctrine, and the development of a new political culture – this final element including the fundamental aim of encouraging church laity to work towards challenging and reforming the existing political system.
Organizational literature provides insights into how the interests of an organization can be determined when there is an apparent inconsistency between its stated and perceived goals. Panebianco (1988) presents a model of the organization as a “natural system,” which serves as an alternative to a strictly rational view that sees organizations primarily as instruments for the realization of specific goals. Under the natural system model, organizations are structures which must respond and adjust to a multitude of demands from various stakeholders, and maintain a balance by reconciling these often competing demands. Because a consensus on organizational goals are finally arrived at as a result of complex processes within the system, this model implies three consequences concerning the problem of organizational interests:

1) The “official” aims are a façade behind which the real aims are concealed.

2) The real aims can be conceived only as the result of each successive equilibrium reached within the organization between a plurality.

3) The only aim that different participants have in common is the survival of the organization.

I believe there is more unification within the Catholic Church than the natural systems model implies, especially in the elements of its religious and social doctrines that are administered from the top of the church hierarchy. However, the attention paid to competing demands within organizations, even those that are hierarchically organized like the Catholic Church, makes this model a useful starting point for understanding and analyzing church interests. A key issue illuminated by this

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approach is the question of reconciling stated aims with perceived aims. In the case of the Catholic Church, perceived political aims can at times seem to contradict the content of the church’s stated aims. However, this issue can be managed by observing and analyzing the strategies and actions of church leaders while staying attentive to the content of written statements and official proclamations.

Lowi (1971) calls this process of adapting official aims to reflect the machinations of competing demands and organizational goals the “articulations of ends.” In well-established organizations, the official aims are never abandoned, nor do they become a mere façade. Rather, they are adapted to organizational needs. The organization continually engages in certain activities related to these aims, for it is precisely upon these activities that the party’s *collective identity* and the leadership’s legitimacy are based. While the work of Lowi and Panebianco was focused on the inner-workings of political parties and other political organizations, these theories can be adapted to illuminate the interests and strategies of national Catholic churches and other religious organizations, especially when these organizations also have political goals they are trying to achieve. Putting specific political interests into official statements can at times detract from the religious mission of the Catholic Church, undeniably its central mission. However, church leaders often make direct references to politics in public statements and in sermons, offering political critiques while refusing to mask a biding interest in political issues.

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as church officials. A well-established organization like the Catholic Church has the capacity to form a strategy serving multiple interests, albeit one that prioritizes certain interests over others.

The language of church leaders always places the religious mission at the forefront, though political aims can be gleaned when one places their message in its political and social context and also recognizes the symbolic political statements their words and actions suggest. For example, the Cuban Church’s political culture, which I label *Christian individualism* (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4), serves as an alternative to two ideologies: the prominence it gives to individual dignity and responsibility countered both liberation theology’s emphasis on class struggle and the Cuban state’s collective socialist ideology.

I divide the collective interests of the Cuban Church into three categories: (1) institutional, (2) moral, and (3) political. I define church interests as follows:

(1). The church has *institutional* interests that include protecting its institutional autonomy from the state, expanding its number of followers, and achieving a level of importance in Cuban society that makes its presence relevant for the moral, social, and political life of the country. Organizational literature and the traditional institutionalist approach to studying religion and politics informs this aspect of church interests as I define them. The church’s institutional interests relate to the endurance of the church as an institution and are ultimately based on *survival*
and expansion. Survival is the dominant interest in highly oppressive situations where authoritarian regimes threaten the actual existence of the church, whether through marginalization, repression, or persecution. The church takes an interest in expansion when it is apparent that its survival is assured and it finds sufficient mobility to work to expand its following.

The church’s institutional interests also relate to the question of status. Cuban church leaders possess a collective memory of heightened status and an institutional superiority in Cuban society that was implemented by the Spanish colonial government and endorsed by the Americans during the era of the Republic (1902-1958). Their recent history of threatened existence has now subsided and the Cuban Church is in a position of wanting to expand its faithful while protecting the institutional autonomy it has accrued. The underlying fervor is for eventually recouping the social status the Cuban Church had under colonial and neocolonial administrations, something church leaders know cannot be achieved under the current system.

(2). The church has moral interests, based on its theology and social doctrine, that encompass its religious values and moral principles and a desire to import these values and principles to the Cuban population through evangelization.

The church’s moral interests are based on a set of religious and social ideas and values. The church wants to help maintain and promote morality in the public
sphere and to be an influential voice on issues of family, life and death, and individual rights. It is also important for churches in contentious relationships with authoritarian regimes that their moral system provides a contrast to the dominant government ideology and the most oppressive tactics of the state. In my interviews, Cuban church leaders argued forcefully for the centrality of their distinct culture and their conception of their religious mission. It is their culture that defines them in opposition to the Cuban regime. Much in the same way liberation theology defined progressive sectors of the church in opposition to traditionalist church leaders as well as to the authoritarian regimes they sought to confront, Cuban church leaders and members use their religio-cultural meaning system to define not only their religious mission but their unique social identity.

(3). The church has political interests that include positioning itself in opposition to the current regime and in so doing, encouraging the development of an autonomous civil society in Cuba and a pluralist democratic political system. In light of the church’s distinctly political statements and actions that place it in opposition to the Cuban government, political interests are emphasized here as a separate category. Ultimately, church leaders envision the creation and ascendance of a political system that reflects the church’s vision of social justice and facilitates the church’s mission to evangelize.

Briefly stated, the political aims of the church are related to access and justice. The church is interested in the establishment of a pluralistic and democratic political
system not only because it would signify a more free and just society but because it would allow the church access to a variety political, economic, social, and cultural arenas to proceed with their religious mission. In effect, the church’s interest in politics reflects its attention to the first two sets of interests: the ability to strengthen and expand itself as a religious and social institution and impart its moral and spiritual values to society. A democratic political system would remove the repressive threat to their political activities and social services, open avenues to promote their message in the national media, allow for the possibility of a return to an alliance between church and state and a heightened social status for the church, and facilitate their mission of evangelization by removing barriers to religious proselytizing, the construction of churches, public processions, and religious education and health services. In this sense, the church does not pursue partisan political agendas but does have a preference for a democratic political system.

What follows is the theoretical framework for the next 5 chapters of the dissertation. Now that church interests have been established, I discuss how these interests influence the timing of the Cuban Church’s entry into contentious politics, the unique religio-political culture it is promoting, and its strategy of contention. I also use comparative analysis to examine the contentious strategies of other churches and propose a theory that accounts for choices between direct and indirect strategies of confrontation. Finally, I discuss why the Cuban Church’s particular strategy, while aiming to facilitate a socio-cultural desire for a transition to democracy, can create the potential for social conflict in a future transitional setting.
2.4 The Timing of Contention

The idea of the political-opportunity structure that comes from social movement theory serves as a useful framework to address the first part of the puzzle – why the Cuban Catholic Church reformulated a politically contentious strategy in the early 1990s. This theory argues that people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change and then, by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, create new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of contention (Tarrow 1994; McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly 1997). Among the most important opportunities is a decline in the state’s capacity or will to suppress dissent.

Even the author of this concept has acknowledged that it has become so broad that it is easily confused with the political environment in general and with post hoc explanations that find opportunities only after movements have had success.⁶ However, thinking in terms of political opportunities is still useful for explaining stark changes in political behavior by previously quiescent actors that correspond with radical changes in the international political structure and the domestic political environment of the country in question. It would have to be demonstrated that the new political actors, in this case Cuban church leaders, harbored a contentious sentiment toward the regime before recognizing the opportunity structure and made

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an appropriately drastic entry into contentious politics in response to newly perceived opportunities. ⁷

A political opportunity opened in the early 1990s that allowed the Cuban Church to adopt a confrontational posture in a favorable environment. The causes of this radical change can be traced to the structural reconfiguration of both Cuba’s international position and its domestic political environment, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and extended through the revolutionary regime’s worst economic crisis. After a brief period of contentious relations in the first few years of the Cuban Revolution (1959-1962) the Cuban Church entered a self-described period of silence as the Castro regime began building its system of revolutionary socialism. Though the Cuban Church harbored a contentious sentiment toward the revolutionary government since its inception, it was not until the regime found itself in a weakened position that church leaders chose to return to and reform a confrontational strategy. By acting contentiously in favorable environments, the Cuban Church has displayed a cautious approach to contention, its intensity corresponding with the emergence of unambiguous political opportunities.

The lightning rod that signaled the church’s new confrontational position vis-à-vis the Cuban government was a 1993 pastoral letter signed by all 11 of Cuba’s bishops (at the time), entitled *El amor todo lo espera*. For the first time in a public

⁷ Moreover, though I argue that church leaders have been innovative in their strategy of contention, it is still unclear if they will ultimately be successful in reaching their political goals.
letter since the early 1960s, the bishops collectively criticized the Cuban political system, including the “omnipresent” and “exclusionary” character of the official ideology, the absence of political liberties, the “excessive control” of the state security apparatus, the high number of political prisoners, and the regime’s institutionalized discrimination on the basis of philosophical, political, and religious ideas. The existence of this letter (circulated only through the church and not through any state-run media outlets) galvanized social discontent amongst Cuba’s Catholic population and made the Cuban Catholic Church the institutional center of contentious collective action on the island, a position previously unoccupied in Cuban society. It then became clear that the Cuban Church would become the primary symbol of political activism in Cuban society and would open its doors to citizens unsympathetic to the social and political goals of the Cuban revolutionary project.

The concept of changing political opportunities also offers an explanation as to why the Cuban Catholic Church, though itself an institution rather than a social movement, profoundly altered its behavior in the early 1990s and entered into contentious politics. Consigned to the opposition, and therefore without government channels through which to pursue its mission of evangelization, the church hierarchy behaved like an institutional movement – using its institutional resources to mobilize its members, in many ways similar to a nascent social movement but with the initial changes coming from the top rather than the grassroots. The collapse of the Soviet Union served as the drastic event that fundamentally altered Cuba’s domestic political

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8 “El amor todo lo espera,” reprinted in *La Voz de la Iglesia*, 410-411.
and economic environment, reducing the government’s will to suppress dissent. Following the release of *El amor todo lo espera*, the Catholic Church was demonized in government media, though Church officials themselves were not persecuted.

In an authoritarian environment with high risks for acting confrontationally, the church was an intermediary between changing social conditions and social movement formation, using its contentious actions and institutional autonomy to inspire social mobilization. It was a top-down process that began with the church response to the new environment. With a change in direction coming from the top of the Cuban Church hierarchy (made up of a core group of bishops that remained at the top both before and after the Soviet Union collapse), grassroots activists followed the lead of the bishops. In effect, the church responses to the political opportunity structure facilitated the formation and mobilization of new social movements, formed within a broader institutional movement led by the church.

This event set in motion a contentious relationship that had to be skillfully navigated by church leaders so as to avoid encroachments by the state on their institutional autonomy. In the early 1990s, a weakened Cuban government did not have the will to imprison or repress church leaders beyond denouncing their critiques. If the Cuban government would be able to reconsolidate in later years, it would not be as hesitant to repress church activities as the weakened one looking to dissuade social discontent and manage the collapsed economy in the immediate years following 1991. Essentially, church leaders were faced with a discernable window in which to
act, if they were to go forward with assuming a confrontational posture. The subsequent creation of a Cuban cardenalate by the Vatican in 1994, along with serving as a stamp of approval by the Vatican of the Cuban Church’s oppositional stance, provided much international attention and further insulation from government repression.

The initial foray into contentious politics by church leaders was not met with an immediate backlash beyond the denunciation of church officials over government-sponsored media (they were accused of, amongst other things, being agents of the US government). Following the theory of social movement cycles, a successful challenge by one previously disadvantaged actor simultaneously (1) advertises the vulnerability of authorities, (2) provides a model for effective claim-making, (3) identifies possible allies for other challengers, (4) alters the existing relationships of challengers and powerholders to each other (at the extreme, turning challengers into powerholders), and (5) thereby threatens the interests of yet other political actors who have stakes in the status quo, thus activating them as well. The success of the challenge made by the Cuban Church was in timing its entry into contention to a moment when the government was severely weakened to protect its institutional interests while pursuing its moral and political interests. The church’s autonomy and its status as the only independent institution in Cuban society, together with the

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9 McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, “Toward an Integrated Perspective on Social Movements and Revolution,” 164.
resonance of its ideas, became its greatest strengths as a fomenter of contentious collective action.

The ideational approach to studying church behavior made it clear that church leaders are largely motivated to act based on their understanding of doctrine and theology. It also demonstrated that competing worldviews within the church itself can pull different sectors of the church in different directions, especially in conflicts between top clergy and grassroots activists. However, a national church hierarchy can also provide leadership to the grassroots, especially in authoritarian scenarios when it formulates a counter-culture to the dominant ideology that resonates with the anti-government sectors of the grassroots. Added to this, a national church hierarchy does have the capacity to respond to political opportunities, inspire social movement formation, and formulate its own strategy of contention while insulating itself from government reprieve by channeling dissidence through the promotion of its cultural meaning-system. Catholicism and dissidence became intertwined in Cuban society when dissident civil actors found in the Cuban Catholic Church an independent national institution offering resources that could assist the formation and mobilization of their movements.

2.5 The Cultural Factor

Cultural theories have a valued tradition in political science and have been used to demonstrate that a strong religious identity and tradition can provide the kind of direction and purpose to social movements that become the basis for mobilization
when actors have shared meanings and a common identity (Smith 1996; Ross 1997; McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly 1997). Scholars have repeatedly shown that religious institutions and faith have played critical roles in the formation of social movements, because religious movements, like social movements more generally, attempt to build and mobilize on the basis of collective identity (Drogus 1995). It was, in fact, the building of a common religious identity and a distinct counter-culture in opposition to the regime that binded dissident activists to the Cuban Catholic Church. The Cuban Church’s cultural meaning-system, which I term Christian individualism, has appealed to the church’s faithful and especially to social activists because it is resonant with their existing religious belief system, it is oppositional to the dominant state ideology, and it is strategic in that its basis in religion offers an alternative to the state ideology while carrying the protection of the Catholic Church. Catholicism gave disparate dissident organizations a potent system of symbols and meaning around which to organize. Binding its message to the Cuban Church’s recognized moral authority and individualist social doctrine helped mobilize many dissident civil actors while also providing them with potent symbols of contentious action.

In his study of the coping strategies of ethnic minorities in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, Cohen (1969) found that groups can use cultural organizations to achieve goals that cannot be pursued directly. In situations where “normal politics” is not possible for one reason or another (and groups must find innovative ways to effect political change), religion takes on added significance and can play an integral role in society as the spiritual legitimatior or condemning judge of a political system. In such
situations, religion often serves as the prototypical cultural basis for political organization: “Religion…mobilizes many of the most powerful emotions which are associated with the basic problems of human existence and gives legitimacy and stability to political arrangements by representing these as parts of the system of the universe.”

The Cuban Church’s cultural meaning-system had to challenge the foundations of the dominant official ideology without appearing too confrontationally political in a way that would threaten the institutional autonomy of the church. Operating on a spiritual plane, the church found its message could transcend the official ideology by staying focused on the spiritual dimension, a dimension not often attended to by communist and authoritarian regimes.

Smith (1996) argues that what sets religious meaning-systems apart from non-religious cultural meaning-systems is religion’s attention and reference to supernatural beings, timeless truths, and celestial realities. Two influential non-religious cultural meaning-systems with competing discursive reference points are Marxism and nationalism: Marxism as a meaning-system takes as its starting point a society’s class structures and relations of material production. Nationalism is grounded in the temporal history and experience of a common nation of people. Religion, however, is rooted in realities that are believed to exist above and beyond the temporal, mundane and material world that we observe empirically. It is characterized by sacred transcendence:

Religion establishes a perceived reality above and beyond temporal life, the world, and history that then occupies an independent and privileged position to act—through those who believe the religion—back upon the mundane world. That which is sacred and transcends temporal, earthly reality also stands in the position to question, judge, and condemn temporal, earthly reality.11

Opposing the Castro regime with a religious cultural meaning-system allowed church leaders and dissident activists to confront the political system on a set of terms poles apart from the socialist ideology of the state, itself an amalgamation of Marxism with a strong sense of post-colonial nationalism. For example, *El amor todo lo espera* was much more than a bishops’ political critique of the Cuban government. Rather, the bishops’ references to politics were integrated into a religious worldview that started with individual man as the center of concern for the church, emphasizing his responsibilities to God, family, and society. The document begins as an invocation to the patron saint of Cuba, *La Virgen de la Caridad*, but the authors soon make it clear that they are addressing their concerns to all Cubans, “including the politicians.”12

The Cuban Church has created a religio-cultural meaning system that emphasizes individual dignity and responsibility to counter the collective-oriented ultra-nationalist ideology of the state. Armed with this meaning-system, which I term *Christian individualism*, the Cuban Church has established a cultural connection with dissident reformers and positioned itself in opposition to the collective social project of the Revolution. The Christian element is found in its emphasis on sacred


12 “El amor todo lo espera,” reprinted in *La Voz de la Iglesia*, 404.
transcendence and the morality of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Church leaders are teaching their laity to think of themselves as autonomous beings, their dignity bestowed by God, and charged with a Christian social duty to act in defense of themselves, their families, and their society. The individual element is its focus on singular man as God’s dignified creation. This culture represents a stark alternative to the official state ideology, in which social and political unity in defense of the Revolution is prioritized over the interests and ambitions of the individual. There is a double disconnect between these two philosophies: the state emphasizes collective unity and allegiance to the nation-state; the church, however, emphasizes individual identity and allegiance to a sacred transcendent God.

This, of course, is not the first time a religious organization or even the Catholic Church has used a counter-culture to oppose an authoritarian state: liberation theology served this purpose for many Latin American churches in the 1960s and 1970s. This Marxism-infused, multi-faceted theological system challenged the conservative elements of the clergy and authoritarian states that ignored the interests of the poor and marginalized, as well as what was deemed an unjust class structure. Liberation theology, however, never resonated with Cuban bishops who were already at odds with a Marxist regime. Embracing liberation theology would have signified an ideological affinity between church and state in Cuba that was never pursued or desired by the bishops. Starting with the 1986 ENEC conference, Cuban church leaders have sought to formulate a theology and doctrine
that represents a substantial alternative to the Cuban regime’s ideology – though without directly confronting the revolutionary political leaders or institutions.

Church leaders have deepened cultural ties to dissidents by transmitting a culture that is resonant with church faithful, oppositional to the dominant ideological culture, and strategically confrontational in its philosophical foundations and its application in society. Promoting a counter-culture to the state ideology within church temples also allows church leaders to exist on the side of contention without directly confronting the regime.

2.6 Indirect Confrontation

The Cuban Catholic Church has not explicitly aligned itself with any specific dissident group nor has it directly challenged the Castro regime by calling for its outright downfall. Rather than positioning themselves at the forefront of political confrontation, church leaders have chosen to remain on the sidelines, preserving the institutional integrity of the church while housing and nurturing social and political discontent. The Cuban Church has found its niche as a morally authoritative voice amongst those unsympathetic to the Revolution; it has also found that it can increase its faithful by promoting a culture oppositional to the dominant ideology and avoid direct persecution by limiting the reach of its political contentiousness. By virtue of its unique standing in Cuban society as the only national private institution, it occupies a symbolic position as the institutional center of contentious collective action.
The Cuban Church’s political strategy can be characterized as one of indirect confrontation. Church leaders have sought to create a politically contentious strategy that simultaneously serves its institutional, moral, and political interests. Though offering broad solidarity, the Cuban Church has not explicitly aligned itself with any dissident group that might put its institutional integrity in danger. Rather, it recognizes with solidarity the overall aims of the dissidents, such as the development of an autonomous civil society and peaceful political reform, and has encouraged lay Catholics to participate in political activities. Furthermore, while maintaining this distance from dissident social movements, church leaders do not directly criticize the Cuban government, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), or iconic political figures like Fidel and Raul Castro. Instead, certain features of authoritarian rule and the Cuban political system are criticized, including the lack of political pluralism, the state-controlled economy that eliminates private property, and the absence of a legal and autonomous civil society. Cuban church leaders are promoting a democratic political culture within their temples, yet they refrain from calling for the outright downfall of the government. They do not endorse any dissident movements, yet laypersons are called upon to stay active in the political life of the nation. In promoting a democratic political culture and calling upon laypersons to act as part of their Christian social duty, the Cuban Church is outsourcing dissidence to Catholic citizens that have played significant roles in dissident social movements.
I define strategies of direct and indirect confrontation as follows: *Direct confrontation* is a politically contentious strategy in which the church makes explicit its view of the illegitimacy and/or malevolence of the ruling regime. In public statements the church identifies specific targets as illegitimate and/or malevolent, including specific officials, policies, institutions, organizations, or the official ideology. The church has a strained or no relationship with the ruling regime but has public relationships with oppositional actors. *Indirect confrontation* is a politically contentious strategy in which the church does not make explicit its view of the illegitimacy or malevolence of the ruling regime. In public statements the church does not identify specific targets as illegitimate or malevolent, but remains confrontational in the context of the national discourse by identifying certain negative political, economic, or social effects resulting from the regime’s governance, policies, and/or ideology, and/or proposing alternative modes of governance, policies, and/or ideological or cultural meaning-systems. The church maintains formal relations with the regime but only symbolic and/or ambiguous relations with oppositional actors.

I argue that *indirect confrontation* is a comprehensive political strategy that can be defined across a series of actions and positions that rests on how the leaders of a religious organization behaves toward (a) the regime and (b) the primary social opposition. This strategy of indirect confrontation can be defined by contrasting the characteristics of direct and indirect confrontational actions. The following table outlines the differences between indirect and direct strategies of contention along four definable positions toward the regime and its primary opposition respectively:
### TABLE 2.1
**INDIRECT CONFRONTATION VS. DIRECT CONFRONTATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political strategy:</th>
<th><strong>Indirect Confrontation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Direct Confrontation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Church position toward:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Regime/Political institutions</td>
<td>Endorse increased political pluralism, open dialogue, public debate, entry of new political ideas, growth of autonomous civil society</td>
<td>Endorse political reform, development of oppositional political parties or specific democratic institutions, and/or a political transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Official ideology</td>
<td>Critique official ideology, make distinctions between church doctrine and official ideology</td>
<td>Condemn the official ideology and perhaps identify its primary governmental proponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relations with the regime</td>
<td>Remain neutral or promote reconciliation with the regime</td>
<td>Seek condemnation of the regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Church position toward:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Association with opposition in the public sphere</td>
<td>Symbolic association with opposition</td>
<td>Open association with opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assistance of the opposition</td>
<td>Endorse growth of civil society, offer no assistance or clandestinely assist opposition</td>
<td>Endorse specific oppositional movements, openly assist opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participation with the opposition in political activities</td>
<td>Encourage only laypersons to participate in political activities</td>
<td>Open participation in political debates and oppositional processions/events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a general strategy of confrontation, whether direct or indirect, there is some form of opposition to the regime manifest in church actions and some form of church relations with dissident actors working to confront the regime. It is the nature of the regime opposition and the nature of relations with dissident actors that define a confrontational political strategy on the part of a religious organization as direct or indirect.
I examine the church’s strategy toward the regime in three areas: the church’s position on the political system in general and on the regime’s political institutions, its position toward the official ideology, and its relations with the regime. The conception of the regime under this formulation centers on the formal institutional and substantive arrangements of power, including communist and authoritarian regimes, as well as military dictatorships. The regime is presented here in contrast to the state, the Weberian conception of administrative, law enforcement, and military organizations under the centralized control of a supreme authority. Though the two may empirically overlap and are fundamentally symbiotic, I place the regime as the central target of the church’s contentious behavior since it is the regime that uses the instruments of the state to maintain itself, exercise its power, and advance its political, economic, and social goals. Direct confrontation is a strategy in which the church publicly vocalizes its condemnation of the regime and works openly with other social actors with shared political goals. The church advocates regime change and may endorse specific oppositional political parties or prominent dissident leaders to replace regime parties and leaders. This is a situation where the church and the regime are at polar opposite ends of the social and political spectrum and this oppositional relationship is widely known amongst relevant social, political, and religious actors. In contrast, in a strategy of indirect confrontation, the church maintains formal relations with the regime and church leaders may meet cordially with government officials. Opposition is restrained to the broad ideology of the

regime and reform of the political system. Increased pluralism is advocated rather than democratic transition or revolution.

I also assess the church’s strategy toward the primary social opposition in three areas: the form of association, the kind of assistance provided, and the degree of church participation with dissidents in confrontational political activities. The difference between direct and indirect confrontation in church relations with opposition actors is the degree to which church leaders openly align themselves with dissident actors and endorse their activities, political programs, and leaders. Under indirect confrontation, the church may endorse the development of civil society, while under direct confrontation the church would align itself specific movements and/or dissident actors working in direct confrontation with the state as well. Church relationships with opposition social actors are presumably limited in this formulation to civil actors and the primary civil oppositional movements, though it could be extended to any social oppositional force, be it armed militants or insurgents with the same theoretical description (recognized throughout the population as the primary social opposition). Despite the fact that it would seem virtually unfathomable that Catholic church leaders would enter into alliances with armed militants or insurgents, a case of a religious organization assisting an armed movement would to varying degrees reflect a strategy of indirect or direct confrontation based on shifts between symbolic vs. open association, clandestine vs. open assistance, and the encouragement of lay participation vs. the public participation of religious leaders in oppositional activities. However, any endorsement by religious leaders of laypeople
entering into armed movements with the purpose of overthrowing a regime, whether into specific movements or into armed organizations in general, would have to constitute a case of direct confrontation.

Indirect confrontation is the defining aspect of the Cuban Church’s political strategy. Why the church chooses a strategy of indirect or direct confrontation relates directly to finding a strategy that can serve multiple church interests. The overall aim of the Cuban Church has been to formulate a strategy that collectively serves its corporate, moral, and political interests, rather than allowing disparate concerns to pull church strategies in different directions. Indirectly confronting the revolutionary regime serves the church’s institutional interests by protecting the institution from persecution while positioning the church as a defender of dissidence. The survival of the church as an institution is not in question under this strategy, and church leaders pursue their mission of evangelization while attending to certain social, economic, and political constraints. Indirect confrontation serves the church’s moral interests by keeping the church’s focus on professing and promoting its Christian individualist culture rather than diluting its religious message in the constant practice of engaging in political quarrels with the government. Finally, this strategy serves the church’s political interests by maintaining the symbolic association of the church with the internal social opposition and allowing church leaders to support actors working for change that could create and/or lead new political institutions that would open access for the church and reflect a Catholic sense of political justice.
This strategy is meant in part to insulate the church from charges that it is conspiring against the Cuban government. Though church leaders maintain that Catholics are free to join any political movement or organization (including the PCC) there is scarcely any encouragement in public church statements or publications to participate in the political institutions of the state. For example, active involvement in the Communist Party would require a Catholic to offer his/her ultimate allegiance to that institution, which would contradict the spirit of the church’s Christian individualist culture – church leaders not only ask one to place his/her ultimate allegiance in the God of the Catholic faith, but asks its faithful to maintain their individuality in the face of groups that would require the adoption of a paramount corporate identity. By choosing to confront the state indirectly, the church is mobilizing its faithful to engage in political activities and protecting its institutional integrity while promoting a Christian individualist political culture. Following its choice to respond to a changing opportunity structure, the Cuban Church has remained a strategic actor in Cuban politics, resting many of its decisions on the perceived will of the Cuban government to suppress its activities and/or challenge its institutional integrity.

Acting cautiously within the realm of contentious politics to protect its interests is behaviorally consistent with the church first re-entering contentious politics in a politically opportune time. The Cuban Church’s most confrontational public moment was the writing of El amor todo le espera. Since the publication of that pastoral letter, Cuban church leaders have retreated from the highly
contentiousness tone of *El amor todo lo espera* and have delved deep into the language of religion and broader philosophical disconnect with the state ideology embodied in their *Christian individualist* political culture. By adopting this strategy it has increased its active faithful, found ways to promote its social doctrine in a hostile environment, and positioned itself as the institutional center of contentious collective action in Cuba’s socialist society, the only national institution of its kind operating under the Castro regime. In effect, the Cuban Church has worked to disassociate itself from a movement it worked to inspire. Having made a very public statement of their feelings toward the revolutionary regime in 1993, the Cuban Church now enjoys a formally and officially cordial relationship with the government, though the internal sentiment of each institution toward the other is one of intense confrontation.

The experiences of Catholic Church officials working with oppositional forces against authoritarian and communist regimes in Latin America and Eastern Europe following the Second Vatican Council was for the most part limited to relationships with civil actors. However, there was variation across countries, regions, and regime types amongst churches that entered contentious politics as to which strategy to pursue (examined further in chapter 7). For example, church leaders in Brazil emerged as the principal voices of protest during the military government that ruled from 1964-1985, directly challenging the regime by protesting and investigating cases of torture, missing persons, and human rights violations in general. Conversely, the Polish Church served as a stabilizing force and mediator in conflicts which arose
between the Solidarity movement and the Polish communist regime during the 1980s, broadly reflecting a strategy of indirect confrontation.

Church interests alone cannot explain a church’s choice to adopt a strategy of direct or indirect confrontation. While indirectly confronting the revolutionary regime does satisfy the Cuban Church’s institutional, moral, and political interests (as they have been defined here), other factors have also influenced the choices of churches in contentious relationships with authoritarian regimes and their confrontational strategies. In chapter 7 I place the Cuban Catholic Church in comparative analysis with other churches that have confronted (or chose not to confront) authoritarian regimes. I analyze the cases of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Poland, and Venezuela to illustrate my arguments about churches and contention under authoritarian regimes of the left and right given certain conditions of competition and the church’s relationship with the primary social opposition. After determining the church’s strategy toward the regime in each of my cases, I argue that a combination of regime type and the world-historical time period during which the church began its contentious activities have a direct influence on the church’s choice of confrontational strategy. Churches that became confrontational under right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s were more likely to pursue strategies of direct confrontation than churches facing leftist authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, which were more likely to pursue strategies of indirect confrontation. This is so because the influence of the Second Vatican Council and the rise of liberation theology, a leftist ideology, led many national churches into
directly confrontational relationships with right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s. Those churches that embraced liberation theology and faced right-wing authoritarian regimes found themselves in extreme ideological opposition with the state, increasing the likelihood of direct confrontation. The Vatican’s turn toward more conservative politics under the papacy of John Paul II did not eliminate contentious relationships between church and state, but it did lead churches to pursue strategies closer to indirect confrontation, especially against leftist authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s. Liberation theology was not embraced by churches that were marginalized by Marxist regimes, as this theology too often closely reflected the regime’s ideology. To confront left-wing authoritarian regimes and avoid the kind of persecution suffered by many church activists under authoritarian regimes of the right and left, church leaders in countries like Poland and Cuba developed strategies of indirect confrontation to challenge these regimes while serving their institutional, moral, and political interests.

The strategy of indirect confrontation goes arm and arm with an outlook toward gradual recuperation of the social status and political networks the church enjoyed under the previous Cuban Republic. Cuban church leaders are patient and are working now at changing the political culture of a sector of the population that will welcome a future democratic transition. They are in fact investing in Cuba’s Catholic faithful in the hope that this sector will be able to navigate and lead a democratic transition and develop democratic institutions. However, in advocating for peaceful political reform the Cuban Church has openly criticized policies and
actions without calling for regime change or the removal of government officials. It has become symbolically associated with many dissident movements and assisted their activities but has not explicitly aligned itself with or endorsed a specific organization. This demonstrates that the church has its own interests that supersede its willingness to assist political movements and will continue to be strategic in its social political activities.

2.7 The Future and the Consequences of Contention

Previous studies of religion and church behavior have demonstrated that decisions concerning political alliances early on affect the ability of the church to switch allies and/or broaden its societal influence in the future (Kalyvas 1996; Warner 2000). As path dependence teaches us, once a country, government, or institution starts down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. The Cuban Catholic Church, though not aligned with any specific dissident group, is perceived as a contentious actor in Cuban society. It is symbolically associated with many dissident groups and has carved out an identity for itself and lay Catholics that disassociates it from the revolutionary identity of the dominant culture. The association between the Catholic Church and dissident activists will likely continue in the future, depending on the political role these activists play in any kind of democratic transitional setting. The extent to which the church distances itself from dissident organizations (by refusing to endorse their leaders or activities) will heighten its potential to play the role of social mediator.
The future importance of this association with dissidence rests in the way race and religion partition Cuban society. Religion and race fall along one cleavage: Catholic identity is associated with white or Hispano-Cubans, while Santería is the religious domain of the black or Afro-Cuban community. The Afro-Cuban population has traditionally been a basis of support for the revolutionary regime, and certain Santería priests have received political and economic support from the government. Mobilizing dissident activity around Catholicism at once acknowledges the racial divide and may serve to deepen it between anti-government and pro- or neutral-government social forces, a development the Cuban Catholic Church could have trouble resolving.

The Cuban Catholic Church, in its writings, sermons, and publications, is working to delegitimize Santería as a religion. This aspect of the Cuban Church’s cultural meaning-system considers Santería a cult rather than a viable religious system, a view that is regarded as a serious offense not only amongst practitioners of Santería but the great majority of Cubans who consider the orishas as integral components of the spiritual identity of the nation. The most flagrant manifestation of the Cuban Church’s disparaging view of Santería came during the 1998 papal visit, when meetings were arranged with the leaders of non-Catholic religions in Cuba and no representatives from religions of African origin were invited. Ignoring the salience of religions of African origin in Cuba and continuously insulting the integrity of their religions has alienated the Cuban Church from the broader society even as it has increased its faithful and consolidated allegiance amongst its core membership.
Cuban Church leaders have formulated a political strategy that they hope will make the church relevant as a mediating actor in a future transition period. It appears beyond doubt that the religious aspect of many of Cuba’s dissident movements will retain its significance into a democratic transition period, especially with church leaders working to recoup their footing in the fields of education and healthcare. The failure to recognize Santería as a religion, however, will alienate the majority of Cubans and could make religion (along with race) a polarizing issue rather than a mediating one.

The following chapters examine these theoretical arguments in the context of the Cuban Church’s relationship to the Cuban government, dissident social activists, the Santería religion, and the broader population. I argue that in the last 20 years the overall aim of the Cuban Church has been to formulate a strategy that collectively serves its corporate, moral, and political interests, rather than allowing disparate concerns to pull church strategies in different directions. Information gathered from interviews and church publications illustrates how church leaders view the mission of the church, the primacy of evangelization, the importance of maintaining independence, and the intersection of religion and politics in Cuba. I also demonstrate that the Cuban case has theoretical significance for the comparative study of religion and politics. I extend my analysis of the Cuban case by establishing a comparative context for the political behavior of the Cuban Church and formulating
an argument about what factors make national Catholic churches more or less likely
to pursue strategies of direct or indirect confrontation.
CHAPTER 3:
THE CUBAN CATHOLIC CHURCH’S ENTRY INTO CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

“A Marxist revolution had occurred, and for distinct political, economic, and ideological reasons, and out of fear, the church remained silent…Many of those fears were eliminated with the fall of the Soviet Union and the visit of the Pope…All that had happened before – the persecution – had ended.”

-Padre Fernando De la Vega, Párroco de la Iglesia Montserrat, La Habana

3.1 Introduction

The Cuban Catholic Church is the only non-revolutionary independent national institution operating in revolutionary Cuba. Historically a privileged institution, the Cuban Catholic Church was perceived by many as a foreign, elitist church up to the revolutionary period. Shortly after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, church leaders questioned the ideology of the new revolutionary regime and consequently lost not only the many private schools and hospitals it administered but nearly all measures of the church’s societal influence. In the 1960s the Cuban Catholic Church entered a self-described period of ‘silence’, having been unable to find an effective role for Catholicism in revolutionary Cuban society.
A series of events in the late 1970s reinvigorated the Cuban Church. Following the CELAM conference at Puebla in 1979 and the election of Karol Wojtyla as supreme pontiff, the COCC, under new and younger leadership, decided to organize a “Pueblita” for Cuba. In 1986 they wrapped up their first national ecclesial conference (Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano – ENEC) and produced a final document that envisioned a new role for the church in Cuban society: the COCC had finally come to terms with the fact that they had stayed silent for too long, that they must live, work, and evangelize in the context of a revolutionary society, and that the social and political transformations that had taken place under the Cuban Revolution were not fleeting, but, presumably, permanent.

In 1991, the situation changed dramatically. The collapse of the Soviet Union sparked a profound change of thinking within the Cuban Catholic Church, especially in its strategy for dealing with the revolutionary government. It now looked as though the Castro regime, like the many satellite communist states of Eastern Europe, was destined for a similar demise. The loss of Soviet subsidies led to an economic crisis unprecedented in Cuban history. Often characterized as a church caught by surprise, the Cuban Catholic Church was not prepared for the sweeping social changes of the Cuban Revolution, but it now sought to prepare itself to assume a larger role in a post-revolutionary Cuba. Two years later, the COCC issued a harsh critique of the Cuban Revolution - harsh in the context of Cuba’s national political discourse, that is. Rather than return to the scathing condemnations of the early
1960s, the bishops framed the contentious message of the pastoral letter *El amor todo lo espera* with words like dialogue, reconciliation, and respect, but it was received by the Cuban government as a contemptible, blatant attack on the Revolution. The weakened position of the government resulting from the economic crisis made its counter-attack on the Cuban Church less virulent than it could have been. The Cuban Catholic Church was denounced in the government-controlled media as a foreign and counter-revolutionary institution with a history of conspiring with foreign enemies. However, no churches were intruded upon, nor did any arrests or overt harassment of church officials occur. Despite the increased tension in church-state relations, the Cuban Church was reaping real benefits. Church attendance was on the rise. In 1994, the Vatican named Archbishop of Havana Jaime Ortega y Salino only the second Cardinal in the history of the Cuban Catholic Church. Shortly thereafter, Pope John Paul II agreed to accept an invitation to visit Cuba that had been extended by the Castro regime a decade earlier. It was becoming apparent to many Cubans that there was an independent institution on the island that would welcome those who were ‘unsympathetic’ to the Revolution. The stage was set for a new period of church-state relations: a relationship characterized by a new church strategy of indirect confrontation.

In this chapter I examine the causes of the Cuban Church’s entry into contentious politics and the important events that have marked the Cuban Church’s confrontational relationship with the revolutionary Cuban government. Using evidence from my field research, I focus on linking church actions to changes in the
political and economic environment in Cuba and the behavior of the other key actors by constructing a chronology of changing strategies and critical events that coincide with changes in church behavior. The Cuban Catholic Church has had a tumultuous relationship with Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government that has gone through what I characterize as four distinct stages, starting with (1) a brief period of direct confrontation, (2) extended tension and church silence, (3) the reemergence of the Cuban Church and a small window for rapprochement, and (4) indirect confrontation. Transitions between these stages have been marked by critical international and domestic events, changes in government policies, and the development of new church theologies, pastoral activities, and contentious strategies.

The concept of political opportunities is used here to explain the sharp change in political behavior in the 1990s by previously quiescent actors - in this case the bishops who made up the COCC. This change corresponded with radical changes in the international political structure and the domestic political environment of Cuba. The bishops that emerged as new political actors had harbored a contentious sentiment toward the regime for decades without engaging the regime contentiously; a newly perceived opportunity structure allowed church leaders to make a radically dramatic entry into contentious politics.

I argue that the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the critical event that created a new political opportunity for the Cuban Catholic Church to enter contentious politics. This event allowed church leaders to adopt a confrontational
posture in a favorable environment. The structural reconfiguration of both Cuba’s international position and its domestic political environment began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and extended through the revolutionary regime’s worst economic crisis. Though the Cuban Church harbored a contentious sentiment toward the revolutionary regime since its inception – to the extent that the initial confrontational statements of the early 1960s led to the marginalization of the church and the depletion of its institutional resources – it was not until the regime found itself in a weakened position that church leaders chose to reformulate a confrontational strategy. By acting contentiously in a favorable environment, Cuban church leaders have displayed a cautious approach to contention, resisting the temptation to become too outward or direct in their contentious language and activities and limiting their behavior to a strategy of indirect confrontation (explained further in chapter 5).

Table 3.1 organizes a history of the relationship between the Cuban Catholic Church and the revolutionary Cuban regime into four distinct time periods (plus a summation of the pre-revolutionary Cuban Catholic Church and its relationship to successive regimes during the period of the Cuban Republic) marked by broad changes in regime policies toward the church and church strategy vis-à-vis the regime. For each period, I juxtapose key state policies with the institutional standing of the church in the context of state positions, church interests, and church strategy.
TABLE 3.1
THE CUBAN CATHOLIC CHURCH’S RE-ENTRY INTO CONTENTIOUS POLITICS IN CUBA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Stage</th>
<th>Cuban Government Regime Status and Key State Policies</th>
<th>Cuban Church Institutional Status and Key Actions</th>
<th>Cuban Church Strategy</th>
<th>Critical Events Affecting Church Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1: Pre-1959</td>
<td>Spanish colonial administration (through 1898) gives way to tenuous democracy under US protectorate (1902-1934); Gen. Fulgencio Batista exercises autocratic rule after 1952 military coup d’etat</td>
<td>Cuban Church viewed as elitist, urban, foreign, exclusively white institution; church leaders generally defend status quo; popular religiosity strong while attendance at mass is weak; little church penetration in rural areas</td>
<td>Church hierarchy defends status quo; 1952-1959: Divided Hierarchy accommodates regime, many Catholic priests express support for democratic reform, some lower-level clergy and lay directly confront Batista regime</td>
<td>1952: Military coup d’etat led by Gen. Fulgencio Batista disrupts 12 years of democratic rule 1959: Cuban Revolution July 26th Movement overthrows Batista regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2: 1959-1962</td>
<td>New revolutionary government reorganizes Cuban polity into one-party socialist system; Consolidates rule and eliminates all organized opposition</td>
<td>Cuban Church criticizes new regime for moving toward communism, establishing relations with USSR and instituting agrarian reform while nationalizing private property, industry, and education</td>
<td>Direct Confrontation Church leaders condemn government policies and communism</td>
<td>1961: Bay of Pigs Invasion defeated by revolutionary armed forces 1962: Street protest leads to expulsion of 130 priests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3: 1962-1981</td>
<td>Revolutionary government continues institutionalization of state socialism; UMAPs intern social deviants, including some Catholics, in work camps (1966-68); regime does not outlaw practice of religion but prohibits proselytizing</td>
<td>Cuban Church remains a muted voice in public life; Conservatives dominate small cohort of progressives within the church; COCC denounces US trade embargo of Cuba, in line with government position</td>
<td>Silence The Cuban Church does not directly engage the Cuban government on a consistent basis, either to confront or support regime policies</td>
<td>1968: Small contingent of Cuban Church officials attend CELAM conference at Medellin 1979: Pope John Paul II elected to papacy 1979: Larger but still modest Cuban participation at CELAM conference at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Stage</td>
<td>Cuban Government Regime Status and Key State Policies</td>
<td>Cuban Church Institutional Status and Key Actions</td>
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<tr>
<td>T4: 1981-1993</td>
<td>Cuban economy experiences growth through the 1980s; government severely weakened by loss of economic benefactor, declares beginning of “special period” of economic crisis (1990); Government drops ban on membership by Christians in Cuban Communist Party (1991), removes references to atheism from the constitution (1991)</td>
<td>COCC initiates 5-year period of reflection (REC, 1981); issues pastoral letter echoing government positions on the external debt crisis (1985); organizes Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubana (1986), during which church leaders admit to failures of the past and express desire to evangelize within a revolutionary context; church attendance rises and loses much of its former social stigma in the context of a pervasive economic crisis</td>
<td>Rapprochement Church leaders and government find areas of policy convergence, without establishing permanent cooperative relations</td>
<td>1986: Cuban Church organizes ENEC conference 1990: Final stages of Soviet Union collapse spur severe economic crisis in Cuba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5: 1993-present</td>
<td>Government institutes economic reforms to quell effects of economic crisis; initiates media campaign against the Catholic Church following composition of El amor todo lo espera (1993); Castro visits Pope JP II in Rome and extends invitation to visit Cuba (1996); reinstates Christmas as national holiday in preparation for papal visit (1997) Cuban National Assembly ignores submission of the Varela Project, a dissident petition for political reform (2002); subsequent repressive ‘crackdown’ lands 75 active dissidents in prison, many representing the CLM (2003)</td>
<td>In El amor todo lo espera, COCC becomes more vocal in its criticism of the Castro regime, criticizing the government’s handling of economy and acknowledging the work of the dissidents (1993); Cuban Church experiences rise in attendance following papal visit; expands social services through Caritas Cuba, a Catholic agency permitted to import medicines and other items to Cuba restricted by US law; dissidents begin tying Catholic symbols to dissident organizations and activities; COCC criticizes general climate of repression, continues calls for reconciliation and peaceful reform</td>
<td>Indirect Confrontation Church formulates a politically contentious strategy in which the church does not make explicit its view of the illegitimacy of the regime but remains confrontational in the context of the national discourse by identifying certain negative political, economic, or social effects resulting from the regime’s governance, policies, and/or ideology.</td>
<td>1993: COCC issues confrontational pastoral letter El amor todo lo espera 1998: John Paul II visits Cuba 2002: Varela Project petition for reform delivered to Cuban government 2003: Government ‘crackdown’ on dissidence lands 75 activists in prison</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chapter is organized according to the time periods described in Table 3.1. I start with a historical account of the Cuban Catholic Church before the Revolution, focusing on the period marked by the establishment of the Cuban Republic/US Protectorate in 1902 that lasted until 1958. In this period the church was given a privileged status by the state though it was recognized as an elite and foreign institution by much of the Cuban populace and had weak roots in society, especially in rural areas. Next, I analyze the initial years of revolutionary rule from 1959 to 1962. Before the consolidation of revolutionary rule, the Cuban Church briefly but forcefully criticized the rapid communization of Cuba and was swiftly denounced by the new revolutionary regime, initiating a period of church-state tension that contrasted sharply with period of the Cuban Republic. This brief period of direct confrontation between church and state culminated with the Bay of Pigs invasion, a mission blessed by Cuban church officials that had already fled to the United States but whose failure secured the revolutionary regime’s rule over the island. A long period of tension and ambiguous relations ensued between church and state that lasted from 1962-1981. It was characterized by the marginalization of the church by the Castro regime and a church strategy of ‘silence’ in the face of a vast program of revolutionary political, economic, social, and cultural changes. The year 1981 marked the start of a new era characterized by a change in church leadership to a younger cohort of leaders who sought to redefine the church’s mission. This change was in large measure inspired by the new papacy of John Paul II and the CELAM conference at Puebla. The ENEC conference in 1986 was the climax of this new era of church assertiveness and rapprochement between church and state. The church
sought to redefine its mission in Cuban society and proceed with evangelization within a revolutionary context. These church leaders initially established closer ties with the Cuban government and offered a more conciliatory message than the Cuban Catholic Church had done during the revolutionary years. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union radically changed the strategic calculations of the church and for a time diminished the extent of government control over society. The writing of the pastoral letter *El amor todo lo espera* in 1993 marked the beginning of a new contentious relationship between the Cuban Church and the revolutionary regime (based on a church strategy of indirect confrontation) that has continued to the present day.

