

TANGIBLE HOPE:  
CUBAN PROTESTANTISM IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA

By

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To Mimi and Opa

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Through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, this study analyses religion and social change in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Bloc, when Cuba entered an economic crisis known as the "Special Period." During this time, some Cubans abandoned scientific atheism and turned to religious beliefs and practices; this period also witnessed significant growth in Protestant revivals. Conversion narratives from formerly atheist Cubans reveal a complex picture of ideological and religious continuity and change within Cuba's specific Revolutionary context. This study argues that the collapse of communism did not result in an ideological vacuum which religious beliefs and practices filled. The Cuban Revolution, which promoted the transformation of human beings and their relationship to society, created a political civil religion within the context of scientific atheism.

Using data from in-depth ethnographic fieldwork conducted in yearly trips to Cuba from 2005-2010, this study argues that Cubans are utilizing highly localized, autochthonous, and grassroots techniques in order to form their own model for Protestant practice, evangelization, and language. House churches, prayer meetings, and cell groups form an integral part of this process and are deeply connected to Cuba's

unique past and current post-Soviet realities. Through faith-based social welfare programs, Cuban Protestants are rethinking precisely what it means to be Protestant within the Cuban context, through an emphasis on providing for the material as well as the spiritual needs of fellow Cubans. This study contends that this emphasis upon a "this worldly" religiosity has provided Cubans with a renewed sense of hope since the economic crisis. This "tangible hope," which moved Cubans forward out of states of despair and outward into their surrounding communities, has developed within the context of the Cuban Revolutionary hope: to radically change both individuals and the larger society.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### The Case of Cuba

Change, and waiting for change, is the norm in Cuba. In fact, "change recurs with such frequency in Cuba that it assumes the appearance of a changeless condition" (Pérez 1999:xi). This (ironically) persistent expectation of change has translated into vast numbers of Cubans waiting for it—some waiting in hopeful anticipation of impending change, others waiting in dread of it. On a daily basis, Cubans have "resigned themselves to a condition of anticipation, waiting for change, waiting for something to happen, even as they went about engaged in the most routine activities of daily life—all a matter of change certain to come, portending an uncertain outcome" (Pérez 1999:xii). As we move further into the twenty-first century, this constant anticipation of waiting for "something to happen" has only increased exponentially, as Cubans anxiously wait—and wonder: "What will happen next, if Fidel dies? Where are we going? What is our new President going to do?"<sup>1</sup>

This perpetual state of waiting within the Cuban populace has indeed had profound cultural and psychological implications. Men and women, young and old, have been forced to creatively develop new survival strategies for understanding and coping with a socio-political and economic environment whose trajectory is anything but predictable (Pérez 1999:xii). The word of choice for negotiating this situation of uncertainty can be heard in the colloquial phrase found at the bottom of a Cuban Baptist prayer manual: "Cubans don't obtain; they resolve, invent" (Pérez 2008:15). During

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<sup>1</sup> On July 31st, 2006, Fidel Castro Ruz announced that he would provisionally hand over the duties of the President of Cuba to his brother, Raúl. In 2008, Raúl was officially elected President during a legislative session of the Cuban National Assembly.

yearly fieldwork trips to Cuba since 2005, I observed Cubans' persistent state of waiting: waiting in line for the rationed food distributed within the local *bodegas*, or distribution centers; waiting for the *guaguas*, or buses; waiting for a prescription at the local pharmacy that suffers from empty shelves; waiting for a state license for permission to add additional building space onto a church. Along with daily frustrations and anxiety, however, I also witnessed moments of joy; I heard laughter from tongue-and-cheek jokes so typical of Cuban colloquial humor; and I saw Cubans selflessly caring for one another within an economic context that, since the fall of the Soviet Bloc, has encouraged more of the individualistic pursuit of material resources. I saw this emphasis on providing for the collective good in particular within numerous Protestant church services and prayer meetings, which have grown significantly since the early to mid-1990s.