3.2 Time Periods

3.2.1 (T1). Pre-1959: The Pre-Revolutionary Church

The pre-revolutionary Cuban Catholic Church was characterized by theological conservatism and institutional weakness in a country where Christianity was a pervasive social and cultural phenomenon. While Cuba was a nation of believers and Christianity itself an integral part of Cuban identity or *Cubanidad*, throughout its history the institutional Cuban Catholic Church remained closely tied to Spain, focused more on elite education than extensive grassroots pastoral initiatives, and concentrated its personnel in urban rather than rural areas. Without

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any significant grassroots structures or social penetration, the Cuban Catholic Church catered to middle and upper classes, dominated almost exclusively by white Cubans, while popular forms of religiosity flourished amongst the lower classes and those of mixed racial backgrounds. Private Catholic education was the domain of the wealthy. In addition, Catholic institutions and personnel were concentrated in Cuba’s cities, leaving rural Cubans without access to the institutional church and its elite-based services. This lack of institutional strength combined with an unwillingness on the part of church officials to acknowledge or engage popular forms of spirituality and worship represented a set of critical weaknesses for the Cuban Catholic Church when it was eventually forced to confront revolutionary socio-political change.

Compounding the broad detachment of the institutional Cuban Church to Cuban society was the perception of the Catholic Church as a foreign institution. The Cuban Church clergy was predominantly Spanish, and though it was a Cuban-born priest named Felix Varela who in the early 19th century made one of the earliest elaborations of a liberal polity and a distinctly Cuban identity (and was subsequently exiled to the United States), the independence movements in the other Spanish colonies during the same time period resulted in an influx of conservative clergy to Cuba that voiced strong opposition to any attempts to break away from Spain. The Cuban clergy exhibited a majority of Spanish-born priests well into the 20th century. By the time of the 1895-98 Spanish-American-Cuban War, virulent anti-Spanish sentiment stirred on the island that was in part directed at a church overpopulated with what came to be perceived as a foreign clergy.
The formation of the new Cuban Republic after the Spanish-American-Cuban War resulted in Cuba assuming a neocolonial status vis-à-vis the United States and presented a new set of challenges for the church. The succession of Catholic Cuban presidents that followed the formation of the Republic (and a two million dollar payment the US government ordered the new state to pay the Cuban Church to recoup resources incurred during the war) sustained an identification of the Cuban Catholic Church with the prevailing system and established intimate relationships between the new political leaders of Cuba and the church hierarchy. Only after the war were Cuban clergy finally given higher positions in the hierarchy (Cuban bishops were named to head two new dioceses in Pinar del Rio and Cienfuegos, and Cuban-born Pedro Gonzalez Estrada was named Archbishop of Havana in 1903). But expanding American Protestant missionary work that made inroads into some rural areas provided new challenges to Catholic hegemony; Protestantism never became a serious religious competitor to the Catholic Church (and neither Catholicism nor Protestantism could ever claim the spiritual loyalty of even half the Cuban population), but what seemed like a Catholic monopoly on institutionalized religion in Cuba became recognizably plural starting in the early 20th century.

During the first half of the 20th century, the Cuban Church focused its pastoral efforts on the needs of the urban bourgeoisie, its primary source of vocations and

local financial support. In the 1920s, to incorporate more lay activists into the church, Catholic Action was introduced from Spain. However, according to Crahan (1979), while Catholic Action in Cuba opened decision-making to limited lay input, it tended to promote idealistic views of a new Christendom rather than forming a pastoral plan consistent with a Cuban reality that was marred by numerous socio-economic injustices and pervasive inequality. Furthermore, Catholic Action was concentrated in Havana and was linked exclusively to the Catholic schools and colleges that catered to the urban upper and middle class elite. High nominal identification with Catholicism was poorly reflected in weak attendance at mass. During the first half of the 20th century, the church offered no protest or commentary on the uneven development, political corruption, foreign intervention, and military brutality that punctuated Cuba’s social and political reality. The cordial nature of church–state relations led the Cuban government to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1936, who had opened a nunciature in 1935 and appointed the first Cuban Cardinal, Archbishop of Havana Mons. Manuel Arteaga, in 1946.

At the dawn of the tumultuous revolutionary years of the 1950s, the Cuban Catholic Church found itself closely aligned with the ruling elite in a country with a strong influence of religion in the conceptualization of polity and society but with weak institutional resources and social penetration. Political alliances with heads of

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16 Crahan, “Salvation through Christ or Marx”, 160.


18 ibid.
state persisted through General Fulgencio Batista’s 1952 military coup, which was blessed by the church. Church leaders accepted favors from the dictator, attended state functions, and received gifts put toward building new churches. When the institutional-standing of the church was eventually threatened by the new revolutionary regime, it had few grassroots structures or social influences to fall back on to stave off its eventual marginalization.

Fidel Castro’s 26th of July Movement was born in a failed attack on the Moncada military barracks in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba. Castro, who hid in the mountains for days after the attack before being captured, found an unlikely ally in the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Mons. Enrique Pérez y Serantes. Mons. Pérez, a Spaniard, appealed in a letter to Colonel Del Río Chaviano of Santiago de Cuba for the guarantee of the lives of the fugitives of the Moncada attack and for a swift return to normalcy and tranquility. Throughout the 1950s, Mons. Pérez revealed himself to be a sympathizer of not just the rebels but of the general discontent that pervaded the Cuban people, making him a uniquely socially-conscious leader amongst the conservative Cuban Church hierarchy.

Fidel Castro’s rebels also found some support for their revolutionary cause amongst lower-level clergy. In 1958, the hierarchy issued a pastoral letter calling for reconciliation between the Batista regime and the rebel forces. That same year, a group of Cuban priests sent a letter to the Vatican’s papal nuncio in Cuba criticizing the hierarchy for inaction in the face of vast and violent social changes. As Castro’s
rebellion started to gain strength and speed, a geographic schism joined the
hierarchical schism in the church that reflected a broader historical pattern of eastern
sympathy for rebellion centered in Santiago de Cuba, the traditional base for rebel
activity in Cuba and the home of Archbishop Pérez, while the west remained
characterized by reluctance to weigh in on the conflict with Havana housing the heart
of the church hierarchy. When the 26th of July Movement consolidated its territorial
holdings in the Sierra Maestra, Archbishop Pérez allowed local priests to serve as
chaplains for Fidel’s army. The bishops of Camaguey and Cienfuegos maintained
close ties with Batista, as did Agrupación Católica and the administrators of Cuba’s
largest Catholic university, Universidad Villanueva. Cardinal Arteaga unsuccessfully
sought a middle road between the hierarchy’s anti-revolutionary position and the
lower-level clergy’s support for the rebels, seeking reconciliation and dialogue
between the military and the armed rebel forces (these pleas could not unify the
church, though they would presage the church’s strategy in later years). Though he
had gained fortune for the church through the formation of political relationships in
the 1930s and 1940s, Cardinal Arteaga’s age and failing health reflected a lack of
energy and vision for the church’s role in Cuban society, and he generally ignored the
atrocities committed by the Batista regime.19

Many priests, members of Catholic Action, and lay Catholics championed and
served in an armed revolution that by the time of its triumph commandeered near
universal support in the Cuban population (including Jose Antonio Echevarría, the

19 ibid., 50.
martyred student leader who was killed in an attempt to kill Batista in Presidential Palace, and was a member of Catholic Action), save for the upper and landed classes. But Catholics who participated generally did so as individuals, not representatives of the church. The church hierarchy was conspicuously hesitant to offer official support to a rebellion that was ideologically ambiguous and could very well threaten its institutional interests and the elite status it commanded under the status quo.

3.2.2 (T2). 1959-1962: Direct Confrontation

Following the triumph of the revolutionary forces on New Year’s Day 1959, Cuban church officials found themselves both the patrons of churches experiencing rising attendance and the leaders of the country’s most prominent religious institution when religion was becoming the logical motivator for opposition to the new revolution. Archbishop Pérez praised the rebels and expressed confidence that they would return democracy to Cuba. But subsequent developments led to hardened divisions between Cuban Catholics and Cuban revolutionaries. In the years that followed, many of the clergy left for Miami along with the upper classes to whom they had traditionally ministered. Though Catholic and Protestant churches initially lent official support to the new government, even the church leaders that had consistently advocated the rebel cause such as Archbishop Pérez were soon forced to abandon their hopes for a return to democracy. For a short time, the priests and Catholics who remained in Cuba led the minority of voices that opposed the triumphant, consolidating, and supremely popular regime steamrolling toward left-

\(^{20}\) ibid.
wing authoritarianism. Their voices were swiftly silenced by a new revolutionary
government that would prove intolerant of all forms of directly confrontational
opposition.

The issues that created this division between the church and the regime were
basic: the most important position for the Catholic Church at the time was its
fundamental stance against communism. Tensions mounted over the rapid pace of
social reform and the deepening of relations between the new regime and the USSR.
The hierarchy began linking these and any proposed reforms too radical for its liking
to what it described as a systemic move toward Russian-style communism. In 1959
there were 65,000 students in Catholic educational institutions.21 Within two months
of assuming power, the new regime intimated that teaching religion in public schools
and the right to private education would be eliminated. The decree of agrarian reform
also caused division within the church between those who thought the revolution
would be democratic and reformist and those who saw the revolution as authoritarian
and socialist.

Revolutionary consolidation and the adoption of socialism led to a critical
rupture between church and state. In 1960, Archbishop Pérez openly criticized the
deepening relationship between the new regime and the USSR, stating that the church
needed to forcefully oppose communism. This provoked a reaction from Castro
himself, who made the iconic declaration that Catholics who opposed the Revolution

21 ibid., 68.
were crucifying Christ all over again. In August 1960, any semblance of optimism in church-state relations imploded when the Cuban bishops collectively issued a letter condemning communism and the relationship between Cuba and the USSR, and calling on the Cuban government to do the same. A war of words began as Castro accused the “falangista clergy” (indicating they were supporters of Franco and fascism) of trying to create divisions within the Cuban people.

There were Catholic voices that sought to encourage the church to recognize the genuineness of the revolution and adapt itself to the prevailing public mindset, though they were vastly outnumbered. To Cuban Church leaders and most Catholic institutions before Vatican II, acceptance of Marxist ideology entailed embracing atheism, a nonnegotiable position for the church. Before Vatican II the international church had envisioned no theology or practical doctrine for cooperation with a communist regime. The Cuban Church upheld a position that it would have no contact, much less cooperation, with a communist government so as not to lend legitimacy to the new Marxist regime. The government in turn employed a propaganda campaign to delegitimize the church as foreign, elitist, and a supporter of counterrevolutionaries. The new regime’s nationalization of industry and social services included Catholic schools and hospitals.

In January 1960 Mons. Eduardo Boza Masvidal, an outspoken anticommunist and the president of Villanueva University, replaced the rapidly failing Cardinal Arteaga as Archbishop of Havana. The hierarchy actively participated in a war of
words that continued throughout the year, as church leaders and the revolutionary regime traded condemnations of each other. An August 1960 pastoral from the COCC stated, “We condemn communism,” and excoriated the dictatorial regime for turning the Cuban population into veritable slaves. By this time the United States had already recalled its ambassadors and imposed economic sanctions on Cuba. In April 1961, the Bay of Pigs Invasion cemented the fault-lines between the Cuban Catholic Church and the Cuban regime. Catholic priests that had already left Cuba served as chaplains for the Bay of Pigs Invasion force and carried letters calling on all Catholics to rise against the government. Led by Manuel Artime, a former leader of Agrupación Católica Universitaria in Cuba, the invaders proclaimed the Catholic nature of their expedition and placed a crucifix on the shoulder patches of all the uniforms of the invading forces.

The failure of the Bay of Pigs invaders provoked a new wave of emigration of clergy and faithful alike from Cuba. Through 1961, the government employed harsh measures against the church, expulsing all foreign clergy from the country and prohibiting the public expression of religion. A dispute over permission for a religious procession led by Mons. Boza Masdival in August 1961 during which participants shouted antirevolutionary slogans, erupting in a melee that resulted in the death of a passing teenager and led to the expulsion of 130 priests and religious to Spain in 1962. The Cuban Catholic Church had earned its reputation as a vocal, confrontational, oppositional actor in the first three years of the revolutionary regime. With the nationalization of education and social services complete and the church
stripped of virtually all its social influence and most of its institutional resources and human capital, the government settled on an official policy that Catholics could participate in the building of revolutionary society as citizens but could not exhibit or proclaim their Catholic identity.

Perhaps the most significant factor that condemned the Cuban Church to a period of silence was the emigration of a great portion of its clergy and of practicing Catholics. As argued in Stevens-Arroyo (1994), the unique political, social, and economic pressures of revolutionary socialist upheaval (including vast programs to redistribute economic wealth, in addition to the delegitimization of religious identity) meant that the social class that dominated the initial wave of migration was likely to be urban Catholic. Miami became the primary destination for exiles, and Catholic practice increased amongst migrants when they arrived in the US. Though these departees may have believed they would be settling temporarily rather than permanently in the US, their choice of exile over confrontation allowed the revolutionary regime to stay in power and consolidate its rule. It also led to a permanent rupture in the Cuban Church between the leadership who stayed and the majority of its faithful who left. Without a base, church leaders were limited in exercising influence and voicing opposition within the new system. The flight of clergy and most of the upper and upper-middle classes left the remaining clergy crippled, retreating within the church and unable to confront the challenges of revolution with no social base of support. Having taken stock of the direction, speed, and popularity of revolutionary change and the inalterable movement toward
communism, church leaders calculated that silence would be the best strategy to insure the survival of the institutional church in some form that would preserve its institutional and moral autonomy, in the midst of a sweeping cooptation of all of Cuba’s private institutions.

3.2.3 (T3). 1962-1981: Silence and the Search for a Mission

The Cuban Revolution, rather than transforming the Cuban Church, reinforced traditional religious policies and behavior, making the church less open and innovative than most other Latin American churches. The Catholic Church’s position in Cuba, which had been one of privilege from the time of Spanish colonization through its period as a republic and US protectorate, became one of highly subdued autonomy under the revolutionary government. After asserting itself confrontationally during the first three years of revolutionary rule, the church turned inward and ceased its confrontational activities, having lost a large portion of its base of believers to emigration and exile, as well as much of its clergy. A period characterized by ‘silence’, tension, and at times ambiguously accommodative relations ensued between church and state for the first time in Cuban history.

The Cuban Revolution was an external experience for the Cuban Church, something that occurred outside the walls of its temples in the larger, radicalizing society around them. Church leaders responded to this external revolution and the attacks on its institutional integrity, social legitimacy, and the decimation of its financial, institutional, and human resources, with a strategy of reverting inward. The clergy that remained in Cuba refused to participate in or even recognize any potential
value in the revolutionary process going on around it. Cuban church leaders had no strength or strategy to confront these processes, and chose silence and retreat in an attempt to survive the revolution with some semblance of the institutional church intact. This experience, combined with the move in the international church toward a more progressive message (reflected in the transition toward creating a church capable of addressing and functioning within the modern world during the Second Vatican Council from 1962-1965) deepened the isolation felt by members of the Cuban Catholic Church.

Clergy in Cuba that have remained on the island throughout the entire span of the revolutionary period remember the 1960s and 1970s as a dark age. Padre Teodoro Becerril of Havana recalls the cloud of oppression that fell over the Cuban Church:

In the first years of the Revolution, there was much tension, discrimination, and incomprehension... The 60s and 70s were periods of tension, of a lack of liberty. The one social aspect of this time present in Cuba that was against the Revolution was Catholic social doctrine. For example, the church didn’t accept the elimination of private property, much less the total state monopoly over Cuban society.22

But church leaders did not have the tools to promote their social doctrine, much less stop the processes of nationalization and socialization of education and social services. By 1962, 70 percent of Catholic priests and 90 percent of Catholic religious

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22 Padre Teodoro Becerril, interview with author, Havana, 10 May 2006.
fled or were forced to leave (though by 1963 some had decided to return). Mons. Alfredo Petit, currently Auxiliary Bishop of Havana, reflects on the social delegitization of Catholicism that accompanied the institutional decimation of the Catholic Church: “Our private schools were nationalized. Catholics were excluded from all public life, they couldn’t profess their faith openly.” Mons. Petit was among a group of Catholic priests that were taken to military detention camps in the mid-1960s, along with individuals from other groups deemed socially undesirable and untrustworthy for incorporation into the revolutionary armed forces:

In 1966 I was personally taken in the middle of the night to a concentration camp in Camaguey. There were about 50,000 people there, Catholics (priests and laity), homosexuals, thieves, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, who were treated worst of all. They were tortured and tied to barbed wire naked with mosquitos biting them all over. I brought someone water, and an official asked me why I would do it. I said, ‘This is a Nazi concentration camp!’ These experiences, one never forgets.

These Military Units to Aid Production (UMAPs) were later admitted as errors by the Castro government and closed down in 1968. But the damage was done. The members of the church that were brought to the camps, a group that included the current Cardinal Jaime Ortega, would not forget the experience.


25 ibid.

26 Kirk, Between God and the Party, 68.
With so many opponents in exile and after the expulsion of 130 priests in 1962, the Cuban Church could pose no threat to the revolutionary government. Overt confrontational action and tension subsided as the regime consolidated the social and political restructuring of the island. A point of contention between Cuban Catholics and the Vatican was the appointment of Mons. Cesare Zacchi as papal nuncio. Nuncio Zacchi sought to reduce distrust and ameliorate relations between church and state, preaching that the church in all places should adapt itself to all regimes, so as not to abandon the flock. He had an excellent working relationship with Fidel Castro, but by virtue of his stance in favor of reconciliation further entrenched the Cuban Church into silence: they would not support revolutionary policy, but did not have the capacity to confront the regime, especially as it reached an accommodative relationship with the Vatican.

Among the clergy who remained in Cuba, a small minority constituted progressive Catholics in support of dialogue, though they were outnumbered by the conservative voices that preferred silence. The dominance of hard-line anti-communists over a smaller group of moderate supporters of dialogue further entrenched the strategy of silence. Unable to reconcile differences within the church, leaders did not offer commentary on the social and political issues facing Cuba in the 1960s. As church officials retreated further from the new social reality around them, silence led some moderates to leave the church and some hard-liners to leave the country. However, the deaths of several old guard church leaders at the end of the

1960s and early 1970s (including Archbishop Pérez of Santiago de Cuba) allowed the ascension of younger clergy into higher positions in the hierarchy, more attuned to needs of the church in revolutionary Cuba. These young church leaders were not necessarily predisposed toward accommodation, but, having come of age during the revolutionary years, they did begin to seek ways to evangelize within a revolutionary context.

Cuban church leaders were present in small numbers at the CELAM conferences at Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979. As the Latin American Church was moving in a progressive direction the core of the Cuban Catholic Church remained conservative and unmoved by the new theologies emerging from Latin America. A progressive segment of the church leadership emerged in the 1970s that was led by newly appointed Archbishop Oves of Havana. He, along with Mons. Carlos Manuel de Cêspedes (the great-grandson of the leader of the 1868 fight for independence of the same name), worked closely with Nuncio Zacchi to seek a new direction for the Cuban Church. In 1969, two key statements were released by the COCC: first, in April, the bishops denounced the US blockade of Cuba in line with the regime’s position, pointing to the blockade’s deleterious effects on the Cuban population. This was the common ground issue that would prevent church-state relations from regressing into all out confrontation and was acknowledged by the regime as a positive move toward cordial relations. Second, in September, the bishops stressed the need to modernize the church’s interpretation of religious life,

reflecting the general impact of the CELAM conference at Medellín, which was mentioned repeatedly in the letter. Fidel Castro, visiting Chile in 1971 and witnessing the fraternal, constructive relationship between the newly elected Marxist Salvador Allende and Santiago’s Cardinal Silva, began speaking of the grand potential for cooperation between Christians and Marxists. While these overtures were in part meant to constitute steps toward achieving broad solidarity with the Cuban people, Cuban Catholics in particular regarded these letters with suspicion and general rejection. The Cuban bishops would later admit that though they attempted to incorporate the progressive ideas of Medellín into their theology, they did not feel the message of the conference addressed their reality. And despite the rhetoric, no pastoral activities resembling the innovative strategies employed in Latin America at the time, such as the formation of Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs), were enacted in Cuba. It was Protestants, rather than Catholics, that developed a theology to recognize and incorporate socialist teachings into their pastoral practices, eventually incorporating themselves into a state-organized Consejo Evangélico in the early 1990s that included all Protestant denominations and dealt cordially with the regime as a single institutional body.

Although the Castro regime has never banned the practice of religion, the church was allowed to engage in only marginal social activities. Proselytizing was still illegal and church attendance was still considered antisocial. The progressive religious fervor and innovative pastoral strategies that gripped many Latin American Catholics had not taken hold in Cuba. The Cuban Catholic Church had finally
become during the 1960s and 1970s a Cuban institution, at least in terms of the nationalities of its clergy: by 1968, all of Cuba’s bishops were born in Cuba. But its ranks were still depleted and internal conflicts between conservatives and reform-minded church leaders persisted, and its passive laity did not feel comfortable openly professing their faith, either socially or in civil activities. Heading into the 1980s, the general aura of the Catholic Church in Cuba was that of a marginalized, quiescent institution, a relic of a pre-Revolutionary society, causing Crahan (1979) to write, “Only if substantial numbers of Cubans feel a strong need for an otherworldly explanation of life is there a likelihood that the churches will recuperate.”

Some Cuban church leaders continuously argued that their congregations were stronger for the constraints imposed by revolutionary society, that those who still attended church did so out of profound religious conviction – in effect, quantity had been replaced by quality. Unable to foster support for dialogue within the church, a sickly Mons. Oves resigned as Archbishop of Havana in 1981. He was replaced by Mons. Jaime Ortega y Alamino, a 39-year old bishop who would come to represent the anticommunist core of the Cuban Church, as well as a generation that came of age during the revolutionary period rather than before it. Mons. Ortega led a movement of younger church leaders who were educated in state schools rather than private

29 Crahan, “Salvation through Christ or Marx”, 181.

30 ibid., 166-167.
Catholic universities. These church leaders now sought a rebirth of Cuban Catholicism, one that recognized revolutionary society and found a role for the church within it.

The 1979 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) at Puebla marked a turning point for the Latin American Catholic Church. Though the Latin American bishops reaffirmed the preferential option for the poor established at the Medellín conference, a balance between the influence of conservatives and progressives emerged that was not evident at Medellín, when progressives dominated CELAM. In addition to articulating a preferential option for the poor, the question of authority was broached with a renewed emphasis placed on acknowledging the highest positions in the hierarchy as the leaders and spokesmen of the Catholic Church. Under the new papacy of John Paul II, the Vatican began to reassert the importance of maintaining strict lines of authority, reigning in the grassroots structures created by progressive church leaders. Along with enforcing tighter lines of authority, John Paul II sought to delegitimize liberation theology. The CELAM conference at Puebla inspired the Cuban Church in two profound ways: first, Puebla witnessed the ascension of a new pontiff, a Pole who had lived under communism just as Cuban Catholics had, who was sure to articulate a worldview that more closely corresponded to that of Cuban church leaders. Cuban church leaders could now identify with the supreme pontiff of the Catholic Church in new and profound ways. Second, though Cubans again felt the content of the Puebla conference and the views of the Latin American church in general didn’t reflect their reality – that of a church
that had experienced a sweeping social revolution - the stylistic achievement of Puebla created the impetus for Cuban church leaders under the leadership of Mons. Ortega, who collectively admired this kind of self-reflective conference, to organize an ecumenical conference for the Cuban Church – a “Pueblita” for Cuba. The COCC, under new leadership and inspired to reflect on 20 years of revolution in Cuba, initiated a five-year period of reflection that would culminate in the ENEG, el Encuentro Nacional Ecclesial Cubano. From this period of reflection, the church emerged finally willing to participate in Cuban society and formulate its mission in a revolutionary context. Participants disclosed in later decades the extent of the inner struggle church leaders had in recognizing that revolutionary Cuba was a permanent social and political phenomenon. They also revealed the extent to which they stayed attuned to the potential for profound political opportunities to change their strategy for dealing with the state and engaging Cuban society. Though he fostered the development of a move toward rapprochement during the 1980s, Ortega had been among the priests interned at the UMAPs in the 1960s. Such experiences, one doesn’t forget.

3.2.4 (T4). 1981-1993: Reemergence and Political Opportunity

The failure to recognize the rising social discontent in the 1950s and formulate a pastoral message that reflected that discontent, the directly confrontational posture of the initial years of the Revolution, the period of silence, retreat, and ambivalent accommodation that followed, and the revival of Cuban Catholicism while recognizing the resilience of revolutionary society were all the result of processes directed by the bishops and church leaders that made up the COCC. Throughout
Cuban history, very few social movements sought to influence the church hierarchy or engage the Cuban Church as a potential ally to their cause (though religion itself was often a powerful cultural motivator in social and political movements). The Cuban Church itself did not forge roots in Cuban society or engage in broad evangelization beyond the urban centers. Crahan (1989) notes that in the lead up to the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban Church had no grassroots organizations to mobilize, nor had any church members worked to foment a popular movement within the church.\textsuperscript{31} Catholic institutions were the domain of the upper and middle classes. Consequently, efforts to form new perspectives and theologies that addressed social and political issues during the 1960s and 1970s were not made in dialogue with other churches or through international conferences but were internal processes for the Cuban Church. It had been stripped of its flock through migration and gutted of its institutional resources before it could even consider the new social doctrines and modern pastorals that emerged from Vatican II and Medellín. In the early 1980s, with a new cadre of leadership and a new Pope, the Cuban Catholic Church again sought to redefine its own mission.

The COCC also decided it would engage the laity in carving out a new social role and theological orientation for the Cuban Church. During their 1983 \textit{ad limina} visit to Rome, Pope John Paul II encouraged members of the COCC to be an active presence in Cuban society. Under the leadership of then Archbishop Ortega, the

\textsuperscript{31} Margaret E. Crahan, “Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Nicaragua,” in Mainwaring and Wilde, eds. \textit{The Progressive Church in Latin America}, 58.
Cuban Church for the first time sought the counsel of its congregations to form a new pastoral.

In 1981 the Cuban bishops called for a five year period of reflection, known as the Reflexión Eclesial Cubano (REC), that would culminate in the 1986 ENEC. Reflecting on the significance of the ENEC for the trajectory of the Cuban Church, Cardinal Ortega stated in 2008:

The ENEC conference meant that doors would be opened, visits would be made, and a new spirit would be infused in our communities. The Church needed to realize its mission here, in the new reality brought on by the Revolution…Our faithful needed to understand this and arise from their knees, and the State needed to recognize that the Church has a mission that is not limited to the walls of their temples.32

More than simply a religious event, the ENEC aimed to re-establish the historical legacy, cultural integrity, and social role of the Cuban Catholic Church. The canonization of Fr. Felix Varela, an early 19th century advocate of Cuban independence, was promoted to Rome by the COCC as a priority for the Cuban Church. During the five-year period of reflection that preceded the event, known as the Cuban Ecclesial Reflection (Reflexión Eclesial Cubana – REC), clergy discussed with their laity what particular challenges they faced as Catholics in revolutionary society, and what they needed from their church. According to Mons. Ramón Suárez Polcari of Havana, “The final document of ENEC was a very great achievement, reached after five years of preparation. Our ecclesial communities, their thoughts and

experiences, were reflected in the document. We wanted to reach an understanding of what the church is from within.” The final document of the ENEC conference stated that the Cuban Church would be, above all things, a missionary church, in line with the direction emphasized by Pope John Paul II. Essentially, Cuban church leaders decided that the church needed to invest energy into its mission of evangelization and organize its flock for social action in ways that had no precedent in Cuba.

Two major themes that signaled new directions for the Cuban Church emerged from the ENEC: first, church leaders admitted their own errors and shortcomings of the past and expressed their determination to update their approach to evangelization and for the church to become an active socio-religious force in Cuban society. In admitting errors of the past and wishing to cast itself as an important Cuban institution, the COCC acknowledged its historical disconnect with Cuban nationalism. Church leaders lamented that in 1960 and 1961 they had advised those who felt persecuted to flee the island, and cautioned Catholics against going into exile. The church affirmed that its leaders in Cuba were staying, and they implored their faithful to stay as well. This also signaled the extent to which Cuban church leaders distanced themselves from the church in exile, a church they believed was far removed from Cuba’s social reality, and proclaimed their independence and autonomy as Cuba’s national church. The church came into its own not only by

drawing contrasts with the revolutionary regime but with the extreme confrontational views of the United States and the Cuban community in exile. According to Padre Fernando De la Vega of Havana, the priority of the ENEC conference was not only to recognize that the Revolution had produced a new fundamental social reality, but to convince Cuban Catholics that it was worth the trouble to stay in Cuba. Just as the church was using the occasion to fix itself, Cuban Catholics should try to fix Cuba from within: “In 1986, the principal objective was to formulate a plan that addressed the national reality…In the past, many were thinking about the Spanish civil war and chose to flee. The state for its part was very hostile. The goal of ENEC was to say, ‘Don’t leave. Let’s see what we have to offer here.’”  

Cuban Catholics, the church seemed to learn, constituted a unique community that needed their active support. The Cuban Church would become a missionary church and begin planting roots amongst the destitute of Cuban society as they had never done before.

Second, the bishops resigned themselves to the fact that the country was socialist and that they must form a pastoral in the context of a revolutionary society organized according to socialist principles with socialist institutions. Not only did this entail forming a pastoral in a situation where they did not have access to public media and could not build Catholic educational or health services as they had traditionally administered in the past, it meant that the church could not simply wait out a regime that was firmly planted in Cuba, politically and culturally. So the church expressed a desire to cooperate, even recognizing some achievements of the

34 Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.
Revolution (such as advances in education and the public health of the country) while reserving critiques for certain social ills that had yet to be resolved (such as disintegrating family life and a penchant for crime in Cuba’s youth). They distanced themselves from their directly confrontational political statements of the early 1960s, when communism and totalitarianism were outright condemned. The Cuban Church emerged from the ENEC with a theology of *communion*, aiming to promote the union of the Cuban people in love, overcoming all separations and divisions. Cardinal Ortega has stated that arriving at a theology of communion signified a rejection of two other strains of Catholic theological thought: first, liberation theology, which the Cardinal acknowledges was preeminent in Latin America at the time the reflection process began, but, he argues, did not reflect Cuban realities, could not animate Cuban Catholics, and was used by some to promote a Christian brand of Marxist analysis and by others to promote violence to achieve their ends. Second, the Cuban Church rejected a theology of reconciliation, articulated by a French theologian Fr. Rene David as a method of overcoming divisions between Marxists and Christians. Reconciliation, according to the Cardinal, was necessary, but was not something limited to conflicts between Marxists and Christians but that had to take place amongst all Cubans.  

35 Avoiding these disputes and promoting a theology of communion, the Cuban Church emerged from the ENEC with renewed vigor and a clearer sense of their mission in Cuban society.

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The 1980s were constructive years for church-state relations. Catholics and Protestants came together to support Rev. Jesse Jackson’s visit to Cuba in 1984 to commemorate the opening of a civil rights center celebrating the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The government began presenting a more favorable image of the Catholic Church through its media outlets, acknowledging the church’s stance on social justice throughout Latin America. A series of interviews with Fidel Castro by Frei Betto (a Dominican friar and liberation theologian from Brazil who had been imprisoned for four years by the military dictatorship for smuggling people out of Brazil) were published in Cuba in 1985 under the title *Fidel y la religión*, in which he reflected on the philosophical similarities between Christianity and Marxism. In 1985 the COCC issued a pastoral letter on the external debt crisis in the developing world that reflected the position of the Cuban government. The late 1980s saw the expansion of Catholic charitable endeavors for the elderly and the destitute as the Cuban Church sought to fill certain social spaces without supplanting government educational and health services. The return of Catholic charitable services was seen by some as a tradeoff for agreeing not to engage in direct political confrontation. In this way, the church sought to carve out a space for itself by working within the system rather than against it.

But the gains made by the Cuban Church were limited. Though Cuban Catholics were reenergized by the ENEC, the Cuban Church did not see an immediate increase in church attendance by new followers. The Catholic Church was not given access to state-run media. The Cuban government was not lauded in the homilies of
church leaders. The events of 1980s did not bring church and state into a warm or friendly terrain; conservatives within the church and hard-liners in the government recoiled at the appearance of a convergence of interests, which served to increase mutual suspicion. Consequently neither institution made gestures toward establishing permanent cooperative relations. But what seemed to be arrived at by each institution was the long in coming mutual recognition that each had a role to play in bettering the condition of the Cuban people. This status quo of peaceable coexistence, however, was interrupted by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Cuban government had a mixed record in the 1980s. The migration exodus of thousands of disaffected Cubans at Mariel in 1980 and the defeat of Castro ally Maurice Bishop of Grenada in 1983 by US forces were offset by the rise of the Sandinista Revolution, bringing to power in Nicaragua a friendly leftist government. The late-1970s through the mid-1980s was also the most stable period of growth in the Cuban economy since the Revolution came to power. But the decade closed with portents for disaster for Cuba. By 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s economic benefactor since the 1960s, began impacting the Cuban economy. The loss of Soviet oil subsidies and the premium prices they paid for Cuban nickel, sugar, and other agricultural products completely undercut the financial base of the island’s centralized economy.

The crisis spurred by the collapse also created a spiritual vacuum that did begin to feed church attendance in ways the ENEC had not. In 1990, the Archdiocese
of Havana performed 33,000 baptisms, up from 7,000 a year in the late 1970s. That same year the COCC sent a private letter to Fidel Castro criticizing the government’s monopoly on power and calling for modest political reforms. The tone of this private letter represented a striking change from the 1985 letter issued by the bishops on the subject of the external debt crisis that echoed many of the Cuban government’s positions. Castro reacted during a speech in Brazil by accusing the church hierarchy of never identifying with the revolution and waiting for the right moment to act against it.

Castro’s reaction in Brazil was the first public sign that a potential church-state schism was brewing in Cuba. Yet, finding itself in a severely weakened position as a result of the crisis, the government moved to open space for Christians. To quell rising discontent, the Cuban government enacted a series of reforms related directly to the regime’s traditionally harsh stance toward organized religion. In 1991, the PCC dropped its ban on membership of Christians, leaving the door open for Catholics and other religious persons to join. The COCC responded that unless the PCC renounced its atheism it was still morally impossible for Catholics to enter the party. The following year, the constitutional assembly amended the constitution to make Cuba a “secular” rather than “atheist” state. These gains emboldened the church leadership. In 1993, they would deliver a critical pastoral letter that permanently changed the nature of church-state relations in Cuba.

International events affected the calculations of Cuban church leaders throughout the revolutionary years, most notably the CELAM conferences at Medellín and Puebla: the progressive tone of Medellín revealed the extent to which Cuban church leaders felt disconnected from the broader Latin American Church and although they produced a pastoral letter in 1969 that reflected a progressive line of religio-political thought, very few steps were taken to formulate a new pastoral program or to create new forms of church organization similar to what was taking place in Latin America. The Puebla conference, however, did inspire the Cuban Church to reorganize and reassert itself in Cuban society, something acknowledged by Cuban church leaders not only for the more balanced approach between progressive and conservative messages apparent in the CELAM conference but the presence of a new pope that had lived under communist rule in Poland. While these events changed the relationship of the Cuban Church to the international church in profound ways, they also influenced how Cuban church leaders made strategic calculations in an oppressive society. They did not, however, affect the domestic calculations or behavior of the Cuban government.

The concept of changing political opportunities offers an explanation as to why the Cuban Catholic Church profoundly altered its behavior in the early 1990s and entered into contentious politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the dramatic event that fundamentally altered Cuba’s domestic political and economic environment, creating the need for the government to open some spaces that would relieve rising social discontent, as it continued policies that clamped down on overt
forms of oppositional political action. It was not until the Soviet collapse that the
Cuban government found itself in a severely weakened position, the first such time
since the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. This opened a political opportunity for
church leaders to again change their strategy and move toward formulating an
innovatively confrontational one. Unlike the CELAM conferences, this event
changed the calculations of both church and state, allowing church leaders to
formulate a strategy that more genuinely reflected their feelings toward the
revolutionary regime, though they continued to proceed with caution and prudence.

Making this theory transferable from its traditional focus on grassroots social
movements to a hierarchical religious institution involves thinking of the church not
only as an institution with corporate interests but as an organization of individual
actors with a social and political agenda. Consigned to the opposition, and therefore
without government channels through which to protect its interests, the church began
behaving like an institutional movement that needed to mobilize its members, in
many ways similar to a nascent social movement. The church was a unique
institution that functioned outside government channels and was mobilizing an
expanding base amidst a social and economic crisis. In an authoritarian environment
with high risks for acting confrontationally, the church behaved like a catalyst
between changing social conditions and social movement formation, using its
contentious actions and institutional autonomy to inspire social mobilization. It was a
top-down process that began with the church response to the new environment.
Church responses to the political opportunity structure eventually facilitated the
formation and mobilization of social movements made up of dissident Cuban civil actors, formed within a broader institutional movement led by the church.

3.2.5 (T5). 1993-present: *El amor todo lo espera* and Indirect Confrontation

Mons. Ramón Suárez Polcari sums up the process that led to the writing of *El amor todo lo espera* and its reception by the Cuban government in this way:

> It was an important moment for the church, which took a position against the government that stemmed from its faith, according to an analysis of many problems with Cuban society. It was written with a desire for improvement, not to enter into endless combat over politics. The government didn’t understand it that way and didn’t want to understand it that way. Soon after, the government began a very strong campaign against the bishops, against the bishops above all. From the beginning this was an attempt to block all the activities of the bishops.37

Though he places the blame for the ensuing tension between church and state on a misreading of church intentions on the part of the government, others within the church have more readily acknowledged the confrontational intentions of *El amor todo lo espera*. Padre De la Vega reiterates the heightened tension this created between church and state, placing more emphasis on the contentious intentions of the Cuban Church when composing the letter and the recognition of the favorable environment that allowed them to produce a confrontational statement:

> It was a great pastoral letter, but the government didn’t understand it. It was written in a tone of confrontation…The position of the church was no longer so defensive. Many of the fears were eliminated, due to the fall of the socialist camp. The Revolution began accepting the participation of religious followers in the Communist Party…The key is always the game with imperialism. Many things stated in the letter began to be addressed in a

round-about way through the media. It was a way of addressing real problems. But other important issues were not addressed, because they are part of the ideological structure.38

Here, Padre De la Vega refers to the limited targets the bishops chose to confront: the one-party system headed by Fidel Castro was not outrightly denounced, but the bishops did choose to critique certain social, political, and economic ills. Even more direct is Mons. Petit, Auxiliary Bishop of Havana, responding to the charge that government officials felt the letter was too tough a critique: “El amor todo lo espera was just, not tough…it speaks of the reality here, and it continues to represent the truth…I was one of the writers…We said what we said because nobody had ever said anything like that before.”39

El amor todo lo espera is a pastoral letter written in 1993 by the 11 Cuban bishops that made up the COCC at the time. Divided into 81 paragraphs, the letter contains the sharpest critique of Cuban society and government written by the Cuban bishops since the contentious anti-revolutionary statements of the 1960s (which led to the church’s marginalization in Cuban society). Written three years after the Cuban government lost its primary economic benefactor, the bishops made the choice to write from a different perspective than had been put forth in the final documents of the ENEC: in 1986, the bishops formulated their plan to engage Cuban society and become a “missionary church” while recognizing the Cuban Revolution as a permanent political phenomenon. In El amor todo lo espera, for the first time, the

38 Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.
bishops took the perspective that Fidel Castro’s socialist regime would likely fall in the coming years, as had the regimes of Russia’s network of Eastern European satellites. Reflecting the dire economic situation spurred by the Soviet collapse, the bishops accused the revolutionary regime of poor economic and political governance. Motivated by their experiences with repression and marginalization as well as a desire to establish connections with Cubans suffering through the crisis, the bishops make a litany of suggestions for political reform, thus opening doors for opposition groups to seek support in the church. *El amor todo lo espera* in many ways could be viewed as a political manifesto, signaling to existing and prospective dissidents where the Cuban Church’s political sympathies lied. It represented the start of an entirely new confrontational strategy and permanently changed the nature of church-state relations in Cuba.

The bishops intended the letter as an act of confrontation. They had found the proper time to air their grievances and signal to society that the Cuban Church had a unique function: it was a place not just for Catholics but for the disaffected and discontented, for those unsympathetic to the Revolution. Marking as it did the re-entry of the Cuban Church into contentious politics, the letter was constitutive of the political strategy that was to come. Rather than denounce the system and its ideology, as had been done in the church’s earlier directly confrontational statements, the bishops of the COCC found ways to critique with a conciliatory tone, and draw contrasts between regime ideology and church doctrine in the spirit of dialogue and reconciliation. The political content of the letter (examined further in chapter 5), was
framed not with words like condemn, combat, defeat, or overcome, but rather with reconciliation, dialogue, pluralism, and reform. The repeated calls for dialogue imply significant distance between the church and the regime on the political and social spectrum, a stark change from the references to common ground found in the final ENEC documents.

The bishops’ first political statements in the letter discuss how the Church will treat the subject of political confrontation: “The church cannot have a political program, because its sphere is another, but the Church can and must give its moral judgment about all that which is humane or inhumane, always with respect to the proper autonomy of each sphere.”40 This perspective differs sharply with the overtly anticommunist statements of the 1959-1962 period, as well as the strategic silence of 1962-1981. The signatories forcefully claim to derive authority to discuss political themes from the pastoral constitution “Joy and Hope,” no.76 of the Second Vatican Council, which they state offers a “very secure doctrine” about this theme:

We don’t identify ourselves with any political or ideological party, because the faith is not an ideology, although the church is not indifferent to the ethical content of such parties. Our points of view are not rooted in any political model, but it interests us to know the level of humanity that such models contain. We speak, then, without commitments and without being pressured by anybody.41

In the letter, the bishops come across not only as a religious institution that is seeking an ecumenical justification for treading in political waters, but as an autonomous

40 ibid., 404.
41 ibid.
institution in Cuba claiming the authority to be an oppositional political voice, something that did not exist in revolutionary Cuba until the then 11 bishops of the COCC signed this letter. The only thing that had changed in Cuba was the crippling economic crisis, brought on by the loss of their economic benefactor and the efforts of the US to isolate them from the global community. The structure and authoritative reach of the regime remained unchanged. The repression of oppositional voices and imprisonment of political activists was continuous. But the bishops go further in the letter than they had at any time since the early 1960s, criticizing the official ideology, limits on freedom, the state security apparatus, excessive numbers of political prisoners, and the general discrimination against any political, philosophical, or religious plurality in the country.

Under the heading, “The Situation of Our Country,” the bishops state that “34 years” (referencing the duration of the revolutionary regime’s hold on power to that point) is a sufficient period to take a historic look at a process that was born “full of promises and ideals, some achieved, but as has happened so many times, reality does not coincide in all cases with the idea that we began with, because it is not always possible to adapt reality to our dreams.”42 The rhetoric paints the picture of the Revolution at a crossroads; taking stock of revolutionary history is recognition of the idea that the Revolution will have an end – something that was not hinted in the ENEC documents that expressed a desire to work and evangelize within the revolutionary system and find a role for the church within a revolutionary context.

42 ibid., 406.
Here, the bishops explain their entry into a discussion of political issues by basing their critiques on a spiritual-moral foundation inherent to Catholic religiosity: “We, pastors of the Church, are not politicians and we know well that this limits us, but it also gives us the possibility to speak from the treasure the Lord has entrusted to us: the Word of God explicated by the Magisterium and the millenary experience of the Church.”43 What is repeatedly stressed in the letter is a desire for openness and honesty in words, concepts referenced as if they were values that had long ago been discarded by the Revolution: “The Cuban people are a wise people, not only possessed of the wisdom that comes from books, but of that other wisdom that comes from life experience. For this reason they hope for a frank, friendly, and free dialogue in which everyone can express their feelings verbally and cordially.”44 Recognizing the contentious history of church-state relations under the Revolution, the bishops anticipated an adversarial response from the regime and warned that “with force one can gain an adversary, but lose a friend, and it’s better to have a friend at your side than an adversary on the floor.”45 The bishops further ground their testimonial not only in a religious cultural-meaning system, but in what they call the “voice of the streets”, the Cubans who come into the church expressing their discontent with the system, hoping for the kind of dialogue the church could provide as a respected, autonomous Cuban institution:

43 ibid., 404.

44 ibid., 411.

45 ibid.
We must recognize that in Cuba there are distinct judgments about the situation of the country and possible solutions and that proponents of dialogue are finding their voice in the streets, in work centers, and in homes. It is evident that the paths that will lead to reconciliation and peace, like that of dialogue, undeniably have popular support and, besides, much sympathy and prestige...We think that rejecting dialogue is losing the right to express one’s own opinion and accepting dialogue opens the possibility of contributing to understanding between all Cubans to construct a dignified and peaceful future.46

Calls for dialogue necessarily imply that up to that time, there had been an absence of dialogue. This was one of the principal critiques of Cuban society leveled by the bishops. The bishops began presenting themselves as mediators, representative of an institutional neutrality in Cuban society, and a voice for dialogue. Advocating dialogue implied that there was a worthy opposition that could enter into dialogue with the regime, though no internal opposition was recognized by the government, nor had dissident groups to this point mobilized or unified any civil opposition. The church seemed to speaking for a multitude of muted, disaffected voices amongst the Cuban people.

Two direct consequences for the Cuban Church’s role in Cuban society developed out of *El amor todo lo espera*: first, relations between the revolutionary government and the Cuban Catholic Church devolved into a state of constant tension, although it was a tension that simmered and only infrequently bubbled to the surface, a tension that remained seemingly imperceptible to the unwitting observer, even during the week of Pope John Paul II’s 1998 papal visit. The Cuban government

46 ibid., 415.
received *El amor todo lo espera* as the harshest critique of the regime by the Cuban Catholic Church since the 1960s.\textsuperscript{47} Coming in 1993 at the nadir of the economic crisis, the pastoral letter was interpreted as an attack that blamed the crisis on the government. Government officials charged that the bishops betrayed the country by first sending copies of the letter to Cuban-American church leaders in Miami before distributing the letter to Cubans. A fierce public relations campaign to demonize the bishops began in Cuba’s state-run media. The newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* accused the bishops of treason and the Fourth Congress of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution concluded that the bishops hoped to defend US interests and return Cuba to its neocolonial status.\textsuperscript{48} The bishops, who could only distribute the text of the letter within church temples, noticed that this campaign had a reverse effect: “The government never revealed the text to the people but accused the church of working for the CIA…But the people saw us being attacked in the media and didn’t know what we said, so we saw more and more people coming to the church looking for the text.”\textsuperscript{49} Following the smear campaign, the relationship between church and state recuperated to the extent that church leaders and government officials were able to negotiate specifics for the visit of John Paul II. In a subsequent private communiqué to the bishops, the government assured them that they wanted to continue working together toward ameliorating the effects of the economic crisis.\textsuperscript{50} But the letter

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50 Crahan, “Cuba”, 108.
\end{footnotesize}
created a state of permanent distrust and tension between the two institutions, despite
the occasional veneer of mutual accommodation and deference.

A second development resulting from the writing of *El amor todo lo espera* was that civil
dissidents and other opponents to the regime, along with many
disaffected Cubans, found a new institutional space apart from the omnipresence of
revolutionary society. During the 1990s, attendance increased at Catholic masses and
other religious festivals not limited to Catholicism. Baptisms continuously rose as
did the demand for religious texts. The growth of the use of Catholic symbolism in
expressions of dissidence was a reaction to what Mons. Petit recognized, that no
expression of what was written in *El amor todo lo espera* had been offered by a
Cuban institution during the revolutionary years. The emergence of religiously-
oriented dissident organizations and references to religion in dissident writings
reflected an emerging symbolic association of dissidence and Catholicism. Though
dissident groups did not emerge as nationally public oppositional actors, groups were
formed at the grassroots level, often by networking Catholic diocese throughout
Cuba. The Cuban Church never endorsed a specific group, nor did priests directly
advise civil activists. In *El amor todo lo espera* the bishops blamed the economic
crisis on government policies, acknowledged as a positive contribution to society the
work of the dissidents, and advocated government power-sharing. The language of
promoting human rights and advocating peaceful reform in the rhetoric of both the
Cuban Church and the dissident groups became analogous. The Cuban Church began
to position itself as a potential ally to dissidents in Cuban civil society. Dissidents
responded by engaging in symbolic politics, using Catholic references and symbology in their organization and activities, and tapping into an oppositional cultural-meaning system that was being articulated by the bishops.

One year after the writing of *El amor todo lo espera*, Archbishop of Havana Jaime Ortega was named only the second Cardinal in Cuban history, and the first since the death of Cardinal Manuel Arteaga. The Vatican was taking notice of the Cuban Church’s emerging defiance and acknowledged the Cuban Church with a blessing that would lend it increased international visibility and signify approval of their new strategy. Recognition came from the highest Catholic authority that the Cuban Catholic Church had come of age and forged a righteous path for itself. During the trip to Rome, the new Cardinal Ortega spoke of the need to preserve the achievements of the Revolution while transcending its limitations, principally through increased evangelization that would prepare the laity to act through a mobilized civil society. During the 1990s, as the Cuban government struggled to recover from the economic crisis, the Cuban Church began carving out social spaces for itself. In 1991, the bishops had organized *Caritas Cuba*, affiliated with the Rome-based Catholic relief agency *Caritas Internationalis*, to deliver more medical supplies to the population. In the context of rising shortages, *Caritas Cuba* began expanding its distribution of food, clothing, medicine, and various personal items. *Casas de Oración* or *Casas de Misión* (Mission Houses) were developed throughout Cuba in private homes, especially in areas with no Catholic churches or with churches in disrepair, to provide an alternative place for worship and to facilitate a sense of
community amongst Catholics on the island. The government allowed the Casas to be organized, though they had to be officially registered, meaning still that no secret or private assembly would be allowed in Cuban society without government knowledge.

Further recognition from the Vatican that it would support the Cuban Church’s strategy came in the form of the 1998 papal visit. According to Cuba’s current Papal Nuncio Luigi Bonazzi, the papal visit has a specific purpose:

Papal visits are organized for specific purposes, not merely to visit a country… In Cuba, the Pope recognized the difficulties found between the church and state, exemplified by the dispute over El amor todo lo espera…The papal visit was an occasion for the Cuban state to manifest its appreciation of the figure of the Pope and the church that the Pope represents; it was an occasion for the Cuban Church to express its closeness, loyalty, and commitment to the path it forged toward the renovation of the Cuban people.51

Clearly, a heightened social awareness of Catholicism in Cuba would result from the papal visit. But the Cuban government also recognized that there were benefits to be gained by such a high-profile visit: the Cuban government used the image of a popular pope traveling and sermonizing freely throughout Cuba to elevate its international reputation, demonstrating that the Pope could come visit Cuba, speak freely with church leaders and Cuban Catholics, and show the divine wisdom to denounce the US trade embargo. The Pope’s repeated calls to end the embargo during and after the visit, as well as the reiteration of such sentiments by the COCC, certainly pleased the government. Only two years earlier, the United States’ Helms-

Burton Act strengthened the embargo by imposing harsher penalties on US multinationals that traded with Cuba through offshore subsidiaries and by pressuring third countries not to do business with the revolutionary government. In the midst of the economic crisis, the trade embargo was the number one international issue for the government, and the papal visit had served as an occasion where the embargo could be thoroughly condemned. Dorita Pérez of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) of Havana sums up the papal visit as one of respect and positive engagement between the church and state, though not an event that seriously changed or challenged the scope of government power on the island:

It was an historic visit, one of respect. We respected his ideas. The church has its space, but the Revolution is absolute. The pronouncements of John Paul II were fair, but he is not a revolutionary. He spoke against the Blockade, and that was a good thing. He also came with a mandate, to ask for the release of political prisoners. However, we couldn’t accommodate this request. He cannot change our convictions. We respect him, we allowed him to speak in 32 plazas, the most important in the country. But El Comandante let him know clearly what our position was.52

There were also added benefits for the Cuban Church: during the visit the church had greater visibility and access to the state-run media, allowing it for the first time to promote its social message over revolutionary Cuban airwaves. The Cuban Church also won a recognized degree of social legitimacy. Thousands of Cubans, Christian and non-Christian alike, gathered to hear the Pope’s homilies. This was a low-risk moment for the church, and in the presence of the Pope and with the international media closely watching, church leaders took the opportunity to become more

confrontational vis-à-vis the government. Transcendent contentious statements, such as Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba Mons. Pedro Meurice Estiú saying that the Revolution has confused the fatherland with a political party, were heard by all. A veneer of cordiality concealed underlying tensions, and the long-term gains were hard to gauge, as Padre Becerril recalls: “A pope had never visited Cuba before. We celebrated the possibility of learning and living by his example. During and immediately after his visit, there was much less tension between the church and the state. But today, there are still problems of freedom and liberty. It is a unique situation.”53 Certain demands brought up by church leaders during the week (that had been made before and after, and have yet to be significantly addressed) included facilitating and increasing the entry of foreign priests to meet the church’s pastoral needs, gaining permission to build new churches, allowing private Catholic education, and gaining access to mass media. The lack of clear progress on these issues caused Nuncio Apostólico Luigi Bonazzi to offer this assessment: “Surely the visit of the Pope left clear that into the future there will be even harsher difficulties, as well as the wish of finding respect for one another.”54

In the ten years following the papal visit, the Cuban economy experienced a steady recovery, bolstered by increased foreign investment in the tourist industry, reforms that allowed for the circulation of US dollars and small, private business initiatives (such as small restaurants, private taxis, and rentals of rooms in private

homes that catered to foreign tourists), and a deepened political and economic relationship with Venezuela (under the leadership of President Hugo Chávez) with new petroleum deals that filled the void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Cuban government would soon prove its willingness and capacity to suppress challenges that it could not sufficiently address during the 1990s.

The earliest dissident groups had organized in the mid-1970s, following the repeated failure of various internal armed uprisings. This kind of oppositional political organization represented a break with Cuban history – for the first time the only internal opposition that challenged the regime was committing itself to nonviolence. These groups were formed mostly by people who had supported the revolution but withdrew support over disagreements with the top leadership. In 1976 the “Cuban Committee for Human Rights” was formed by Marta Frayde and Ricardo Bofill on a platform of nonviolent resistance and defense of human rights.

Dissident activities consisted primarily of compiling reports of arrests and human rights abuses and establishing informal independent journalism and library networks on the island. Few steps were taken to protest government policies and fewer to petition or make public calls for political changes. Cubans that took part in these activities were subject to repeated harassment and arrest, and their organizations were frequently and effectively infiltrated by government agents. This kept the

sparse groups of Cuban dissidents not only from affecting real change inside Cuba but from achieving any inter-group collaboration or making their presence known to the Cuban population.

In the 1980s, some dissidents were able to gain a measure of international notoriety and establish links with sympathetic foreign governments and international NGOs. Elizardo Sánchez, a former University of Havana professor, first broke with the regime when he spoke out against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. He formed the “Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation” in 1987 with the aim of starting a process of dialogue amongst all Cubans and to bring about gradual reforms of the one-party system. During the 1990s, more civic and human rights groups began springing up throughout Cuba. Sporadic waves of repression followed, as in 1996 when the government detained and arrested approximately 100 activists representing various dissident organizations. But increased international visibility led the government to an unofficial policy of “tolerance” in the late 1990s of some of the island’s most prominent dissidents and their organizations, though they still remained invisible to the larger population and subject to surveillance, harassment, and arrest.

Dissidents had not expressed their dissent in religious terms until after 1993. The Cuban Catholic Church had never been incorporated into the revolutionary

system and had directly confronted the regime from 1959-1962. Dissident Cubans knew the church to be the only institution autonomous from the revolutionary structure. *El amor todo lo espera* signaled that dissidents would be welcome in the church, though church leaders declared that no political organization would be endorsed or given direct support. What was tacitly encouraged was a symbolic association of dissidence and Catholicism. The Cuban Catholic Church provided the only physical and cultural space apart from revolutionary society and maintained a recognized degree of autonomy in Cuban society. The Cuban Church’s move toward becoming a more contentious actor and its encouragement of lay Catholics to participate in the civil and political life of the country made it likely that new dissident actors would come out of the Catholic Church and that some existing forms of dissident activity would be tied to Catholic symbols.

The Varela Project, a petition presented to the Cuban National Assembly in 2001 proposing laws that would entail comprehensive political reforms, including the establishment of freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, free elections, freedom of religion, freedom to start private businesses, and amnesty for political prisoners, was organized by Oswaldo Payá’s dissident organization, the Christian Liberation Movement (*Movimiento de Liberación Cristiana* – MLC). Payá, himself a Catholic layman, was sentenced to three years of hard labor in the 1980s while serving in the Cuban army for refusing to participate in the transportation of political prisoners, a decision he ascribes to a refusal to compromise his religious beliefs. Payá tried several times in the 1990s to run for a seat in Cuba’s National
Assembly, but his candidacy was never accepted. He formed the MLC in the mid-1990s and lent a religious dimension to his organization by tying the word ‘Christian’ to ‘Liberation.’ This religious symbolism continued when he formed the Varela Project in 1998, which invokes the name of Padre Felix Varela, the 19th century Catholic priest and champion of Cuban identity and independence. MLC activists collected 11,020 signatures of registered voters, more than the 10,000 required by the Cuban constitution for any petition proposing new laws to be reviewed by the Cuban National Assembly. Though the petition was not given formal recognition by the Cuban government, Payá began receiving numerous international human rights awards for his efforts. US President Jimmy Carter endorsed the Varela Project while speaking uncensored through government media during an April 2002 visit to Cuba. The apparent success of the Varela Project to garner international attention made this strategy of tying Catholic symbols to political dissidence attractive to other Cuban dissidents. Roberto Carlos Pérez, a dissident from Santa Clara, named his organization the Democratic Christian Movement (Movimiento Demócrato Cristiano – MDC). In March 2003, however, only one year after President Carter’s historic visit, a government crackdown on dissidence landed 75 members of the opposition in jail, with prison terms of up to 28 years. The activists were charged with “disrespect” toward the Revolution, “treason,” and “giving information to the enemy.” Over two-thirds of the targeted dissidents belonged to the MLC and MDC. Nevertheless, in 2004 Payá presented an additional 14,000 signatures to the National Assembly, but again received no official reply.
Elizardo Sánchez, Oscar Biscet (who was imprisoned in 1999 for forming the Lawton Foundation, a human rights organization that promotes nonviolent civil disobedience), and Marta Beatriz Roque represent Cuba’s most prominent secular dissidents. What separates Sánchez from the other two is his apparent refusal to accept US financial aid, while Roque has become known for being closely allied to the US and Biscet was granted the 2007 Presidential Medal of Freedom while in prison, accepted by his wife in Miami from US President George W. Bush. In 1997, Roque, along with fellow dissidents Felix Bonne, René Gómez, and Vladimiro Roca, submitted to Cuban authorities a document entitled *La Patria es de Todos*, criticizing the lack of political freedoms, the regime’s economic policy, and its interpretation of history – all four were subsequently arrested. 57 Roque was imprisoned from 1997-2000, and then again in 2003 as part of the March crackdown.

Oswaldo Payá, Roberto Carlos Pérez, and Dagoberto Valdés are Cuba’s most widely recognized Catholic dissidents. Dagoberto Valdés has served as director the Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa (Center of Civic and Religious Formation) and the Catholic magazine *Vítral*. The Center of Civic and Religious Formation was created in 1993 and operated as educational center in the Diocese of Pinar del Río until it was closed in 2007 (discussed further in chapter 4). It offered a diverse curriculum on democracy, civics, and economics with the objective to promote the Cuban as a free person and contributing to the reconstruction of civil society in Cuba,

with a vision toward creating spaces of participation and solidarity. Valdés is also a member of the Vatican’s 30-member Council of Justice and Peace.

Some members of the dissident movement in Cuba receive support from the US Congressional Cuba Democracy Caucus and the US-Cuba Democracy Pac, as well as several non-governmental organizations such as the Mothers Against Repression, the Cuban Liberty Council, and the Cuban American National Foundation. International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have drawn attention to the actions of Cuba’s dissident movement and designated certain imprisoned members as Prisoners of Conscience, including Oscar Biscet. In addition, the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba led by former heads of state Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic, José María Aznar of Spain, and Patricio Aylwin of Chile was created to support the work of civil dissident organizations in Cuba. Yet, there remains no acknowledged leadership amongst the disparate dissident groups, they continue to be infiltrated by government agents, and their work remains largely unknown to the broader population.

Though the church had previously expressed its desire to maintain its autonomy by avoiding giving any direct support or recognition to dissident organizations, the 2003 crackdown on dissidence provoked a response. In a 2003 pastoral letter, Cardinal Jaime Ortega acknowledged the Cuban Catholic Church’s

reputation as a destination for dissidents and encouraged some changes in the political posture of the Cuban government:

Many of our brothers turn to the church in Cuba asking for a word of encouragement, because there is a vague but generalized fear regarding the future among the Cuban people. The time has come to pass from an avenging state that demands sacrifices and settles scores to a merciful one that is willing to first extend a compassionate hand instead of imposing controls and punishing infractions.59

This statement came at the 10-year anniversary of *El amor todo lo espera*, and Cardinal Ortega took the opportunity to express concern for the oppressive character of the Cuban government (though in indirect terms). In late 2004 wives of the imprisoned dissidents began gathering at the Church of Santa Rita in Miramar in a weekly demonstration of public opposition. Their routine has been to dress in white for mass and then walk the avenues outside, eventually gathering in a nearby park while they pray for the release of the dissidents. The Ladies in White soon gained international recognition and compiled this statement describing their mission:

We are the peaceful wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts to 75 prisoners of conscience, jailed on March 18, 19 and 20 of 2003 for the crime of trying the exercise their right of freedom of expression. We strive for their immediate and unconditional release. We are their voices. Our pain and injustice unite us. On March 30, 2003 we attended mass together for the first time at Santa Rita de Casia Church and we walked on 5º Avenida in Miramar, and since then, we have considered that date as the date of the inception of our movement.

International awards arrived in droves. The Ladies in White received the Human Rights Award for 2004 from the Fundación Hispano Cubana, based in Madrid. In

2005, they received the Sakarov Award to Freedom of Conscience from the European Parliament, an award also granted to Oswaldo Payá for organizing the Varela Project. And in 2006, the Ladies in White received the Human Rights Award from the New York-based NGO Human Rights First. Yet, though they gather at the Santa Rita Church in Miramar, they have not received any special recognition from the Cuban Catholic Church.

The Cuban Church’s current political posture can be characterized as indirectly confrontational. Its political stance has been criticized by both the radical left in the Cuban government and the extreme right of the Cuban exile movement in Miami. Nonetheless, the church’s seemingly moderate stance is highly politicized and falls under the rubric of contentiousness within the context of Cuban politics. Cuban political discourse demands an unquestioning loyalty to the regime and the socialist goals of the revolution. The Cuban Church’s acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the dissident movement as well as its formulation of a new social doctrine based on human rights and dignity places it outside the domain of what the revolutionary regime deems legitimate in Cuban politics. This symbolic association of Catholicism and dissidence in Cuban society, combined with the intensification of the political rhetoric of the Cuban Church, represents a striking change from the first 30 years of the Cuban Revolution, during which, according to Crahan (1985) the Cuban Church was characterized as institutionally the weakest and least innovative of all the Catholic churches in Latin America. By allowing this symbolic association – not endorsing dissident organizations but not repudiating them either – the Cuban
Catholic Church is signaling its solidarity with the aims of the dissidents without having to perform any physical acts of outright confrontation itself.

Rolando Suárez, Catholic layman and lawyer for the COCC, does not present the Catholic Church as under any extralegal attack by the Cuban government:

From the point of view of the law, the government hasn’t done anything against the church; the Catholic church has the same status from a legal point of view that it had before the Revolution. But, in the social arena, the church has no free space. The church cannot run or control any other institution, foundation, or school. The church doesn’t pretend to have schools, rather, it relies on the participation of the faithful in relation to religious teaching.60

There is a palpable sense on the part of church leaders that they lost, and will not regain under the current system, the social intangibles it had before the Revolution – its status as the “official” religion of Cuba, the church that blessed government initiatives and ran the educational institutions attended by the wealthy and powerful, its influential voice in the moral and political affairs of the island, access to the various means of communication, and the ability to continuously fortify its clerical ranks, attend to the physical well-being of its churches, and fill its coffers with financial contributions from affluent Cubans. In an interview commemorating the 10th anniversary of 1998 papal visit, Cardinal Ortega in 2008 reflected on the purpose of El amor todo lo espera, stating, “(The government) affirmed that we had exchanged a conciliatory posture for a confrontational one…This wasn’t the motivation of the bishops, rather, they hoped to exercise the mission of the church in

60 Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
society, which includes an awakening of both the governors and the governed with respect to the well-being of society.”61 El amor todo lo espera was a transitional step toward carving out a confrontational and independent place for the Cuban Church in Cuban society that would not threaten its autonomy. Going forward, church leaders would embrace the role of the church as a destination for those unsympathetic to the Revolution, though they at no time sought to throw support behind specific political movements or organizations. Instead, the church would encourage civil dissidence indirectly, as it had chose to confront the government indirectly. The focus was not on insurrection, but on participation, broadly and ambiguously defined: “We must have a participatory attitude. This will always have two currents: that we participate and that it is understood that our participation belongs wholly to Cubans who are part this nation that we love and want to serve. The state must understand this reality. I believe that these are the paths we must follow.”62

Under the governance of the Castro regime, the Cuban Catholic Church has shifted its broad strategies of political engagement from direct confrontation to silence, from silence to rapprochement, and from rapprochement to indirect confrontation. Having finally come to terms with the ability of the revolutionary government to remain in power, Cuban church leaders in the 1980s began to reformulate their role in Cuban society as one that would be missionary but would work within a revolutionary context. This process was halted with the collapse of the


62 ibid.
Soviet Union, an event that sparked a profound socio-economic crisis in Cuba and changed the domestic calculations of church leaders. Starting with the publication of *El amor todo lo espera* in 1993, church leaders have adhered to a strategy of indirect confrontation in an attempt to carve out a unique role for the Catholic Church as a center of social opposition without directly condemning the government or its ideology, or forming direct alliances with dissident actors. Instead, church leaders have created a discourse that highlights fundamental differences between the socio-political worldviews of the church and state without retreating to the directly confrontational statements of the early 1960s. They have also encouraged their faithful to actively participate in the political and civil life of the country without endorsing specific groups or oppositional leaders. A primary method of this strategy to indirectly confront the government has been through the promotion of a unique cultural-meaning system based on Catholic social doctrine, one that is termed in this study as *Christian individualism*. 
CHAPTER 4:
CHRISTIAN INDIVIDUALISM

“We are arguing that man cannot be subordinated to any other value. The human person…is the first value and, as always, social development is achieved when society is capable of producing better people, not better things.”

– El amor todo lo espera

The following chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the political culture and social doctrine the Cuban Church is promoting, which I term Christian individualism, to counter the state ideology. This chapter is structured to first describe in the present time who Cuban church leaders are and what the composition of the Cuban Catholic Church is, followed by a treatment of what their message of Christian individualism represents and how it resonates with the Catholic laity, and finally, how Cuban church leaders dispense their message to their faithful. I start with an illustration of the structure of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba, its important leaders, departments, and commissions, to establish the institutional organization and resources of the Cuban Catholic Church. Next, the principles of Christian individualism and its relevance as an oppositional political culture are
discussed in depth. I conclude with a description of the Catholic magazines, the primary vehicle used by the Cuban Church to promote and disseminate *Christian individualism* to the Catholic faithful.

Church leaders and laypeople are seeking to build a democratic political culture that challenges Marxist ideology, promotes a Christian worldview, and prepares the faithful for a transition to democracy by encouraging their participation in society and politics while maintaining the values inherent to *Christian individualism*. The values of this cultural system are consistent with universal Catholic values, however, Cuban church leaders emphasize certain aspects of contemporary Catholic thought that run analogous with the burgeoning democratic political culture that is being developed in Cuba’s parishes to counter the revolutionary regime’s socialist ideology. A prime example of this strategy is the emphasis placed on the concept of the dignity of the individual in their articles and pastoral letters, used specifically as a counterpoint to the subjugation of the individual in the state’s concept of revolutionary socialism. In the context of a society that exhibits a large degree of social uniformity under the official revolutionary ideology and in which all mass media are controlled by the state, the principle vehicle for church leaders to promote this political culture is through the publication of “formative-informative” Catholic magazines that are distributed only in Catholic churches.
4.1 The Structure of the Cuban Catholic Church

The Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba (COCC) is the union of Catholic bishops of the island and the organizational set piece of the Catholic hierarchy in Cuba. Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino is head of the Cuban Catholic Church and a member of the Permanent Committee of the COCC (a Committee that also includes the Bishop of Holguín Mons. Emilio Aranguren Echeverría). As of March 2008, Archbishop of Camaguey Mons. Juan García Rodríguez was serving as president of the COCC, with Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba Mons. Dionisio García Ibáñez serving as Vice-President, Auxiliary Bishop of Havana Mons. Juan de Diós Hernández Ruiz serving as Secretary General, and Mons. José Félix Pérez Riera of the Santa Rita Church in Miramar (which houses the COCC headquarters) serving as Adjunct Secretary. Cuba has eleven total dioceses, including three archdioceses in Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Camaguey. The Cuban Catholic Church currently has 14 active bishops (listed in Table 4.1), one for each diocese (including Cardinal Ortega as Archbishop of Havana), plus two auxiliary bishops of Havana, Mons. Alfredo Petit Vergil and Mons. Juan de Diós Hernández, and Nuncio Apostólico Mons. Luigi Bonazzi, the Vatican’s representative in Cuba.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diocese</th>
<th>Bishop(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pinar del Rio</td>
<td>Mons. Jorge Enrique Serpa Pérez (appointed 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Clara</td>
<td>Mons. Marcelo González Amador (appointed 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cienfuegos</td>
<td>Mons. Domingo Oropesa Lorente (appointed 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciego de Avila</td>
<td>Mons. Mario Eusebio Mestril Vega (appointed 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camagüey</td>
<td>Mons. Juan García Rodríguez, Archbishop of Camagüey (appointed 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holguín</td>
<td>Mons. Emilio Aranguren, Echeverría (appointed 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayamo-Manzanillo</td>
<td>Mons. Álvaro Beyra Luarca (appointed 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guantánamo-Baracoa</td>
<td>Mons. Wilfredo Pino Estévez (appointed 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuncio Apostólico</td>
<td>Mons. Luigi Bonazzi (appointed 2004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the early 1990s, the bishops began reorganizing the COCC into departments and commissions to attend to specific religious and social issues. The COCC currently has four episcopal departments: (1) Faith and Mission, (2) Liturgy and Ministry, (3) Laity and Culture, and (4) Social Pastoral Activity. The Department of Social Pastoral Activity encompasses the church’s social agenda in Cuba, divided into three sections: (1) the Commission of Charity and Health, which directs the church’s administration of charitable health and social services, including international financial and medical contributions through Caritas Cuba; (2) the Commission of Human Mobility, created in 2001 to forge relations with Cubans in the exterior, principally with Cuban Catholics in the United States; and (3) the Commission of Justice and Peace, through which clergy and laity work to formulate a
social doctrine and message designed specifically for Cuba. Created in 1994, the Commission of Justice and Peace also attends to the needs of prisoners and their family members. According to Rita Petrirena, the Social Area Coordinator of the COCC and a member of the Commission of Justice and Peace, serving the needs of prisoners was natural for church members since it was the church’s own pastoral agents that were often the ones most likely to have family members in prison for political reasons.63

A 2002 study found that in 1998 Cuba had 602 Catholic churches, 297 priests (of which 55.3% were Cuban with the rest predominantly Spanish), 27 lay brothers, 31 deacons, and 518 nuns. This made for a total of 873 religious leaders, 420 more than in 1988.64 Table 4.2 contains data available on the website of the COCC as of 2007 (which closely approximate the 2002 data).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diocese</th>
<th>Priests</th>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Parishes</th>
<th>Casas de Misión</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pinar del Rio</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Havana</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matanzas</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

63 Rita Petrirena, Social Area Coordinator of the COCC, interview with author, Havana, 4 April 2006.
64 Annet Del Ray and Yalexy Castenada, “El reavivamiento religioso en Cuba”, Temas (La Habana), No. 31 (October-December), 2002.
Representatives of both the COCC and the government-funded Department of Socio-Religious Studies (*Departamento de Estudios Socio-Religiosos – DESR*) agree that approximately 85% of Cubans profess to be believers in God, and some 60% of these claim to be “Catholic” (though this number is complicated by the syncretic nature of Santería and its relationship to Catholicism, discussed further in chapter 7). However, only 2% of the population attends mass regularly.\(^65\)

According to Adjunct Secretary of the COCC Mons. Pérez Riera, “The COCC officially convokes twice a year. There can always be one or two more assemblies. The pastoral letters depend on when the bishops determine it is appropriate; the last collective one was written in 2003.”\(^66\) This was a 2003 theological-pastoral instructoral entitled “The Social Presence of the Church” (discussed further in chapter 5) that marked the 10-year anniversary of *El amor todo lo espera* and addressed the Cuban Church’s perspective on political involvement. In the letter, the COCC

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\(^65\) Rita Petrirena, Social Area Coordinator of the COCC, interview with author, Havana, 4 April 2006; Aurelio Alonso, “Relations between the Catholic Church and the Cuban Government as of 2003,” 2005, 244.

reiterated its position of not supporting any partisan political party or organization, neither of the government nor the opposition, four times throughout the 11-page text.

Cuban church leaders describe the structure of authority in their own church as being one of the most vertical and Roman in the world. This sentiment was summed up in a statement made to the author by Mons. Ramón Suárez Polcari, Chancellor of the Cuban Catholic Church, during a 2006 interview: “In structural terms, we are very Roman.”

67 The strict adherence to hierarchical lines of authority reveals the attention paid by Cuban church leaders to protecting the church’s institutional interests and adhering to their neutral position on political involvement described in “The Social Presence of the Church.” Maintaining autonomy is of the utmost importance to the church so as to protect itself from charges of engaging in conspiratorial political actions or with oppositional political organizations. Neither clergy nor religious can belong to or endorse any political groups. Yet, Cuban church leaders have combined this position of strict neutrality with a message of intense encouragement to its faithful to participate in the political life of the nation and to participate in the development of civil society. Their political interests dispose Cuban church leaders to position themselves in opposition to the current regime and in so doing encourage the development of an autonomous civil society in Cuba and a pluralist democratic political system without directly confronting the regime or risking threats to their institutional interests. To accomplish this, Cuban church leaders have promoted a political culture which I term Christian individualism to

serve as an alternative meaning-system to the official revolutionary ideology of the state. This meaning-system is similar to that which is promoted and valued elsewhere in the Catholic world. But Cuban church leaders, regarding both the socio-political situation of their country and the place of the Cuban Catholic Church within it as unique in Latin America and in the Catholic world in general, have formulated and articulated this meaning-system in a way that makes it a diametrically-opposed alternative to the official ideology and political culture of the state while favoring democratic forms of governance and social organization. While church leaders themselves avoid direct involvement with any oppositional organizations, they are promoting an oppositional political culture and encouraging their faithful to be politically active while adhering to the principles of *Christian individualism*.

The 2006-2010 Global Pastoral Plan of the COCC, called “Building Tomorrow Together”, was released in February 2006, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the ENEC conference. Starting in 1997, the COCC began releasing pastoral plans in 4 or 5 year increments that detail the themes church leaders and members will focus on in their pastoral efforts. The pastoral plans are comprehensive strategies for evangelization in Cuban society that articulate the principles of *Christian individualism*. The principal objective of the 1997-2000 Global Pastoral Plan was to evangelize through inculturated communities that would spread Catholic doctrine. The plan emphasized the responsibilities of the individual to himself, to the

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church, and to society, and promoted evangelical communities as symbols of love and reconciliation. The 2001-2005 Pastoral Plan focused on the formation of an authentic Christian spirituality, a more just society, and the themes of reconciliation and participation. The current 2006-2010 Pastoral Plan seeks to make Cuban Catholics feel they are genuinely part of the Cuban people, and draw parallels between Christian faith and Cubania, or Cuban identity. Church leaders will encourage lay to participate and transform both the island’s ecclesial and social reality. The new plan is centered on the theme of collaboration in the transformation of Cuba’s reality to make possible a new hope, and to develop actual pastoral answers to changing circumstances while maintaining the themes of the ENEC. Through the pages of the Global Pastoral Plans emerges a repeated emphasis on individual dignity, autonomy, participation, and collective solidarity amongst the faithful, which form the basis of Christian individualism.

4.2 Christian Individualism

The Cuban Church has created a cultural meaning-system that emphasizes individual human dignity and personal responsibility to counter the state-oriented, ultra-nationalist ideology of the revolutionary regime. Armed with this Christian individualist meaning-system, the Cuban Church has positioned itself in opposition to the collective social project of the revolutionary regime and established a cultural connection with reform-minded dissident activists. The Christian element is found in the emphasis placed on sacred transcendence and the morality of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Cuban church leaders are teaching their laity that their dignity is bestowed
by God (rather than the Revolution, as the regime suggests) and charged with a Christian social duty to act in defense of themselves, their families, and their society. The individual element is found in the focus placed on singular man as God’s dignified creation. The church faithful are instructed to think of themselves as autonomous beings, take the initiative to act, and bear personal responsibility for their choices. This culture represents a stark alternative to the official state ideology, in which social and political unity in defense of the Revolution is prioritized over the interests and ambitions of the individual. Both emphasize the common good and welfare of the community as valued ends, but with different pathways, responsibilities, and allegiances to achieve them. There is a double disconnect between these two philosophies: the state emphasizes collective unity and allegiance to the nation-state; the church emphasizes individual autonomy and allegiance to a sacred transcendent God.

Paraphrasing the definition provided by Ross (1997), culture is a system of meaning that people use to manage their daily worlds and a framework for organizing those worlds, for making sense of the actions and interpreting motives of others, for linking collective identities to political action, and for motivating people and groups toward some actions and away from others.69 This broad definition provides a framework for establishing the role of the Cuban Catholic Church’s distinct cultural meaning-system in separating the church from the expansive scope of revolutionary

culture and ideology in Cuban society and for motivating its faithful, including some
dissident activists, to participate in Cuban society in an oppositional manner.
Ironically, the content of this *Christian individualist* culture – its dual focus on
allegiance to God over the state and the individual as a means to counter the
collective orientation of the state ideology – has succeeded in creating a *collective*
identity amongst Cuban Catholics that come through the doors of Catholic parishes
disaffected and unsympathetic to the Revolution and can find in the church a cultural
and physical space apart from revolutionary society. Those amongst this group who
have become political dissidents have learned to use Catholic symbols and the
church’s political culture to engage in confrontational political activities.

It was the building of a common religious identity and a distinct counter-
culture in opposition to the regime that bound dissident activists to the Cuban
Catholic Church. *Christian individualism* has appealed to the church’s faithful and
especially to social activists because it is resonant with their existing religious belief
system, it is oppositional to the dominant state ideology, and it is strategic in that its
basis in religion offers an alternative to the state ideology while carrying the
protection of the Catholic Church. It was not until after church leaders began openly
signaling their opposition to the regime, most significantly with the writing of *El
amor todo lo espera*, that dissidents began tying their activities to Catholic symbols.
This gave Catholic dissidents a repertoire of action, grounded in religion, with which
to engage in confrontational political activities. Tilly (1995) conceives of repertoires
of collective action as learned cultural creations that are shared and acted out through
a relatively deliberate process of choices. Catholicism gave disparate dissident organizations in Cuba a potent system of symbols and meaning around which to organize. Binding its message to the Cuban Church’s recognized moral authority and individualist social doctrine helped mobilize dissident civil actors while also providing them with an cultural foundation for opposition. It was in this context that Catholicism and dissidence became intertwined, starting with the actions of Cuban church leaders.

Throughout history, Catholic church leaders have used Catholic doctrine to support and legitimize both democratic and authoritarian regimes. The 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), distributed at the conclusion of Vatican II, endorsed democracy as the Catholic Church’s preferred form of government for both moral reasons (it would best guarantee individual freedom) and institutional reasons (it would best guarantee the autonomy and freedom of the church). However, since Vatican II, national bishops’ conferences have at times entered into accommodative relationships with authoritarian regimes (most notably in Argentina during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship). National Catholic churches and their leaders must integrate Catholic social doctrine and the church’s vision of social justice into local messages in their efforts to effect political change. Creating a cultural-meaning system that uses Catholic social doctrine to promote a democratic political culture still requires work to make such a meaning-system relevant to the local context.
The social doctrine of the Cuban Church is the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, as Cuban church leaders often say. Indeed, the general secretary of CELAM, the Argentine bishop Mons. Andres Stanovnik, in 2007 held a news conference during a meeting in Havana and stated that the Catholic Church did not have a separate strategy for Cuba, that Catholic social doctrine “is the same for all countries,” and it includes defending human rights and the rights to life, liberty and truth. However, certain features of Catholic social doctrine are emphasized by Cuban church leaders in a uniquely Cuban context to create a cultural meaning-system that sets Catholic culture apart from the official culture in Cuba. Opposing the Castro regime with an alternate cultural meaning-system allows church leaders and dissident activists to confront the political system with a different discourse and set of values than that of the socialist ideology of the state, itself an amalgamation of Marxism with a strong current of post-colonial nationalism. For example, *El amor todo lo espera* was much more than a bishops’ political critique of the Cuban government. The bishops’ references to politics were integrated into a religious worldview that started with individual man as the center of concern for the church, emphasizing his responsibilities to God, family, and society. In a section of *El amor todo lo espera* entitled, “Man: Center of all Problems”, the Cuban bishops describe the individual man as the sole focus of their concern and the basis of their critique of the government: “In the center of this entire problematic situation is the individual man, the preferred subject, the greatest treasure that Cuba has.” Going on to quote from Gaudium et Spes, “Man on earth is the only creature that God loves as he is,”

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the bishops argue that society advances when it focuses “more on the individual than on ideas” and when man is defined “by what he is, not by what he thinks or what he has.”71 Here, by setting up dichotomous pairs of that which is offered by the church and that which is offered by the regime, the bishops imply an over-emphasis in the official ideology on materialism and subordinating man to the idea of a collective social project.

Through contemporary Catholic social teaching, the Cuban Church is attempting to cultivate a socially independent community while fostering a liberal democratic political culture within its parishes (one that falls in line with the broad political aims of the dissident community). Rolando Suárez, a Catholic layman and the lawyer of the COCC, has described Catholic social teaching in Cuba (as in all places) as resting on three important principles: (1) the dignity of the human person, (2) solidarity, and (3) subsidiarity.72 These three principles all have referents to the Cuban system and the revolutionary social context Cuban church leaders have been forced to navigate to go forward with their mission of evangelization while carving out an oppositional political space for the Cuban Church. They are elaborated in the Cuban Church’s social teaching as follows:

(1). The dignity of the human person

71 “El amor todo lo espera,” reprinted in La Voz de la Iglesia, 411.

In emphasizing the dignity of the human person church leaders hope to contribute toward the development of people’s consciousness of their autonomous status. Catholic social teaching focuses on the recovery of individual people’s consciousness of their dignity as human beings. The faithful are taught that their dignity stems from their status as children of God. The heavy emphasis placed on the idea of individual autonomy involves convincing people that their thoughts and aspirations have worth and, with effort, can become reality. It means citizens have a right to participate as autonomous human beings in the creation of culture and the structure of government rather than simply accepting direction from the state. From this aspect of church doctrine stem certain concrete positions, such as right to life issues and abortion prevention and education. According to Rolando Suárez, church leaders are trying to promote “thinking with your own head” rather than following the official government line on a myriad of issues.

(2). *Solidarity*

The principle of solidarity involves teaching that greater freedom and liberty imply commitment to a community, especially by offering solidarity to its most destitute members. Church leaders conceive of this concept as teaching honesty where concealment is the reality and sharing experiences of the kind of social repression that comes with not going along with revolutionary society. The church acknowledges that it is very difficult to teach mercy in a society it feels is riddled with envy and revenge, where families are in pieces. The principle of solidarity balances to a substantial degree the individualism of the Cuban Church’s political
culture with its emphasis on the collective well-being of the community and Christian unity in the face of social oppression. It also implies that there has been a failure of the socialist project to adequately take care of the entire population and that the church has a role to play in the spheres of charity and social justice. This cuts at the heart of what the Revolution feels are its most laudable achievements, in creating a fair distribution of wealth and providing free and universal education and healthcare.

(3). Subsidiarity

Church leaders describe subsidiarity as the principle that no task should be undertaken by a higher authority that can be accomplished by a lower and more local authority, including families and individual people themselves (especially in the realm of education). They teach that through collaborative work in parishes people can act independently of the state, on their own initiative. There is a focus on collaboration, as collaborative work in parishes teaches people that they are capable of acting on their own initiative, independent of the government. Rolando Suárez identifies subsidiarity as a key point of contention between the church and the state: “The government follows certain socio-economic principles, not specifically to confront the Catholic church, but those are their concepts, their rules. They don’t coincide with the principle of subsidiarity of the church.”\(^{73}\) Catholic social teaching here implies that citizens need not feel dependent on the state, a critical theme of the official ideology. Subsidiarity also reflects the need to get involved to solve problems

\(^{73}\) Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
as a community. Pastoral action around this principle aims to foster a desire for greater participation.

These three pillars form the basis of the Cuban Church’s alternative political culture to the official revolutionary ideology. Taken together, they counter the official ideology with their focus on autonomy, Christian identity, and personal initiative and participation, in a society where the official ideology demands interdependent collective mobilization directed by and subsumed into state organizations. According to Rolando Suárez, they also reflect the kind of social values the COCC feels are necessary for a more just and “healthy” society: “The Cuban bishops believe that for an adequate development of the human person one should favor the exercise of freedoms, fraternal relations, and the search for what transcends the human being. There will not be a healthy society unless these three dimensions of the human being are promoted and guaranteed, inseparably.”

Of the three principles, the dignity of the human person is the principle most often emphasized by church leaders. In the Cuban Church’s Global Pastoral Plan for 2006-2010, the principle of individual human dignity is described as “the focus that supercedes the limitations and contradictions of the different ideologies and human projects.” This is also the principle that most concretely separates Catholic social

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teaching from the official ideology. According to Rolando Suárez, starting with the
dignity of the human person allows Cuban church leaders to expound upon the
individual rights and freedoms necessary for human dignity:

The church offers an alternative line of thinking directly to the person, in all
parts. Man is free and self-responsible; he has a mission on this earth. This
freedom always goes with responsibility. Dignity starts with respect for life.
And dignity is predicated on responsibility. His socialization occurs within
the family. After, he is a political being, an economic being, etc. There are
three fundamentals to human dignity: life, liberty, and responsibility in the
family. If the revolutionary social project is against these fundamentals, the
church will still defend them.76

Offering alternatives and drawing contrasts is a fundamental part of the Cuban
Church’s confrontational strategy that itself contrasts sharply with the denunciations
and condemnations of communism that characterized the directly confrontational
relationship between the Catholic Church and the revolutionary regime in the period
from 1959-62. The strategy has become to denounce and accuse by implication – the
church promotes these principles of dignity, solidarity, and autonomous initiative
because they are fundamental to a healthy society and, it is most often implied,
lacking in the revolutionary regime’s ideology and social organization.

There is a long history of philosophical conflict between Marxism and
Christianity, centered fundamentally over the promotion of atheism by Marxist
regimes in the 20th century. After directly denouncing Marxist ideology in the early
years of the revolution, church leaders learned over time that it was necessary to

76 Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
adapt to revolutionary society (if they were to survive as a relevant, independent institution) while promoting the church’s alternate social doctrine rooted in Christian sacred transcendence and individual humanism. Throughout the revolution’s history ‘socialism’ has been the preferred term of the regime (rather than Marxism) when describing the official ideology and the organization of society. The Cuban Revolution is also most commonly referred to by the regime as a ‘socialist’ revolution. The Marxist-inspired socialist ideology of the revolutionary regime has always centered on the collectivism of the nation and the unity of the population under the revolutionary banner. This intense collective revolutionary nationalism is directly opposed by the church’s Christian individualist culture. Orlando Márquez, director of the Archdiocese of Havana’s magazine Palabra Nueva, argues that the focus on human dignity is what separates the Cuban Church’s social doctrine from the official ideology: “I am reminded of one of Pope John Paul II’s sayings, that ‘man is the path of the church.’ The dignity of the human being means putting the human being at the center of everything. However, it happens [in this country] that other conceptions or values supercede man himself, including ideologies and economic ideas.”

Starting at this philosophical level, Márquez makes the application of this dichotomy in Cuba explicit: “In Cuba, for example, the Marxist social project has been proclaimed as the supreme value, subordinating man to the function of the social project, supposedly to liberate man. But, in this system the project becomes the most important thing. For the church, man is more important than anything, not the social

77 Orlando Márquez, interview with author, Havana, 19 April 2006.
system and not the party.”78 Placing the supreme value on the dignity, freedom, and autonomy of individual man over the regime’s revolutionary social project is the crux of Christian individualism. The focus on the dignity of the individual is significant primarily for the context in which it is discussed, that of an all-encompassing revolutionary political culture that has held sway in Cuba since 1959. When Cuban Catholics hear the church promoting individual consciousness, it is not only as an end in itself but as a contrast to the ethos promoted by the revolutionary regime, that of subsuming one’s individual aspirations for the needs of the collective society.

Yet, in drawing these contrasts, Cuban church leaders do not go so far as to condemn Marxism or socialism in their public statements. Indeed, many church leaders are hesitant to publicly acknowledge that their social doctrine is an alternative to the official social ideology. Mons. Suárez Polcari argues that this often places the church in the undesirable and untenable position of being politicians, or perceived as politicians, not just by the government but by the very citizens unsympathetic to the revolution that are attracted to the Catholic Church in Cuba:

With the theology of the ENEC, the church reformed itself into one that is and wants to continue to be, of the people; we have faith in our bishops; we consider them to have been faithful to their faith, to their identity, to their independence, to their politics, although [the bishops] aren’t politicians; neither would we want the church to represent in any dimension a political party; we are not an opposition party, nor an alternative against the State;

78 ibid.
there are some who would want us to be that, but the Cardinal says we must be a church for everyone.\textsuperscript{79}

In this statement, Mons. Suárez Polcari reveals the Cuban Church’s concern for not treading too far into the politics of contention. He also demonstrates the strict lines of authority adhered to by the Cuban Catholic Church, to its very “Roman” structure, with the Cardinal and the bishops atop the hierarchy formulating, directing, and enforcing the church’s confrontational strategy. While recognizing the dichotomy between Christianity and Marxism, church leaders try not to portray the two meaning systems as incompatible: “The Church doesn’t use the word incompatible. It tries to live and evangelize in whatever social context because the focus of attention is not on the social system, it on the people, and that is always the same. The church can exist in contention, and it is not a secret that the church is a symbol of contention.”\textsuperscript{80}

Papal Nuncio Mons. Luigi Bonazzi recalls that upon his arrival in Cuba in 2004 he was impressed with the degree to which Catholics had responded to the call to participate in society, act in solidarity with their fellow countrymen, and respect their own and each other’s human dignity: “I found in Cuba a citizenry possessed of the conscience that the Gospel is not only a fountain of motivation in one’s personal life, but is a fountain for efforts to enact a renovation of society; they are conscious of the profound importance of the Gospel for the personal life as well for acting out of

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\textsuperscript{80} Orlando Márquez, interview with author, Havana, 19 April 2006.
faith for the improvement of society.”

Nuncio Bonazzi speaks to the practical application of *Christian individualism* – the formation of a citizenry that is participatory, that will act in whatever ways it can to pressure the current system, and is prepared to act in a transitional setting. In fact, Cuba’s Catholic laity will have the distinction and advantage of having been exposed to and formed in various strains of democratic thought should a transition to democracy occur, making them likely to be key actors in the building of democratic institutions. But, *how* the church transmits this culture to the population while operating in an authoritarian revolutionary system is certainly a difficult and complicated process.

4.3 Catholic Publications in Cuba: “The Voice of the Church”

In a society in which virtually all media and social spaces are controlled by government institutions, evangelization and the promotion of an oppositional political culture is extremely difficult – or as Rolando Suárez puts it, “The problem of providing spiritual nourishment to the Cuban people is arduous.”

According to Suárez, with no private education permitted in Cuban society, traditional methods for spreading Catholic social doctrine have become untenable: “We believe that every student has the right to learn religion, but in Cuban schools religion is not taught. This is the reality of the structure of our society. We cannot create foundations. We

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have to work to reclaim our rights." There are very few physical spaces beyond the parish itself in which church leaders can work to spread their Christian individualist culture. Each diocese in Cuba has a Centro de Formación en la Fe (Center of Formation in the Faith) for religious workshops and bible study. Pinar del Río’s diocese was the only in Cuba to feature a Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa (Center of Civic and Religious Formation), that was used to organize lectures on democracy, human rights, and civic responsibility, though it was closed in 2007 (discussed further below and in chapter 5). In the 1990s, Cuban Church members created Casas de Misión as a way to evangelize and provide houses of worship in places with no Catholic temples. Casas de Misión had to be registered with the government and were developed throughout Cuba in private homes, especially in areas with no Catholic churches or that had churches in disrepair, to provide an alternative place for worship and facilitate a sense of community amongst Catholics on the island. Priests, religious, and laymen can preside over mass in the Casas and teach catechesis. The Casas also serve as informal religious gatherings for prayer and bible discussion. In addition to traditional Sunday mass services, the Centers for Formation in the Faith, and the Casas de Misión, the only form of media available to the Cuban Catholic Church through which church leaders can promote Christian individualism is through the rudimentary publication of Catholic magazines.