I initially became interested in this growth of Protestant Christianity in Cuba while pursuing a master's degree in Latin American Studies at Tulane University. I sought explanations for the recent growth of Protestantism in Cuba, and whether or not the Cuban case resonated with analyses of the spread of Protestantism elsewhere in Latin America. Given the long history of North American cultural, political, and economic intervention in Cuban affairs, I wanted to see if we were witnessing a parallel with what some scholars found elsewhere in Latin America. Some scholars have linked the Protestant "invasion of the sects" to "the efforts of the religious right to turn evangelical missions into an instrument for militaristic U.S. policies" (Stoll 1990:9). Speaking on the growth of Protestantism in Cuba, Stoll (1990:8) actually characterized it as a disappointment: the exodus of many of the faithful to Florida after the 1959 Revolution

had made recovery slow. At the time that Stoll (1990) wrote this, however, Cuba had not yet experienced the ramifications of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, and the religious revivals that occurred along with it. The religious scene that I witnessed during the decade of the 2000s had apparently changed dramatically since the collapse of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe. Evangelical groups were—and are—rapidly expanding through networks of Bible studies and services within private homes (“house churches,” or *casas culto*). They are also blurring the boundaries between the public and the private through the adoption of religious social welfare programs that emphasize providing for the material as well as the spiritual needs of fellow Cubans.

Having studied United States-Cuba relations and political economy extensively since my initial visit to the island during a study abroad trip in 2002, I was well aware of recent policy changes on the part of the U.S. with respect to religion. In 2003, the U.S. State Department created the "Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba," which sought to "hasten Cuba's transition" through links with international NGOs, humanitarian groups, and faith-based organizations" (Report to the President: Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba:2004). According to the report, religious organizations in Cuba "represent the fastest growing and potentially strongest alternatives to the Cuban state in providing basic services and information to the Cuban people" (Report to the President: Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba:2004). Renewed links between the United States and Cuba have also "made it much easier for Americans to provide Cubans with not only money, but also supplies, publications, and even guest preachers" (Corse 2007:141).

In light of these new political and economic structural changes, I sought to evaluate if, and to what extent, they have played a role within religious change in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Union. In Cuba, I did not find that we were witnessing what some refer to as "lámina por ánima" (a soul for tin roofing), whereby the material goods of Evangelicals have greatly contributed to their success in gaining converts. This "soul for tin roofing" quip surely cannot explain the whole story. We need to account for continued explosive growth in Protestant numbers, even after an emergency has passed and Protestant agencies "run out of concrete blocks and potted meat" (Garrard-Burnett 1998:121).

During in-depth interviews during yearly trips to Cuba from 2005-2010, I became increasingly skeptical that the "a soul for tin roofing" quip would apply to the Cuban case. Of the nine formal qualitative interviews conducted during a fieldwork trip in 2005, five of them contained narratives from Cuban men and women who had, of their own admission, either "grown up atheist," or "never spoken to God" prior to their sudden turn to religion in the early to mid-1990s. Notably, none of them, prior to their conversion, had any North American missionaries evangelizing to them. From a theoretical perspective, the notion that this type of social change was occurring due to North American imperialist expansion did not seem to resonate with what was empirically occurring on the ground in Cuba.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the Cuban state has increasingly inserted its socialist economy into the global market. This situation, in combination with the particularly acute periods of economic stress in the early to mid-1990s, has posed significant challenges to Revolutionary goals of providing key social welfare programs.

The spread of religious revivals in post-Soviet Cuba is connected to larger socio-economic changes, and reveals “a breakdown in social solutions to address material problems that accentuated the search for answers, real or symbolic, at the individual level” (Alonso 2005:244). I argue that Cubans are seeking a particular form of thought and practice in turning to Protestantism. This Protestantism is not a mere replication of North American forms of religiosity, which are often grounded upon certain individualistic notions of self in relation to society. This is a Cuban Protestantism: one that is autochthonous in structure and organization, and focused upon providing for the material as well as the spiritual needs of fellow Cubans. This Cuban Protestantism has grown and developed within the context of a larger Cuban civic and political religion—the Cuban face of scientific atheism and the hope of creating a “New Socialist Man.” When this Revolutionary hope faced severe challenges following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, Cubans sought a “new hope” that could address what was lost during the most acutely difficult moments of the post-Soviet economic crisis: the notion that a better world is possible, through working for the betterment of the larger collective.