The US State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in its 2007 annual country reports outlined the extent of government control of mass

83 Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
media in Cuba. The government operated four national television stations, six
national radio stations, one international radio station, one national magazine, and
three national newspapers, and considered all print and electronic media to be state
property. Additionally, it operated many local radio stations, television stations,
magazines, and newspapers, all of which were official organs of the Cuban
Communist Party (PCC). The report described the content of all media as nearly
uniform, with none enjoying editorial independence from the PCC.

National law bars all “clandestine printing.” The regime vigorously
prosecutes anyone attempting to distribute written, filmed, or photographed material,
including the few underground newsletters that some dissident organizations try to
circulate. State censors require prepublication approval for any media published in
Cuba. As stated in the State Department’s report, the only exception to the
censorship and publication laws are the Catholic magazines published by the Cuban
Catholic Church. Thus, not only are these magazines the only printed vehicle
available for the Cuban Church to spread its social doctrine and political culture (as
they have no regular access to broadcast media), they are the only non-state
publications legally available to the Cuban people. In preserving its independence as
a private religious institution and maintaining a strategy of indirect confrontation, the
Cuban Catholic Church in the 1990s was able to publish their own magazines with
the stipulation that they only be distributed within the churches themselves and that

84 Cuba: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 2007, Released by the Bureau of
they don’t directly criticize or condemn the state. In certain instances, some magazines have gone too far and they have been the subject of complaints from regime officials and certain forms of self-censorship (described later).

Roberto Veiga, editor of Espacio Laical – a Catholic magazine published by the Archdiocesan Lay Council of Havana – describes the approach of Espacio Laical as holistic and emphasizes the Catholic perspective while playing down its political dimensions: “The magazine is not political; it is formative and informative. The articles are reflective. The aspects they discuss can be any. All critiques must come from a Christian perspective…The three most important themes in the magazine are ethics, anthropology, and the family. The magazine may also include critiques of themes in science, politics, and spirituality.” Catholic magazines such as Espacio Laical carry articles on a very wide range of issues, including politics, society, culture, economics, science, and of course theology. These “formative-informative” magazines serve as comprehensive alternative sources of information in Cuba. In describing Espacio Laical as formative and informative, Veiga reflects the Cuban Church’s project to promote an alternative cultural meaning system, aiming both to form Cuban Catholics and the faith and inform them from a different socio-political perspective than that offered by the official ideology.

According to Veiga, the Catholic magazines are all written from a perspective that is “fundamentally Catholic, but not exclusively,” pointing to the presence of one

doctor on the staff of *Espacio Laical* who is Protestant. Catholic magazines are only sold within the parishes and are usually published bi- or tri-annually. Some, like *Palabra Nueva* and *Vitral*, publish more frequently. Articles in these magazines are written by Cuba’s bishops, priests, and by various Cuban and international Catholic scholars and laymen, and are often shared amongst and reprinted in the various publications. Table 4.3 constitutes a list of the “formative-informative” Catholic magazines that are currently being published by the Cuban Church.

### TABLE 4.3
CUBAN CATHOLIC MAGAZINES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>City of Publication</th>
<th>Published by</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enfoque</td>
<td>1981 Ca</td>
<td>Camaguey</td>
<td>Archdiocese of Camaguey</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iglesia en Marcha</td>
<td>1990 Santiago de Cuba</td>
<td>Archdiocese of Santiago de Cuba</td>
<td>Six times annually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palabra Nueva</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Havana</td>
<td>Archdiocese of Havana</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imago</td>
<td>1994 Ciego de Avila</td>
<td>Diocese of Ciego de Avila</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitral</td>
<td>1994 Pinar del Rio</td>
<td>Diocese of Pinar del Rio</td>
<td>Six times annually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanecer</td>
<td>1994 Santa Clara</td>
<td>Diocese of Santa Clara</td>
<td>Six times annually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuadernos</td>
<td>1996 Havana</td>
<td>Centro de Referencia de Bioetica Juan Pablo II</td>
<td>Six times annually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocuyo</td>
<td>1996 Holguin</td>
<td>Diocese of Holguin</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bioetica</td>
<td>2000 Havana</td>
<td>Centro de Referencia de Bioetica Juan Pablo II</td>
<td>Tri-annually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

86 Ibid.
Distributing and circulating the Catholic magazines is also difficult. The magazines are published with rudimentary photocopiers and printing machines. *Palabra Nueva*, advertised as and treated by Cuban church leaders as the “voice of the church”, is published by the Archdiocese of Havana, where Cardinal Ortega has his office. Only 1500 copies of *Palabra Nueva* are printed at each publication and given to priests for their parishes. According to the founder and director of *Palabra Nueva*, Orlando Márquez, “We don’t have a system of distribution. But, in ecclesial environments, the magazine is passed around amongst families, neighbors, work colleagues; it is also available in academic institutions inside and out of Cuba, and we make of point of distributing it to foreign diplomats.”87 Márquez notes that some of the magazines, including *Palabra Nueva*, *Espacio Laical*, and *Vitral*, are now archived and available on the internet. However, Fr. Fernando De la Vega of the Montserrat Church in Havana – a frequent contributor to many of the Catholic magazines – offers a more pessimistic assessment: “The magazines are our only lines of communication. But they are insignificant. Four thousand in a city of three million, is nothing. These magazines are directed at our sectors. It’s still difficult to

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87 Orlando Márquez, interview with author, Havana, 19 April 2006.
find a Bible but very easy to get *The Da Vinci Code.* Fr. De la Vega reflects the frustration that comes with having no access to mass media. He also highlights the fact that the influence the magazines carries is on the Cubans that attend mass and seek out the magazines, not the entire population. However, as the only alternative source of information available in a communist country – that does provide essays and indirect forms of political critique from a politically democratic perspective – they carry a greater potential as the informational building blocks of future political actors that have sought out and gained access to them.

*Espacio Laical* began publishing quarterly in 2005. The four issues that comprised the magazine’s first year of publication contain a representative selection of articles dealing with political and social themes that can be found throughout the Cuban Church’s magazines. Many of the articles also demonstrate how the Cuban Church uses its *Christian Individualist* culture to make critiques of politics and society and to convey the principles of its unique political culture in the context of revolutionary society.

Issue one of *Espacio Laical* contains a myriad of articles with referents to Cuba’s socio-political context. A short essay by Francisco Almagro Domínguez, 

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88 Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.

89 These four magazines were also the first of the Cuban Catholic magazines I encountered in my research. They were given to me by Dr. Ramon Calzadilla of CIPS/IESR: *Espacio Laical,* “En El Mundo y al Servicio de los Hombres,” Ano 1, No.1, 2005; *Espacio Laical,* “Religiosidad Popular, Sincretismo y Evangelización,” Ano 1, No.2, 2005; *Espacio Laical,* “El Mundo del Trabajo,” Ano 1, No.3, 2005; *Espacio Laical,* “Familia, Religion y Sociedad,” Ano 1, No.4, 2005.
entitled “The Quijote that We Need”, describes the true and oft-missed virtues of heroism as prudence and a corresponding faith. An article by Alfonso López Quintas entitled “Liberty vs. Manipulation” warns against the dangers of ideological manipulation and the reduction of a nation of people to the “masses.” A summation of an October 2004 presentation by the Commission of Justice and Peace of the COCC entitled “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: The Intangible Dignity of the Person” outlines this key principle promoted by the Cuban Church and calls for its teachings to be put into practice. “Making Oneself Present in Christ in the Middle of the People” describes ways in which individual Catholic laypersons can be more vocal and become evangelizers within their communities. An article picked up from Zenit by a Spanish theology professor entitled “Religious Freedom, Church, and State” argues for the urgency to affirm the liberty of conscience and promotes religious faith as the primary expression of human dignity in the context of powerful ideologies that falsify the consciences of entire populations. Finally, “The Social Commitment of Christians (1)”, by Fr. Antonio Rodríguez Díaz, affirms that the central mission of the church is a religious one, but that the church also has a political mission that does not entail engaging in partisan politics but in promoting reconciliation and dialogue, echoing the principal themes of El amor todo lo espera. Fr. Rodríguez goes on to warn that Christians should not belong to any political parties disposed against evangelical values, human dignity, or that have a frank anticlerical orientation.
Issue two continued dealing with similar themes: “Liberalism (I)”, by Roberto Veiga González, begins a two-part discussion of the historical antecedents of liberal democratic philosophy. A short essay entitled “Anti-Catholic Literature” by Francisco Almagro Domínguez identifies Karl Marx as an anti-Catholic philosopher. An interview with Mons. José Félix Pérez broaches the theme of church-state relations in the context of the 1998 papal visit and the death of Pope John Paul II. Mons. Pérez states that the death of the Pope could lead to a new stage of improvement in church-state relations (“as a gift to thank John Paul II”), but that any improvement would have to occur over the bases of “respect, truth, and the sincere convergence of good efforts.” Additionally, Padre Alfonso López Quintas concludes “Liberty vs. Manipulation (II)” with the advice that Cubans stay alert, think with vigor, and find ways to live creatively. Fr. Antonio Rodríguez Díaz also concludes “The Social Commitment of Christians (II)”, arguing that “democratic pluralism is the most adequate from of government to achieve the common well-being,” and urges lay Catholics to learn the teachings of Catholic social doctrine in order to exercise their commitment now while asking rhetorically, “are we prepared to confront the present as well as the future?”

In issue three, Fr. Antonio Rodríguez Díaz argues in “Christian Faith, Ethics, and the World of Work”, that different political options must be considered in

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reference to Christian ethics and again states that political pluralism is necessary for a
happy and normal social life. Roberto Veiga González concludes “Liberalism (II)”
with an observational discussion of the successes and failures of liberal forms of
government, arguing fairly ambiguously that positive developments will occur when
the “democratic reserves of each country and the whole world gain the necessary
capacity to achieve the political goals of the present moment.”92 Issue three also
contains essays criticizing laws in Cuba that facilitate divorce and abortion.

Issue four, the final issue of 2005 for Espacio Laical, contains a treatise on the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Jorge Pinckney elaborates parallels between
Catholic social doctrine and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Pinckney
states that the primary objective of pastoral action focused on human rights is that
these rights be accepted and implemented effectively in all parts, and advocates the
building of “an authentic democracy of values.”93 In “Family and Mission”, P.
Antonio Rodríguez Díaz argues that the mission of the Cuban Church depends on the
extent to which church members are able to transform human structures and families
that have been ripped apart for more than a generation and convert people in the faith
of God and into healthy families. P. Rodríguez Díaz states that this task should be

Mundo del Trabajo,” Ano 1, No.3, 2005.

93 Jorge Pinckney, “Declaración de los derechos humanos”, Espacio Laical, “Familia,
Religion y Sociedad,” Ano 1, No.4, 2005.
recognized as difficult rather than impossible, while listing the lack of access to mass media as a major limitation for the Cuban Catholic Church in Cuban society.

Nowhere in these articles are the names of Fidel or Raul Castro or the PCC ever mentioned, nor is any political option endorsed. In issue one of *Espacio Laical*, Fr. Antonio Rodríguez Díaz affirm in “The Social Commitment of Christians (I)” that the mission of the church is religious and that the church does not offer political solutions. However, continues Fr. Rodríguez, Catholic lay have a responsibility as citizens to participate in the political life of the nation and must not belong to political parties disposed against evangelical values, human dignity, or that have a frank anticlerical orientation. Though there is no mention of the revolutionary regime, the context and implications remain clear.

A consistent theme in many of the magazines is spotlighting the Cuban Church’s lack of access to mass media. In a 2002 issue of *Palabra Nueva*, Orlando Márquez discussed the significance of the Catholic magazines in the context of the theme of media access:

The lack of access to mass media at the national level has created a task for the church never before seen in Cuba…These magazines are the only link, or news channel, between the Cuban Church and Cuban society…The only intention (of the magazines) is to contribute to the formation, affirmation, and promotion of a public opinion in line with the view of natural rights and the postulates of the church.\(^\text{94}\)

In this article Márquez also broached the subject of self-censorship in the Catholic magazines: “We don’t have a censorship committee. We meet as an editorial group and review the articles and analyze what is appropriate for the publication. Could one call this self-censorship? I don’t know. One could also call it prudence, or call it Christian identity.” The issue of censorship was also addressed by Cardinal Ortega in an interview published in *Verdad y Esperanza* in 2003. Cardinal Ortega stated that the Catholic magazines only exist because the church is able to publish without submitting them to any kind of government censorship: “The magazines are publications that are not officially accepted, because the Ministry of Culture has an official stamp that goes on all publications, but we have not put this stamp on our publications because it would place us under regulation and a kind of censorship that we cannot accept.” However, one Catholic magazine in particular did become the subject of self-censorship for straying too far into the realm of confrontational politics – the magazine published by the Diocese of Pinar del Rio, *Vitral*.

### 4.3.1 Vitral and the Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa

From the time of its founding in 1994 (the year in which Archbishop of Havana Jaime Ortega was named to the College of Cardinals) through 2007, *Vitral* had gained a reputation for being the most confrontational of the Catholic magazines and the most openly critical of the government. It was published by the Center of Civic and Religious Formation in the Diocese of Pinar del Rio, the only such Center

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95 Ibid.

in all of the Cuban Church’s dioceses. The Center of Civic and Religious Formation was created in 1993 (the same year that *El amor todo lo espera* was written) with the objective to promote the individual Cuban as a free person, responsible and participative, and to form him in democracy, as well as to contribute to the reconstruction of civil society in Cuba, with a vision toward creating spaces of participation and solidarity. It began offering a diverse curriculum centering on educating Cubans in the political, social, and economic spheres of a liberal democratic polity. For free market economics, the Center offered classes in computer programming and small business creation. For democratic theory, it offered classes in “Human Rights” and “Pluralism and Political Participation in Cuba.” Dagoberto Valdés, the former director of the Center and of *Vitral*, estimates that 5600 people had participated in the Centro’s classes since its founding. Valdés was also named to the Vatican’s 30-member Council of Justice and Peace following the 1998 papal visit.

During the 1990s, the Center operated with relative freedom in the Diocese of Pinar del Rio. Government officials, while respecting the physical space of the church, consistently voiced concerns to Cuban church leaders about the Center and the political content of *Vitral*, though the 1998 papal visit and the Cuban government’s good relations with the Vatican probably contributed to the ability of both the Center and *Vitral* to remain open and functioning. However, in the 2000s the Cuban government, having emerged from the bowels of the special period, demonstrated a renewed willingness to suppress various forms of dissent, most glaringly in the 2003 March crackdown on dissidence. In February of 2007, Cardinal
Ortega had named a new bishop to replace the retiring Mons. Jose Siro González. Newly appointed Mons. Jose Enrique Serpa, well-known for being a close confidant of the Cardinal, stated that due to a lack of resources the magazine would not be able to continue production, and the Center of Civic and Religious Formation would be closed. *Vitral* had been edited in the Center since its inception with four photocopiers and a small group of volunteers. But, in April of 2007, Valdés announced he was forced to cease publication due to a lack of paper and ink. The Vitral editorial board also lost their Internet access at that time. A firestorm of controversy ensued, with lay activists in Pinar del Rio claiming church leaders had submitted to government pressure and had even began discussions to close *Vitral* the previous year. In 2006, Cuban National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón had stated that *Vitral* was too harsh in criticisms of the government, though the government never halted its publication. Valdés himself stated that he never thought a decision such as the closing of *Vitral* would come from within the church, rather than the government. Once month later, *Vitral* resumed publication under new editorial management and with less contentious content.

Dagoberto Valdés, in his final editorial for *Vitral*, affirmed that Cuba was living in “an hour of opportunities”98. “The hour has arrived to make better decisions for Cuba and her future, without impertinence but without pause, because for many, due to their age and capacity to resist, this is the last hour of opportunity…and the


Homeland shouldn’t lose a significant portion of its children due to a lack of opportunity.” It seemed that Valdés was calling upon Catholic clergy and lay alike to be bold in their statements and actions, to truly begin a program of democratic awakening led by the church: “It is the hour to leave behind the anachronisms that, as we all know, signify an attachment to a time that has already passed. This will mean leaving behind a form of social organization that has already passed, ideologies that have already passed…The hour of opportunity is the hour of… shared liberty and responsibility.” The closing of the Center of Civic and Religious Formation demonstrated that church leaders will police themselves to avoid direct confrontation with the government. Cuban church leaders have remained cautious in their approach to political confrontation and promoting *Christian individualism*. Yet, since 1993, the Cuban Catholic Church has become increasingly recognized as an independent, oppositional institution in Cuban society and the one institution that has come to serve as a destination for the disaffected and even for dissident activists. But dissidents have also learned that they cannot rely on the church to consistently provide support for them or to be their vocal advocates.

Another 2007 incident revealed the extent of church-state tension in Cuba as well as the degree to which both institutions have sought to prevent such tensions from reverting to all-out confrontation. On December 4, police forcibly entered a church in Santiago de Cuba Province and pepper sprayed and beat a group of approximately 18 dissidents awaiting mass. Dissidents had gathered in the church to plan activities to coincide with International Human Rights Week. Police arrested
seven of the dissidents, who were then released the following day. The COCC immediately condemned the incident and government officials subsequently apologized to the church. Church officials accepted the apology and no further investigation was expected.

The Cuban Catholic Church has maintained its autonomy and carved out a space to promote an alternative political culture by adhering to a strategy of indirect confrontation. Cuban church leaders have deepened cultural ties to dissidents by transmitting a culture that is resonant with church faithful, oppositional to the dominant ideological culture, and strategically confrontational in its philosophical foundations and its application to society. The substance of Christian individualism is not much different from Catholicism that is promoted elsewhere; but Cuban church leaders were not always as confident and forthright in promoting this cultural meaning-system in reference to the larger context of Cuban revolutionary society. They have found ways to promote this culture as an diametric alternative to the official ideology. Promoting a counter-culture to the state ideology within church temples also allows church leaders to exist on the side of contention without directly confronting the regime. At times, this strategy has earned the ire of dissidents themselves who would prefer that church leaders be more vocal in their opposition. But Cuban church leaders, operating under strict hierarchical lines of authority, have resisted these pleas to deviate from the strategy that has, since 1993, made them relevant to Cuban society as the one independent institution on the island. They have
adhered to a strategy of indirect confrontation to stay on the side of the opposition while avoiding direct confrontation with Cuban government.
CHAPTER 5:

CHURCH STRATEGY: INDIRECT CONFRONTATION

“Doing direct opposition is dangerous. Catholicism is not an adversary ideology. But it is true that the great majority of people that attend mass do not sympathize with the Revolution. The church is like an intermediate zone.”

-Padre Fernando De la Vega, Párroco de la Iglesia Montserrat, La Habana

“No pulpit should be used for conspiracy. They must recognize, for example, that if you believe in Christ, I believe in Castro. They must respect that.”

-Dorita Pérez, Director of the Office of Religious Subjects of the Cuban Communist Party, Provincial Committee, Ciudad de la Habana

5.1 Introduction: Distinguishing Strategies of Contention

Mons. José Félix Pérez Riera is the párroco of the Santa Rita Church in Miramar. A soft-spoken man, Mons. Pépe (as he is familiarly and affectionately known) is inviting and kind, cordial and humble as he greets his guests and parishioners in the Santa Rita Church. His round face, plump stature, and quick smile suggest the joviality of a man bereft of enemies, adverse to conflict, bereft of anger.
A tireless worker, it is immediately obvious to anyone who meets him that Mons. Pépe lives for the Cuban Catholic Church, and is determined to spread the faith, message, and love of Jesus Christ while protecting the institution that he has devoted his life to. When asked about the nature of the Cuban Church’s dealings with the Cuban government, he centers himself in his chair and pauses to reflect, showcasing the careful consideration of words circulating in his mind. It is thus unsurprising that Mons. Pépe is sensitive to language and measures his statements when referencing this contentious relationship: “We have common interests, a shared concern for the family and our youth…Now we’re opening a new, systemic stage in our relations: we’re dealing with these themes together to help our society. We’ve achieved a dialogue, and are trying to develop this kind of relationship. This way, we’ll eventually be able to discuss more political themes.”

By virtue of his locale, there is a great deal of government attention and resources focused on Mons. Pépe – and consequently much for him to protect. The Santa Rita Church houses the central offices of the COCC, of which Mons. Pépe is Secretario Adjunto. It is also the weekly meeting place of Las Damas en Blanca (the Ladies in White), a group of Catholic wives of imprisoned political dissidents. Every Sunday, these women gather for mass at the Santa Rita Church and then stage a unique procession through the streets of Havana, dressed in white and holding flowers for their imprisoned husbands. No other procession like that of Las Damas en Blanca takes place regularly in Cuba, but the religious nature of the group and the

international attention they have received has allowed them to conduct their procession virtually un molested (though carefully monitored). These circumstances make Mons. Pépe’s position as párroco of Santa Rita one of high visibility. He is a diplomat for the Cuban Catholic Church, often traveling abroad to deliver lectures about Catholicism in Cuba. With his gentle demeanor and respectful tone, he has mastered the strategy of indirect confrontation.

Mons. Alfredo Victor Petit Vergel is one of two auxiliary bishops of Havana. He was ordained a priest in Rome in 1961 and named auxiliary bishop of Havana in 1991 by Pope John Paul II. Mons. Petit has become hardened by his 30 years of service in the Cuban Catholic Church under the Cuban Revolution, 16 of which as a bishop. When asked about the nature of the relationship between the Cuban Church and the Cuban government, he will inform you that no such “nature” exists. His words quickly fill with passion and anger, and his tone becomes intimidating. His perspective is informed by a personal history of persecution – a history that is never far from his mind. Mons. Petit wears his scars on his sleeve: “With the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, an unspoken systematic persecution began against the church. Priests weren’t killed, but Catholics were stripped of their religious freedom. Many left the country, especially Spanish priests with memories of the experience of Franco in Spain. They left in fear.”100 Absent in Mons. Petit’s statements are any references to common interests and dialogue, but he remains a realist. He resolutely confirms that the mission of the Cuban Catholic Church is evangelization, not political

activism: “Politics is the responsibility of the laity…A lot of people come to the church thinking they are going to find an alternative political party, but the church is not that.”\textsuperscript{101} Yet, the political reality of Cuba cannot be ignored for long, especially when it conflicts with the church’s mission. And Mons. Petit speaks about that reality in no uncertain terms: “Here, there is slavery. We don’t have a free press. We have to work hard to evangelize.”\textsuperscript{102}

These are the two faces of Cuban Catholicism. Their presence suggests that within the Cuban Church hierarchy there are both soft-liners and hard-liners, those who would like to pursue a more open dialogue with the government and work together toward mutually desired goals and those who maintain harsh feelings toward the revolution after 48 years of continual marginalization of the church by the state. Some believe evangelization is the only mission of the church, while others would like to pursue a more directly confrontational political agenda and fight for social justice while fulfilling the church’s religious mission. Speaking frankly about Cuba’s political situation may be the norm when church officials are amongst other church officials, but, the instant they assume a public role – including in homilies, church-sponsored lectures and conferences, published articles and pastoral letters – the great majority of church officials follow the indirectly confrontational line. In practice, the public manifestation of church confrontation more closely resembles the gentle demeanor of Mons. Pérez Riera: guarded, diplomatic, respectful, even optimistic –

\textsuperscript{101} ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} ibid.
indicative of an indirectly confrontational strategy. However, behind closed doors, it is apparent that many church attitudes toward the Cuban government reflect the resolute defiance of Mons. Petit: firm, impassioned, combative – a directly confrontational posture, but one that rarely emerges publicly in Cuban society outside church doors, or, when church officials are in social settings that are open to non-church members.

While their approach to contention differs, these men share a vision of the strategy the church must take in confronting the government. Both postures are necessary for the survival and expansion of the Catholic Church in Cuba, to promote its ideas and values, and to achieve more societal access while fighting for social and political justice. However, the directly confrontational posture remains reserved for the church faithful, for those unsympathetic to the Revolution who come to the church seeking, if not the “alternative political party” discussed by Mons. Petit, then at least the “intermediate zone” described by Padre de la Vega. Indirect confrontation remains the defining element of the Cuban Catholic Church’s political strategy.

The social and political environment in Cuba is uniformly organized and highly controlled, making deviations from official positions and norms of behavior that much more conspicuous. There is only one political party, the PCC, and it is illegal to form any other political parties or movements that are not state-controlled. All television, radio programming, and newspapers in Cuba are run by the state. Organizing public events and processions require state permission. This is not to say
that no criticism takes place, or that there is a lack of dialogue amongst representatives from church and state. But church leaders are aware that their behavior, activities, and statements are monitored and scrutinized by state officials. So their private conversations often differ in tone and message from that which is delivered in public statements. In fact, it is the Cuban Catholic Church’s philosophical foundation in spirituality and sacred transcendence that makes it on the surface less threatening to the Cuban government than an alternative political party or movement would be. However, the danger for church leaders is treading too fervently in the political arena and flaunting its opposition to the regime and/or exposing its ties to dissident political actors.

5.2 Why is Strategy Important?

Analyzing and defining a church’s contentious strategy under oppressive conditions is important for three reasons: first, a contentious strategy reveals what church leaders believe about the mission of their church and how church leaders think about political issues. How a church approaches contention signifies what their leaders believe their role should be in politics and what church leaders are willing to risk – that is, how far they are willing to go in challenging authoritarian governments – as well as what they may be willing to contribute during a transition period.

Second, the choice of contentious strategy may reflect the scope of religious penetration in society and the extent to which religion and politics are intertwined. A church’s choice to enter the realm of political contention instantly politicizes religion.
and can make the church a subject of repression. Competitive pressures and institutional considerations have a role to play in the formation of church strategy. The extent of a church’s reach into society and/or the resonance of its message with the population may influence its choice of confrontational strategy.

Third, I argue that a church’s choice of confrontational strategy is influenced by a combination of regime type, institutional church reforms, and the world-historical time period during which the church began its contentious activities. Churches that became confrontational under right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s would be more likely to pursue strategies of direct confrontation than churches facing left-wing authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, which were more likely to pursue strategies of indirect confrontation. This is so because the influence of the Second Vatican Council and the rise of liberation theology (a leftist ideology that served as a counter-ideology to the ideal of the national security state promoted by right-wing authoritarian regimes) led many national churches into directly confrontational relationships with such regimes during the 1960s and 1970s. Progressive churches that confronted these regimes had in liberation theology a political ideology that called for direct confrontation in the context of the military dictatorships that ruled their countries. The Vatican’s turn toward more conservative politics under the papacy of John Paul II did not eliminate contentious relationships between church and state, but it did lead churches to pursue strategies closer to indirect confrontation, especially against leftist authoritarian regimes where liberation theology could not serve as a viable confrontational ideology and autonomous
grassroots political mobilization declined as a pastoral activity. In addition, the repression suffered by progressives who were among the first Catholic Church members to directly confront authoritarian regimes was sufficiently harsh to cause church leaders to reconsider the losses they suffered when entering politics and make it less likely for churches to pursue this kind of confrontational strategy in later years.

In the chapter 6 the Brazilian Church and the Chilean Church serve as the two paradigmatic cases of churches that pursued strategies of direct confrontation. These churches stood at the forefront of the opposition to the authoritarian regimes of their home countries. Many bishops and priests also established direct ties with dissident social and political actors. The directly confrontational posture taken by the church served to create alliances with civil oppositional actors, who found in the church willing participants in the dissident movement and an institutional space unpenetrated by the ruling regimes, in many cases the only such oppositional institution still actively operating in society. The Brazilian Church earned a reputation as the “voice of the voiceless” – the only institution that would defend the poor, marginalized, and victims of the military regime’s oppressive apparatus. The Chilean Church established institutions that documented instances of human rights violations and assisted victims of repression. It became the institutional center of dissident opposition to the Pinochet regime. The relationships between church and state in both of these countries became severely strained, especially when church members became targets of repression and persecution. Each country witnessed instances of
church members suffering harassment and arrest, and in a few cases even physical violence.

These cases contrast sharply with the case of the Cuban Catholic Church. Church leaders in Cuba have not denounced the Cuban regime, condemned the regime’s ideology, or established ties with dissident actors that have challenged the regime to the extent that occurred in Brazil or Chile. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the Cuban Catholic Church has in the last 20 years pursued a confrontational strategy vis-à-vis the Cuban government, albeit an indirectly confrontational one.

In this chapter I use evidence gathered from my field research in Cuba to examine the first facet of church strategy – how the Cuban Church approaches contention, what their strategy is, how it serves church interests, and how the church interacts with and is perceived by the Cuban government and dissident actors. I begin by defining and contrasting strategies of direct and indirect confrontation. The Cuban Church’s confrontational strategy is then analyzed on six dimensions:

1. The church’s position toward the regime
2. The church’s position toward the regime’s ideology
3. The church’s relationship with the regime
4. The association of the church with the opposition in the public sphere
5. Church assistance to the opposition
6. Church participation with the opposition
I conclude by analyzing the government’s perspective on the role of, and its relationship with, the Cuban Catholic Church. The next chapter analyzes the second and third aspects of church strategy in comparative perspective—why the church chooses the strategy it does, and what factors influence the choice of church strategy. I compare the contentious strategy of the Cuban Catholic Church with cases from Latin America and Eastern Europe in reference to such variables as the world-historical time period the church is acting in, the influence of bishops’ conferences and liberation theology, and the type of regime it is confronting.

5.3 Church Strategy: Indirect Confrontation in Cuba

Indirect confrontation is the defining aspect of the Cuban Church’s contentious strategy. The institutional, moral, and political interests of the Cuban Church are manifest in its strategy of indirect confrontation. The church’s institutional interests include protecting its institutional autonomy, expanding its number of followers, and achieving a level of importance in Cuban society that makes its presence relevant for the moral, social, and political life of the country. The church’s moral interests are based on a set of religious and social ideas and values. The church wants to help maintain and promote morality in the public sphere and to be an influential voice on issues of family, life and death, and individual rights. It is also important for churches in contentious relationships with authoritarian regimes that their moral system provides a contrast to the dominant government ideology and the most oppressive tactics of the state. The Cuban Church’s Christian individualist cultural meaning-system counters state ideology and associates the church with the
pro-democracy dissident opposition. Finally, the church’s political interests include positioning itself in opposition to the current regime and in so doing, encouraging the development of an autonomous civil society in Cuba and a pluralist democratic political system. In pursuing political aims that are related to access and justice, the Cuban Church favors the establishment of a pluralistic and democratic political system in Cuba not only because it would signify a more free and just society but because it would allow the church access to a variety political, economic, social, and cultural arenas to proceed with their religious mission. These include reestablishing private catholic educational services and health services, two fields repeatedly mentioned as priorities by church leaders, and gaining access to mass media. In this sense, the church does not pursue partisan political agendas but does have a preference for a democratic political system. It is the church’s strategy of indirect confrontation that allows it to simultaneously pursue these three sets of interests.

I define strategies of direct and indirect confrontation as follows: Direct confrontation is a politically contentious strategy in which the church makes explicit its view of the illegitimacy and/or malevolence of the ruling regime. In public statements the church identifies specific targets as illegitimate and/or malevolent, including specific officials, policies, institutions, organizations, or the official ideology. The church has a strained or no relationship with the ruling regime but has public relationships with oppositional actors. Indirect confrontation is a politically contentious strategy in which the church does not make explicit its view of the illegitimacy or malevolence of the ruling regime. In public statements the church
does not identify specific targets as illegitimate or malevolent, but remains confrontational in the context of the national discourse by identifying certain negative political, economic, or social effects resulting from the regime’s governance, policies, and/or ideology, and/or proposing alternative modes of governance, policies, and/or ideological or cultural meaning-systems. The church maintains formal relations with the regime but only symbolic and/or ambiguous relations with oppositional actors.

A strategy of indirect confrontation can be identified by contrasting the characteristics of directly and indirectly confrontational actions and positions. The following table outlines the differences between indirect and direct strategies of contention along three definable positions the leaders of a religious organization takes toward (a) the regime and (b) the primary social opposition:

### TABLE 5.1

**INDIRECT CONFRONTATION VS. DIRECT CONFRONTATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political strategy:</th>
<th>Indirect Confrontation</th>
<th>Direct Confrontation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church position toward:</td>
<td>A. The Regime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The Regime/Political institutions</td>
<td>Endorse increased political pluralism, open dialogue, public debate, entry of new political ideas, growth of autonomous civil society</td>
<td>Endorse political reform, development of oppositional political parties or specific democratic institutions, and/or a political transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Official ideology</td>
<td>Critique official ideology, make distinctions between church doctrine and official ideology</td>
<td>Condemn the official ideology and perhaps identify its primary governmental proponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relations with the regime</td>
<td>Remain neutral or promote reconciliation with the regime</td>
<td>Seek condemnation of the regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church position toward:</td>
<td>B. The Opposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Association with opposition in the public sphere</td>
<td>Symbolic association with opposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Assistance of the opposition</td>
<td>Endorse growth of civil society, offer no assistance or clandestinely assist opposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participation with the opposition in political activities</td>
<td>Encourage only laypersons to participate in political activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open association with opposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Endorse specific oppositional movements, openly assist opposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open participation in political debates and oppositional processions/events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following sections examine church positions in Cuba on each of these six aspects of confrontational strategy. Cuban church leaders have sought to maintain a strategy of indirect confrontation in the context of a repressive socialist regime that has marginalized a Church unsympathetic to their social and political goals while dealing with a burgeoning dissident movement replete with Catholic lay activists.

5.3.1 Regime Type

This section considers church positions toward the regime as a whole – focusing on its legitimacy (or lack thereof) as a governing body. The primary difference between direct and indirect confrontation lies in the target of church criticisms and the extent to which the church is willing to challenge the regime either by attacking its modes of governance and/or calling for a regime change. A distinction between direct and indirect confrontation can also be found in where the church finds entry to promote its political interests and how it makes confrontational statements – whether it expressly propounds a political agenda and/or desire for political change, or if its political critiques are routinely couched in religious rhetoric. In a strategy of direct confrontation, the church endorses profound political reforms
and/or a change of regime. It may publicly name the kind of regime, democratic or otherwise, it would like to see replace the current regime, and may endorse the development of oppositional political parties or the efforts of oppositional political actors. In a strategy of indirect confrontation, the church advocates increased political pluralism without necessarily questioning the legitimacy of the current regime. Dialogue and the entry of new ideas into the public debate are advocated without explicitly naming what new political ideas or institutions should be adopted. The church may lament the lack of broad political freedoms and endorse the growth of civil society but does not publicly call for transition or regime change.

In the 21 years since the Cuban Church emerged from its period of “silence” to reassert itself in Cuban society, it has reinvented itself as the primary symbol of social and political opposition in Cuba, utilizing its status as the only independent institution functioning on the island and its unique cultural meaning-system to signal its contentious stance against the revolutionary regime to the populace. Church leaders have been careful to protect their autonomy while acting contentiously, forming a strategy of indirect confrontation to stay on the side of opposition while protecting their institutional interests.

The Cuban Catholic Church views the revolutionary government as an oppressive, totalitarian regime, albeit one that has made an indelible mark on Cuban society and Cuban identity. However, these views are not explicitly divulged in public settings or in church documents. Only in private conversations do these views
become apparent. In official statements, the Cuban Revolution is treated as an undeniable part of Cuba’s social, political, and cultural reality – not a fleeting moment in Cuba’s history or the creation of a small cohort of rulers.

In many ways the difference between direct and indirect confrontation reflects a change of tone in the language used by church officials. Rather than use words like condemn, combat, defeat, or overcome, the Church speaks of reconciliation, dialogue, pluralism, and reform – even in its most pointed critiques.

The perspective of the official ideology is that of one unified collective. It would then seem that the only options for opponents of the regime are quiescent silence or direct challenge. The Cuban Church began its relationship with the revolutionary regime with a three-year period of direct confrontation that resulted in repression and the marginalization of Catholicism in Cuban society. For approximately the next 25 years of the Revolution, the church assumed the strategy of quiescent silence. In the years following the writing of *El amor todo lo espera*, the Cuban Church has sought a third route, in nurturing a democratic political culture among its faithful, promoting a religious worldview rooted in the individual, and indirectly confronting the Cuban government with rhetoric that passively calls for dialogue and reform.

*El amor todo lo espera* contains the few examples of directly confrontational statements the bishops have made since entering contentious politics. The tone taken
by the bishops in this letter was unique and did not become constitutive of their political strategy; rather the bishops used the letter to signal their contentious stance to the rest of society and have since remained exclusively indirectly confrontational (the exceptions including a few speeches during the 1998 papal visit). The two strategies are brought together in this letter, with a few instances of the bishops explicitly naming the parties or institutions they deem responsible for Cuba’s social crises.

The bishops begin the political portion of their treatise by describing one of many politically self-reflective subjects that would be discussed at the PCC’s IV Party Congress a year earlier in 1992:

The calling to order of the IV Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba made a clear call to eradicate what it called double morality, false unanimity, and the feigning and/or silencing of opinions. Surely, a country which rewards those attitudes is neither a healthy nor totally free country; little by little, it changes into an aseptic country, untrustworthy, wherein wishing for the resurgence of a new man one finds instead a false man.103

The example is used to find entry into a political critique by referencing an intra-regime recognition of the hazards of suppressing critical or oppositional voices. The bishops go as far as attacking Che Guevara’s conception of the “New Man” that was needed to build socialism (though Guevara is not named) by arguing that it has been replaced by a “false man.”

103 “El amor todo lo espera,” reprinted in La Voz de la Iglesia, 410.
Under the heading, “Political Aspects”, the bishops identify five political “irritants” that must be eradicated along with the necessary economic changes, the accomplishment of which would produce a “bridge of hope in the national soul”\(^{104}\):

(1). The bishops begin by attacking the “omnipresent and exclusionary” character of the national ideology. They identify five paired terms used by the government to equate the Revolution with the nation, but that in the bishops’ view should not and cannot be considered synonymous: fatherland and socialism, state and government, authority and power, legality and morality, Cuban and revolutionary. According to the bishops, the latter subjective terms have been superimposed by the regime on the former neutral terms. La Patria, the fatherland, has been construed by the regime as somehow indelibly socialist. The state, made up of official positions that are endowed with a certain degree of authority, is equated by the regime as this particular government, with unchecked political power. What can be codified into law by the regime – legality – is not necessarily moral, an indicator that the bishops see the existence of unjust laws within the legal system. And the issue of identity – what it means to be Cuban – has been closed by the regime to include only those who are also revolutionaries. The bishops go on to argue that the constricting nature of the state ideology produces a sensation of exhaustion with all the repeated orations and slogans.

\(^{104}\) ibid.
(2). The bishops denounce the limitations imposed not on the exercise of certain freedoms, but on freedom itself. This statement is indicative of an indirectly confrontational strategy, however, the bishops argue that any substantive change in this attitude must be accompanied with the administration of an independent justice system – which would result in the consolidation of a state governed by the rule of law. Identifying a specific institution as necessary for the exercise of complete freedom reflects a directly confrontational strategy.

(3). The bishops call attention to the excessive control of the Organs of State Security, that at times intrudes on the strictly private lives of citizens and produces a social fear that is hard to define but palpable to feel. Again, identifying State Security as a culprit for social ills in a public letter is a directly confrontational statement.

(4). The bishops underscore the high number of prisoners in Cuba, condemned for actions which could reasonably be depenalized or in some cases at least reconsidered. The bishops reason that under a conciliatory political climate men could be freed who have been imprisoned for crimes motivated by politics or economics.

(5). The bishops argue that the effective elimination of all discrimination for philosophical ideas, political ideas, or religious creed, would open the way for participation of all Cubans in the life of the country.
*El amor todo lo espera* represents one of the few cases in which direct and indirect strategies of confrontation are blended by the Cuban Church. The bishops point specifically to the Organs of State Security as a social menace and recommend the creation of an independent justice system to consolidate the rule of law. Still, while virulently denouncing some of Cuba’s social and political institutions, the bishops do not name the Cuban president or any other government leaders as culprits in the lack of social justice, they do not list specific freedoms that are denied by the Cuban regime, and do not call for a new system of government to replace the regime.

Finding themselves in a situation of challenging the regime and exercising political demands, the bishops also use *El amor todo lo espera* to call for a “direct and frank dialogue with the authorities of the nation,” as a way of maintaining a “double and exigent faithfulness: to the Church and to the Fatherland.”

In certain instances, the bishops make explicit references to the nuances of their political strategy, recognizing how cautious they must be in challenging the regime: “The bishops of Cuba, conscious of living in a historic stage of singular transcendence, have exercised their sacred magisterium with the tact and delicacy that the situation requires.”

The premium placed on tact and delicacy has continued. Since the writing of *El amor todo lo espera*, the Cuban Church has not directly confronted the ruling

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105 ibid, 411.

106 ibid.
regime in its actions or rhetoric. It has instead chosen to focus on the challenges and difficulties of fulfilling their religious mission, thus highlighting in an indirect way the repressive social environment in Cuba. In a 2002 conference on the Catholic Church and the media in Cuba that took place in the *San Juan de Letrán* Convent in Havana, Orlando Márquez, editor of *Palabra Nueva*, referred to the singularity of *El amor todo lo espera* as a political statement saying, “In the document…the Church said what it could say…Everything is clear, everything is said, and the actual means of communication of the Church in Cuba try to proceed according to that mission of the Church.” The Church publicly treats the pastoral letter as a unique event rather than a representative statement of their ongoing strategy. However, church leaders privately express great pride for composing the letter and have deemed it unnecessary to write another similar pastoral letter because Cuba’s social, political, and economic conditions have not profoundly changed – the singularity of *El amor todo lo espera* has given it iconic status in the history of the Cuban Church and has allowed church leaders to proceed with an indirectly confrontational strategy without feeling the need to make direct denunciations. What the Church continues to call into question is the lack of political pluralism in Cuba, again without characterizing the regime as totalitarian and in only scattered instances criticizing the domination of the PCC.

The singular moments that do appear directly confrontational achieve a heightened salience and become entrenched in the national memory, contributing to

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the image of the Cuban Church as a contentious institution in the minds both pro- and anti-revolutionary Cubans. One such moment occurred during the 1998 papal visit in the eastern city of Santiago de Cuba. Mons. Pedro Meuríce Estiú, Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba from 1967 to 2006, gained a reputation along with the former Archbishop of Pinar del Río, Mons. José Siro González, as the members of the Cuban Church hierarchy that pushed the envelope in terms of entering the realm of direct confrontation. He delivered the words of welcome to John Paul II on January 24th, words that connected the ultimate spiritual struggle of the Cuban people to overcoming the legacies of the Revolution: “Our people are respectful of authority and they like order but they need to learn to demystify false messiahs.” Then came the statement that struck at the heart of the revolutionary mission, resonating with the dissatisfied multitudes that were waiting for the church to speak out against the revolutionary regime: “I present you to a growing number of Cubans that have confused the Homeland with a political party, the nation with the historic process that we have lived in the last decades, and the culture with an ideology. It was the reference to confusing the Homeland, la Patria, with a political party, un partido, that caused the greatest scandal and solidified the Cuban Church once again in opposition to the regime. The Revolution has always equated itself with the Cuban nation, making criticism of the Revolution equivalent to a lack of patriotism. Mons. Meuríce was declaring that Cuba’s only political party, the PCC, was merely that – a party of political cadres that should not be considered synonymous with the Homeland, in

109 ibid.
spite of the efforts of the country’s leadership to convince the population of just that. His statement received cries of approval from the sprawling crowd. Mons. Meurice continued, “Holy Father, for years this people has defended the sovereignty of its geographic borders with true dignity, but we have forgotten that this independence should give rise to a sovereignty of the human person that sustains from below all national projects.” This statement centered Mons. Meurice’s words in the context of the Cuban Church’s culture of Christian individualism, placing all “national projects” as subservient to the “sovereignty of the human person.”

Offering John Paul II a brief history of the Catholic Church in Cuba, Mons. Meurice spoke of the glorious era of Padre Varela, the troubles the church encountered during the independence wars of the 19th century and the recuperation process that concluded in the 1950s, according to Mons. Meurice, when the Cuban Church reached the height of its splendor and Cubanía. Then, Mons. Meurice acknowledged the period of church-state confrontation that has characterized the revolutionary period: “Later, as a result of the ideological confrontation with Marxism-Leninism, induced by the state, (the church) became impoverished of means and pastoral agents, but not of emotions of the Spirit as was seen in the Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano.”

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110 ibid.
111 ibid.
Mons. Meurice’s words remained the subject of conversation amongst the bishops throughout the duration of the papal visit. Mons. Petit remembers how iconic the moment became for the Cuban Church:

In *La Plaza de Santiago*, Mons. Meurice said what he said – that the government had confused the Fatherland with a political party – the people rose with a great shout of hope. Even with Raul Castro there in front. When the Pope arrived at the airport to leave the island all the bishops were together in a microbus with him. Meurice asked the Pope if he had done some thing against protocol, and the Pope responded saying that Mons. Meurice, as a bishop of the church, had every right and every responsibility to his people to say the truth.112

Mons. Meurice continued making bold statements throughout his final 9 years as Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, before retiring in 2006. For example, in a May 1999 speech he identified the source of Cuba’s desperate situation as a fundamentally political problem: “The situation in Cuba cannot be reduced to an economic problem or one of distributive justice. At the very heart of the problem one finds the limitations of fundamental freedoms, that, as we all know, is the profound cause of all other problems.”113

Cuban church leaders strive to put distance between themselves and the ruling regime, a strategy that is facilitated by the development of its *Christian individualist* culture, setting the church’s discourse as an alternative to the Revolution without making repeated reference to the Revolution. In this way they call attention to what


the church offers and what is distinct about their cultural-meaning system rather than dwelling on the oppressive measures of the regime. Highlighting their unique cultural meaning-system, they imply that what is offered by the church – a transcendent worldview, salvation, an emphasis on the individual man and his duties to God, family, and society – is lacking in the Revolution.

To signal their disapproval of the regime without overstepping into direct confrontation, church leaders have issued calls for increased political pluralism and the open debate of political ideas. They do not explicitly condemn the regime or call for a democratic transition. To avoid giving the regime the tools to portray the Cuban Catholic Church as a conspiratorial political organization, church leaders affirm Catholic doctrine that the church does not and will not instruct its faithful to join any specific political organization or choose a specific political option. Yet, the church always follows these caveats by stating that its faithful is free to choose any and all political options – as long as their decisions are made in recognition of God’s love and a religious morality. This freedom to choose amongst a plurality of political options is something not offered by the Cuban regime, which has legalized only one political party and in a strict sense only one political option – that for socialism and the Cuban Revolution – though they may believe the Revolution altruistic and skillful enough to serve the needs of all of Cuba’s people. This is a fundamental difference in the political philosophy between church and state in Cuba: for the Church, the Revolution forms Cuba’s social and political reality, though it is a closed political system and only one political option among many. For the regime, the Revolution is
the embodiment of identity and nation, not just a set of political institutions. Any
options contrary to the Revolution are contrary to Cuba, to the nation itself. Part of
the Catholic Church’s strategy of indirect confrontation is the simple recognition that
there exist a variety of political options.

Mons. Ramón Suárez Polcari is the Canciller (Chancellor) of the Cuban Catholic Church, an office that makes him the pointman for all communications between the Cuban Church and the Cuban government. Mons. Polcari does not mince words when discussing the Cuban Church’s political preferences: “It is the desire of the church that a civil society and a political plurality develops in Cuba; I’m not talking about a specific party or organization – but we want it to be a representative democracy; but the State always responds that it is already representative of the people.”114 This statement highlights one of the difficulties of engaging in political discourse with a regime that considers itself the political embodiment of a unified populace.

It should be made clear that the phrase “representative democracy,” is a loaded political term in Cuba’s national discourse, as this is the term normally used to characterize American democracy in a pejorative way. Cuba’s state media outlets frequently make note of the ways in which American political representatives often come from privileged backgrounds, making them less “representative” of the populace. Mons. Polcari’s use of the word “representative democracy” at once

signaled the church’s desire for democratic change in Cuba and served as an endorsement of adopting political institutions resembling those of the United States. In addition, this statement calling for a “representative democracy” (made by Mons. Polcari in an interview with the author) was striking in that it explicitly called for a new kind of regime type in Cuba. Such statements cannot often be found in public Cuban Church documents. What church leaders do not hesitate calling for are greater plurality and the development of civil society, broad political concepts that could seemingly be achieved without necessarily threatening the survival of socialism. Although presented in the spirit of progressive political reform, government officials certainly interpret them as counter-revolutionary acts of defiance and conspiracy.

Not Mons. Polcari or any other church official would deny that the mission of the church is a religious one, though the church does acknowledge that its political obligations flow from that religious mission. A 2003 theological-pastoral instructoral of the COCC, entitled “The Social Presence of the Church”, explicitly addressed the Cuban Church’s perspective on church involvement, or lack thereof, in politics. It was delivered to mark the 10-year anniversary of *El amor todo lo espera*. It states:

The mission of the Church is not political; its mission is not to intervene directly in the exercise of civil power, nor in the oppositional structures of power, nor support one or another party, nor recommend a candidate party up for vote in an election. In the political debate amongst parties that confront one another or join in ideological or strategic alliances the Church must be
neutral, although it is a part of its ethic that the rights of everyone be respected in this debate.  

Recognition of the idea that such a debate should occur, even without identifying the specifics of what political issues or ideas should be included in Cuba’s public discourse, is in itself perceived by the regime as an act of confrontation. Church officials do not endorse particular parties but they decry the fact that political options are not offered by the Cuban political system. Christian laypeople need only be loyal to the Catholic Church, and must necessarily base their political choices on Christian ethics. In an article for Espacio Laical, Padre Antonio Rodríguez Díaz discusses the difference between moral pluralism and political pluralism: “A moral pluralism cannot exist. There is one morality for everyone, because it is founded in the nature of the human person, in his dignity…Morality on the other hand, does not exclude political pluralism, which is necessary for normal and happy social living arrangement; rather, it is founded on it. The different political options must be confronted with morality.” The church, then, would be against any system that did not provide for political choices among which Christians could choose. In “The Social Presence of the Church” the Cuban bishops are more specific about what kind of choices faithful Christians should make:

Being this way for an ecclesial entity, Christian laypeople that are integrated in it as individuals have the freedom to choose any political option in one sense or another, as long as they make their choice with the objective of the


arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. This objective includes the respect for
human rights, the fundamental values that must be protected, to the honesty in
the management of public funds, etc.\textsuperscript{117}

This is the indirect way in which democratization is advocated – avoiding mention of
specific leaders, parties, institutions, and political options that should be ousted,
formed, erected, or exercised (respectively), but acknowledging that a plurality of
potential leaders, parties, institutions, options do exist and should be respected.
While the Cuban Church does not denounce the revolutionary system per se, it does
affirm the existence of a plurality of political options that would benefit Cuba should
some social force work toward the realization of those options.

5.3.2 Regime Ideology

This section considers church positions toward the regime’s official ideology.
A strategy of direct confrontation would condemn the regime’s ideology as
oppressive or incompatible with Catholic doctrine, and would decry the political
capacity of its staunchest proponents. A strategy of indirect confrontation would
critique the official ideology and highlight difference between the official ideology
and Catholic doctrine, perhaps by creating and promoting its own cultural meaning-
system rather than condemning the official ideology.

In \textit{El amor todo lo espera}, the Cuban bishops signaled their disapproval of
Marxism, referring in their list of five political “irritants” to the “omnipresent and

\textsuperscript{117} COCC, “La Presencia Social de la Iglesia,” 9.
exclusionary” character of the national ideology. The bishops reserved the national ideology for the first position on their list, arguing that the regime has forcibly attempted to equate the Revolution with the nation – and by characterizing the efforts of the ruling regime in this way, the bishops hoped to rescue the concept of Cuban nationhood from the Revolution. Further feeding into their concept of “irritants”, the bishops concluded by observing that the constricting nature of the state ideology had created in the population a sensation of exhaustion as a result of all the repeated revolutionary orations and slogans.

However, the bishops do not – in El amor todo lo espera or in any successive writings – condemn Marxism per se. What they focus on criticizing is the “omnipresent” and “all-inclusive” nature of the official ideology, rather than the actual content of revolutionary Marxism as it is interpreted by the Cuban regime. This kind of critique has been consistent since the writing of El amor todo lo espera.

In “The Social Presence of the Church”, the bishops reiterate their criticism of the official ideology and hint at a political solution to the “difficult situation” created by totalitarian ideology:

When one identifies the ideology of the government with all the juridical order and the ethical reality of the country, he is equating society with the State and in this way the State converts itself equally in the conscience of all the citizens. The difficult situation created by this undue identification can only be overcome by the development of a civil ethic and by the growth of an open culture in which the highest possible number of realities and hopes of the
citizens can converse. It is imperative to keep in mind that, actually, all thought and action does not coincide with the official ideology…

The virtues of Marxism are not attacked, rather, the official ideology is criticized only to the extent that it does represent all the realities to be found in Cuba nor the conscience of every citizen. The bishops hope to position the Catholic Church as the one institution that recognizes the plurality of Cuban culture, even as they follow their mission to evangelize the population and advocate a single morality, based on Christian ethics.

In a 2006 lecture commemorating the 20th anniversary of the ENEC conference, Cardinal Jaime Ortega began a discussion of why the Cuban Church rejected the formation of a theology of reconciliation in favor of a theology of communion, following the 1986 ENEC. The Cardinal argued that such a theology unnecessarily implied that reconciliation ought take place between Catholics and Marxists, rather than amongst all Cubans: “The conflicts have taken place between Cubans, not between Catholics and Marxists. It was not appropriate to transcribe to these conflicts the conflictual history between Marxism and Christianity with all its philosophical implications, that would convert this treatment into a dialogue of experts, to our reality, more simple, with less philosophical importance and, perhaps, more of an emotional charge.” Here, Cardinal Ortega aims to draw attention away from the ideological conflicts that have taken place in Cuban society and simplify

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118 ibid, 3.
such conflicts as derivative of an “emotional charge.” A theology of reconciliation would imply a mediation between two camps of Cubans, something the Church wants to avoid, at least in its rhetoric. However, Cardinal Ortega goes on to identify Marxism as the source of the social transformations that have made it difficult for the Church to deepen its roots in Cuban society and proceed with evangelization: “The social transformations that have taken place in Cuba, inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology during a long stage of the revolutionary process, with its consequent prejudices and ignorance of what the Church is, moves us to expound, newly, on what is the nature of the Church that determines its life and what is its mission in the world.”

Though the Cardinal initially aimed to dilute the ideological battle between Marxism and Christianity in Cuba society, he finds himself accusing the regime, with its ideology at its core, of alienating the Catholic Church from the populace.

The Cuban Catholic Church has created an alternative cultural meaning-system to combat the omnipresence of the Marxist-inspired official ideology of the Cuban regime. Their primary strategy has been to affirm what is distinct about their culture – centered on the individual and inspired by transcendent spiritual foundations – rather than denounce the tenets of revolutionary socialism in Cuba. Church officials often accompany their critiques of the official ideology with vague statements about the exercise of personal liberties and the lack thereof in Cuba. But it

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apparent to all of Cuban society that the Catholic Church cannot be counted amongst the supporters of the revolutionary regime’s social project.

5.3.3 Relationship with the Regime

This section considers the church’s formal relationship with the regime. In a strategy of direct confrontation the church seeks to condemn the regime and leading to or following a rapid deterioration of relations between the church and the ruling regime. In this scenario, church leaders and members are very often the subject of political persecution. In a strategy of indirect confrontation, the church remains neutral or formally seeks reconciliation with the regime and the advancement of mutual interests, though still remaining indirectly confrontational in regard to the regime’s leaders, institutions, political, economic, and social policies, and the official ideology.

Formally and in a very public way, the Cuban Catholic Church strives to maintain a cordial relationship with the Castro regime. Even when critiquing the official ideology, Cuban church leaders do not make the regime itself a subject of attack. Describing the nature of church-state relations, Mons. Pérez Riera uses very dry, stark terms, never flowering over the coldness the exists between the two entities:

Relations are formal, in order, and they are functioning. They cover administrative aspects, that may have to do with the restoration of churches or priests that want to do a religious procession. In another dimension, we try to include political aspects. Between the government and the COCC, we cover basic principles: there is a dialogue about human and social issues. The government is worried about the divorce rate and the disintegration of the
family. But our focus is different – we’re always thinking about the loss of values.\textsuperscript{121}

Mons. Pérez Riera sought to acknowledge certain issues around which the church and the regime have found common ground, in this case highlighting a shared concern for the family. Yet, as is the case with other national churches, he found it necessary to distinguish the church’s emphasis on the loss of values. Mons. Suárez Polcari, who as \textit{Canciller} must deal with government officials on a regular basis, also looks for positive signs when characterizing church-state relations: “In these moments we are in a stage of certain flexibility, looking for understanding. There are favorable signs for the church’s sphere of influence; there has been an opening in the mentality of those who govern; there are more permissions for religious processions; they are allowing us to have our own space.”\textsuperscript{122}

Even the most genial descriptions of church-state relations made by church leaders emphasize the differences in thinking between the two entities. The Office of \textit{Asuntos Religiosos} (Religious Subjects) of the PCC is the official channel through which all communications between church and state take place. The existence of such an office is a source of consternation for the Cuban Church. For decades the Cuban Church enjoyed a special position vis-à-vis the state as the “official” church of Cuba, a position the Church occupied informally at the close of the Spanish colonial period and was inscribed into formally (by the United States) under the period of the

\textsuperscript{121} Mons. José Félix Pérez Riera, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.

\textsuperscript{122} Mons. Ramón Suárez Polcari, interview with author, Havana, 9 May 2006.
Republic. This history is not lost on today’s church leaders, who not only find it distasteful communicating through a special office, but abhor the fact that they are treated as one amongst many religions, including Protestant churches and religions of African origin, all with the same status and communicating through the same office. Mons. Pérez Riera notes that when the Office of Religious Subjects contacts the Church, it is usually to protest church actions that overstep boundaries instituted by the government: “It doesn’t occur with much frequency. It could be that a priest in a town organized a procession without permission, as they say, disturbing the social order; it could be about certain articles published in church magazines, or that someone visited without official documentation.”123 In discussing the process of dealing with the Office of Religious Subjects, Mons. Suárez Polcari expressed dismay at the Cuban Church’s loss of status:

All of us communicate with the State through the official office; there are signs of improvement but there is always tension; they have their own style of working; the (Catholic) Church maintains a unique posture; there is a historical tradition – the period of the Republic (1902) opened by placing the church in a special position – the church never had to incorporate itself into any special Council (like the Consejo Evangélico today); after the Revolution, we ceased being the official church; but, we maintained our status as the church with the highest percentage of faithful…124

The Consejo Evangélico is a Christian Church council that encompasses all the Protestant denominations in Cuba. All the churches that belong to the Consejo cooperate with and are supportive of the Revolution. The Catholic Church remains the only Christian church that has not been incorporated into the Consejo Evangélico.

Mons. Polcari detailed how being part of the Consejo has resulted in benefits for the Protestant churches, even with fewer percentages of faithful in Cuba than the Catholic Church:

Amongst Protestants and Evangelicals there is no considerable percentage of faithful in Cuba; they haven’t even grown much, but they have more facilities, they have permission to construct new temples; so they have their own posture – the Catholic Church has more independence than the Consejo Evangélico, which is identified with the State; although it has been difficult, we haven’t cut the dialogue – this is the policy of the Bishops, to maintain dialogue, it was also the attitude of John Paul II.125

The important thing for Catholic officials is to stress that they function independent of the government, something that would be compromised by joining a council that, in the eyes of the Cuban Catholic Church, forces other churches to tow the government line.

Maintaining dialogue is the official policy of the Catholic Church, but church leaders recognize that the Castro regime has erected barriers that inhibit maintaining effective dialogue, that is, dialogue that would produce compromises between the church and government on areas of mutual interest and lead to collaboration on social issues and projects between the two institutions. Rolando Suárez, a Catholic layman and the lawyer of the COCC, points to certain social issues that have been on the table in discussions between church and government officials: “The government made abortion legal, and employs the death penalty. On these issues we are not in agreement. But, for example, the government has said that euthanasia will be illegal.

125 ibid.
On this issue we have agreement.”126 However, the regime does not in practice consult the Church on how to approach social issues. Areas of agreement are arrived at more or less by chance rather than consultation. Rather, the Office of Religious Subjects dictates to and admonishes the Church for its offenses.

In “The Social Presence of the Church”, the Cuban Church cautions against what it perceives as attempts of the Office of Religious Subjects to limit its capabilities to evangelize:

We have the impression that there is a subtle and ongoing campaign in our country against the Church, treating it as a private entity or a marginal institution capable of drawing energy away from the Revolution. The existence of an Office for Attention to Religious Subjects, appointed by the Communist Party, is often perceived as a form of control that limits the evangelization efforts of the Church and not as a constructive institution that makes possible, through dialogue, the revision and solution to issues of common interest.127

Here, the Church mildly disguises its loathing of the Office by stating what it is perceived as – again, *indirectly* accusing by implication. The Church makes apparent its desire to find solutions to issues of common interest, but it criticizes the official channels set up by the regime to purportedly achieve a constructive dialogue. The COCC conveys its awareness that the regime has tried to marginalize the Catholic Church; but the highly critical tone of the passage keeps its reference point in the Church’s apparent desire to work *with* the regime, not against it.

126 Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.

Padre de la Vega offers this summation of church-state relations over the last 20 years: “Relations improved after ENEC. But now they are more complicated. They were good during the Pope’s visit, but after he left, political prisoners weren’t released. Now we are able to celebrate Christmas and Semana Santa. But relations have become more tense in the last 2 or 3 years, when the government initiated the ‘Battle of Ideas.’”128 The ‘Battle of Ideas’ is a government-led propaganda campaign to promote the social achievements and ideology of the Revolution against its enemies, chiefly amongst them the US government, but including Cuban-American exile groups and dissident organizations within Cuba. A founding principle of the campaign is that the Revolution is better-equipped to find solutions to social, political, and economic problems than any other institution, organization, or foreign government, adding more fuel to the fiery relationship between the regime and an institution like the Cuban Catholic Church that has made efforts to address social issues – among them education and healthcare – that Cuban church leaders feel they have a role to play in solving. But the ‘Battle of Ideas’ also aims to marginalize the church as a relevant social institution. Just one element of this strategy is the government’s effort to promote Santería as the official religion of Cuba, a policy that has stirred intense feelings of anger and revulsion within the Cuban Church (explored further in chapter 7).

128 Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.
To illustrate the tension, Padre de la Vega discussed the difficulties church authorities experienced in getting permission to display crosses in Old Havana for Good Friday of 2006. Despite this difficulty, the procession of crosses in Rome for that day was transmitted live over state-run television. “The difficulty is doing it here. That is the ‘Battle of Ideas.’”¹²⁹ And it has created a severe frost over church-state relations as a result: “There is today a divergence of the lines of thinking between the church and the government. To do anything outside of the church you have to ask permission. Sometimes they grant it, sometimes not. They don’t permit us to build new churches. They have repaired some, but there are places like Habana del Este that don’t have churches.”¹³⁰

The desire to maintain normal relations between the Cuban Catholic Church and the Cuban government is shared by the Vatican. The Vatican’s representative in Cuba, Nuncio Apostólico Luigi Bonazzi, has delineated specific challenges that face Cuban society, the Cuban Catholic Church, and the Cuban state:

Cuba is a Latin American country that shares many of the same challenges that are found throughout the rest of Latin America, among them creating better life conditions for their citizens. The Cuban government has realized significant accomplishments in the field of education, but there remain problems in the areas of living conditions, communications, etc. Cuba has a specific identity; the challenge of the Church in Cuba (which is also the challenge of the State) is demonstrating how social justice, equality, fraternity – what are claimed as the ideals of the Cuban Revolution – are alive and shared and put in practice in the life of the ecclesial community; for the State the challenge is respecting the religious duty of its citizens and acknowledging

¹²⁹ ibid.
¹³⁰ ibid.
that Cuban society has fundamental Christian roots. This reality should be seen as an important base for the whole social project.\textsuperscript{131}

This statement puts the church and state on equal standing in Cuban society as equally important institutions for the development of Cuban society, a sentiment expected from the Vatican but that continues to inhibit a productive relationship between the Cuban Catholic Church and the revolutionary regime. The Cuban government refuses to offer special status to the Catholic Church, a religious institution that not only considers itself exceptionally relevant amongst the other Cuban religions but recalls its own history of heightened status and elitism. The Cuban Church’s indirectly confrontational posture allows it to maintain formalized relations with the regime, though they remain contentious. Political themes remain a taboo subject and are not broached in official meetings between the PCC and the COCC. This is perhaps the primary reason why a formal relationship is maintained between the two institutions.

5.3.4 Association with the Opposition

This section considers the degree of the church’s association with the primary social opposition in the public sphere. A strategy of direct confrontation would find the church in open association with oppositional leaders and groups, appearing with them in protests or rallies and defending their political ideas and actions. A strategy of indirect confrontation finds the church in symbolic association with the primary social opposition – church leaders themselves do not participate in or endorse the

\textsuperscript{131} Papal Nuncio Mons. Luigi Bonazzi, interview with author, Havana, 11 May 2006.
activities of dissident actors, but it is generally known that the church supports the 
work of the primary social opposition. These dissidents tie their politics to Catholic 
symbols and generally seek the protection of the church and religious spaces to 
organize their activities.

A 2002 article in *Palabra Nueva* (the magazine that serves as the official 
“voice of the Cuban Church”) clearly outlined the Church’s relationship to Cuba’s 
dissident community, as much by what was said in the article by what wasn’t said. 
Entitled *El Proyecto de la Iglesia* (“The Project of the Church”), *Palabra Nueva*’s 
editor Orlando Márquez responded to a letter from Iván Chávez Viera (presumably a 
Catholic dissident) criticizing the Catholic Church for not endorsing Oswaldo Payá’s 
Varela Project, a petition presented to the Cuban National Assembly proposing laws 
that would entail comprehensive political reforms, including the establishment of 
freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, free elections, 
freedom of religion, freedom to start private businesses, and amnesty for political 
prisoners. Oswaldo Payá’s dissident organization, the Christian Liberation 
Movement (MLC), organized the Varela Project. MLC activists collected 11,200 
signatures of registered voters, more than the 10,000 required by the Cuban 
constitution for any petition proposing new laws to be reviewed by the Cuban 
National Assembly.

To establish credibility as a defender of oppositional actors, Márquez invokes 
passages from *El amor todo le espera* as a record of what the institutional Church,
through the voice of the COCC, thinks about those Cubans that are called “dissidents,” “opponents,” and “counter-revolutionaries.” The passages convey the bishops’ opinion that “dissension” can be “enlightening,” and argue that if Cuba can open international relationships with nations who do not agree with the Cuban political system, why at the national level should Cuban citizens be forcibly uniform? Márquez continued: “The prophetic mission of the church is to affirm and denounce from its own position, centered in the human person, without attaching itself to any political posture, but in recognition of the political vocation of citizens.”132 Here, Márquez claims the Church’s neutrality in questions of political disputes: the Church does not and will not endorse or adhere to any partisan political programmes.

Yet, the Varela Project was not in and of itself a partisan political manifesto but a petition proposing liberal democratic political reforms including freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, free elections, and amnesty for political prisoners. These are the very freedoms that church officials have intimated at in its political testimonials and professed to support in private interviews, in line with their Christian individualist culture. The Varela Project did not forward the agenda of a partisan political organization, but requested the kind of political opening that church leaders hope will lead to the development of political pluralism and civil society. Nevertheless, Oswaldo Payá, a Catholic layman, was forced (according to church policy) to abandon any pastoral duties done for the church when he

established a *political* organization, to relieve the church of direct association with the Varela Project or the MLC.

Later in the article it becomes apparent that Márquez believes the Cuban Church should avoid endorsing the Varela Project out of concern for the institutional autonomy of the church vis-à-vis government reprisals rather than the interests of partisan neutrality. The Cuban Church has become so adept at navigating the political waters of Cuban society that it will not capitulate to the demands of any of Cuba’s dissident actors, even though it may support the stated goals of such actors. The goal of Cuba’s strategy of indirect confrontation has been to symbolically align itself with the social opposition while maintaining its independence – thus, retaining its status as the only private, independent, yet politically contentious institution on the island. This, according to Márquez, means refusing to respond to the pressures of those very social actors the Church has worked to cultivate – at times, in fact, publicly distancing itself from these social actors when they become excessively belligerent. Making clear that he speaks *for* the hierarchy in the pages of *Palabra Nueva*, Márquez goes on to outline the *project* of the Church:

Should the church define itself – and this magazine *is* an instrument of the church – according to the criteria of political actors, or should it strive to maintain its independence in such subjects, engaging itself even more in a pastoral of reconciliation and preserving its obligation with the people to fulfill the mission received from Jesus Christ? *That is the project of the church.*

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133 ibid.
Knowing that the Cuban Church, as a result of its indirectly confrontational strategy, often is charged with not going far enough into the arena of contentious politics by more extreme and partisan political dissidents, in Cuba and in exile, Márquez further explains how the Church addresses political issues: “If they existed, it is possible that we would occupy more of these subjects, but not from a partisan position. In other words, prudence is not synonymous with silence and complicity.”\textsuperscript{134} Church officials do not often address politically contentious issues in public, not because it is complicit with the government but because it is prudent in its behavior.

Prudence dominates the Church’s agenda in Cuba. Yet, church officials still are pressured by extreme political opponents in exile and moderate dissident activists on the island to assume a more directly politically confrontational approach. Padre de la Vega states what has become an oft repeated phrase by church officials to those who would look to the Church to use its institutional autonomy to organize dissident groups against the Castro regime, that the Church will not serve as an alternative political party: “The church cannot be an alternative political party in Cuba. The church is positioned between two camps – those that live here and don’t accept the official ideology and the church in exile, which says that we don’t come out strongly enough against the state. But they are there and we are here.”\textsuperscript{135} This sentiment was echoed in my talks with Mons. Pépe: “The church cannot assume any political projects, it cannot be an alternative opposition political party. It must maintain its

\textsuperscript{134} ibid.

\textsuperscript{135} Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.
independence before those that want to manipulate it with the official ideology. The church has its own project of evangelization. Our lay can be members of dissident groups or governmental groups.”

Padre Teodoro Becerril of Havana has witnessed many young and old Cubans come through his doors in search of a different political and social perspective as much as salvation: “Yes, some people come to the church looking for an alternative political option, but the church has never been that. Yet, there is always collaboration amongst Catholics. I myself work to make sure the social doctrine of the church reaches the people.” And so church officials continue propagating their Christian individualist culture, continue preparing their flock not only for the Kingdom of Heaven but for a new political reality in Cuba, one in which individuals will make choices from a variety of political options, trained to use a Christian morality to guide them in their choices. But the Cuban Church has never worked to build any political organizations itself, and though it encourages Catholics to be politically active, it does not endorse the organizations that may be built by its faithful. The association of the church with opposition groups remains symbolic, even though these groups may be predominantly populated with individuals bred from within the church’s temples.

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137 Padre Teodoro Becerril, interview with author, Havana, 10 May 2006.
5.3.5 Assistance to the Opposition

This section examines the extent to which the church assists the opposition. In a strategy of direct confrontation, the church may endorse specific oppositional movements and offers assistance to a variety of dissident actors working for reform of the political system or regime change. Under a strategy of indirect confrontation, the church broadly endorses the growth of civil society and only clandestinely assists oppositional actors or offers no assistance at all.

The Cuban Catholic Church has since the early 1990s consistently vocalized its desire for the development of an autonomous civil society, independent of the many state-run organizations that promote citizen participation in the socialist system. Rolando Suárez, Catholic layman and lawyer of the COCC, puts the development of civil society at the forefront of the Cuban Church’s political interests:

This is a church that is an active participant in society. Freedom implies participation. The big issue on the table is civil society, and participation in civil society. Some Marxists argue that the Communist Party is part of civil society, but for this to be true there must be other civil actors present as well. Non-governmental organizations don’t necessarily have to mean anti-governmental, there are many in all parts of the world that are pro-governmental. This is an unresolved theme here. The church defends the values of civil society, not the specific organizations. We are motivated to defend these ideals because we are children of God, and we love God very much.\textsuperscript{138}

The unresolved theme is the ability of dissident political organizations to organize and petition the government legally. The aim of the Church is to nurture and defend

\textsuperscript{138} Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
the development of civil society, not specific civil organizations. Suárez bases the church’s position on civil development on the church’s love for God rather than the achievement of a political ideal (presumably because the political ideals espoused here are God’s ideals for the fulfillment of human freedom) to maintain the basis of the church’s actions in sacred transcendence. This is the essential source of protection for the church – its strict adherence to its religious duties and functions while avoiding any public forays into political activities.

Resolving not to offer direct assistance or recognition to specific dissident organizations has put the official church at odds with some grassroots sectors of the church and Catholic oppositional actors that would like the official church to adopt a more directly confrontational strategy and be an active participant in dissident activities. Oswaldo Payá, who’s Christian Liberation Movement directed the Varela Project, has not received an endorsement from the official church. Events surrounding the development of the Varela Project signaled the distance that exists between the official church and Catholic lay activists that participate in dissident activities, illustrating the Church’s adherence to an indirectly confrontational strategy. Church leaders seem willing to encourage the laity to engage in dissident activities, but will publicly distance themselves from Catholic dissidents who draw the attention of the government.

Dagoberto Valdés, Director of the Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa (Center of Civic and Religious Formation), President of the Comisión Católica para
la Cultura de Pinar del Río, and a member of the Vatican’s Council on Peace and Justice, in the 1990s formed close relationships with Mons. José Siro González, Archbishop of Pinar del Río, and Mons. Meurice of Santiago de Cuba. These functions have made Valdés a leading figure among Catholic laymen in the promotion and formation of the Cuban Church’s *Christian individualist* political culture. Though each diocese in Cuba has a Centro de Formación en la Fe (Center of Formation in the Faith), Pinar del Río’s diocese was the only in Cuba to feature a Center of Civic and Religious Formation. Valdés used the Centro to organize lectures on democracy, human rights, and civic responsibility. He also served as the director of *Vitral*, considered the most politically contentious of the church publications. *Vitral* made a habit of making direct denunciations of the Cuban government and many of its policies.

When Valdés agreed to begin supporting Payá’s Varela Project at an October 2001 meeting of lay workers in Cienfuegos, they decided to work together to attempt to move Catholic lay workers into more openly politically contentious positions and activities.¹³⁹ The meeting had been organized by the COCC’s Commission on Culture, Justice, and Peace, then presided over by Mons. Meurice. The resulting alliance brought Mons. Meurice, who had not attended the meeting, to declare in the pages of *Vitral*, “It is not the mission of the Church to remove or install kings. It is her mission to proclaim the Evangelization with all the values that the Evangelization

has.” The remark was meant to distance the official church from the dealings between Payá and Valdés.

In early 2007, the church resigned to cut its ties with the increasingly contentious and directly confrontational tone of *Vitral*. Valdés’ close associate and ally, Mons. González, retired in early 2007 and was replaced by Mons. Jorge Enrique Serpa as Archbishop of Pinar del Río. Among the first decisions made by the new bishop was that resources reserved for the publication of *Vitral* and running the *Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa* would be redirected. The publication of *Vitral* would no longer be guaranteed.

In an editorial announcing the new bishop’s decision Valdés cited a lack of funds as the reason for the closing of *Vitral*. For a church that consistently bemoans its lack of access to media outlets, closing one of its own publications, the most critical of the Cuban government, was interpreted internationally as a concession to the Cuban government. In one of his only interviews following the closing of *Vitral*, Dagoberto Valdés lamented the fact that the church itself had shut the magazine down, rather than repressive government tactics: “What I could not believe was that the decision to close the magazine came from within the Church.”

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Responding to the high level of international publicity the story of Vitral’s closing received, Mons. Serpa stated in an official communiqué from the diocese of Pinar del Río that he never discussed closing or terminating Vitral or the Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa, only that it was decided that the resources of the diocese must be redistributed in corresponding diocesan commissions, to better serve the program of evangelization, noted by Mons. Serpa as the “most important program of action the church can have.”142 He continued: “I have asked that Vitral magazine keep to the truth based on the gospel and the church's social doctrine, without falling into aggressive and argumentative expressions.”143 Church activists in Pinar del Río and Havana said church leaders had been discussing the closing of Vitral for more than a year because of government pressure. A news article revealed that the sharpness of Vitral political critiques had come to worry both conservatives in the church and hard-liners in government, according to an anonymous dissident activist.144

This self-policing by the Cuban hierarchy reflects their intent to distance themselves from acts of direct confrontation and the superiority of their corporate interests. Dissident actors were shocked to learn that the same church that produced El amor todo lo espera was willing to engage in self-censure to fulfill its indirectly confrontational strategy. The Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa has been

143 ibid.
dismantled. The church hierarchy had successfully removed its official stamp from the pages of *Vitral*, though a new edition was in fact published after Mons. Serpa’s decision with a new director. It continued to address political themes, and contained an editorial on the theme of respect:

> The politicians can believe that the only way to conceive of society and construct a just society is according to their ideology, which they believe is the only truthful one. One must respect the politicians, as individuals, but they must also respect and defend the legitimate right that other individuals have to think in a different way, to be able to express themselves, in order to construct a plural and truly participative society.\(^{145}\)

With Dagoberto Valdés and his group of editors no longer involved, *Vitral* assumed the indirectly confrontational yet more conciliatory tone of the Cuban Church’s official line.

5.3.6 Participation with the Opposition

This section looks specifically at whether or not church leaders participate with the opposition in confrontational activities. A strategy of direct confrontation would find church leaders openly participating in political debates and joining the opposition in public demonstrations protesting against the regime. In a strategy of indirect confrontation, church leaders encourage laypersons to participate in the political life of the nation, but do not themselves participate nor encourage laypersons to join specific organizations.

\(^{145}\)“El Respeto que Añoramos y Merecemos”, *Vitral*, año XIV, no.79, mayo-junio 2007.
Cuban dissidents have not chosen to stage many formal protest marches/events or make public protest a part of their contentious repertoire. Only the Ladies in White, who gather every Sunday at the Santa Rita Church and stage a walk through Havana, have made public protest their primary contentious action. Yet even this group, who walks peacefully and virtually unencumbered through the streets of Havana, does not receive any public acknowledgement or participation from church officials. The Ladies in White are permitted to use the Santa Rita Church as their gathering place, but they do not receive any public recognition by leaders of the church itself. Their processions go largely unmolested by government forces, due in large part to the high level of international attention they have garnered as well as the fact that no political statements or directly confrontational actions accompany the processions.

Mons. Petit has witnessed a large number of believers flocking to the Cuban Catholic Church in search of political as much as religious leaders, and consequently a large number of disillusioned people: “Politics is the responsibility of laymen, they carry the social doctrine that we have. A lot of people come to the church thinking they’re going to find an alternative political party, and the church is not one.”\textsuperscript{146} The Cuban Church has delegated the responsibility of political confrontation to laymen. According to the church’s strategy, laymen should be actively participating in politics, though church officials themselves cannot enter the political sphere. The political nature of \textit{El amor todo lo espera} gave many Cubans the sense that the

\textsuperscript{146} Mons. Alfredo Petit, interview with author, Havana, 19 April 2006.
Catholic Church would lead a movement of dissident activists, but it has refused to assume this role. Though Cuban church leaders acknowledge that the Catholic Church now attracts almost exclusively Cubans who are unsympathetic to the Revolution, its ideology, and its political, economic, and social goals, they do not use their pulpits to make directly confrontational political pronouncements.

As adamant as church leaders are about refusing to become political figures, they forcefully argue that the Catholic laity must themselves become politically active. According to Rolando Suarez, “The Church doesn’t involve itself in politics. This is the duty of our faithful. However, many Catholic faithful often don’t realize that this is a social duty.”

It becomes apparent that church leaders feel they are endowed with a great responsibility to help develop a politically conscious citizenry, a responsibility that was neglected prior to the 1986 ENEC conference. Though they will not themselves assume a directly confrontational public voice, they are fomenting an able portion of the citizenry to think of themselves first and foremost as dignified Christian individuals, rather than simple parts of a large collective group. The Cuban Church does not want to be the voice of the opposition – but it does want to form and inform those who would become that voice.

Mons. Luigi Bonazzi is Cuba’s *Nuncio Apostólico*, the Vatican’s representative in Cuba. As he elaborates on the mission of the Catholic Church, in Cuba and in all places, it becomes apparent that the Cuban church has the expressed

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147 Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
approval of the Vatican in carrying out all facets of its strategy of indirect confrontation:

The mission of the Cuban Church, as in all places, is to preach the Gospel, to proclaim that Jesus is present with us, to bring people toward a knowledge of Christ; Its mission is to help people take conscience of their dignity as children of God. Building society, the organization of civic life is the task of citizens, including Catholics who are citizens. The church doesn’t take a position in relation to social systems in the sense that it respects all political options from which citizens may decide to choose. Yet, the Gospel is also a powerful instrument of social transformation – it calls on society to construct itself with respect to the individual with citizens at the center of social life. Politics is the responsibility of citizens that are moved by the idea of a just society, constructed for the benefit of everyone.148

Mons. Bonazzi speaks the same message that Cuban church officials imparts, namely, putting the onus on citizens to build a just society while emphasizing the importance of their religious identity. He acknowledges that the Gospel itself can be transformative of citizens and should be used to build a moral political consciousness among the faithful so that they may be able to build just institutions for society to stand on – exactly the task the Cuban Church is working to achieve.

5.4 The Government Perspective

The harshest public critique of the Cuban government by the church came in the 1993 pastoral letter El amor todo lo espera. Significantly, this letter was not only the most contentious statement made by the church but also the first openly confrontational pastoral letter issued by church leaders. Since being issued, church leaders have disagreed over the significance of the letter, largely reflecting the degree

of commitment to remaining indirectly confrontational. For example, Mons. Petit fiercely defends the content and purpose of the pastoral letter, contributing to the view that its publication was a watershed event:

*El amor todo lo espera* talks about reality, and it continues to represent the truth. The people were suffering. I participated in the writing of the document. The government never revealed the content of the text to the people, but it subsequently accused us of working for the CIA. People saw us accused but didn’t know what we said, so more and more began looking for the text of *El amor todo lo espera*. They say it was harsh; it was fair, not harsh. Nobody had ever said anything before that.149

The document was denounced, but never published, in the official government media. However, this led to more and more people seeking out the letter to discover its contents. As Mons. Petit notes, never before had an indigenous Cuban institution made such a statement questioning the ideology, practice, and direction of the Revolution.

Mention of *El amor todo lo espera* to Dorita Pérez, Director of the Office of Religious Affairs of the PCC, *Provincia La Habana*, stirs a wrath of disdain toward the Cuban Catholic Church. Speaking for the Cuban government, her office handles all communications between the Catholic Church and the PCC in Havana Province. Fiercely disagreeing with Mons. Petit, Sra. Pérez points to *El amor todo lo espera* as an example of the Cuban Church overstepping its bounds into the realm of political and economic issues in Cuba: “*El amor todo lo espera* made a very harsh critique. It criticized the treatment of youths, it criticized our educational system. They do

politics in a devious, underhanded way. They are capitalists. They want education and healthcare to charge for these services. Cuba is not in want for any of this.”

These kinds of accusations represent the government’s view that the church is not only seeking to assist dissident activists in Cuba but also wants to reoccupy a social space that represents the most touted achievements of the Revolution, the fields of education and healthcare – two fields traditionally administered to by church institutions in Cuban society, but that now are under a state monopoly. Other leaders within the Cuban Church, such as Mons. Pérez Riera would prefer to avoid the kind of directly confrontational tone of *El amor todo lo espera*: “*El amor todo lo espera* was written in another era, during the worst juncture of the ‘special period.’ Today the situation is not the same. It was valid for that time, but I would slightly disagree with Mons. Petit. The principles continue being valid, but the situation is different.”

Indeed, *El amor todo lo espera* was written during the worst year of the economic crisis of the 1990s, when the government was in a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis social actors that challenged the ideology and leadership of the Revolution. No such statement had been made by the Church while the Soviet Union still provided economic resources and international political and military backing to the revolutionary regime. Sensing that the government was in a position of weakness, the

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bishops acted. The Vatican signaled its approval of the Church’s direction by creating a cardenalate for only the second time in Cuba’s history. *Nuncio Apostólico* Luigi Bonazzi recalls the significance of *El amor todo lo espera* in drawing a line in the sand between church and state in Cuba:

*El amor todo lo espera* seems to me to exemplify the difficulties that exist between the church and state. It is a bishop’s document that intended to invite all Cubans to look at each other as brothers and to work together as brothers in the construction of the Homeland. The State received it as a harsh criticism, as an attack on the system. I repeat that it was a difficulty in understanding one another, and it shouldn’t be surprising – these are the difficulties of joining entities, each with a very distinct identity, in a common project.152

The debate over *El amor todo lo espera* shows the sensitivity church leaders share toward crossing the line from indirect to direct confrontation. Yet, the Cuban government does not waiver in its view of the Cuban Church as a domestic antagonist, a non-revolutionary institution if not a counter-revolutionary one: “From the beginning of the Revolution the Catholics were against the revolutionary authority. Counterrevolutionaries hid within the church. They were against the Revolution and wanted to continue with their oligarchy.” This suspicion of religion and the Catholic Church specifically continued throughout the revolutionary era. Following the ENEC conference, when Cuban church leaders emerged with a new theology that appeared to recognize the legitimacy of the Revolution and some of its achievements, rapprochement seemed possible. But issuing *El amor todo lo espera* at the low point of the “special period” confirmed government suspicions that the Church remained a counter-revolutionary organization: “This same church claims it

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doesn’t have anything to do with politics, and always it takes positions directly contradicting what we say. The Cuban Revolution is what teaches values. Now their pastoral letters speak against everything the Revolution says, and later they say that they don’t talk about politics.”¹⁵³ The political character of much of the Church’s writings and some of its activities does not go unnoticed by the government.

Sra. Pérez’s characterization of church-state relations centers on delineating boundaries. It would seem that relations could improve if the church would limit itself to matters of spirituality and nothing more:

Relations between the Catholic church and the government are stable, more or less. They are relations of coexistence. The church has a specific objective of getting control of education and healthcare. These interests haven’t changed. They want them as they used to have them here, and like they have them in other countries, but here that is the work of the government, not the church.¹⁵⁴

Education and healthcare are two areas of heightened contention, as these fields constituted the most touted achievements of the Revolution yet have historically been included in the domain of the Catholic Church: “After the ‘special period’ began they hoped to give they people a ‘little snack’ and health services. But that is the responsibility of the government, not the church.”¹⁵⁵ To highlight the hypocrisy of the church, she discussed the example of Cuban provincial schools, located primarily in the country. Church leaders have spoken against these schools, saying they break

¹⁵⁴ ibid.
¹⁵⁵ ibid.
up the family structure, because children normally must attend school in the country for a period of approximately two weeks, visit home for a weekend, and then return to the countryside again. But, she argued, don’t the monasteries and seminaries do the same thing? In the end, according to Dorita, the schools only give a percentage of a child education and the rest must come from the family.

Sra. Pérez runs the Havana chapter of the very Office of Religious Subjects that monitors and vexes the Cuban Church. All communications go through Mons. Polcari, who Sra. Pérez describes as, “…not a revolutionary, but he’s a fine comrade. There are others with whom relations are more tense.”156 The intuition here is that Mons. Polcari is willing to put on a good face when dealing with the Office of Religious Subjects, though in private he advocates a transition to representative democracy. Describing communications between the church and her office, Sra. Pérez states, “Communications are fluid, there is no other word to describe them. But they don’t want to extend them. The objective of the church should be to serve and perform humanitarian services. But relations are normal. El Comandante had a meeting last year with the COCC and it went well, it was cordial. They say in front of him that they don’t want to alter socialism, but when they leave to do something else.”157 In the Cuban government’s perspective, the church’s strategy of indirect confrontation consists of concealing its true objectives and desires, to return to the elite status the church enjoyed under the Republic, participate in a democratic

156 ibid.
157 ibid.
transition, and reoccupy and administer Catholic services in education and healthcare. The philosophy of the Revolution is that the state has the capacity to deliver all goods and services to the populace, so that efforts of the church to administer social services, even charitable ones, are considered a threat: “We don’t have anything but what the Revolution provides. Foreign priests often come to Havana and ask the people of the barrio what they need. But there is no lack of necessities here. The state performs this function, giving people what they need. They cannot teach us this, no priest can.”

A strategy of indirect confrontation is at its foundation confrontational. The Cuban Catholic Church and the Castro regime are institutions on opposite sides of broad political and philosophical questions in a decidedly adversarial relationship. Indirectly confronting the regime relieves the church from the threat of direct persecution, but the government has its own way of indirectly marginalizing the Cuban Church, to assure it does not become an autonomous and mainstream political institution.

Part of this strategy came in creating the Consejo Evangélico, which gives special privileges for Protestant religions, including permission to construct new churches. Sra. Pérez concedes, “Relations are normal with everybody, but with the protestant churches they are better.” According to Orlando Márquez, the existence

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158 ibid.
159 ibid.
of the Consejo has severed channels of communication between the Catholic Church and the more revolution-sympathetic Protestant faiths: “Really, there aren’t any relations between Catholicism other faiths. There are many Christian churches here but the communist system is paralyzing in terms of the relationships we are able to forge.”  

The Consejo then serves to strengthen the capacity of Protestant churches to proselytize while isolating the Catholic Church.

There is stark disagreement over the nature of the Church’s relationship to dissident activists as well. In response to the question of whether the dissidents have an alliance with the church to confront the government, Rolando Suárez states:

No – the church has always been of the opinion that our faithful is free to participate in politics. After declaring yourself faithful, all our faithful are free to choose any political path, it’s the freedom that the church proposes, not that they must choose certain parties. The church, the hierarchy, has always been at the service of everyone. There are Catholics that are communist, that are liberal, the church is open to everything. There is no coalition between the church and a political party. I am a layperson, and the hierarchy has never told me what the best political option is. But the church is against the lack of options in our political system.

This caveat allows the Cuban Church to position itself against the socialist system without denouncing it. However, it has not convinced the regime that there is not more than a symbolic relationship between the Cuban Church and Cuba’s dissidents. According to Sra. Pérez, “The few counterrevolutionaries we have here, miserable as

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161 Rolando Suárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
they are, hold their meetings in the Catholic church because they give them the space. The pulpit is not for counterrevolutionary activities.”

Does, then, the government envision any role for the Catholic Church in Cuban society? Only one that would come with validation of and submission to the social and political goals of the Revolution:

Society wants the church to join with the social revolutionary project. But they always ask for Catholic private education. They have Catholic schools for infants within the churches. We respect that because the churches are theirs. Here Catholics are not persecuted. They say that they are not permitted to build new churches but we give them the resources to repair the ones they have. This is building anew, although they say it isn’t. More than 200 churches throughout the country have been repaired. For example, during the Pan-American Games, foreign athletes like to go to church to pray before playing, so we repaired churches near the stadiums. Here, no religion is persecuted for anything. But they have to respect our constitution and our laws. The Catholics confuse this – they talk foolishly. What they do in the church is conspiracy against the state. They should be very careful.

In effect, outlining preferences for increased political pluralism, promoting Christian individualism, and any suggestions that dissident work may improve the political situation of the country are considered disrespecting the laws of the country, and “talking foolishly.” It is no small feat that the Cuban Catholic Church remains the one private institution functioning on the island that has not been subsumed by the state. The price for this distinction has been periods of repression and unending suspicion. Charges of conspiracy have come even as the church pursues an indirectly


163 ibid.
confrontational strategy, which makes the Cuban Church’s resistance to endorse dissident organizations or movements like the Varela Project much more logical. Maintaining this strategy requires coordination and precision, as it is apparent that no article or procession goes unnoticed by the Office of Religious Subjects. While disdaining the church, Sra. Pérez refuses to label it as a potential threat. But for all the talk of normalized relations, it is evident that the government recognizes with contempt the efforts of the church to nurture a new way of thinking in its flock. No less than the Cardinal himself has been signaled out as a target of the government’s scorn:

> It doesn’t interest us when people profess religion. What interests us is that they respect the laws of the country, of the *patria*. Now certain processions are permitted, for example during *Semana Santa*. We’re not scared of that, but they must respect the public order. They organize their public activities and we don’t have absolutely any fear. But there are people that manipulate these activities. And Jaime (Cardinal Ortega) is the one who is scared. He never goes out in procession.164

The challenge to Cardinal Ortega here is very revealing, almost as a recognition of the extent to which the government would come down on the church if it were to organize processions without permission. Sra. Pérez displays a confidence in the oppressive apparatus of the regime to illustrate her point that the Cuban government would not fear even a directly confrontational challenge from the Cuban Church.

The Cuban Catholic Church is firmly situated on the side of opposition to the Castro regime. Its relationship with the government is one of mutual dislike. The

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164 ibid.
church has adopted strategies to conceal its desires for a regime transition and to
mask what would be considered by the regime counter-revolutionary activities. It has
chosen to indirectly confront the regime, deliberately avoiding overtly confronting the
regime so as not to risk overt persecution. The government has responded with its
own efforts to marginalize the Catholic Church in Cuba, creating a situation of
heightened tensions between the two institutions.
6.1 Introduction: Distinguishing Church Strategies

The Catholic Church is a hierarchical, international institution. Yet, it is an institution that exhibits significant cross-national diversity, in terms of (among other variables) church strategy towards ruling national regimes, social actors, and other religious groups. Comparing the case of the Cuban Catholic Church to other cases of national Catholic churches that chose to act confrontationally against authoritarian regimes not only sheds light on the causes that led the Cuban Catholic Church to choose its particular confrontational strategy but reveals a broader pattern of how and why national churches choose to confront authoritarian regimes. By looking at the similarities the Cuban case shares with other cases and what characteristics make the Cuban case unique, a more comprehensive argument can be drawn about the variables that lead to a particular national church’s choice of confrontational strategy.

In this chapter I place the Cuban Catholic Church in comparative perspective with other national churches that have confronted authoritarian regimes. I examine the cases of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Poland, and Venezuela to illustrate my arguments about churches and contention under authoritarian regimes of the left and right in particular time periods demarcated by critical international church
conferences. Scholars have dealt extensively with the question of why churches supported or opposed authoritarian regimes – their work has informed to a tremendous degree the arguments presented in this study. However, my argument concerns the kind of strategy chosen, after a national church decides to confront a dictatorship, distinguishing between direct and indirect strategies of confrontation. In this chapter, I deal explicitly with the factors that led national churches that did oppose authoritarian regimes to choose directly or indirectly confrontational strategies.

I argue that a combination of regime type, institutional church reforms, and the world-historical time period during which the church began its contentious activities have a direct influence on a national church’s choice of confrontational strategy. Churches that became confrontational under right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s were more likely to pursue strategies of direct confrontation than churches facing left-wing authoritarian regimes from the 1980s to the present, which were more likely to pursue strategies of indirect confrontation. The influence of the Second Vatican Council and progressive Catholic thinking that gave rise to liberation theology (a leftist theology that served as a counter-ideology to the ideal of the national security state promoted by right-wing authoritarian regimes) led many national churches into directly confrontational relationships with right-wing regimes during the 1960s and 1970s. Progressive churches that confronted these regimes had in liberation theology a political ideology that called for direct confrontation in the context of the military dictatorships that ruled their countries.
The Vatican’s turn toward more conservative politics under the papacy of John Paul II did not eliminate contentious relationships between church and state, but it did lead churches to pursue strategies closer to indirect confrontation, especially against leftist authoritarian regimes since the 1980s where liberation theology could not serve as a viable confrontational ideology and autonomous grassroots political mobilization declined as a pastoral activity. In addition, the repression suffered by progressives who were among the first Catholic Church members to directly confront authoritarian regimes was sufficiently harsh to cause church leaders to reconsider the losses they suffered when entering politics and make it less likely for churches to pursue this kind of confrontational strategy in later years.

I chose the national churches of Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, Poland, and Venezuela to include a wide range of experiences between churches and authoritarian states and to highlight the general, comparative importance of the problem of the Cuban Church’s contentious stance against the Castro regime. My case analysis takes into account the governing structure and ideology of the regime, institutional ecclesial reforms, the influence of politically progressive theologies and pastoral activities, and the nature of interactions between the church and civil society under authoritarianism. Two of the cases – Brazil and Chile – are churches that formulated political strategies in the post-Vatican II/pre-Puebla era. Both the Brazilian and Chilean churches pursued strategies of direct confrontation against right-wing regimes. Three of the other cases under study – Nicaragua, Poland, and Cuba – crafted their political strategies during the John Paul II papacy against left-wing regimes. The case of
Poland (the only case included here that is not part of Latin America) is important because it constitutes the first case that systematically formulated a strategy of indirect confrontation. The Nicaraguan Church remained divided throughout the Sandinista years, reflecting the difficulty of finding a unifying confrontational strategy when the hierarchy would not accommodate the regime and the grassroots worked closely with the left-wing government. Cuba best exemplifies a strategy of indirect confrontation in Latin America (though it was formed approximately one decade after the Polish Church fully formulated its confrontational strategy against the communist regime) that in many ways is being replicated by the process currently underway in the Venezuelan Church. The Venezuelan Church serves as a case of a national church that is currently experiencing its polity transition from democratic rule to a left-wing authoritarian government, making it a case of a church that, according to the arguments presented here, should adopt an indirectly confrontational strategy (a la Poland and Cuba) or end up divided if it cannot formulate a unifying strategy (a la Nicaragua).

The next section offers a more detailed description of the argument presented in this chapter to explain the choices national churches make when confronting authoritarian regimes. This section is followed by a brief series of case descriptions of the political strategies of the five churches under study and their relationships with ruling regimes and oppositional actors. Finally, the confrontational strategies of all the cases are placed in comparative analysis with the Cuban case as the focal point of the comparison.
6.2 The Argument

For much of Latin American history, church-state relations were based on formal and informal concordats between government elites and the upper levels of the church hierarchy. In most countries, the Catholic Church served to reinforce the traditional order of things. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) set the stage for a variety of new relationships between church and state. In the 1960s, many Latin American Catholic churches, seeking closer relationships with poor and marginalized people, began developing new pastoral practices and focused their evangelization efforts in these communities. Lines of authority were redrawn to give greater responsibility to the laity and the development of new forms of pastoral ministry were encouraged to focus on drawing the poor and marginalized into the church. *A Theology of Liberation*, published in 1970, blended elements of Marxist class struggle with a Christian view of social justice and political activism. Followers of liberation theology expressed a new commitment to mobilize the poor to struggle for their own liberation and emphasized the need for broader social and economic rights. These progressive church leaders not only adopted a new view of salvation – centered on the construction of a better temporal reality – but felt a political responsibility to help the poor and promote social justice.\(^\text{165}\) The emergence of a well-articulated and developed socio-political religious theology gave coherence and direction to scores of bishops, priests, and grassroots Catholic activists that stood in opposition to militaristic forms of governance adopted by right-wing authoritarian regimes throughout the Americas.

\(^{165}\) Mainwaring and Wilde, *The Progressive Church in Latin America*, 6-7.
The Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Episcopal Conference at Medellín (1968) coincided with the rise of a panoply of right-wing militaristic authoritarian regimes in Latin America that promoted the idea of the national security state, set up in some cases explicitly to defend “Western Christian civilization” against communist and other ‘subversive’ socio-political influences. That a progressive church in Latin America emerged out of these developments demonstrated the responsiveness of church leaders to critical events that either change thinking within the church or alter domestic political arrangements. Mainwaring and Wilde (1989) argue that these two phenomena – the institutional reforms orchestrated during the Second Vatican Council and Medellín and the concurrent rise of right-wing dictatorships – together explain the emergence of the progressive church in Latin America. The Second Vatican Council, called to address the challenges of the modern world, put defending human rights and promoting social justice at the forefront of the Catholic Church’s agenda. Instituting these reforms required a greater effort in Latin America than Europe, due to the widespread presence of poverty and repressive regimes that dominated the power structure. The CELAM conference at Medellín addressed the changes that came out of Vatican II and went even further in a progressive direction by denouncing structural sin, calling for social justice, criticizing past failures of the church, and encouraging broader participation in politics.
According to Mainwaring and Wilde, “Alone, neither the broader institutional reforms nor political dictatorship explain the strength of radical Catholic sectors…together, they had a catalytic effect upon the ecclesiastical institution.” It was the combination of these phenomena (rather than either in isolation) that produced a stronger progressive church that sought to confront the military regimes that ruled their countries. Taking this argument a step further, it is argued here that the institutional reforms made in the church conferences toward a more progressive, leftist political vision combined with the rise of authoritarian regimes of a right-wing militaristic bent created a contentious situation that led the church into a strategy of direct confrontation. It was not simply ecclesial reforms but left-wing theological developments implemented by church leaders in countries facing the new experience of right-wing political dictatorship that made confrontational church-state relationships more likely to be directly confrontational. Broadly stated, the church and the regime as institutions were on polar opposite sides of the political spectrum with very little room on either end for political compromise or the moderation of rhetoric and action. Opposition to military regimes tended to unite church members, and liberation theology provided direction to many Catholic progressives that organized pastoral activities based on assisting the poor and promoting the process of liberation. At the time these strategies were formed, church leaders in Latin America did not have experiences as the targets of state persecution. Indirect confrontation did not emerge as a viable political strategy in the 1960s and 1970s, when progressive church leaders armed with liberation theology denounced ruling regimes and assisted

166 ibid., 15.
the victims of repression while helping to organize social opposition. In many cases, they began suffering direct persecution as a result of these efforts.

The churches that adopted a directly confrontational approach stood at the forefront of the opposition to the authoritarian regimes of their home countries. Many also established direct ties with dissident social and political actors. A fundamental pastoral activity of progressive church leaders was the establishment of ecclesial base communities (CEBs). CEBs were grassroots structures led by pastoral agents that organized Catholic followers in poor urban and rural areas around bible study, discussions of its social and political significance, and fostering a sense of community around low-scale political initiatives, such as creating cooperatives and self-help projects.\(^{167}\) Liberation theology thrived in the CEBs, putting them theologically and politically on the side of opposition to the military regimes. The directly confrontational posture taken by the church served to create alliances with civil oppositional actors, who found in the church willing participants in the dissident movement and a private institutional space unpenetrated by the ruling regimes, in many cases the only such space still open and available to social dissenters. This gave the Catholic Church a privileged status in dissident civil society during the years of dictatorship. Both the Brazilian and Chilean Catholic churches exemplify the directly confrontational strategy adopted by church officials that were heavily influenced by a new insurgent ideology that challenged the efforts of right-wing dictators to construct national security states.

\(^{167}\) ibid., 6.
Scholars have debated the factors that led many national churches into contentious relationships with authoritarian regimes, but less attention has been devoted to the kind of contentious strategies that were chosen by church leaders in different times and places: not all the national churches that faced authoritarian regimes in the 1960s and 1970s chose to become politically contentious. However, the churches that embraced liberation theology and did become contentious tended to choose strategies of direct confrontation. This created very tense, contentious relationships between church and state. Quite often, church members became targets of persecution, unable to immunize themselves from the repressive apparatus of the military regimes they confronted. This had a pivotal effect on the Latin American church in general: suffering political persecution refocused church leaders on the religious mission of the Catholic Church. Straying too far into politics made the church more dynamic but endangered its institutional integrity and brought harsh repercussions for radical church members that directly confronted the regime.

The 1979 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) at Puebla marked a turning point for the Latin American Catholic Church. Though the Latin American bishops reaffirmed the preferential option for the poor established at the Medellín conference, a balance between the influence of conservatives and progressives emerged that was not evident at Medellín, when progressives dominated CELAM. Apart from reiterating a focus on working for the poor, the question of authority was broached with a renewed emphasis placed on acknowledging the
highest positions in the hierarchy as the leaders and spokesmen of the Catholic Church. Under the new papacy of John Paul II, the Vatican began to reassert the importance of maintaining strict lines of authority, reigning in the grassroots structures created by progressive church leaders. The progressives had never seriously considered creating a splinter church; but changes at the grassroots level that had been made rather autonomously by priests and pastoral agents now required the consent of the church hierarchy, which sought to impose even greater constraints on grassroots pastoral organization.\footnote{ibid., 16.} Along with enforcing tighter lines of authority, John Paul II delegitimized liberation theology. The Vatican took the position that the main problem facing the church in Latin America was the threat of a Marxist-inspired unorthodoxy that only served to imperil the church’s unity by dividing the hierarchy from the grassroots.\footnote{Peter Hebbelthwaite, “The Vatican’s Latin American Policy,” in Dermot Keogh, ed., \textit{Church and Politics in Latin America}, 1990, 57-59.}

The effects of the renewed conservative outlook of the papacy were manifested in limited options for churches facing authoritarian regimes. John Paul II was vociferously anti-communist and anti-authoritarian in general, but reining in the popular church and showing disapproval of liberation theology undercut the efforts of progressive church leaders to articulate a directly confrontational message based on urging victims of military dictatorships to fight for their own liberation. A distinctly Catholic social message was still put forth by the church hierarchy, but the language of human rights and human dignity did not have the same confrontational

\footnote{ibid., 16.}

\footnote{Peter Hebbelthwaite, “The Vatican’s Latin American Policy,” in Dermot Keogh, ed., \textit{Church and Politics in Latin America}, 1990, 57-59.}
impact or insurgent connotation of the language of liberation. Starting in the 1980s the right-wing authoritarian regimes that had ruled most of Latin America began to crumble. While the national episcopates of countries in transition faced new challenges associated with oncoming democratization and the rising strength of Protestant churches, other national Catholic churches continued confronting left-wing authoritarian regimes. Left-wing authoritarianism presented a different set of circumstances and challenges for church leaders that were repressed or marginalized by such regimes. Liberation theology could not serve as a viable confrontational theology, as it shared in broad ideological terms many of the political goals sought after by these left-wing regimes. No comparable conservative political theology existed that called on church leaders and pastoral agents to directly challenge these regimes with political activism. Furthermore, church members had learned that they too could become targets of persecution when they took directly confrontational approaches. Confrontation was still an option for church leaders, as the Vatican rejected Marxism and promoted an anti-communist political agenda. However, new strategies of contention would have to be developed to successfully confront left-wing authoritarianism.

The 1980s witnessed in Latin America the decline of right-wing authoritarianism and, for the first time, the presence of two left-wing authoritarian regimes. Forced to deal with the emergence of a left-wing regime that came to power on the cusp of John Paul II’s ascension into the papacy and the Vatican’s shift toward a more conservative world outlook, the Nicaraguan Church was especially divided
during the decade in which Nicaragua was ruled by the Sandinista government. The Nicaraguan church had been a politically active institution under the previous dictatorship, and had welcomed the end of Somoza’s reign. Various grassroots Catholic groups supported the nascent Sandinista revolutionary army. When the FSLN took power, a large segment of radical church leaders and lay activists openly participated in the new government. Many progressive grassroots sectors of the Nicaraguan Church supported the socialist project of the Ortega government while Cardinal Obando y Bravo and most of the middle and upper classes openly supported the Contras and US President Ronald Reagan’s war against the regime, in direct confrontation. However, the church hierarchy eschewed grassroots mobilization while the regime based its power on mobilizing the grassroots. The presence of competing agendas within the church led to division and intra-church conflict, as the Nicaraguan church found itself unable to find a unifying strategy under conditions of left-wing authoritarianism and a conservative church hierarchy. Division created by the regime’s deep social penetration and the church’s anti-authoritarian position reflected the difficulties associated with choosing direct confrontation under these social and political conditions.

Directly confrontational church strategies faded along with the decline of right-wing authoritarianism. In countries where dictatorships lingered on, the church moved toward strategies of mediation and reconciliation, perhaps prescient of the oncoming wave of democratization. However, indirect confrontation as a contentious church strategy developed out of the Polish Church’s and the Cuban Church’s
experiences confronting communist regimes. The Polish Church embodied John Paul II’s definitive stand against communism without directly confronting the Polish communist regime, choosing instead to nurture dissident civil society and serve as a mediator between the government and dissident forces. In a country that was almost uniformly Catholic, the Catholic Church was able to wield a great deal of influence without making church officials the leaders of the dissident movement, thereby relieving them from becoming subjects of repression. New ecclesial institutional reforms in a conservative direction combined with the distinct oppressive tactics and social conditions created by left-wing authoritarian regimes made these confrontational relationships more likely to be indirectly confrontational. Before John Paul II ascended to the papacy, both the Polish and Cuban churches experienced extended periods of tension between church and state that did not become confrontational. The rise of a conservative papacy under conditions of left-wing authoritarianism unified these churches and made confrontation in this world-historical time period sustainable and more likely to take on an indirectly confrontational character.

Indirectly confronting left-wing authoritarian regimes meant that the church would no longer put itself on the frontlines of political opposition. Rather, laymen and grassroots activists would be encouraged, at times assisted, in their efforts to organize dissent. The rhetoric of pastoral letters and communiqués did not fervently denounce the regime or its ideology, nor did it call for the liberation of the general population. Instead, church leaders broadly criticized certain policies or social ills
while recognizing the regime’s authority and couching their language in a tone of reconciliation, the promotion of human dignity and the pursuit of dialogue with the regime. These churches sought to elevate the church’s social position by symbolically positioning itself on the side of the opposition without extending its confrontational efforts to a point where the institutional autonomy of the church would be threatened or church members would become the targets of repression.

6.3 The Comparative Cases

6.3.1 Direct Confrontation: Brazil (1964-1985) and Chile (1973-1990)

In a strategy of direct confrontation, church leaders endorse profound political reforms and/or a change of regime. They may also condemn the regime’s ideology as oppressive or incompatible with Catholic doctrine. Relations with the regime deteriorate over time, especially when members of the church suffer direct persecution. Direct confrontation finds church members in open association with oppositional leaders and groups, offering assistance to a variety of dissident actors working for reform of the political system or regime change, and openly participating in political debates and public manifestations protesting the regime with the opposition. Both the Brazilian and Chilean churches adopted broad strategies of direct confrontation. Right-wing military dictatorships ascended into power in these countries concurrently with new developments in the Catholic church – progressive church leaders adopted a leftist political orientation in opposition to the right-wing ideology of national security that neglected the poor and persecuted political rivals.
who spoke out against the regime. The Brazilian Church earned a reputation as the “voice of the voiceless” – the only institution that would defend the poor, the marginalized, and the many victims of the military regime’s oppressive apparatus.

The Chilean Church established institutions that documented instances of human rights violations and assisted victims of repression. It became the institutional center of dissident opposition to the Pinochet regime.

- Brazil

Initially, the Brazilian church approved of the military takeover of Goulart’s presidency and lauded the armed forces for having saved the country from communism. But when the harshest period of repression began in the late 1960s – during which activist lay and clerical leaders became specific targets of government and military forces – the Brazilian Church emerged as the most vocal opponent of the military regime and adopted a directly confrontational strategy. A new cadre of progressive bishops emerged in the period from 1968-1971 and joined with Helder Câmara (the first secretary general of the Brazilian episcopal conference (CNBB) and one of the founders of Catholic Action) to provide a new direction to the church. This meant taking up the cause of Brazilian society’s poor and destitute to become the oft repeated “voice of the voiceless” in Brazil.

Under the leadership of Dom Aloísio Lorscheider, who became secretary general of the CNBB in 1968 and president of the conference in 1971, the CNBB became a progressive tribunal and offered support for oppositional activists.\(^\text{170}\) In

\(^{170}\) Klaiber, 30-32.
1976, responding to the murders of two priests and the kidnapping of a Brazilian bishop, the CNBB issued a communiqué entitled “Pastoral Message to the People of God.” The bishops used the letter to denounce the death squads that carried out the dirty work of the military regime, asserted that the state was not equivalent to the nation, and outrightly compared the national security state to a communist totalitarian regime.

In Sao Paolo, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns formed the Archdiocesan Commission of Peace and Justice to investigate cases of torture, missing persons, and human rights violations. Cardinal Arns also personally visited political prisoners and later expanded the Commission’s services to assist victims of domestic violence and abandoned street children. When he organized a highly publicized ecumenical service for a slain foreign journalist (a non-Catholic and a Marxist, Wladimir Herzog), Cardinal Arns assumed a prominent role as defender of human rights in Brazil.171

The Brazilian bishops issued many pastoral letters that focused on the harsh social conditions created by the military regime and the growing tensions between the church and the military. They often addressed these letters toward the regime and condemned the ideology of national security and the paramilitary groups used by the regime to eliminate its opponents. For example, in 1973 the bishops in the northeast region of the country produced a pastoral letter entitled, “I Have Heard the Cry of My

171 Klaiber, 31.
People,” which accused the regime of creating an environment that condoned oppression and state terrorism. Other regional dioceses followed with similar pastoral letters that were subsequently condemned by the government.

Close links between the grass roots and the hierarchy strengthened the Church’s stance against the regime and made it a more potent force for social change. Brazilian CEBs mobilized popular support for change and imputed progressive values and teachings in the population through discussions of social justice and the distribution of political education pamphlets. Forging direct links to political dissidents and creating new social organizations served to put the Brazilian Church squarely on the side of the opposition. Some church members even had direct ties with armed guerrilla groups. For example, in 1969, a group of Dominican priests were arrested for establishing contacts with Carlos Marighella’s rebel group, Action for National Liberation (ALN).172

The consequences of direct confrontation for the Brazilian church included persecution, harassment, arrests, kidnappings, and some murders of priests and church members. In a document prepared for the Puebla conference, the Brazilian Ecumenical Center of Documentation and Information reported that between 1968 and 1978 122 church officials were imprisoned and another 273 pastoral agents were detained for political reasons.

- Chile

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Under the Frei and Allende presidencies the Chilean Church made a commitment to neutrality in political contests between opposing parties. However, as Chilean CEBs became more closely associated with partisan political activities (tied to the Allende regime), unity broke down. The Chilean Church responded to the Pinochet coup with cautious support, hoping that social conflict would be reduced.\footnote{Brian Smith, “The Catholic Church and Politics in Chile”, in Dermot Keogh, ed., \textit{Church and Politics in Latin America}, 328-9.}

But, competing social agendas between church and state soon became apparent: the church’s commitment to the poor conflicted with Pinochet’s desire to promote a business-friendly economy and eliminate social services.

Relations between church and state soured within a year of the regime’s ascension to power. Under the leadership of Cardinal Raúl Silva Henriquez, the Chilean Church took the lead in organizing institutions to monitor human rights abuses and assist victims of the regime. Two ecumenical organizations were established after the first year to provide emergency relief services for victims of the regime, help foreigners leave the country, and offer legal aid services to prisoners and dismissed workers: the National Committee to Aid Refugees (CONAR) and the Committee of Cooperation for Peace (COPACHI). COPACHI also began providing health and nutritional assistance to the poor, in part to fill a gap that was created by Pinochet’s dismantling of social services. To this point the bishops had remained ambiguous in their stance toward the regime in their public statements. Nevertheless, relations deteriorated due to the work of CONAR and COPACHI, which were viewed
by the regime as subversive institutions. Pinochet pressured Cardinal Silva to close these organizations, to which the Cardinal responded by creating the exclusively Catholic *Vicaría de Solidaridad* (Vicariate of Solidarity), which was run under his personal supervision and protection. From 1976-1985, the *Vicaría de Solidaridad* provided moral leadership to the opposition and stood out for its defense of victims of state repression.

The *Vicaría* provided legal assistance to victims of repression, housing assistance to the poor, established moral cooperatives, and documented human rights abuses. It was composed of 200 priests, lawyers, and consultants that organized seminars and conferences and published books and pamphlets on the human rights situation in Chile. The social service programs that constituted the *Vicaría* were organized by local members of CEBs. A strong international financial network also lessened the church’s reliance on the state. As a result, the *Vicaría* became an umbrella organization for dissident groups: secular political dissidents flocked to the church when their organizations were shut down and often used these Catholic institutions to conceal their activities from the regime.

In retaliation, the government-controlled media accused the *Vicaría* of harboring Marxists and supporting political dissidents with foreign money. Clerical and lay leaders, including some bishops, continued to suffer harassment and repeated arrests.\(^{174}\) A major source tension lay not only in the social work organized by the

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\(^{174}\) ibid., 331-2.
church, but the public criticism of the regime and its myriad human rights violations, criticism that was perceived by the regime as partisan political attacks. As was the case in Brazil, in Chile the systematic repression of civil society resulted in countless detentions and disappearances, which spilled over to include church members that became involved in confrontational activities.

6.3.2 A Church Divided: Nicaragua (1979-1990)

Nicaragua represents a case of a divided church that could not forge a coherent, unifying strategy, either to confront or accommodate the ruling regime. The Nicaraguan Church faced the unique experience in post-Vatican II Latin America of transitioning from right-wing authoritarianism to left-wing authoritarianism. This transition also came as John Paul II ascended to the papacy and CELAM held its third bishops’ conference at Puebla, signifying a transition in the Latin American church from a progressive-dominated socio-political agenda that emphasized grassroots organization to a conservative framework that sought to reinforce traditional lines of authority. A split in the Nicaraguan Church between the conservative hierarchy and the radical grassroots sectors reflected this broader trend. The hierarchy adopted a directly confrontational strategy to challenge the new regime while many radical church members accommodated the regime, some going so far as to accept government positions.

The church hierarchy, headed at the time of the Sandinista Revolution by Archbishop of Managua and soon to be Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, initially approved of the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship but conveyed its preference for
a multi-party democratic system. A strong community of CEBs that had been growing since the Medellín conference provided support to the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) throughout the 1970s. From 1978-79 church groups provided humanitarian assistance to the FSLN and mobilized international support for the Sandinistas. After the new regime came to power, five Catholic priests were given positions in the government, displaying an unprecedented degree of church collaboration with a left-wing authoritarian regime. To a great extent the Sandinistas tied their stated reverence for the plight of the poor to Catholic symbolism. The transition from the previous dictatorship to the Sandinista government was associated with the coming of the “Kingdom of God” in the eyes of the many Catholics that welcomed the new government. What was new in Nicaragua was that liberation theology was supported by the governing regime.

The church hierarchy, however, never offered full support to the Sandinistas. Starting in 1982, divisions within the church came to a head as the hierarchy began criticizing both the new regime for failing to institute a democratic government and the popular sectors of the church for subverting the authority of the church hierarchy. A letter from John Paul II to the Nicaraguan bishops reinforced their position against both the regime and the popular church. This view was reiterated during the Pope’s

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175 Conor Cruise O’Brien, “God and Man in Nicaragua,” in Dermot Keogh, ed. Church and Politics in Latin America, 141.
1983 visit to Nicaragua, a momentous occasion that served to increase rather than heal polarization within the Nicaraguan Church.\textsuperscript{176}

The accommodative members of the popular church conflicted sharply with the directly confrontational posture being shaped by the hierarchy. A critical event that solidified the position of the hierarchy in direct confrontation to the regime came in August of 1983 when the bishops issued a communiqué that condemned the implementation of a military draft. Printed in the newspaper La Prensa under the title, “Nobody can be obliged to take up arms for a party,” the bishops declared that the draft was a coercive tool used to bolster the Sandinista army and consolidate Sandinista rule rather than assist in the defense of the nation. They went on to question the legitimacy of the regime, stating, “The absolute dictatorship of a political party...poses the problem of its legitimacy as well as the legitimacy of its institutions, including the army...”\textsuperscript{177} Though many Catholics in the CEBs remained enthusiastic supporters of the Sandinistas, the leadership of CELAM and the Vatican both threw support behind Archbishop Obando and the conservative bishops, signaling the extent to which a new conservative direction had been taken by the international church to the detriment of liberation theology and the progressive sectors of the church. Archbishop Obando was made Cardinal in 1985 – an undeniable mark of the Vatican’s approval of the church hierarchy’s confrontational strategy. Appearing with the Contra leadership at a mass in Miami on his way back

\textsuperscript{176} Margaret E. Crahan, “Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Nicaragua,” in Mainwaring and Wilde, eds. The Progressive Church in Latin America, 53-54.

\textsuperscript{177} Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, “Comunicado,” Managua, August 29 1983.
from Rome, the new Cardinal signaled his support for the opposition, remarking, “I do not object to being identified with the people who have taken up arms.”178 In forging direct links to the Contras (the armed opposition confronting the Sandinista government) Cardinal Obando eliminated the potential for the church hierarchy to play the role of mediator in the peace process that eventually developed. Instead, during the peace process, the Cardinal took an aggressive, interventionist role. The Nicaraguan Church remained a primary actor in Nicaraguan politics throughout the duration of the Sandinista government.

The experience of the Nicaraguan Church demonstrated the difficulty in finding a unifying strategy under the political and institutional conditions generated by the leftist Sandinista revolution and the conservative shift in the Vatican. The division in the Nicaraguan Church that resulted from competing strategies was not an experience that other churches confronting leftist regimes hoped to replicate. The Polish and Cuban churches exemplify cases of churches that took a long time to find a unifying confrontational strategy after being marginalized by left-wing authoritarian regimes.

6.3.3 Innovation of Indirect Confrontation: Poland (1948-1990)

Churches that had longer experiences with the repression characteristic of communist regimes found directly confrontational strategies undesirable. First the

Polish Church, and later the Cuban Church, made indirect confrontation the defining feature of their contentious strategies with communist regimes after finding an appropriate political opportunity to assert themselves. For the Cuban Church it was the fall of the Soviet Union. For the Polish Church, it was the ascension of a Pole to the papacy.

Both the Cuban and Polish churches experienced decades of communist rule and both nurtured the development of dissident civil society. Each also adopted a strategy of indirect confrontation to confront their respective dictatorships. In a strategy of indirect confrontation, the church advocates increased political pluralism without necessarily questioning the legitimacy of the current regime. The church critiques the official ideology and may highlight differences between the official ideology and Catholic doctrine, but remains neutral or formally seeks reconciliation with the regime and the advancement of mutual interests. Indirect confrontation finds the church in symbolic association with the primary social opposition – the church broadly endorses the growth of civil society and encourages laypersons to participate in the political life of the nation, but do not themselves participate nor encourage laypersons to join specific organizations.

In Poland in the early 1950s the communist government waged a violent campaign against the Catholic Church hierarchy. Priests, bishops, and cardinals were thrown in jail for voicing opposition to the regime. Catholic education was nationalized. Yet, the Polish Church remained, as it had been for centuries, a
rallypoint for opposition to foreign occupation – in this case the Soviet domination of the Polish government. Adding to its capacity to survive were the territorial changes to the Polish nation instituted during the Potsdam Conference of 1945, which, combined with the extermination of the Jewish population by the Nazis, made the religious composition of the country approximately 96% Roman Catholic.179

The period from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s saw an amelioration of church-state relations in Poland. The church still had grievances against the regime, including enforced restrictions on religious practice, the confiscation of church lands, state interference in religious instruction, and the social outcasting of practicing Catholics. In the 1960s, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski initiated a program of national religious revival entitled the Great Novena of the Millenium. The purpose of the program was to rededicate Poland to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but the decades-long effort also gave the Polish Church an opportunity to promote its own cultural meaning-system and conception of Polish collective identity that included values and conceptions of community that were the opposite of those promoted by the communist Polish state.180 Cardinal Wyszynski’s “theology of the nation” – embodying the argument that the Polish Catholic Church represented a national culture based on religious morality and the unity of the historical experience of the

Polish people – was a thinly veiled counterpart to the “internationalism” of the Polish state, indicating its domination by the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{181}

A sharpening of tensions preceded the election of Karol Wojtyla as Pope John Paul II in 1978. Subsequently, the church began criticizing the regime in pastoral letters and communiqués, but for the most part couched its rhetoric in language that was diplomatic, restrained, and conciliatory – the language of indirect confrontation. The election of a Polish pope made the Polish Church’s role at once more prominent and more political. At times the church’s language became more forceful when denouncing the government’s efforts to marginalize the church, especially in the area of education. When the anti-government Committee for the Defense of the Workers (KOR) praised the church for its commitment to the cause of human rights in Poland, the church and the KOR coordinated some statements criticizing the regime, although the church was careful to avoid participating in political activities and never made public statements supporting the KOR.\textsuperscript{182}

Even when church-state relations deteriorated, personal relations between the church hierarchy and government officials remained cordial.\textsuperscript{183} In 1980 as the weak Polish economy reached crisis levels, worker opposition mounted and the government took steps to grant more freedoms to the populace – including the freedom to

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{183} Monticone, 75.
organize independent trade unions. Out of these conditions emerged the Solidarity movement, which consisted primarily of practicing Catholics who looked to the church as an advisor in their social and moral philosophy as well as their political strategy. The Polish Church served primarily as a free space for dissident thought and social interaction. Church funds were also funneled into the Solidarity movement clandestinely. Cardinal Wyszynski personally counseled Lech Walesa, preaching prudence and taking a reasonable approach vis-à-vis the regime; during their meetings, Walesa agreed to moderate Solidarity’s demands.

When all authority broke down in Poland the church served as a stabilizing force. Bishops were present as mediators in negotiations between Solidarity and the regime. This function constituted the formal entrance of the church into the political arena – but not with the objective of provoking regime change. In fact, church-state relations improved as a result of the bishops having accepted the role of mediator. In the regime’s view the church’s efforts were made in the spirit of constructive cooperation for the benefit of Poland’s well-being and security. But the church had already been providing space and counsel to the opposition. The presence of a highly organized social opposition allowed the church to play mediator rather than place itself at the forefront of opposition.

When the crisis worsened and the regime imposed martial law, the church defended various social groups that suffered for directly challenging the regime. The bishops began using gentle language in their communiqués, and then sharpened their
attacks when the social situation became chaotic. In a critical communiqué that was read from the pulpits of all churches, the bishops affirmed that it was their moral duty to defend victims of violence and rejected the use of force not only by the security forces but by the opposition. They also stated that the church would not substitute for social groups or secular organizations and urged dialogue, reconciliation, forgiveness, and mutual concessions.

After a second papal visit in 1983 (during which the Pope in his homilies repeatedly referred to Solidarity, providing further legitimacy to the opposition), martial law was lifted and both church and state expressed a desire to normalize relations. The murder of a priest who had made statements openly supporting Solidarity stalled these efforts. Through the aftermath of this event the Polish Church remained consistent with a policy it held for the previous 40 years of dictatorship by insisting that it was not a political actor and even reprimanded certain priests that became overtly political. In 1989, the bishops’ participation in round-table discussions between the state and the opposition was once again institutionalized.

6.3.4 Emerging Confrontation: Venezuela (1998-present)

The Venezuelan Church now finds itself facing a consolidating left-wing authoritarian regime that purports to take care of the poor, similar in this way to the Nicaraguan and Cuban regimes when they assumed power. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has demonstrated his eagerness to copy the Cuban experience and adapt many of the Cuban regime’s social and political innovations in Venezuela. Chávez sees Cuban President Fidel Castro as a political mentor and shares his political vision
vis-à-vis internal and external enemies (in that the internal enemies are often accused of working in concert with the external enemy, namely the US government). This has come to include a virulent distrust of the Venezuelan Catholic Church and its confrontational position on his effort to bring socialism to Venezuela.

The Venezuelan Bishops’ Conference (CEV) has developed a contentious relationship with the Venezuelan government based on objections the bishops have voiced to the regime’s authoritarian policies and threats to the church’s institutional survival. As the Chávez regime began consolidating power and institutionalizing socialist programs, the CEV voiced its opposition to the government’s infringement on political and civil liberties. In response, the Chávez government has threatened to withhold the appointment of bishops, secularize all education in Venezuela, abolish Catholic media, and loosen Venezuela’s ban on abortion – a crucial policy issue for the CEV.¹⁸⁴ Chávez himself switched faiths from Catholicism to the Evangelical Christian Church, and has called the bishops’ conference a “tumor” in Venezuelan society.

The CEV has not yet formulated a definitive confrontational strategy. The uneven speed with which the Chávez regime has been moving toward authoritarianism (though oppositional forces have been marginalized by the regime’s policies, elections are still held and term limits have not yet been abolished) has left a rapidly diminishing degree of uncertainty concerning the country’s political future.

¹⁸⁴ Hagopian, 75.
However, it is not yet clear how far the Chávez regime will go in creating another “Cuba” in Venezuela. The CEV is still deciding what line to take vis-à-vis a regime that has a firm base of societal support, especially amongst the poorer classes. A telling incident occurred when retired Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara, while speaking during the Procession of the Divine Shepherdess, stated that the Chavez regime had “lost its democratic course and presents the semblance of a dictatorship,” and added that Chávez himself was a paranoid.\(^{185}\) After Chávez responded with pronouncements denouncing the bishops for disrespecting the Venezuelan nation, Archbishop of Caracas Jorge Urosa Sabino, speaking for the CEV, cautioned against the voicing of political opinions by church members during religious functions. This statement constituted a step toward indirect confrontation, under which the church avoids directly referencing the ruling regime and especially specific officials of the regime, including its leader.

During the failed 2002 coup attempt against the Chávez regime, the CEV used the language of indirect confrontation to help quell the crisis, repeatedly calling for national dialogue and reconciliation. It has since continually addressed political themes in its pastoral letters and communiqués, blending directly and indirectly confrontational statements throughout. They have warned against the deteriorating integrity of the country’s political institutions, the increasing militarization of Venezuelan society, polarization between supporters of the government and the social opposition, and threats to political and civil liberties. A critical Chavez political

\(^{185}\) Qtd. in Hagopian, 75.
initiative that could represent the ultimate consolidation of his authoritarian rule is his proposed reform of the Venezuelan constitution to remove term limits. The CEV responded to this proposal with a scathing communiqué condemning the push the Chavez regime is making toward installing socialism:

The model of a Marxist-Leninist, socialist state is contrary to the thinking of the Liberator Simón Bolívar and is also contrary to the personal nature of the human being and the Christian vision of man, because it establishes the absolute dominion of the state over the individual… The reform proposal excludes political and social sectors of the country that do not support a socialist state, restricts personal freedoms and represents a retreat in the progress of human rights.186

Statements like these are constitutive of a directly confrontational strategy. The CEV here sets socialism in opposition to values held not only by the Catholic Church but to human rights in general and the national legacy of the nation’s greatest hero, Simón Bolívar. Yet, the channels of communication between church and state have stayed open. On occasion the bishops have met personally with Chávez in the spirit of maintaining a dialogue. It remains to be seen if the Venezuelan bishops will mimic the strategy of the Cuban bishops to the extent that the Venezuelan regime has mimicked the Cuban regime.

6.4 Cuba in Comparative Perspective

Cuban church leaders have a tendency to regard their experience with revolutionary authoritarianism as unique amongst other national churches in Latin America and elsewhere. Cuba does stand alone as the only country in Latin America headed by a communist regime that came to power before the Second Vatican Council, survived through the end of the Cold War, and remains in power today. Some Cuban church leaders argue that this experience isolated the Cuban Church from broader theological developments in Latin America, forcing them to wait a long time to recuperate from the shock of the Cuban revolution’s ascension and consolidation before regaining the capacity to assert themselves in Cuban society. It has been argued in this study that after emerging from its period of silence the Cuban Church has found innovative ways to disassociate themselves from the revolutionary regime while protecting their interests and promoting their moral and political agendas. However, the Cuban Church’s confrontational strategy toward the regime has been formulated in a way that fits in a broader pattern of contention amongst other churches that have confronted left-wing authoritarianism. The national churches under study here have responded to the rise of dictatorships, institutional church reforms, international events, and political and religious developments in each other’s countries when formulating their contentious strategies. This does not necessarily constitute an imitation of a standard model of contention; rather, endogenously developed strategies have come to share certain similarities arising from similar responses to similar conditions.
The rise of right-wing military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s were initially met with cautiously supportive responses from many national churches that soon became directly confrontational, and were able to sustain directly confrontational strategies for years. Both the Brazilian and Chilean churches welcomed coups in their countries with reserved optimism, in part due to the erratic social and economic situations that existed at the time of the coups and the perceived possibility of having a government that could assure social order. The harsh conditions imposed by these regimes, combined with the spread of progressive Catholic thinking and liberation theology, propelled church-state relations into open confrontation. In contrast, national churches that experienced the rise of left-wing regimes usually spoke out against these regimes from the outset and experienced a heavy repressive backlash. Left-wing dictatorships that embraced communism took total control of politics, society, and the economy, and often espoused the Marxist doctrine of atheism, in contrast to the right-wing authoritarian regimes that in many cases sought to defend “Western and Christian civilization” (In Latin America, Cuba stands out as an exception of a left-wing authoritarian regime that embraced atheism. Both the Sandinista and Chávez regimes have confronted their national Catholic Church hierarchies but also sought to embrace Christianity broadly. However, on a global scale, communist regimes more often than not adopted atheist doctrines.). This put the Catholic churches in these countries at tremendous risk of not only being marginalized but completely eradicated as cohesive religious institutions. In Poland and Cuba communist regimes rapidly co-opted all political, economic, social, and cultural institutions; the church, especially when it became a vocal adversary, also
became a target of repression. Though the church temples themselves in Poland and Cuba were not attacked or destroyed, traditional Catholic institutions in education and social services were abolished by the regime. Both of these churches entered periods close to appeasement before re-entering the realm of contentious politics.

Confrontational churches under right-wing regimes were guided by a theological perspective that directly challenged the state’s ideological and policy goals. The emphasis placed by liberation theologians on social and economic rights and mobilizing the poor to struggle for their own liberation cut into the social order envisioned by military regimes that were rooting out suspected subversives and dismantling social services. Progressive church leaders flaunted the security measures imposed by these regimes and found themselves the targets of persecution, further pushing the church into directly confrontational relationships. Both the Brazilian and Chilean churches began active campaigns of social organization amongst the lowest classes of their societies, often using liberation theology to re-orient the segments of the population in situations of social and economic desperation toward oppositional political thought and activism. Liberation theology provided an ideological arsenal to churches under right-wing regimes that was not available to churches in left-wing regimes; this theological paradigm could not serve as a viable contentious theology against socialist regimes that shared a similar Marxist vocabulary. This being the dominant theological vision in Latin America in the 1960s, the Cuban Church felt alienated from these developments. For example, many Cuban Church leaders felt that accepting liberation theology meant they would be
accommodating left-wing authoritarianism (like the radical sectors of the Nicaraguan Church). Furthermore, the Cuban Church could not embed itself amongst the poorer classes or portray the poor as a neglected class when it was the poorest sectors of the population that provided the foundation of support for the regime. Instead, the Cuban Church remained for many years an elite church without an elite class.

The key difference the Cuban bishops see between themselves and the rest of Latin America is that they experienced a sweeping, leftist, social revolution that was unique in the region. Comparing the Cuban Church to other Latin American churches during a lecture commemorating the 20th anniversary of ENEC, Cardinal Ortega stated that the Cuban Church is unique for being in a “post-revolutionary” situation. In the “pre-revolutionary” situation – referring to the early years of the revolution when the Cuban Catholic Church had not yet adapted to the new social and political reality created by the revolutionary regime and the newly mobilized Cuban population – many Cuban Catholics risked their lives and died in the internal struggle against the consolidation of the new revolutionary government. According to Cardinal Ortega, the “post-revolutionary” situation constitutes the aftermath of the complete decimation of the Catholic Church’s social-standing and cultural influence: “Now, Cuban Catholics live with their faith folded back in communities decimated by emigration or by fear of the kind of social sanction that can fall on those who attend the Church.” Summarizing the motive behind the church’s emergence from its period

of silence, Cardinal Ortega states, “Our objective, in recognition of the reality in which we find ourselves, was to find paths to remove the Church from its immobility, to rise from its knees.”\textsuperscript{188}

Being in the “post-revolutionary” situation meant the Cuban Church had to acknowledge the fact that the Cuban revolutionary regime had consolidated its political power and social influence. It also meant it could not confront the regime with the tactics employed by some Latin American Catholics against authoritarian regimes in previous decades, or by Cuban Catholics during the early years of the Revolution. Referencing the progressive church leaders that embraced liberation theology, Cardinal Ortega warns that in no circumstance should members of the Cuban Church participate in revolutionary actions or join Marxist guerrilla groups – even if, Cardinal Ortega concedes, this was done by Latin American Catholics in the name of Christian love.\textsuperscript{189} Cardinal Ortega’s critique of the violent consequences that come from adopting liberation theology reflects an intense suspicion and revulsion of the theology shared by Cuban church leaders who, having lived under a revolutionary government for over 45 years, have become skeptical of all leftist ideologies. Instead of mimicking the directly confrontational churches, the Cuban Church had to reinvent its strategy for dealing with the regime and evangelizing the Cuban people. In the political realm, this meant endorsing increased political pluralism, open dialogue, public debate, and the entry of new political ideas into the

\textsuperscript{188} ibid.

\textsuperscript{189} ibid.
nation’s political discourse – a discourse that is controlled, along with all national media, by the ruling regime. But the memories of intense oppression experienced during the early years of the Revolution remained with the bishops, and kept them from treading into open confrontation with the regime. According to Mons. Polcari, the Cuban Church’s deep commitment in the struggle to find a place for Catholicism in Cuba prevented the church hierarchy from looking outward for examples of churches that directly challenged authoritarian regimes: “Our bishops have this mentality, they take into account a series of experiences that we have lived through; we cannot live so dangerously, or try to transplant (another church’s) experience here; we only have our own experience; we must give our response to society from the perspective of the faith; no specific church has inspired us.”

Despite the stated desire of Cuban church leaders to portray their struggle as unique (and the justification they have in doing so) there are observable trends in church strategy that have taken place in Cuba and elsewhere, and international influences that have guided events surrounding the Cuban Church’s entry into contentious politics. Occasionally at least, Cuban Church members have admitted as much.

For the Polish, Nicaraguan, and Cuban church hierarchies, critical events provided re-entry points to assume positions of prominence in their societies and opportunities to develop confrontational strategies. All of these churches benefited from high-profile papal visits from a very popular pope that provided social legitimacy to the political stances of the church hierarchies. The social status of the

Polish church was immediately elevated by the election of a Polish pope in 1978. John Paul II effectively used his internationally recognized moral stature and notoriety to focus world attention on the plight of his brethren in communist Poland.¹⁹¹ The collapse of the USSR was the momentous event that spurred change in the behavior of the Cuban Church in a more contentious direction, leading to the creation of a Cuban cardenalate and a 1998 papal visit. For all three of these churches, approval from the Vatican and increased international attention combined with regime statements espousing admiration for the pope and respect for the Catholic Church made it less likely that church would itself be persecuted. However, while Nicaraguan Church leaders used the occasion to elevate their directly confrontational rhetoric – leading to increased division within the Nicaraguan Church, church leaders from the Polish and Cuban churches were careful not to overestimate gains made from the papal visits and deviate from their fundamental strategy of confronting the regime indirectly.

When the Chávez regime began moving toward authoritarian socialism, the Venezuelan bishops’ responded with some harsh statements reminiscent of a pattern that was laid out by both the Polish and Cuban churches: reacting to the onset of left-wing authoritarianism with acts of direct confrontation. After experiencing periods of severe retaliation by their governments, both the Polish and Cuban churches then entered periods of acquiescence as their respective regime’s consolidated their power.

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The CEV seems to be discovering the virtues of indirect confrontation earlier than those churches, having already sensed the extent to which Chávez is willing to socialize Venezuelan society and realizing that direct confrontation could put their institutional survival at risk. Yet, the country has not been completely ‘socialized’ to the extent of what occurred in Cuba or Poland, and the CEV is still expressing disapproval for certain Chavez policies in a directly confrontational manner.

International religious conferences were watershed events for the Latin American Church in which new theological visions were fleshed out and new directions were sanctioned by CELAM. The Second Vatican Council and the Medellín, and Puebla conferences all dealt with the problem of how the church should deal with modern political systems and what should be the church’s role in society. The 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), distributed at the conclusion of Vatican II, endorsed democracy as the Catholic Church’s preferred form of government for both moral reasons (it would best guarantee individual freedom) and institutional reasons (it would best guarantee the autonomy and freedom of the church). Each of these conferences fundamentally changed the way church leaders perceived their religious missions, leading to changes in the way they intervened in political matters. They were also occasions during which various national churches could learn from each other’s experiences and seek solutions to common problems. The Cuban Church, however, did not have a significant presence in either the Medellín or Puebla Conferences and, not having any affinity for the progressive direction being taken by the Latin American Church
(especially at Medellín), was isolated from the developments associated with liberation theology and the new pastoral practices that sprung from progressive thinking. Nevertheless, Cuban Church leaders did take note of the value of these conferences in preparation for the development of their own ecclesial conference and a uniquely Cuban theology.

When reflecting on the significance of the CELAM conferences, Cuban church leaders express a clear feeling of detachment from the Latin American church’s evolution in favor of a more progressive outlook during the 1960s and 1970s. “The content of Puebla did not correspond to our reality,” says Mons. Pérez Riera. “The grand themes of the conference were valid but the content wasn’t applicable to our reality. But the conference, the style of the conference, was the inspiration for ENEC.”192 Echoing this theme of showing admiration for the style of the CELAM conferences but not their content, Mons. Polcari suggests the Cuban Church’s distrust of leftist religious theology resulted from Cuba’s harsh experience with left-wing authoritarianism:

We think that it is necessary to familiarize ourselves with the official conferences; what was said in Medellín and Puebla was good, but Cuba is distinct from the rest of Latin America. We are in agreement with the preferential option for the poor, but liberation theology was not applicable here in Cuba; the problem of the poor in Latin America is not like what we have in Cuba – we have our own experience. We didn’t apply the teachings

of these conferences to Cuba, rather, we held ENEC from within, from our own perspective.  

Here, Mons. Polcari highlights a unique element of the Cuban system that made liberation theology untenable for Cuban Church leaders: the poor in Cuba were being tended to by a regime that already purported to “liberate” the populace.

During his lecture marking the 20th anniversary of ENEC, Cardinal Ortega acknowledged that liberation theology was born out of a situation of grave injustice, but admonished the example set by those theologians that degraded themselves by employing Marxist analysis and advocating methods in their struggle against injustice that could lead to violence, including expressing a mentality that would “justify that killing of the rich for the love of the poor.” According to Cardinal Ortega, the Cuban Church’s experience with socialist revolution gave it a higher wisdom, a knowledge of the wickedness of leftist ideology that liberation theologians could not understand or appreciate, as they still had a “pre-revolutionary” state of mind. Yet, as Orlando Márquez states, the Puebla conference changed modes of thinking within the Cuban Church even as they continued to promote their uniqueness: “The situation in Cuba is unique and distinct from Latin America. The ENEC Conference was preceded by a period of reflection over the reality of the country that came after Puebla. The goal was to formulate our own pastoral.”

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195 Orlando Márquez, interview with author, Havana, 19 April 2006.
prospect of a new direction in the Latin American church, the Cuban Church sought to develop a theology of communion, one that would unite all Christian brothers in love and elevate them above all separations and divisions.\textsuperscript{196}

After holding the ENEC conference in 1986, the Cuban Church felt more comfortable engaging in broader religious and social themes that were affecting Latin America as a whole. The Cuban Church is still unsettled by its period of silence – it has tried to explain its inability to assert itself in the first 25 years of the revolution by calling attention to the dramatic extent of the revolutionary regime’s social and political control. Yet, it has also failed to acknowledge the fact that Catholicism in Cuba had not penetrated the grassroots of society, had not established roots that would be strong enough to withstand the challenge of revolutionary political ideology.

Consequently, the Cuban Church adopted an indirectly confrontational strategy to redress their stagnant social position while minimizing the risk of political retribution. Indirect confrontation was more in line with the trajectory of thinking in CELAM and the Vatican after Puebla and up to and including the 1992 CELAM conference at Santo Domingo. Cuban church leaders did participate at the Santo Domingo conference and have acknowledged that, in the words of Mons. Polcari,

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“the conference at Santo Domingo was closer to our reality.” During the 1992 CELAM conference Latin American church leaders decided they would seek to reclaim the public sphere for religious morality by reinjecting the church into civil society, but not specifically into political organizations or by taking sides in political conflicts. It was recognized at the conference that the church became vulnerable to repression and persecution in the past when it took sides in political conflicts. The influence of Santo Domingo is apparent in the efforts the Cuban Church has devoted to encouraging the growth of civil society (while maintaining distance from dissident actors) and building its own cultural meaning-system. In 1992 CELAM did reiterate the Catholic Church’s defense of representative democracy as the preferred form of governance, a view that is not often openly professed by Cuban church leaders but one that is certainly the prevailing conviction behind the closed doors of the church itself.

The fundamental difference between the national churches in contentious relationships with authoritarian regimes in the period between the Medellín and Puebla conferences and the post-Puebla period is the way in which churches chose to confront these regimes. The vehement contentiousness between church and state throughout many Latin American countries that witnessed the coming to power of military dictatorships dissipated over time; many progressive church leaders continued evangelizing with liberation theology, but the repression many had suffered served as a vivid cautionary tale for clergy and lay alike. Furthermore, the Vatican’s

denunciation of liberation theology and appointment of many conservative bishops sent clear signals as to where the highest positions of the hierarchy decided the Catholic Church was heading. As right-wing authoritarian regimes began to fall, church leaders that had been marginalized in left-wing dictatorships searched for ways to assert themselves while taking into account a myriad of oppressive social, political, and institutional conditions.

Some conditions and strategic tactics were constant across different political systems and time periods. In Chile, Brazil, Poland, and Cuba, the Catholic Church remained the only significant independent institution with a public oppositional voice. Civil society used the church in these cases to create a political space autonomous from the state. While the Brazilian and Chilean churches became very vocal and active in their confrontational activities, the Polish and Cuban churches lent themselves to a symbolic association with dissidence. The regimes in these four cases worked to marginalize the church, but only in the Polish and Cuban cases was religion per se attacked by regimes that declared themselves atheist. This not only made confrontation dangerous but evangelization itself – especially in the Cuban case where Catholicism did not have the social reach of the Polish Church and the Cuban regime sought to extend revolutionary political and cultural domination over every corner of the island.

A common strategy in all the cases of church confrontation is the development of alternative cultural meaning-systems. The popular church in Latin America set
itself up as defender of the poor and marginalized, and had in liberation theology an ideological antidote to the ideology of national security promoted by the military dictatorships. But while in cases of right-wing authoritarianism the Catholic church and the state ferociously disagreed over how to best interpret Christianity (most regimes fancied themselves the defenders of Christian civilization), churches under communist regimes needed simply to invoke a transcendental religious order to stand in opposition to regimes promoting a Marxist, atheist national ideology. According to Osa (1996), the convening of the Great Novena of the Millenium in Poland established a symbolic and tactical paradigm for contention – the Black Madonna as the primary symbol of the church as embodiment and defender of the Polish nation against the atheist and traditionless communist state. The establishment of a cultural meaning-system that countered the state ideology enhanced Solidarity’s potential for mass mobilization and made the crosses, flowers, and religious pictures used in the Gdansk shipyards in 1980 instantly comprehensible to the Polish populace. The Cuban Catholic Church now represents an equally contentious symbol in Cuban society: its Christian individualist culture was developed to counter the Cuban regime’s socialist ideology and it is widely recognized as an institution that welcomes those unsympathetic to the Revolution. Cuban dissidents have tied their organizations and activities to Catholic symbols, though they have to date not achieved the organizational capacity or level of popular support that Solidarity enjoyed.


199 ibid.
As the only independent institution with an oppositional public voice (in cases of both right and left-wing authoritarianism), the Catholic church’s public statements became an important tool for extricating themselves from the regime and its ideology, and expressing their support for victims of the regime and oppositional actors. Pastoral letters and communiqués allowed the hierarchy to communicate with the population beyond their temples in cases where the regime imposed censorship over the media. When they provided an oppositional, independent message to society they served as a beacon for dissidents and repressed citizens. When directing these messages to regime officials, the bishops spoke in a voice on behalf of those who had no outlet to speak for themselves. The Chilean, Brazilian, and Nicaraguan hierarchies all used written statements to condemn the regime and its ideology. The Polish and Cuban episcopates never outrightly condemned the regime or expressed support for oppositional political organizations, but made clear the distinctly religious philosophical grounding of the church in relation to their respective regime’s Marxist foundations. In the case of Cuba, one politically contentious pastoral letter had enough of an effect to ignite and sustain a contentious relationship between church and state. Nothing had been expressed by a Cuban institution quite like the content of El amor todo lo espera, and, having felt that the socio-political situation never drastically changed, the bishops felt nothing quite so contentious needed to be repeated. The Venezuelan Bishops’ Conference is still finding its voice through its pastoral letters and communiqués. But it has already developed a contentious relationship with the regime. It remains to be seen whether the CEV will formulate a
coherent indirectly confrontational strategy or become directly confrontational as the Chávez regime continues to consolidate itself. The risk of going forward with direct confrontation could be a highly repressive backlash (as occurred in the Polish and Cuban cases) or potentially increased division within the church if poorer sectors stay loyal to Chávez, a la the Nicaraguan case.

The churches that were directly confrontational built Catholic socio-political institutions to monitor human rights abuses and assist victims of the regime. When the first two ecumenical institutions formed to monitor human rights abuses and assist victims (CONAR and COPACHI) were shut down by the Pinochet regime, Cardinal Silva responded by creating the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* under the explicit protection of the Chilean Church and worked to build an international financial support network to reduce dependency on the state. In contrast, the Cuban Church has proceeded far more cautiously than the churches that took directly confrontational approaches. It was the Cuban Church itself that cut off resources to Pinar del Rio’s *Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa* - an educational center that dealt explicitly with religious morality and democratic political theory that did not go so far as to provide aid to dissidents but was still viewed as subversive by the Cuban government. The *Centro*, and its literary organ *Vitral*, were brought up by government officials as a point of contention in virtually all discussions between church and state since its inception. Significantly, the church hierarchy shut down the center on its own initiative, rather then at the regime’s behest.
No sectors of the Cuban Church ever shared the theological vision or substantive political objectives of the progressive Church in Latin America, while the revolutionary movement in Nicaragua was able to court a large portion of the Catholic population that had been inculcated with liberation theology in Nicaraguan CEBs. The Cuban Church never built any grassroots organizations similar to CEBs, nor had any church members worked to foment a popular movement within the church, thus limiting the amount of potential support the revolutionary government could draw from the church.\(^{200}\) However, having received no permission to build new temples by the Cuban government, the Cuban Church found ways to develop new spaces for worship and to evangelize in areas with no church facilities. In the 1990s, Cuban church members created *Casas de Misión* (Mission Houses), as a way to evangelize and provide houses of worship in places with no Catholic temples. The *Casas* also serve as informal religious gatherings for prayer and bible discussion. Politics are not formally discussed in the *Casas*, but they are attended exclusively by those who are unsympathetic to the Revolution.

The churches that engaged in indirect confrontation also found areas of agreement on key policy issues with the regime that kept relations from sinking into direct confrontation. The Polish Church always supported the government’s position on the retention of the Western and Northern territories established in the Potsdam Conference – to the extent that it openly disagreed with the Vatican on this issue. For

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\(^{200}\) Margaret E. Crahan, “Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Nicaragua,” in Mainwaring and Wilde, eds. *The Progressive Church in Latin America*, 58.
this reason the Party Secretary recognized the Polish church as the “loyal opposition” in that the church did not support the Polish United Workers’ Party because it was opposed to the philosophy of Marxism but was nevertheless loyal to the interests of the Polish nation. Similarly, the Cuban Church has always denounced the US Blockade of Cuba – the most sensitive foreign policy issue for the Cuban government – to the extent that relations with the Cuban-American Church based in Miami have been continuously sour since the first decades of the Revolution over the issue.

Directly confrontational episcopates were widely regarded as the leaders, or most vocal representatives, of the opposition to their regimes. In Brazil, assuming this role meant becoming the “voice of the voiceless” – providing a voice not simply to the opposition but to the poor and marginalized. Brazilian priests and bishops organized masses and funerals for the regime’s opponents. In Nicaragua, the episcopacy railed against the Sandinistas and lionized the Contras – to the extent that Cardinal Obando y Bravo appeared side by side with Contra soldiers in Miami and defended the internationally-funded insurgent war against the Sandinista government. Chilean Catholic institutions provided legal and humanitarian aid to victims of oppression, and created umbrella organizations for various dissident groups. In these three cases, the church hierarchy was openly associated with the political opposition. Whether working clandestinely with oppositional actors, publicly providing aid, or using their pulpits and pastoral messages to denounce the regime and rally the opposition, the level of open association, assistance, and participation of church
leaders with oppositional forces put these churches squarely in a directly confrontational relationship with their regimes.

For the Cuban and Polish churches, association with the opposition in public arenas was more symbolic than open. The Polish Church undoubtedly provided aid, space, and counsel to members of the Solidarity movement. But church members were never present at the movements public gatherings, strikes, or massive street demonstrations. The Polish episcopate took the official position that the church is neutral vis-à-vis political systems and organizations, but encouraged Catholics to join organization that fit a Christian world outlook and deplored the fact that they would be forced to join organizations that did not reflect a Christian outlook – a classic indirectly confrontational statement against the involuntary enlistment of Poles into various state organizations that has also been expressed by Cuban church leaders in the context of revolutionary Cuban society.

Though Cuban dissidents have not yet organized the kind of visibly oppositional activities that Solidarity was able to orchestrate, they have still used Catholic symbolism to lend a spiritual aura to activities that would otherwise appear more overtly political. The clearest and most internationally renowned example of such behavior is the Ladies in White. Though they gather after Sunday mass at the Santa Rita Church to begin their procession, the Ladies are not accompanied by any clergy in the march that carries them through the streets of Havana – though they are monitored closely by state security and often pursued by international photographers.
The Solidarity movement offers a prime example of a dissident movement that began in the realm of symbolic politics (Osa 1996), tying activism to Catholic symbols the way the Ladies in White have done with their protest marches against political repression and the dissident Cuban organizations the MLC and the MCD have done by explicitly joining the label “Christian” with “Liberation” and “Democratic” in the titles of their organizations. While the Polish Church was more clandestinely active in helping the leaders of Solidarity form their political message and strategy to deal with the regime, the Cuban Church has kept politically dissident organizations at arms length, encouraging the laity to be active in the political life of the country and join organizations that are in line with Catholic social doctrine but not allowing any direct ties between church members and political organizations. Yet, while not endorsing the political organizations that employ Catholic symbolism, the Cuban Church has not actively discredited them either. To a large extent, it was sufficient that church leaders under communist regimes stayed neutral in reference to many political issues, critical events, and dissident groups to remain in the realm of contentious politics; in a socio-political milieu where revolutionary support is demanded by the structures of authority, silence can be vociferously declarative and neutrality itself an act of confrontation.

6.5 Religious Competition: A Competing Argument?

The religious economy paradigm has been applied to the question of church strategy in Latin America to explain when national churches are more or less likely to
confront authoritarian regimes. Gill (1998) argued that the national episcopates that became progressive and confrontational towards authoritarian regimes did so out of perceived competitive pressures from Protestant groups. According to Gill’s theory of religious competition, the nature of the religious market (either monopolistic or competitive), rather than changes in ideational worldviews, has the greatest impact in shifting the church’s pastoral and political strategies.

The argument presented here concerns the kind of strategy chosen, after a church decides to confront a dictatorship, and distinguishes between direct and indirect strategies of confrontation. For the purposes of this study, the theory of religious competition cannot be taken as a competing argument because it does not distinguish between different strategies of confrontation. While competition may have influenced the decisions of church leaders to become confrontational, it does not, as articulated by Gill, explain the choices made between strategies of direct or indirect confrontation.

It is still pertinent to ask, did religious competition have an effect on the choices national episcopates make concerning their confrontational strategies? Competition did affect relations between the state and the Catholic church when authoritarian regimes aided the growth of Protestant religious groups. By offering support to Protestants in return for legitimization of the regime, the regime in many cases solidified direct confrontation by creating another plane for church-state discord. Regimes of both the left and the right utilized this strategy to combat the
extension of the Catholic Church’s sphere of social influence. The Brazilian and Chilean cases served as paradigmatic examples for the Gill thesis of churches that became confrontational while experiencing competitive pressures from Protestant groups. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista regime began favoring Protestant churches when the Catholic church hierarchy became directly confrontational. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez has injected a spiritual dimension into his effort to boost social support for bringing socialism to his country (he has referred to Jesus Christ as one of history’s great socialists) and has chosen the Evangelical Church as his faith while rejecting Catholicism. The Cuban government has established an Evangelical Council (Consejo Evangélico) that includes representatives from all Protestant and Orthodox churches, to which the Cuban Catholic Church has no desire to join. Among the advantages of belonging to the Consejo is that these churches are at times granted permission to build new church temples, even though the sizes of their followers in Cuba are much smaller than that of the Cuban Catholic Church.

The case that most complicates this pattern is the case of the Polish church. With the territorial changes in 1945, the new Poland became 96% Roman Catholic, creating virtual religious uniformity in the country. This allowed the Polish Church to play a role as a stabilizing force and mediator in conflicts. Members of the Cuban Church themselves recognize this key difference between two otherwise similar cases in terms of political conditions and church strategy:

They say abroad that we are the same or similar to the Polish Church but it is not that simple… The Cuban Church doesn’t have the same social influence the Polish Church has. And the Cuban people do not express their faith like the Polish people. For example, we estimate that around 80% of the Cuban...
population is baptized, but as people grow they don’t become practicing Catholics, and they don’t attend mass every Sunday. 201

Poland became confrontational in spite of the fact that it did not face any competitive pressures, making religious competition an unlikely explanatory variable for the church’s choice of confrontational strategy. The Cuban Church does face competitive pressures, but a key distinction between the Cuban Church and the rest of the cases presented here is the nature of religious competition in Cuban society: in Cuba, the primary religious competitors to the Catholic Church are not Protestant churches but are religions of African origin. While the Protestant churches have gained favor with the Cuban government, Protestantism is not promoted by the regime as religiously or culturally significant to Cuban society or history, nor are any of the Protestant churches recognized as the “preferred” or “official” religion of Cuba. Significantly, Santería and other religions of African origin have been promoted by the regime as the “official religions” of Cuba. They have also been promoted over state-controlled media as integral to the religious and cultural history of the island. The Cuban Catholic Church has worked to delegitimize these religions with little success, though these efforts have served to polarize Cuban society along religious and racial lines in ways that have not occurred in other cases.

201 Orlando Márquez, interview with author, Havana, 19 April 2006.
CHAPTER 7:
RACE AND RELIGIOUS COMPETITION

7.1 Introduction

Cuban society is characterized by a diverse spectrum of religious traditions, beliefs, and forms of practice. Statistics from government, academic, and religious institutions show that 85% of the population believe in the divine, a percentage that has been relatively consistent from the 1950s to the present. However, formal religious practice and the institutional sturdiness of religion have been traditionally weak throughout Cuban history. Indeed, much of Cuban religious practice has been characterized by popular religiosity, syncretism, and the permeability of belief systems. Though institutional religion has been weak, Cuban culture, society, and identity have been highly influenced by religious symbols, icons, customs, and beliefs.\textsuperscript{202}

Christianity has been a pervasive religious influence throughout Cuban history. But, in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the Catholic Church in Cuba was never strong enough in numbers of followers or institutional resources to be a hegemonic religion,

while Protestantism never gathered the momentum necessary to challenge the national prominence or political influence of the Catholic Church as a significant religious competitor. In Cuba, the primary faultline of religious competition exists between two traditions from different geographical and theological roots with different structural make-ups and different referents to race, class, and politics: on one side is Catholicism, an institutionally hierarchical church of European origin that entered Cuba as the official religion of the colonizing power, and cemented its influence in the white, upper and upper-middle classes of Cuban society, thus gaining a reputation as an elitist church; on the other side there is Santería, an institutionally decentralized mystical tradition of African origin that entered Cuba illicitly and became the primary expression of identity and culture for enslaved Africans. It manifested itself as the religion of the black, lower classes of Cuban society by blending diverse spiritual traditions and remained accessible to followers of other belief systems through its openness to popular and informal forms of religious practice and worship.

Presently, these two religions compete intensely for followers and for prominence in Cuban society and the country’s religious and national culture. In recent years, a racial/religious political cleavage has started to form around the competing political positions each religious system holds vis-à-vis the Revolution: the Cuban Catholic Church, as a religious institution whose faithful are almost exclusively white/Hispano-Cuban, has confronted the regime politically, while the most prominent leaders of Santería and its followers are generally recognized as
politically sympathetic or neutral in regards to the revolutionary government and are largely black/Afro-Cuban. This cleavage does not equally divide all of Cuban society – only a small percentage of the population are active Catholics and Santería has a significant white following along with the Afro-Cubans that form its traditional base. Yet, the Cuban Catholic Church has become a prominent symbol of contentious collective action in Cuban society and recognized as the one independent national institution in Cuba. Santería has gained a reputation as the religion of the poor and of Cuba’s black population, a spiritual system promoted by the government as the Cuban religion.

Cuba’s dissident civil society is saturated with Catholic faithful. However, while the political allegiances of followers of Santería remain unquantifiable, there are no active babalao (the priests of Santería) in these dissident movements. When the rhetoric of Cuba’s dissidents deals with religion, in general it focuses on the free practice and profession of religion and advocates the promotion of Judeo-Christian values in Cuba’s political system, rather than disparaging the practice or social influence of Santería. However, in the rhetoric of Catholic clergy and lay, whether in homilies, pastoral letters, or Catholic magazines, a clear disdain and disrespect toward religions of African origin is openly professed – starting with the repeated references to Santería as a “cult” rather than a religion. A transitional setting in which Catholic clerical and lay leaders assert themselves politically has the potential to polarize Cuban society along religious and racial lines.
This chapter asks three key questions: first, what is the social presence and influence of Santería and religions of African origin in Cuba? Only with a strong social presence and pervasive cultural influence could Santería exist as a distinct religious competitor to the Cuban Catholic Church. Second, in what regard does the Cuban Catholic Church hold Santería and what does this signify for the effectiveness of Catholic evangelization and the church’s social and political activities? The efforts of Cuban church leaders to delegitimize Santería as a religion has placed these two religious systems in cultural opposition to each other and limited the potential for dialogue between the leaders and practitioners of each system. Finally, what is the potential for the opening of racial/religious cleavage in Cuba in a transitional setting? The socio-cultural influence of religion and the increasing interconnectedness of religion and politics in Cuba could create conditions for a cleavage to open along racial and religious lines should Cuba enter a politically-transitional period in the near future.

In the context of religious plurality, the Cuban Catholic Church has sought to carve out a space for itself amongst its committed faithful and the segments of the population unsympathetic to the Revolution. In addition to confronting the regime indirectly and promoting an alternative political culture, the Cuban Church is urging its faithful to be active participants in the political process, which would certainly include a future transitional setting. The Cuban Catholic Church has also been working in the last 25 years to redefine Catholicism in a Cuban context. Santería, however, is a distinctly Cuban religion. It evolved early from its entrance into the
island through the slave trade through a process of syncretism, in which elements from Catholic and African traditions were combined to preserve African forms of worship in harsh circumstances. However, Catholic church leaders have not recognized Santería as a religion – they most often refer to Santería as a syncretic “cult” – and this disrespect has alienated not only the practitioners of Santería from the church’s realm of religious and social influence but the many Cubans who subscribe to popular beliefs associated with religious systems of African origin.

The Cuban Catholic Church is positioned to become an important player for mediating peace and advocating democratic institution-building if Cuba were to enter a transitional period. Among the Cuban Church’s most important assets for playing such a role are its autonomous status as the only independent national institution on the island, its formation of a pro-democratic political culture and consistent advocacy of reconciliation, political pluralism, and reform, and the extent to which it has prepared its laity to be participatory in politics and society. However, the church’s unwillingness to come to terms with the importance and vibrancy of Santería in the Cuban population could severely limit its social influence. The position of not recognizing Santería as a religion has alienated the Cuban Church from large segments of the population, including many who are not necessarily practitioners of Santería but who consider the religion to be an integral part of Cuban culture and who may informally revere or worship the *orishas*. This position has further lent to the Cuban Church to characterizations that it is out of touch with Cuban society, that it is seeking to regain its former elite status, and, at worst, that it is a racist church.
Cuba’s ethnic and religious reality is mestizo; there is a great deal of mixing and intermingling amongst both the country’s races and its religious belief systems. While Cuban church leaders have formed an innovative strategy to stay on the side of the opposition while protecting their institutional interests and continuing their mission of evangelization, the disrespect and derision they have shown toward the Santería religion could severely constrain their ability to play the role of mediator or exercise a large degree of socio-political influence in a transitional setting. Alienating this large segment of the population could also reveal the limits of Catholic influence in the context of religious plurality. Cuban church leaders have advocated for political pluralism and a variety of political options, but they have failed to give due recognition to the plurality of religious options available to Cubans, or even to foster dialogue with the prominent figures of religions of African origin. The Cuban Catholic Church is the one institution on the island that has actively promoted a democratic political culture, and it has relied on the commitment of its faithful that attend mass, read its publications, and participate in pastoral activities. If democratic change is broadly embraced across all sections of the population after a transition, the church will not suffer from its present association with dissidence. However, a resistance to change from the current system, which could come in part from the Afro-Cuban population, could lead to a divisive period of social and political conflict between two groups distinguished by race and religion. Thus, in following its institutional, moral, and political interests, the strategy of the Cuban Catholic Church to indirectly confront the revolutionary regime could at its worst result in a
disturbing outcome marked by the emergence of a racial and religious cleavage in Cuban society.

7.2 Santería and Religion in Cuba

Cuba exhibits a high degree of religious diversity. Catholicism was introduced with the earliest Spanish colonizers and throughout the colonial period held title as the official religion of Cuba, with the Catholic hierarchy and the Spanish monarchy serving to legitimize each other as the religious and political authorities on the island, respectively. The Catholic Church concentrated its resources in the cities and overwhelmingly populated its clergy with Spanish clerics. Its alignment to the monarchy fed a strong current of anticlericalism in Cuban national culture as independence movements gathered strength in the second half of the 19th century. This anticlericalism, combined with the church’s negligence of the countryside, the intermixing of Spanish castoffs with other ethnic Europeans (some of Jewish and Islamic backgrounds) in the contraband economy, and the spread of practices associated with religions of African origin created a situation in which popular religiosity and an unstructured spiritual culture of superstition and syncretism flourished.

The institution of slavery took hold in Cuba in the early colonial period and spread with the rapid growth of the sugar economy in the 18th century. The slave trade brought droves of West Africans into Cuba and with them, their religious systems, traditions, customs, and beliefs. Though Santería is the predominant
religious system of African origin in Cuba and is frequently used as shorthand for all religious practices of African origin on the island, Santería is actually the largest of three prominent forms of inter-related African religion that came to be practiced in Cuba (along with other less popular traditions). Santería, or “Regla Ochá,” which is practiced by the majority, is derived from the advanced Yoruba societies of West Africa. It is distinguished by a pantheon of masculine and feminine deities called orishas. A smaller group of ethnic Bantu originally from the Congo brought a religious system that came to be known as Palo Monte. Enslaved Africans from present-day Nigeria also developed Abakuá societies, which served as secret men’s societies for free and enslaved people of color. Having no communication with the homelands of Africa, these religious systems evolved into uniquely Cuban systems of practice and beliefs within a social context of slavery and hostility. Even as the free population of color expanded (while slavery was still legal) into the late 19th century with the abolition of slavery in Cuba, people who practiced African-based religions were treated as inferior by the upper classes and especially by the Catholic clergy. Yet, they found survival strategies in difficult situations by syncretizing their beliefs, icons, and many customs with Catholic beliefs, icons, and practices (discussed further below).

Protestant missionaries from the US began entering Cuba in the late 19th century as American economic interests grew on the island and increased their presence in the early years of the US Protectorate/Cuban Republic. Eventually 54 Protestant denominations found their way onto the island, with their early pastoral
efforts focused on rural areas ignored by the Catholic Church. The Protestant churches in their totality, however, never equaled the institutional presence or numbers of followers of the Cuban Catholic Church. European spiritist beliefs were also introduced through various migrations and were largely assimilated into the practices and beliefs of followers of religions of African origin. A small Jewish population descended from migrants from Europe and the US, primarily during the first and second World Wars. Cuba now has between 1000 and 2000 followers of Judaism. There are less than one thousand followers of Islam, as well as practitioners of Haitian Voodoo (brought from Caribbean migrations) and Chinese religions (introduced through Chinese indentured servants following the abolition of slavery in the 19th century).

Santería, though now a distinctly Cuban religion that has syncretized certain practices, religious images, and forms of worship with other religious systems (chief among them Catholicism) is fundamentally rooted and derived from its African spiritual origins. Mederos (2002) provides this summation of the African belief system on which Santería is based:

African beliefs are characterized by an adoration of all the supernatural forces of organic and inorganic nature. Certain actions or words cause effects without actual material causal relationships and the living communicate with spirits, orishas, and dead ancestors through several means of divination…These rituals are intended to restore harmony between the forces
of good and evil, and to resolve disturbing social, earthly, or spiritual problems.\textsuperscript{203}

The essence of African religious belief and practice is still present in Santería. The pantheon of \textit{orishas} retains their referents to certain social and natural phenomena, including war, wisdom, sexuality, and the ocean, thunder, and lightning. Through consultations with \textit{babalao}s (the equivalent of priests in Santería), the \textit{orishas} suggest to their followers “strategies and standards of conduct governing the relationship between the subject and his or her context.”\textsuperscript{204} The devotion to the \textit{orishas}, and more specifically to the \textit{eleda} or “guardian angel” that is revealed by the \textit{orisha} Orula through an initiation ceremony to each follower, is constant throughout Cuba in the practice of Santería. But Santería is an open system that interacts with other religious and nonreligious systems.\textsuperscript{205} This means, in part, that practitioners of Santería do not have to deny the sacred transcendence of other religions and their deities while devoting themselves to the \textit{orishas} and their life prescripts. There is also a great deal of local and individual interpretation in Santería. According to Cros Sandoval (1995), “Santería is not a religion governed by a strict and narrow orthodoxy. On the contrary \textit{santeros} interpret beliefs and mythology according to their religious


\textsuperscript{205} ibid.
experience and knowledge, while introducing variations in the rituals motivated by
their own convictions and the needs of their followers.”

During the three centuries during which enslaved Africans were shipped to
Cuba, the largest contingent came from the Yoruba-speaking regions of West Africa,
including individuals from the highest social ranks of the complex political and
religious structures that made up Yoruba society. Religion was an important cultural
refuge for enslaved Africans uprooted from their families and homelands, as it helped
to form common bonds amongst strangers in a foreign land under a hostile social
system: “religious practices were instrumental in the presentations of language,
music, dances, and other aspects of African culture. African slaves passed on their
values, world-view, and beliefs to their children in the context of their worship.”

Slaves were used principally on sugar estates, but also in mines, in various trades, and
for urban construction. Though enslaved peoples in Cuba had the right to coartación
– a system by which they could negotiate emancipation with their owners – and Cuba
had a relatively large population of free people of color, the conditions of slavery
were bloody and brutal and the free population of color was relegated to the lowest
rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Among the most important functions of
religion in this context was as a social support system and as an agent of acculturation

206 Mercedes Cros Sandoval, “Afro-Cuban Religion in Perspective”, in Stevens-Arroyo and
Perez y Mena, eds., Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples’ Religions
Among Latinos, New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1995, 90.

207 ibid., 82.

and collective identity. Religion had to be practiced in secret. Free black Cubans formed *cabildos*, based on religious brotherhood organizations with cultural antecedents in Africa and Spain that served as recreational and mutual-aid societies where religious practices survived and flourished. The healing aspect of the Yoruba religion also attracted a significant white following during the colonial period in the context of limited supply and access to medicinal services. This curative function of African religions eventually evolved into a supplemental role for black and white Cubans alike during the 20th century as medical services became more widely available. Furthermore, white Cubans found themselves attracted to African religions for the reputation they enjoyed as being capable of magical prowess.209

Santería cannot be separated from the Catholic influences that affected how the religion came to be practiced and the syncretic strategies used by enslaved Africans to maintain the religion in hostile environments. As argued by Sandoval (1995), “it is precisely this Christian overlay which makes Santería distinct from the African religions from which it originated.”210 The evangelization that occurred on the plantation was meant to deprive enslaved peoples of their religious traditions, beliefs, and practices – considered pagan fetishes by Catholic officials211 - and convert enslaved communities by teaching Catholic doctrine and offering Catholic sacraments. In general, this evangelization was not heavily forced upon enslaved


210 ibid., 81.

peoples – the Cuban Catholic Church was still elitist and concentrated in urban areas. Moreover, slave owners did not need conversion to legitimize slavery when they had more directly repressive methods. Several historians (Moreno 1978, Mederos 2002, Perez 2006) have characterized Cuban slavery as soft on religious evangelization and heavy on cruel tactics and repression. The syncretism that occurred was done in a context of hostility as a strategy to preserve African belief systems, not in dialogue with Catholics or under cordial conditions.

The pantheon of orishas were blended with the numerous Catholic saints and lithographs introduced to enslaved Africans on the plantation based on similarities between the mythology of the individual orishas and the hagiography of the Catholic saints.212 For example, Changó, the god of fire and thunder and a fierce warrior, became identified with Saint Barbara, the patroness of the Spanish artillery who appeared in Catholic lithographs in red – the symbolic color of Changó. Oschún, the goddess of love and the owner of the river, is identified with La Virgen de la Caridad (the Virgin of Charity) the Catholic patroness of Cuba.

Through syncretism, some of the orishas changed from their original African conceptions and took on some characteristics of the Catholic saints with whom they were in symbiosis. Baptism in the Catholic Church also was incorporated as an essential rite for all santeros, and practitioners would come to the Catholic Church to get holy water for ceremonies and to ask for masses for the dead. But at no point did

212 Mercedes Cros Sandoval, “Afro-Cuban Religion in Perspective”, 85.
the Catholic Church in Cuba incorporate any African myths, icons, symbols, or beliefs into their religious practice, social doctrine, or pastoral activities.

Into the 20th century, Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and practices continued to spread throughout the population clandestinely, and in the form of popular religiosity and culture. The 1902 and 1940 republican constitutions highlighted Christianity as the sole normative referent of Cuban society. All non-Catholic religious institutions had to be registered at the Ministry of Justice as a precondition to operate in the country. According to the Penal code, religions of African origin were considered witchcraft and thus subject to civil prosecution.213

Santería was no exception to the social marginalization and at times repression of overt religious practices by the revolutionary government through the 1960s and 1970s. Castro’s revolution had come to power without making explicit reference to Cuba’s racial situation, though the deconstruction of all legal forms of discrimination, the redistributive economic policies of Cuban socialism, and Cuba’s forays into Africa to defend Angola against the apartheid South African government endeared much of Cuba’s black population to the revolution. But Santería and popular religiosity were delegitimized along with all religious and other countercultures to the new revolutionary consciousness in the intensely fervent revolutionary decades of the 1960s and 1970s. Santería was officially designated a folkloric

African tradition by the regime. The regime also restricted *tambores* – drum ceremonies performed in reverence to the *orishas* that would bring some participants into possession – from being held in public places. *Iddés* – beaded necklaces and bracelets worn by *santeros* with colors representing various *orishas* – had to be carried discreetly, under clothing or under another leather bracelet. Years of clandestine practice, even before the Revolution, once again gave *santeros* strategies for survival. However, the many Cuban blacks that left during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 alerted the regime to the limited progress in cultural discrimination against blacks on the island, and religion was identified as one social sphere where the government could re-court the Afro-Cuban population. In a symbolic gesture of reconciliation with Cuban followers of Santería, the government received in 1987 his Majesty Alaiyeluwa Oba Okunade Sijuwade Olubuse II, the Ooni of Ife – the highest spiritual authority of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and all who worship Yoruba deities, including the *orishas*. The Ooni met separately with Castro and 20 hand-picked Cuban babalaos. This visit occurred as the government was moving toward rapprochement with the Cuban Catholic Church, as the Castro regime seemed to be shoring up social support amongst Cuba’s religious followers as the Cuban economy and the economic status of the Socialist Bloc was becoming evermore precarious.

It was in the late 1980s that the taboos and prohibitions against the popular and public practice of Santería, and religion in general, began to be disassembled. The resurgence of Santería was also part of the religious revival and the desire to make sense of the profound economic and social crises that accompanied the late
1980s and early 1990s. As Cuban Catholic churches were repopulated with old and new believers alike, Santería began to be practiced with renewed fervor. The colorful *iddés* and the white clothing worn by *santeros* when being initiated into *Ifá* were constantly on public display. The notable increase in the public practice of Santería led to what is described by Menéndez (2005) as a pervasive rumor that “one could imagine that virtually the entire population of the capital had been ‘crowned’ and that they were living in either a holy or divine city, a wicked and pagan city, or one contaminated by religion…One thing was clear and surprising to santeros and non-santeros alike: santeros were beginning to break away from one of the long-standing rules of concealment.”\(^{214}\) Breaking the rules of concealment meant no longer masking their identifiable religious symbols in public social spaces, removed from areas where the religion is traditionally practiced. The practical, curative, and magical aspects of Santería were attractive to many Cubans experiencing the extreme scarcity of resources that accompanied the economic crisis. It was a religion focused on solutions for the here and now rather than expected rewards in the after-life:

“*These Cuban religions have no Messiahs, no truths revealed, and no dogmas. Knowledge is found not in sacred scriptures but in nature, society, mankind; experience, and with it well-being, are achieved in life’s struggles, in work, in solidarity with others who share the horrors of misery and disdain or the hope of a tolerable daily existence.*”\(^{215}\) Popular music and films centered on spiritual themes associated with Santería also facilitated the acceptance of Afro-Cuban religious

\(^{214}\) Lázara Menéndez, “In Order to Wake Up Tomorrow, You Have to Sleep Tonight”, 270.

\(^{215}\) ibid.
symbols and mythology into popular culture. In 1990, approximately 200,000 people attended the December 17 procession for San Lázaro in Havana – who corresponds to the orisha Babalu-Ayé, the god of epidemics and venereal diseases. In 1991, a similar number of Cubans came out for the annual procession of the Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre – identified with the orisha Oschún – in Santiago de Cuba.\(^{216}\) The preponderance of colorful ñddés worn by the majority of the crowd demonstrated that these were Santería events as much as Catholic festivals.

The early 1990s saw not only a cultural and social revival of Santería but, for the first time, the beginnings of the institutionalization of religions of African origin. These institutions helped to elevate religions of African origin from their subordinate position vis-à-vis Cuba’s other religions and legitimized the social and cultural importance of religions of African origin in Cuban society while facilitating international spiritual, cultural, and academic exchanges. *La Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba* (Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba - ACYC) was founded in 1992 and given legal status by the government. Less a religious institution than a cultural organization, the ACYC facilitated artistic and other cross-cultural exchanges and created new spaces for dialogue. The ACYC, which includes babalaos, practitioners of Santería, non-believers, and academics who study culture and religious themes, also organized religious ceremonies and festivals. An annual international conference organized by the ACYC brings together hundreds of religious leaders and experts from around the world. In 1993, the Abakuá men’s

\(^{216}\) See Oppenheimer, *Castro’s Final Hour*, 338-355.
societies also formed the *Organización de Unidad Abakuá* (United Abakuá Organization – OUA), which brought into union 121 Abakuá societies.

In the 1990s, as religion reemerged into mainstream Cuban society and culture, Catholicism and Santería competed for national prominence. But, as the Cuban Catholic Church was taking a confrontational political direction, the government instituted a campaign to promote and support Santería: in 1990 the Central Committee of the Cuban government launched a program to extend substantial economic and political support to many babalao; concurrently, Santería was promoted as an important Cuban cultural phenomenon through government-controlled media. This initiative came at the same time the COCC had enraged Castro by sending him their private letter calling for a political opening, lending credence to the idea that the regime’s Santería promotion campaign was arranged partly in response to the Cuban bishops’ recalcitrance. Cuban church leaders came out as fierce critics of the renewed prominence of Santería in Cuban society and its promotion by the government. To date, Cuban church leaders have not come to terms with the popularity and widespread practice of Santería. As the Cuban Catholic Church has been redefining its role in Cuban society, Santería has gained strength in numbers of both clergy and active practitioners and become the most popular religion in Cuba.
7.3 The Catholic Perspective

A 2006 internal document of the COCC written to assess the “ecumenical situation” in Cuba described the position of the Cuban Catholic Church in Cuban society vis-à-vis other religions and Christian denominations.\footnote{This document was written and provided to the author by Mons. Alfredo Petit Vergel, 19 April 2006.} The document describes the creation of the Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba (Council of Cuban Churches – CIC, referred to by Catholic church officials as the Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas) in the 1970s as a Council whose political positions were quickly “radicalized and became unconditionally and totally identified with the politics of the Marxist-Leninist state.” Though the Council counts 52 distinct denominations as members, the document emphasizes the fact that the Catholic Church does not belong. Churches that belong to the Council maintain good relations with the PCC’s Office of Religious Affairs, giving them preferential treatment in requests to buy new cars and “all classes of consumer goods,” and have been granted special permission to build new churches and bring in foreign pastoral agents. According to the document’s signateur, Auxiliary Bishop of Havana Mons. Alfredo Petit, “For all of this, and for political reasons more or less explicit, the Catholic Church finds itself in a disadvantaged situation vis-à-vis the other Christian denominations.”

Further on in the document, Mons. Petit makes passing reference to Santería, deducing that among the state’s strategies to marginalize the Catholic Church is attempting, “in tourist propaganda, to present Santería (a syncretic cult of African
origin) as ‘*the* religion of Cuba.’” The qualifier of describing Santería as a “syncretic cult of African origin” is part of general tone of dismissiveness toward this religion shared by much of the Cuban Catholic Church. Cuban church leaders have adopted the word “cult” in an effort to delegitimize the status of Santería as a religion. Cuban church leaders have also repeatedly shown a marked disdain for state-sanctioned institutions like the CIC and the ACYC, which it feels gives the state undue influence over religious institutions. As stated by Fr. Fernando De la Vega of Havana, “The Yoruba Association is aligned with the state. Its function is to manipulate people. But this is part of our reality.”\(^{218}\) It is a point of pride for the leaders of the Cuban Catholic Church to highlight their autonomy and independence from the state, something they feel the churches that incorporate themselves into state-sanctioned institutions cannot do. But while the Protestant churches have gained favor with the Castro regime, Protestantism is not promoted by the regime as religiously or culturally significant to Cuban society or history, nor are any of the Protestant churches recognized as ‘the’ religion of Cuba – a position that was held by the Cuban Catholic Church under both the Spanish colonial administration and the US Protectorate/Cuban Republic. This status is something still dear to Cuban church leaders, like Fr. Teodoro Becerril of Havana: “The Catholic Church, Catholicism, has been the religion of Cuba. The rest are small groups, they aren’t possessed of a historic reality, much less any social influence.”\(^{219}\) It is further apparent that the promotion of Santería stings when it comes from a government that previously

\(^{218}\) Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.

\(^{219}\) Padre Teodoro Becerril, interview with author, Havana, 10 May 2006.
espoused atheism and worked to marginalize the Cuban Catholic Church, along with all forms of organized religion.

A significant non-Christian religious competitor to the Catholic Church seems unlikely anywhere in the former Spanish colonies of the Western hemisphere. Yet, the soup of Afro-Cuban religious symbols that daily manifest themselves in Cuban life and society have made Cuban Church leaders fiercely uncomfortable. The Cuban Catholic Church has worked to delegitimize these religions of African origin with little success, except amongst their own faithful. The ire of Cuban church leaders over the promotion of Santería in tourist propaganda and over state-run media outlets in historical and cultural documentary programs has revealed a deeper prejudice in the Cuban Catholic Church – not only against the forms in which Santería is practiced but against the people who practice it. This prejudice was manifest not only in certain interviews I conducted with members of the Cuban Catholic Church but from informal observations I made while carrying out my fieldwork in Cuba. Bringing up the subject of Santería at times caused my interviewees to shift uncomfortably in their chairs, and reference to Santería as a ‘religion’ at times provoked a sharp reaction. According to Fr. Becerril, “Those that come to the church come to practice the Catholic religion. The others, with a santero character, only come out of custom.”

This distinction between practice and custom is meant to belittle the syncretic practices that are essential for santeros in their religious worship, including Catholic baptisms and saint’s day festivals. Padre De la Vega also offers a frank summation of

\[220\] ibid.
prevailing views in the Cuban Catholic Church on Santería, highlighting the 
frustration felt by church members toward what they feel is a frivolous use of the 
church by practitioners of Santería: “Generally those people are of a very low 
cultural level. The church is like a big couch or pool: They come for baptisms, for 
Palm Sunday, to pray with the Virgen de la Caridad or with Santa Bárbara. On the 
other hand, they also participate in state activities.” 221 The large number of non-
practicing Catholics that come to Catholic churches on Palm Sunday, for example, 
leaves some Cuban priests feel their parishes are being misused for a custom that is 
not central to the Catholic mission - syncretic practices have made Palm Sunday an 
important day for practitioners of Santería, who can be seen flooding church doors 
(which remain closed save for a chosen window) seeking palms that are handed out 
by priests. Fr. De la Vega’s statement also reflects not only the church’s irritation 
with syncretic practices but the view that someone who accepts the church’s social 
doctrine and moral system could not in good conscience maintain ties with the 
revolutionary regime. According to Fr. De la Vega, the lack of a moral orthodoxy 
places Santería outside the realm of what a proper religion must offer: “The Afro-
Cuban religions in one sense are united with the church, to get spiritual images and 
baptisms. But they don’t have a code of ethics, much less a philosophy. We have 
ethics. We say that you can’t rob, you can’t kill, and you can’t be homosexual.”222 
Rolando Suárez, the lawyer of the COCC, shares Fr. De la Vega’s emphasis on moral 
instruction, as well as the commonly-held view that Santería is a cult:

221 Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.

222 ibid.
The Catholic church has theological instruction. There are other things that proclaim themselves as religion but don’t have instruction. Saying that this is equal to the Catholic church is an error in my view. Cuba is still a Christian nation. The other one goes with Christian roots but manifests itself as a cult, and to call that religion is absurd. That is the position of the church.\textsuperscript{223}

Suárez further points out that this characterization of Santería as a cult is a serious point of disagreement between the Cuban Catholic Church and the Cuban government, which does regard Santería as a religion: “From the point of view of the law there is no difference amongst the treatment of religions in Cuba. But we are not in agreement on the definition of religion.”\textsuperscript{224}

Failing to recognize Santería as a religion also points to the difficulty church leaders have in reaching dialogue and understanding not only with santeros but with black Cubans generally. As stated by Fr. De la Vega, “Cuba has a racial problem. It costs the church a lot of effort to feel comfortable with these kinds of people, who have syncretic beliefs. Here in Cuba the church belongs to the people of high spheres. These people operate in low spheres – culturally and economically. The church does not feel comfortable with these people.”\textsuperscript{225} It would be difficult to quantify whether or not black Cubans collectively remain the poorest Cubans (though they have befitted most from the Revolution’s economic redistribution, their disadvantages include the fact that they have fewer relatives abroad with remittances to send than white Cubans) but this statement reveals a racial consciousness and bias

\textsuperscript{223} RolandoSuárez, interview with author, Havana, 4 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{224} ibid.
\textsuperscript{225} Fr. Fernando de la Vega, interview with author, Havana, 26 April 2006.
that has kept the Cuban Catholic Church from being fully incorporated into Cuban society and national culture. This bias is also recognized by Dorita Pérez, the Director of the PCC’s Havana Office of Religious Affairs: “With the black race, the church is equally hypocritical. They say one thing and do something else. The church is clearly racist.”

The Cuban Catholic Church remains an institution that almost exclusively caters to Cubans who are politically unsympathetic or oppositional to the revolutionary system and whose racial makeup is predominantly white. It has failed to articulate a cultural meaning-system that fosters dialogue with the segment of Cuban society that practices Santería, and by extension has largely alienated Cuba’s black population.

The Castro regime has certainly recognized that promoting Santería can shore up political allegiance in the Afro-Cuban community. In 1990, Cardinal Ortega criticized the avalanche of Santería stories in government media. He said the regime was “artificially creating a cultural phenomenon” to drive a wedge between Catholics and Santería followers, and that followers of Santería were actually Catholics who practiced a kind of grassroots Catholicism that can similarly be found in ancient traditions in Spain and Italy.

This effort to try to minimalize the depth and influence of Santería was echoed by Pope John Paul II during the 1998 papal visit to Cuba. The Pope made only one reference to religions of African origin during his visit, in which he disparaged these religions for attempting to operate on the same

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227 qtd in. Oppenheimer, *Castro’s Final Hour*, 347.
plane as Catholicism: “There are, nevertheless, some reductionist conceptions that try to situate the Catholic Church on the same level of certain cultural manifestations of religiosity, including those syncretic cults that, although they merit our respect, cannot be considered specific religions, but rather an ensemble of traditions and beliefs.” These comments were received harshly by santeros in Cuba, as the Pope posited Catholicism as not only a superior religion but referred to Santería and other religions of African origin as “syncretic cults” that could not even be considered full religions. The refusal of church leaders to allow Santería priests to participate in ecumenical conferences during the 1998 papal visit represents the Cuban Church’s own efforts to marginalize Santería and was also perceived as a major insult by many santeros. Just prior to the papal visit, a prominent Havana babalao presented an offer to perform a tambor in honor of the Pope’s arrival to Cardinal Ortega with a request that representatives of Santería be present in the ecumenical dialogue the Pope was going to hold with leaders of non-Catholic religions. Practitioners and priests of Santería were not included in the meeting – which Cardinal Ortega said was only for Christians who were non-Catholic – and no Catholic officials attended the tambor, which was nevertheless performed.

It is difficult to reconcile the descriptions of santeros as practitioners of a grassroots Catholicism with Cardinal Ortega’s assertion that only non-Catholic Christians were welcome at the ecumenical dialogue with the Pope. It would seem

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that the church cannot decide what to make of practitioners of Santería: Are they followers of a strange, foreign cult? Or are they undeveloped Catholics? An article by Padre Raúl Dago in *Espacio Laical*, entitled “Popular Religiosity, Syncretism, and the Mission of the Church”, attempts to come to terms with the high presence of practitioners of Santería in Cuban society and specifically the syncretic customs that bring them into Catholic churches. Referring to the final ENEC documents of 1986, Fr. Dago describes the Cuban Church’s perspective that there are three kinds of Catholics in Cuban society: (1) committed Catholics who are active in the Christian community, (2) Catholics who are not active in the Christina community, and (3) Catholics who are not active in the Christian community and who incorporate elements of Spiritism and African religions into their practice.

While advocating that more pastoral attention should be focused on followers of this syncretic culture in order to enrich the faith, elevate dialogue, and increase by numbers the ecclesial Catholic community, Fr. Dago points out several problems for Catholics when dealing with practitioners of Santería: “It is difficult to find dialogue with people embroiled in beliefs predominated by suggestion, subjectivism, fear, and the search for security and protection…These are people that can be exploited or manipulated when they are in constant search for securities and protections.” Here, Padre Dago is directing his criticism at babalao, the priests of Santería, for taking opportunities, in his view, to exploit and manipulate an insecure people. He

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continues, “it is curious to note the cost of the initiation ceremonies or doing *santo* in Regla de Oshá or Santería.” Indeed, the influx of foreign tourists that have sought out and been willing to pay high prices for initiation rites and ceremonies has increased the cost of these rites beyond the means of many average Cubans (although Cubans are not charged the same prices as foreigners).

Practitioners of Santería, it turns out, are considered by some Cuban church leaders as Catholics who have syncretized their beliefs as a result of “deficient evangelization.” Fr. Dago concedes that “a certain measure of religious syncretism, on occasion, was tolerated by the Church.” He states that church leaders “must value their presence in our Masses and their receptivity to listen to us,” and sees baptism as an evangelical opportunity: “We have taken notice of their growth in the last decades. We see them everyday in our churches, and they should be evangelized with great charity and Christian patience.” Fr. Carlos Manuel de Céspedes of Havana has also acknowledged the influence of Afro-Catholic syncretism on national culture, and identified the process of coming to terms with religious syncretism as a major challenge of the Catholic Church. In an article for the Catholic magazine *Vivarium*, Fr. De Céspedes has argued that the deficient evangelization that occurred in Cuba was the result of a language barrier, and that the time not taken to educate the enslaved population facilitated the syncretic process by means of visual elements. To correct this course, the mission of the church should be to get syncretic believers to

accept Christ and the evangelizing ethics of the Catholic Church while giving up the magical elements of their practice.\textsuperscript{231}

Their efforts to evangelize practitioners of religions of African origin notwithstanding, the Cuban Catholic Church as a whole has not overcome its view of Santería as a “syncretic cult” and its practitioners as people from “low” spheres of life. This elitist view of religion has limited the ability of the Cuban Catholic Church to expand its social influence. By confronting the revolutionary regime with an indirectly confrontational voice, the Cuban Church is positioning itself to be an important actor in a transitional setting, especially if the dissident groups that have mobilized support around Catholic symbols achieve a significant measure of political power. However, mobilization around Catholic symbols can become a polarizing force in Cuban race relations, as signs of conflict around religion and race have already become apparent in Cuban society.

7.4 The Future of Race and Religion

Cuban church leaders have been urging their faithful to be active in Cuban politics while educating them through their publications and in some institutional settings in the processes and philosophical underpinnings of democracy. Their interest in preparing their laity for political activism, combined with their adherence to an indirectly confrontational political strategy, could make Cuban church leaders

important players in a contentious transitional setting in which social conflict erupts and dissident activists challenge government officials for political power. Churches that have been successful in playing the role of mediator in transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy were able to rely on their previous commitments to victims of oppression and their autonomy from the state. According to Klaiber (1998) the Brazilian Church further facilitated the democratization process by legitimizing the transition and helping to mobilize the new civil actors, allowing them to become the voice of the opposition: “In this new context the church put aside its mantle of lonely prophet and handed over the torch to the newly organized civilian groups. Church leaders decided their role now consisted in supporting the redemocratization process.”

Fleet and Smith (1997) make note of the shifting position of the Chilean Catholic bishops in the later years of the military regime, leaving their directly confrontational posture aside and tending towards a policy of neutrality and mediation:

Between 1982 and 1989, the Catholic bishops of Chile continued to retreat from their active opposition role of the late 1970s. They sought to mediate between the government and its critics and to reconcile Chileans of all political persuasions. As in previous years, however, they stressed issues of human rights, social justice, and the need for a dialogue that would permit a return to democratic rule. Their public statements and positions were phrased in terms with which most Chileans could identify, and were more difficult to discredit or dismiss than those of other groups.

In Poland, the church served as a stabilizing force when authority broke down, and bishops were present as mediators in negotiations between Solidarity and the

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233 Fleet and Smith, *The Catholic Church and Democracy in Chile and Peru*, 115.
communist regime. Church-state relations improved as a result of the bishops having accepted the role of mediator, and the Polish regime recognized the spirit of constructive cooperation in the Polish Church and their interest in Poland’s well-being and security. All of these churches were recognized for their independence, moral leadership, and opposition to authoritarianism by the broader society, giving the church a key role in a transitional setting: “The church’s commitment to all persons places it in a unique position to arrange and/or host such talks, and to help social and political forces to shape new policy and procedural consensuses.”

Religion has played an important role in political developments throughout Cuban history. Political and religious cleavages were apparent as early as the 19th century when the Catholic Church was identified with the Spanish colonial administration and African and Protestant beliefs were identified with the independence movement. The 19th century independence movements used religious symbols to legitimize the cause of Cuban independence and religious actors were important on both sides of the conflict. The Catholic Church was populated almost exclusively with Spanish clergy and was associated with the monarchy and Cuba’s colonial status. Protestant missionaries from the US helped transmit liberal political ideas and contributed to civic organization. Afro-Cubans aligned around the anti-slavery/anti-colonial cause also used religion to legitimize the independence struggle. Black soldiers often rode into battle flying the banner of the Virgin of

234 ibid., 112.
Charity, the virgin icon of the Cuban Catholic Church but also the image of Oschún, a popular female orisha of the Santería pantheon of deities. In this way, the image of the Virgin of Charity/Oschún “doubly legitimated the struggle for independence and the creation of a republic.”

The lack of broader political inclusion and social justice under the new Republic/US Protectorate at the turn of the 20th century led many Afro-Cubans to organize the Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color – PIC) to advance a socio-political agenda that promoted the interests of the black population. The PIC used a rearing horse as its party symbol and urged Cubans to vote for the party of the horse, which was also the symbol of the powerful orisha Changó and his corresponding Catholic saint, Saint Bárbara. The PIC and all racially-based political organizations were outlawed, leading to an armed uprising by leaders of the PIC in 1912 and eventual massacre and period of severe repression that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Afro-Cubans.

Upon the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, all of the victorious rebels wore their red and black M-26-7 patches, but some also wore crucifixes and others wore iddés, reflecting the participation of both Catholics and practitioners of Santería in the revolutionary struggle. An iconic religious moment for Fidel Castro and the Santería religion occurred shortly after the triumph of the Revolution: during his first

\[236\] ibid., 234.

speech upon his arrival in Havana, two white doves landed on Fidel’s shoulder – the fact that the doves were symbols of the orisha Obatalá were interpreted by many santeros that Fidel was favored by the orishas.

As Crahan (2005) argues, religious institutionalization has been historically weak in Cuba while the influence of religion (from multiple traditions) in the conceptualization of polity and society has historically been very strong. Moreover, the two strongest religious traditions throughout Cuban history and into the present day are Catholicism and Santería. The occasionally simultaneous invocation of Catholic/African symbology leaves open the possibility for religion to unify people around political causes. However, religion can create cleavages if the dual nature of the symbols, the inherent syncretism of Catholicism and Santería, is not recognized and respected by the institutional Catholic Church. This failure to come to terms with Santería represents the greatest challenge and potential source of conflict to Cuban church leaders. In examining the impact of the 1998 papal visit on Afro-Cuban religiosity, Mederos (2002) argues that the Catholic Church in Cuba has not surrendered the personal bias that self-represents Catholicism as a “superior” religion. In a study of Afro-Cuban responses to the papal visit, Mederos found that a majority of followers of Santería expected to be ignored by the church during the visit and continuously portrayed as “sorcerers”, which they find interesting since the total number of practitioners of Santería far outnumber that of Catholics in Cuba. The majority also said that they nevertheless participated in the various public activities held in the pope’s honor and wished they could have been included in the meeting.
with non-Catholic religions. The refusal of the Pope or of Cuban church leaders to meet with the leaders of Santería reflected the Cuban Catholic Church’s personal superiority bias, but may have also served to unite the various sects that comprise Afro-Cuban religion and strengthen their own cultural identification. According to Mederos, efforts to institute a Catholic religious monopoly will be unsuccessful and the pervasive adherence to Afro-Cuban beliefs in this sense is not only a distinctly Cuban form of spiritual expression but also a strategy of cultural resistance.

Catholic identity is associated with white or Hispano-Cubans, while Santería is the religious domain of the black or Afro-Cuban community. Furthermore, the Afro-Cuban population has traditionally been a basis of support for the Castro regime, and Santería priests have received political and economic support from the government since the 1990s. Mobilizing dissident activity around Catholicism at once acknowledges the racial divide and may serve to deepen it between anti-government and pro- or neutral-government social forces, a development the Cuban Catholic Church could have trouble resolving. Previous studies of religion and church behavior have demonstrated that decisions concerning political alliances early on affect the ability of the church to switch allies and/or broaden its societal influence in the future (Kalyvas 1996; Warner 2000). As path dependence teaches us, once a country, government, or institution starts down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. The Cuban Catholic Church, though not aligned with any specific dissident

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group, is perceived as a contentious actor in Cuban society and has worked to foster Catholic participation in oppositional activities. The future importance of this association of Catholicism with dissidence rests in the way race and religion partition Cuban society. If democratic change is broadly embraced across all sections of the population after a transition, the church will not suffer from its present association with dissidence. Concordantly, if there is broad social support for continuance of socialism and opposition to any transition, the position of the Cuban Catholic Church may not change to any significant measure. However, the least desirable result of these trends would be a divisive period of social and political conflict between two groups distinguished by race and religion. Thus, in following its cultural and institutional interests, the seemingly rational behavior of the Cuban Catholic Church could at its worst result in an irrational and disruptive outcome.

A political transition in Cuba is not yet in the offing. Crahan (2005) points out the Catholic Church has benefited from a dearth of secular alternatives in Cuban society that constitute organized, oppositional forces. Though it remains difficult to say if Cubans will accept religions as political or cultural leaders, a rise in secular associational alternatives could lead to a decline in the popularity of religious involvement. Cuban church leaders recognize that their church has become a destination for those disaffected with Cuban society and unsympathetic to the revolutionary project. Yet, they have made it clear that they themselves will not endorse, much less involve themselves directly in, any political organizations, dissident or otherwise. Even if it can be expected that this holds true in a transitional
period, Cuban church leaders could avail themselves the opportunity to mediate political and social conflicts. With no broadly recognized leadership coming from an autonomous civil society that is in organizational disarray, the Cuban Catholic Church remains the one institution that operates privately and independently in Cuban society. They retain this status without much competition from other religious institutions. The one religion with comparable socio-cultural influence is one that the Cuban Catholic Church refuses to recognize as a religion, creating a contentious situation that could backfire on a church hoping for a heightened social role in a transitional setting. While the ACYC is incorporated into the state system and Santería is often promoted by the regime, the lack of institutionalization of, or hierarchy within Santería makes it difficult to say how closely aligned its followers or leaders are with the revolutionary system. What is clear is that though santeros are not politically disposed against the revolutionary regime as Catholic clergy and laity are in Cuba, many are already voicing their anger with how they are treated by Cuban church leaders. The socio-political polarization of followers of Catholicism and Santería could become the faultline for a political cleavage that divides much of Cuban society. Cuba is a country where religion has been and will continue to be a pervasive social and cultural influence. It is not the influence of religion that Cubans will resist; it is the influence of the Cuban Catholic Church that presents itself as superior while refusing to recognize the sacred transcendence of Santería.
CHAPTER 8:
CONCLUSION: SOWING THE SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY

8.1 Concluding Overview of Cuban Church History

From the arrival of the first Spanish invaders to the island of Cuba and up to the present day, the broad trajectory of the Cuban Catholic Church has been, on the one hand, a gradual loss of status and official privileges from a starting point of authority and religious domination; and on the other, a deepening of the church’s penetration into the grassroots of Cuban society, having begun as a church for the elite and transforming itself into a church for those disaffected with, and at times fearful of, the social and political mores of revolutionary Cuban society. The Catholic Church began its history in Cuba as the official church of the Spanish crown, an institution rivaled in its singular authority in Cuban affairs only by the Spanish military. Yet, for all its status and authority, the Cuban Catholic Church in the 20th century stood out in Latin America among the most isolated churches in the region, and was considered among the least vibrant, least innovative, and least penetrating—that is, without deep roots in society. The 1959 Cuban Revolution posed the greatest challenge to the status and mission of the Cuban Catholic Church on the island since it established its foothold in the 16th century. Having been granted the title of the “official” religion of Cuba by two imperial powers, Cuban church leaders relied on their support among urban and upper class Cubans and the political elite to maintain
their status and made few inroads with rural and lower class Cubans, while forming few grassroots pastoral organizations or social networks.

The Cuban Catholic Church was severely weakened by the loss of faithful and institutional resources following the Revolution’s ascent and a short period afterward in which church leaders directly confronted the regime in their statements and activities. The church’s privileged position in Cuba from the time of Spanish colonization through its period as a republic and US protectorate became one of highly subdued autonomy under the revolutionary government. Often characterized as a church caught by surprise, the Cuban Church was not prepared for Castro’s social revolution. When the revolution triumphed, many of the clergy left for Miami along with the upper classes to whom they had traditionally ministered.

The Cuban Catholic Church never embraced liberation theology – much to the chagrin of political and religious leftists who saw in Cuba an opportunity for an alliance between church and state that would focus attention on helping the marginalized and the poor. Rather than endorse the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban Church entered a self-described period of ‘silence’ that lasted through the 1960s and 1970s, making church-state relations extremely tense and lopsided for the first time in Cuban history.

In 1986 the Conference of Cuban Catholic Bishops (COCC) organized a national ecclesial conference that signaled an end to the Cuban Church’s period of
silence and sought to redefine the church’s mission in recognition of the island’s socialist reality. But it was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that church officials became increasingly vocal in expressing their discontent with the Castro regime and subsequently developed a confrontational relationship with the government. The crisis spurred by the collapse also created a spiritual vacuum that fed church attendance. In its message, the Cuban Church began to position itself as a potential ally to dissidents in Cuban civil society. Following the writing of *El amor todo lo espera*, it became clear that the Cuban Church would become the primary symbol of political activism in Cuban society and would open its doors to citizens unsympathetic to the social and political goals of the Cuban revolutionary project. The Cuban Church had to reinvent its strategy for dealing with the regime and evangelizing the Cuban people, by *indirectly* confronting the regime rather than *directly* confronting it.

In the political realm, this meant endorsing increased political pluralism, open dialogue, public debate, and the entry of new political ideas into the nation’s political discourse, a discourse that is controlled, along with all national media, by the ruling regime. In many ways the difference between direct and indirect confrontation reflects a change of tone in the language used by church officials. Rather than use words like condemn, combat, defeat, or overcome, the Church speaks of reconciliation, dialogue, pluralism, and reform. Since the 1980s, the Cuban Catholic Church has also sought to become a *missionary* church, one that finds its spiritual calling and social foundation in the grassroots, in a laity that has held on to its faith.
and pushed forward with its mission of evangelization in the midst of a government and broader society that rejects its sacred transcendence and regards its institutional independence as cause for suspicion. It has become a church with no official status or privileges, with no elite schools to educate the rich and with no prominent moral voice or influence beyond its parishes and devoted faithful. It is, however, completely dedicated to providing moral and spiritual nourishment to its growing laity and to reestablishing its role as a leading public voice in Cuban society. And it is the one national institution in Cuba that has been, for almost 20 years, sowing the seeds of democracy.

8.2 Summary of Main Findings and Contributions

This dissertation offers a variety of new empirical observations and arguments about the case of Cuba and the socio-political role of the Cuban Catholic Church, and it offers theoretical contributions to the field of comparative politics dealing with the intersection of religion and politics and the formation of confrontational church strategies. It constitutes a comprehensive examination of the Cuban Catholic Church based on original research conducted in Cuba, a case for which few political scientists have devoted rigorous academic attention, especially for comparative study. The following is a summary of the contributions offered by this dissertation, divided into those generated from the Cuban case and those with theoretical import for the comparative study of religion and politics:
8.2.1 Empirical Contributions

1. Catholicism and the Catholic Church have in recent years become a symbolic basis for dissident collective identity and provided institutional support for contentious collective action in Cuba. This was the result of the Cuban Catholic Church taking advantage of a political opportunity that opened in the early 1990s and allowed Cuban church leaders to adopt a confrontational posture in a favorable environment. Though Cuban church leaders harbored a negative view of the regime throughout its duration, they made a strategic decision to re-enter contentious politics at an opportune time, demonstrating the extent to which they have carefully navigated and continue to monitor political developments in Cuba and allow changes in the political environment to influence their behavior.

2. The Cuban Catholic Church is promoting a cultural-meaning-system that emphasizes the individual to counter the collective-oriented state ideology. In this process it has established a cultural connection with dissident reformers and positioned itself in opposition to the social project of the Revolution. In their sermons and through the distribution of Catholic magazines, Cuban church leaders are teaching their laity to think of themselves as autonomous beings, their dignity bestowed by God, and charged with a Christian social duty to act in defense of themselves, their families, and their society. The political culture of the Cuban Catholic Church offers a stark alternative to the official state ideology, in which social and political unity in defense of the Revolution is prioritized over the interests and ambitions of the individual.
3. To stay on the side of the opposition while protecting their institutional integrity, Cuban church leaders have formulated a politically contentious strategy that is indirectly confrontational. Cuban church leaders indirectly confront the Cuban state by promoting a democratic political culture within their temples without calling for the outright downfall of the government. In calling on their laity to stay active in the political life of the nation and participate in politics – by implication, as oppositional actors - the Cuban Church is outsourcing dissidence to laypersons that are called upon to act as part of their Christian social duty. To avoid the kind of repression that was visited upon the Cuban Church in the early 1960s when they were directly confrontational actors, Cuban church leaders themselves do not engage in political activities, they do not endorse oppositional movements, and they do not make direct denunciations of the Cuban system, government officials or the official ideology. This strategy is meant to insulate the church from charges that it is conspiring against the Cuban government. By choosing to indirectly confront the state, it is promoting a Christian morality, mobilizing its faithful to engage in political activities, and protecting its institutional integrity.

4. The failure of the Cuban Catholic Church to acknowledge and incorporate Santería into socio-cultural worldview is the greatest detriment to its efforts to re-establish the church as a leading moral and social force in Cuba. The Cuban Catholic Church refuses to recognize Santería as a religion, a stance that has increased animosity toward the church not only among followers of Santería but within the
great majority of Cubans who, although non-practicing, consider the orishas (the deities of Santería) as integral components of the spiritual and cultural identity of the nation. Cuban church leaders and many Catholic dissidents are poised to become important political players in a future transitional setting. At worst, this position could lead to political mobilization along racial and religious lines in Cuba and could further polarize race relations in the future.

8.2.2 Theoretical Contributions

1. I establish a new theoretical framework that distinguishes strategies of religious-based contention into two ideal types: direct confrontation and indirect confrontation. This reconceptualization of church strategies characterizes indirect confrontation as a viable strategic option for churches dealing with authoritarian states in addition to (direct) confrontation or acquiescence, and can be examined in comparative perspective with other church strategies. I build a new paradigm for comparing confrontational church strategies by articulating new definitions for church strategies and offering a theory about what conditions and factors lead to the adoption of certain confrontational strategies.

2. The definitions: I define strategies of direct and indirect confrontation as follows: Direct confrontation is a politically contentious strategy in which the church makes explicit its view of the illegitimacy and/or malevolence of the ruling regime. In public statements the church identifies specific targets as illegitimate and/or malevolent, including specific officials, policies, institutions, organizations, or the
official ideology. The church has either a strained, or has no relationship, with the ruling regime but has public relationships with oppositional actors. Indirect confrontation is a politically contentious strategy in which the church does not make explicit its view of the illegitimacy or malevolence of the ruling regime. In public statements the church does not identify specific targets as illegitimate or malevolent, but remains confrontational in the context of the national discourse by identifying certain negative political, economic, or social effects resulting from the regime’s governance, policies, and/or ideology, and/or proposing alternative modes of governance, policies, and/or ideological or cultural meaning-systems. The church maintains formal relations with the regime but only symbolic and/or ambiguous relations with oppositional actors.

3. The theory: I argue that a combination of regime type, institutional church reforms, and the world-historical time period during which the church began its contentious activities have a direct influence on a national church’s choice of confrontational strategy. Churches that became confrontational under right-wing authoritarian regimes during the 1960s and 1970s were more likely to pursue strategies of direct confrontation than churches facing left-wing authoritarian regimes from the 1980s to the present, which were more likely to pursue strategies of indirect confrontation. The influence of the Second Vatican Council and progressive Catholic thinking that gave rise to liberation theology (a leftist theology that served as a counter-ideology to the ideal of the national security state promoted by right-wing authoritarian regimes) led many national churches into directly confrontational
relationships with right-wing regimes during the 1960s and 1970s. Progressive churches that confronted these regimes had in liberation theology a political ideology that called for direct confrontation in the context of the military dictatorships that ruled their countries. The Vatican’s turn toward more conservative politics under the papacy of John Paul II did not eliminate contentious relationships between church and state, but it did lead churches to pursue strategies closer to indirect confrontation, especially against leftist authoritarian regimes since the 1980s where liberation theology could not serve as a viable confrontational ideology and autonomous grassroots political mobilization declined as a pastoral activity. In addition, the repression suffered by progressives who were among the first Catholic Church members to directly confront authoritarian regimes was sufficiently harsh to cause church leaders to reconsider the losses they suffered when entering politics and make it less likely for churches to pursue this kind of confrontational strategy in later years.

The addition of world-historical time as an influential variable in the formation of confrontational strategies allows me to revise existing theoretical arguments that took into account regime type and the influence of new theological ideas, especially when explaining the new indirectly confrontational strategies that were developed in Poland and Cuba after the election of Pope John Paul II. There are intra-case comparisons to be made as well: the two cases in this study of leftist regimes that were in existence during the 1960s and 1970s, Poland and Cuba, had churches that initially pursued strategies of direct confrontation during the first years of their respective regimes, but did not pursue comprehensively confrontational
strategies (either direct or indirect) from the time period between the Second Vatican Council and the ascension of John Paul II to the papacy. The Cuban Church strategy of indirect confrontation serves as a contrast not only to the directly confrontational strategies employed by the Brazilian and Chilean churches to challenge their respective regimes, but to the directly confrontational strategy formulated by Cuban church leaders against the new revolutionary Cuban government from 1959 to 1962.

The arguments and evidence presented in this dissertation also demonstrate how vital the Cuban Catholic Church and its laity will be should Cuba transition toward democracy and the building of democratic institutions and a democratic political culture in the near future. The Catholic Church is the lone institution in Cuba with the independence and resources (institutional, organizational, and cultural) to work toward the spread of a democratic political culture. Crucially, it has used its resources toward this very end, all the while working to protect its autonomy and institutional integrity in the face of real and perceived threats of repression. This strategy has made the Cuban Catholic Church less recognized abroad as an advocate for democratic change in Cuba (certainly less so than the Brazilian or Chilean churches were when they confronted their respective dictatorships), though it is regarded among the Cuban population as a beacon for those unsympathetic to the revolutionary regime, and by the revolutionary regime as a conspiratorial institution that nurtures counterrevolutionaries.
8.3 Future Considerations

When reports surfaced in July of 2006 that Cuban president Fidel Castro was suffering from a mysterious illness, speculation began in the American media about how likely it was that a democratic transition could occur in Cuba’s near future, especially in a scenario in which Fidel Castro was eliminated from the top leadership post. Having served as Cuba’s national leader and the symbolic embodiment of everything revolutionary on the island since 1959, the absence of a ruling Fidel Castro would eventually bring drastic changes to Cuban society, if not complete democratization, the story went. Commentators speculated about the plans of Cuban exiles and the Bush administration in a post-Castro scenario, how the leadership style of Raul Castro would be different from his elder brother, and the significance of Cuba’s ties to leftist governments in such countries as Venezuela and Bolivia in perpetuating socialism on the island.

As of November 2008, the revolutionary regime is still intact. Still suffering from undisclosed illnesses, in February 2008 Fidel Castro resigned from his post as President of the Council of State (a post to which the Cuban National Assembly subsequently elected his brother Raul Castro) but remained General Secretary of the PCC, by law the ultimate authority in Cuba. The PCC remains the only legal political party. In the economic realm, Raul Castro’s administration has instituted various reforms. For example, ceilings on wages were removed to create incentives for workers and to improve Cuba's economic performance; agriculture was decentralized to allow private farmers more leeway to decide how to use their land, what crops to
plant and what supplies to buy; and the government began leasing land to private farmers, cooperatives, and state companies for the first time under the revolutionary regime. In addition, under the leadership of Raul Castro, some “excessive prohibitions” on Cuban citizens were removed. This included lifting a ban on the ability of Cubans to buy consumer goods like computers and DVD players, allowing Cubans to freely buy and use cellular telephones (something that had been available only to government officials and foreign companies), and allowing Cubans to stay at hotels and beach resorts previously reserved for foreigners only, ending a “tourism apartheid” that was a deep source of resentment among the Cuban people. However, no changes have been made to the island’s political institutions, and no challenges have been organized against the government beyond the peaceful activism of Cuba’s dissidents.

An editorial in the second edition of Espacio Laical of 2008 addressed the reforms that were being carried out by the revolutionary leadership. The editorial board expressed skepticism and some trepidation at the direction of the reforms, but conveyed a desire on the part of the Cuban Church and the Catholic faithful to be participants in these changes and assume an active role, as long as they could get an honest and complete assessment of what direction the regime planned to take the country. The editorial board stated that it was necessary “to know with exactitude the fundamentals, goals, and methodology of the program the new president seems to be
This interest in getting a comprehensive account of what the program would be revealed a deeper concern for whether or not these changes represented a new direction or merely a series of reform measures: “To implement this program in an effective manner it is necessary to share its content, so that one may be assured that it will be realized as presented, and for this to be carried out it is essential to gain familiarity with this program in its entirety.” Espacio Laical also signaled the willingness of Cuba’s Catholics to be active in such a program, as well as the necessity for all Cubans to be involved without submitting to any kind of political or revolutionary allegiance: “The solution to our problems demands that all Cubans, without exception, are permitted to unite themselves as a community, while – and this is key - holding on to their personal identities, in the process of building la Casa Cuba (the Cuban house).” The emphasis on retaining personal identities reinforces the Cuban Catholic Church’s emphasis on the individual and maintaining individual Christian consciousness, should Cuban Catholics participate in any reform process. This is presented as the crucial demand for Cuba’s Catholic population, that they participate as individuals without subsuming their identities in the collective revolutionary project. Espacio Laical made the assurance that the Cuban Catholic Church can contribute to the reform process as well, and it “hopes that it can count on all the necessary space it needs to execute its thorny responsibility in this decisive

240 ibid.
241 ibid.
moment in the history of our nation.”242 Once again, the essential element is maintaining autonomy, at both the individual and institutional levels, in any reform process.

The tone of the editorial is that of a laity highly attuned to any real or perceived political reforms and developments on the island, and that aims to stake out a voice in such developments. Though it is unlikely that Cuban church leaders themselves will have the capacity or desire to spark a transition – they themselves are not engaging in directly confrontational activities meant to provoke regime change – their faithful are the Cuban citizens who will most likely be ready to engage in democratic institution-building. Cuban Catholics are the one social group on the island that has been continuously exposed to a democratic political culture over the past two decades. This flock has been primed in the Cuban Church’s Christian individualist culture and they are ready to actively engage in Cuba’s political processes in the event of a regime transition.

Throughout the Cuban Revolution, Cuban government officials have continuously held a view of the Cuban Catholic Church as a potential threat to domestic stability, a source of social discontent, and a cradle of counterrevolutionaries. In my interview with Dorita Pérez, Director of the Office of Religious Affairs of the PCC in Havana, she offered the admonition that church officials should “be careful” with their statements and activities, and observed that all

242 ibid.
the counterrevolutionaries that Cuba has are given space by the church. Indeed, in December of 2007, a group of Cuban dissidents were arrested inside a Catholic church in Santiago de Cuba, before being released along with an official apology to the Cuban Church. These kinds of tension still exist as the church and state maintain a public veneer of cordiality and mutual respect.

Cuban church leaders will attempt to play a significant social role in the event of a regime transition in Cuba. They have been seeking new media outlets and access to existing outlets in the hopes of reestablishing a public moral voice. The Catholic Church occupies a unique space in Cuba as the one national institution independent of state control, as it has in other cases of authoritarianism. This status has given Catholic leaders the opportunity to take the roles of mediators in other cases of regime transitions, including Latin America and Eastern Europe. In these roles, church leaders have aided transitions to democracy from communist and authoritarian systems. The Polish church nurtured and aided the Solidarity movement in the 1980s and was able to play the role of mediator between the old communist guard and the ascendant democratic parties during that country’s transition years. The Brazilian and Salvadoran churches abandoned radical postures to return to a church-state model of power-brokering with the political elite following turbulent transitions from militaristic authoritarian regimes. This is a role that Cuban church leaders could assume without changing political positions, rather, they could legitimate such a process in a new democratic environment by pointing to their previous stances against the revolutionary Cuban government and their calls for political pluralism during the
revolutionary years. The résumé of the Cuban Catholic Church could also be boosted by its efforts to keep its relationship cordial with the revolutionary regime, even as tensions simmered and occasionally rose to the surface.

In 1993, the moment when the Cuban Revolution seemed on the precipice of collapse and when a transition was perceived to be in the offing, Cuban church leaders leveled a strong critique of the policies and character of the government. But they joined this critique with a forceful call for dialogue, a dialogue that would bring dissident activists to the same table with government officials. In calling for these oppositional actors to come together in dialogue, Cuban church leaders were positioning themselves as the kind of neutral leaders that could mediate such a dialogue. These church leaders acted and continue to act strategically; in the pages of Palabra Nueva, Orlando Márquez refers to the strategic element of church behavior as “prudence” – the prudence not to endorse the Varela Project and risk the church’s institutional integrity. The church’s strategy of indirect confrontation is what has placed them in a position to be mediators and play a prominent social role in a transition. The Cuban Catholic Church finds itself in a situation where there is not an outpouring of social mobilization against the regime. There is not a strong social movement within Cuba pressing for the regime’s overthrow or calling for an elaboration of past wrongs. While the church remains the primary symbol of collective contentious action, it has favored maintaining its independence vis-à-vis the dissident community. Its independence is what makes it unique in Cuban society. Whereas the church is viewed as an institution that favors the opposition, its decision
not to endorse or directly assist or participate with dissident movements allows the
class church to label itself an independent institution. In a situation where public protest
against the regime was more widespread and volatile, an institution that supported
dissident movements with material or logistical support would be favored as a
mediator. But the church has been careful to endorse ideas – political pluralism,
autonomous civil society – rather than actual groups and organizations. This
catalogue of indirectly confrontational statements is the church’s most valuable
resource in a transition setting, along with the moral weight it carries as a spiritual
organization promoting distinct moral values.

The Cuban government has displayed remarkable stability over the past 20
years in the face of a severe economic crisis, an increasingly aggressive US foreign
policy, and, in the past year, the passage of leadership from Fidel Castro to Raul
Castro. Neither the Cuban Catholic Church nor Cuba’s dissident organizations
currently have the capacity to spark regime change, or even the kind of social unrest
that would lead to significant political changes. A strategy of indirect confrontation
does not provoke the kind of political action that would lead to a widespread
challenge of Cuba’s political leadership; Cuban church leaders are encouraging
participation in the political process, not an organized effort to confront the
legitimacy of the regime. These leaders, however, are fomenting social activism in a
significant segment of the population that is now politically engaged and well-versed
in democratic political thought. This is the segment of the population that will likely
have the capacity to lead in the development of democratic political institutions in the
event of a regime change. The kind of challenges already made by Catholic
dissidents in Cuba, such as the Varela Project, have been made within the legal
parameters of Cuban law (regardless if they have or have not been given due
consideration by the Cuban government). This demonstrates a respect for
institutional processes on the part of dissident activists that will be essential in the
construction of democracy.

The most serious impediment the Cuban Catholic Church will encounter as it
seeks to regain national prominence in a transitional setting and assert itself as a
moral leader of the broader society is the negligence it has shown in respect to
demonstrating recognition of the religious integrity of Santería or establishing
dialogue with the leaders and followers of that religion. While Cuban church leaders
have formed an innovative strategy to stay on the side of the opposition while
protecting their institutional interests and continuing their mission of evangelization,
the disrespect and derision they have shown toward the Santería religion could
severely constrain their ability to play the role of mediator in a transitional setting.
Alienating this large segment of the population could also reveal the limits of
Catholic influence in the context of religious plurality. Cuban church leaders have
advocated for political pluralism and a variety of political options, but they have
failed to give due recognition to the plurality of religious options available to Cubans,
or especially to foster dialogue with the prominent figures of religions of African
origin. The Cuban Catholic Church is the one institution on the island that has
actively promoted a democratic political culture, though this has been limited to the
committed faithful that attend mass, read the Catholic magazines, and participate in pastoral activities. If democratic change is broadly embraced across all sections of the population after a transition, the church will not suffer from its present association with dissidence. However, a resistance to change from the current system, that could come in part from the Afro-Cuban population, could lead to a divisive period of social and political conflict between two groups distinguished by race and religion. Thus, in following its cultural and institutional interests, the strategic behavior of the Cuban Catholic Church could, at its worst, result in a disturbing outcome.

The flock of the Cuban Catholic Church is a limited but highly devoted one. Statistics recognized by both church leaders and government officials in Cuba reveal that while approximately 80-85% of the population is baptized Catholic, only 2-4% attends mass regularly. Santería is the dominant religion among the Afro-Cuban population and boasts higher numbers of both clergy and active practitioners than Catholicism. Recognizing that black Cubans make up a majority of the population and have consistently been a basis of political support for Castro, in the early 1990s the Central Committee of the Cuban government launched a campaign to extend substantial economic and political support to many babalao\textsuperscript{s} as a way to win them and their followers over. Santería was also promoted as an important Cuban cultural phenomenon through government-controlled media. This initiative came at the same time that the COCC had written \textit{El amor todo lo espera}, lending credence to the idea that the regime’s Santería campaign was arranged partly in response to the Cuban bishops’ recalcitrance.
As the Catholic Church has been redefining its role in Cuban society, Santería has gained strength and become the most popular religion in Cuba. The refusal of church leaders to allow Santería priests to participate in conferences during the 1998 papal visit represents the Cuban Church’s own efforts to marginalize Santería and was also perceived as a major insult by many *santeros* (and became an iconic event in the tense relationship between Catholicism and Santería in Cuba). Should Catholic leaders seek to exercise authority in a post-Castro setting, the potential exists for a cleavage to develop between followers of institutional religion and popular religion on the island. It is imperative for Cuban church leaders to rethink their views on Santería and to form a pastoral strategy that integrates the segments of the Cuban population that practice this religion into their worldview in a way that promotes dialogue while demonstrating a respectful recognition of their spiritual practices.

Still, the Cuban Catholic Church is forming the kind of community that could lead a democratic transition, provided they recognize the pluralism of Cuban society politically and religiously, rather than attempt to reoccupy the elite position Catholicism and the Catholic Church previously occupied as the “official” Cuban religion. Catholic laity that have been exposed to the liberal democratic ideology of the Catholic magazines, and the thousands of Catholics that attended the *Centro de Formación Cívica y Religiosa*, will be better equipped than any other sector of the population to build and engage in a new democratic institutional set-up. The extent to which Catholicism will continue to be tied symbolically with the dissident opposition
in the event of a transition to democracy will depend on whether Cuba’s dissidents will continue to invoke Catholic symbology and religious themes as they build democratic institutions and political parties. Dissidents have broadly adopted opposing patterns in other cases: in Brazil, the opponents of authoritarianism allied with the church continued to profess their religion, and they remained with the church after the transition to continue working for the rights of landless peasants and other social justice struggles in the context of democratization. In Chile, however, many opponents of authoritarianism that had allied themselves with the church because there was no place else to go, left the church orbit once the democratic transition was complete.

I believe that Cuba’s new democratic leaders will use religion as a bulwark against either the resurgence or presence of Marxist-inspired/socialist opponents. The Catholic Church has not become the primary symbol of contentious collective action in Cuba due to its institutional independence only; Catholicism itself, with its basis in sacred transcendence and the Judeo-Christian moral system, serves as a deep socio-cultural well of values antithetical to Marxism-Leninism – the philosophical tradition on which stands the Cuban Revolution. Depending on the direction of a democratic transition in Cuba – including whether or not communist or Marxist-inspired political parties continue to flourish -- future democratic political leaders with ties to the church could use Catholicism and Catholic symbology as an enduring counterpoint to the atheism of Marxist revolutionary ideology, and as a cultural wall to prevent the return of revolutionary socialism.
In a different scenario, dissidents may resent the Cuban Church’s strategy of indirect confrontations, for not having gained direct support for activities and programs such as the Varela Project, during a time when dissidents were harshly punished for engaging in directly confrontational activities. If the Cuban Church retains the perception as the one institution that maintained its independence during the revolutionary years, sheltered society’s disaffected citizens, and nurtured dissident sentiments and the development of a democratic political culture in Cuba, it will have a role as an important public moral voice in a transitional setting. If, however, dissident actors that participate in a transition feel that they have no obligation to stay within the orbit of a church that did not endorse their activities or participate openly with them, they may emphasize a more secular philosophy of democratic liberalism. Again, it is crucial for Cuban church leaders to work toward reconciliation with the Santería religion under either scenario, if religion itself is to be a unifying rather than divisive force in a future transitional setting.

Regardless if the regime’s opponents retain their ties with the church or not, it is likely that the leaders of democracy in a future transitional setting will have been nurtured in the Cuban Catholic Church. Cuban church leaders seem eager to resume the former position held by the Cuban Catholic Church as the “official” church of Cuba, though they are acutely aware that they cannot operate as an elitist institution (like they once did) in Cuba’s contemporary political culture. The ENEC conference began a renovation process within the church, one they feel 20-plus years later has
positioned them to champion the renovation of Cuban society and to contribute to that process as its principal moral and spiritual voice. They have focused on their own faithful, as the structures of revolutionary society has not permitted them to establish a mainstream role in society nor any access to mass communication. The Cuban Catholic Church remains on the fringes of revolutionary Cuban society, but it is the dominant institution of those dissident sectors of society that oppose the regime. For now, the church does not have many avenues to spread its spiritual or political message beyond its parishes. But its members have been primed and are ready to actively engage Cuba’s political processes in the event of a regime transition. Their faithful are the Cuban citizens who will most likely become advocates for democratization and the spreading of a democratic political culture beyond Cuba’s Catholic parishes.

8.4 Future Projects

Distinguishing between strategies of direct confrontation and indirect confrontation creates a new set of reference points for recognizing confrontational church behavior. In my dissertation, I deal explicitly with the factors that led national churches that opposed authoritarian regimes to choose direct or indirect strategies of confrontation. In future projects, I intend to broaden the comparative analysis of my dissertation to further test my arguments with new relevant cases, based on the following four questions:

(1). Under what conditions and in what other regions can direct and indirect strategies of confrontation be found?
(2). What additional factors that influence the choice of confrontational strategy are revealed when utilizing a larger N?

(3). Have other religious institutions formulated similarly distinguishable strategies of confrontation?

(4). Do religious institutions employ similar confrontational strategies in conflicts with democratic regimes?

To further investigate these questions I will start by expanding the number of cases included in my project of Latin American Catholic churches that confronted authoritarian regimes starting in the 1960s as well as cases of Eastern European Catholic churches confronting communist states prior to the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, and present-day Asian churches (such as in China) emerging as confrontational institutions against authoritarian regimes. I then envision using a comprehensive descriptive account of church strategies under these conditions to begin expanding the project to include cases of church-state confrontation in democracies and to start exploring cases where other religious institutions have confronted regimes with innovative contentious strategies.

My dissertation also argues that Cuba’s Catholic laity, having been formed in the pluralistic political culture promoted by the Cuban Church, may be better equipped than any other sector of the population to engage in democratic institution-building in a transitional setting. This aspect of my dissertation opens a discussion of what role will be played by non-governmental civil actors during a regime transition in Cuba. A comprehensive account of Cuba’s dissident civil
society and their strategy for confronting the revolutionary regime will provide insights into the prospects for democratization and the development of civil society in Cuba and merits comparison with other cases of civil confrontation against authoritarian regimes. The decision of many of Cuba’s dissidents to tie their activities to Catholic symbology and to use exclusively peaceful measures to confront the regime represents a striking change from Cuba’s history, where oppositional groups often used violent measures to challenge authorities and Catholicism was defined with elite groups and the status quo.

A democracy is a unique set of political institutions that requires a commitment to its legitimacy by not only a country’s political leadership but by its population. These institutions must be purposively created, that they do not simply arise in a political vacuum. Rarely have scholars, political commentators, or American political leaders, in their studies and discussions of Cuban politics and the potential for a future transition to democracy, devoted attention to the one institution in Cuban society that has retained its institutional autonomy throughout the entirety of the revolutionary era and is actively nurturing and promoting a democratic political culture – the Cuban Catholic Church. Though itself an extension of an international hierarchical organization, the Cuban Catholic Church has since the early 1990s been the one consistent national advocate of reconciliation, dialogue, and increased political pluralism. Observers that have reported on the resurgence of Catholicism in Cuba have so far not seriously considered the institutional, organizational, or cultural resources the Cuban Catholic Church has utilized to nurture democratization. Many
observers properly believe that the actions of the US government and Cuba’s top leadership will be the primary determinants of Cuba’s future. But if democracy is an option, and if it is to take root, it will need a fertilizer native to Cuba to help its seeds grow. This is where the Cuban Catholic Church and its laity will play a vital role.

The Cuban Catholic Church is the one credible institution that has survived the duration of the Revolution with its autonomy intact while contributing to the development of a democratic political culture on the island. Their positions as oppositional actors that have remained in Cuba have afforded Cuban church leaders a sophistication in dealing with the system – they have become adept at validating the Cuban reality while promoting both their theological vision and democratic principles. The Cuban Church does not subscribe to a particular agenda for political reform, does not endorse any dissident movements within Cuba, Catholic or otherwise, and has not advocated any overthrow of the current regime, peaceful or otherwise. Rather, it is working within the system, following its primary mission of evangelization, and educating its parishioners to think of themselves as autonomous individuals who are responsible for their own choices. This is the Cuban Church at its most subversive – bringing the focus to the dignity of the individual and his choices, a scandalous philosophy in a system that prizes the collective will and demands unity in support of the revolutionary project. Rolando Suárez describes the Cuban Catholic Church as a church committed to a system of democratic ideals rather than partisan political groups: “The church, the hierarchy, has always been at the service of everyone. There are Catholics that are communist and that are liberal. The
church is open to everything. There is no concert between the church and a political party. I am a layperson, and the hierarchy has never told me what the best political option is. But the church is against the lack of options in our political system.” If one goes to Cuba searching for the seeds of democracy, one need look no further than the island’s Catholic churches.
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