After conducting qualitative interviews with Baptist and Pentecostal Cubans, I found a complex picture of conversion within the post-Soviet context. With the exception of older Cubans who were born prior to 1959, nearly everyone I spoke with had grown up within the Cuban Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary environment. They have never known any other system, or any other leader other than Fidel Castro (or his brother Raúl). This is significant, and it has deeply influenced the type of religiosity and practice at the grassroots level in Cuba today. I am not concerned here with whether or not Cuban Protestants are in favor of or opposed to the Cuban Revolutionary structure;

rather, this study examines how a larger political civil religion in Revolutionary Cuba has shaped and influenced the specific development of Cuban Protestant practice and thought.

### **Methods and Methodology**

I focus in particular on the nature and growth of contemporary Protestant movements, in an effort to gain insight into what Yaremko (2000:xii) has referred to as a subject of "benign neglect." Although the literature on Protestantism in Cuba from Independence through the Revolution is quite extensive, there is a gap in our knowledge of contemporary Protestantism since the fall of the Soviet Union. This "benign neglect" in focus on contemporary Protestantism in Cuba is due to a variety of reasons, mostly structural in nature. Firstly, the Cuban state has tended to identify Cuban Protestant groups as historically linked with U.S. cultural and economic hegemony. In practice, this has led to several issues that affect research on the ground in Cuba. In terms of acquiring written data that would fill in our gaps in knowledge of the historical record, Cuban policy has restricted access to certain primary source documents and archives. Due to the strained relationship between the United States and Cuba, the Revolutionary government also tends to view with some suspicion the presence of foreign researchers in general, and North Americans specifically. The authoritarian nature of the government, which still places restrictions and controls on the flow of information, has also made the use of large-scale surveys of public religious opinion implausible. Lastly, many archives within the United States have also been closed only until recently (Yaremko 2000:xii).

In light of these structural issues, this study should not be taken as representative of all Protestant groups in Cuba. There are also notable limits to my empirical data, and

I acknowledge the absence of a comparative analysis with Roman Catholicism in Cuba. However, this study is primarily concerned with the development of Protestantism in Cuba in comparison to, and in contrast with, the expansion of Protestantism elsewhere in Latin America. A future ethnographic comparative analysis between various religious groups in post-Soviet Cuba would be fruitful and would add both breadth and depth to the current literature; however, it goes beyond the scope of this current work.

I focus my research in particular on Western Baptists in Cuba for a variety of methodological reasons. Firstly, the denomination is significant historically: the birth of Cuban Protestantism began with Alberto Díaz, a Cuban who returned to the island following the Ten Years War (1868-1878) and struggles for Independence from Spain. The church he helped establish, the Gethsemane Church in Havana, was briefly affiliated with the Episcopal Church before becoming a Baptist church in 1886 (Ramos 1989:22). The Baptist denomination is also currently one of the largest in Cuba; from statistics issued from the Western Baptist Convention in 2006, the denomination has nearly 15,000 more members now than they did in 1990, not including non-Baptized members, sympathizers, or those participating in the growing number of house churches (*casas culto*) and prayer meetings (*casas de oración*) (González Muñoz 2007:212). In addition, I wanted to know more about recent growth within a denomination that has historically had significant ties to the North American Mission Boards and the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States.

From 2005-2010, I conducted yearly fieldwork trips lasting approximately two weeks to one month in duration in a semi-rural town approximately thirty minutes from Havana. I worked primarily within one Baptist church and the religious networks

affiliated with them, although I also conducted participant-observation in a local Pentecostal church and women's retreat. I participated in numerous church services, weekly prayer meetings, retreats, and various day-to-day activities. Primary source materials from Cuban churches, such as pamphlets, memoirs, evangelical tracks, musical hymns, and sermon notes, were also examined. Over the course of my fieldwork I conducted eighteen open-ended and semi-structured interviews ranging in length from an hour to an hour and a half. Participants were found using the snowball method, in light of the structural limitations of random samples.

I spent most of my time in the field either conducting participant-observation, or spending as much time as possible with Cuban Protestants as they went about with their daily routines. This is particularly important given the fact that on the whole, most foreigners in general—and North Americans in particular—have not had the opportunity to see the way that everyday Cubans live at the grassroots level. I have therefore tried, to the best of my ability, to let what Cubans have related to me in their interviews speak for itself, while not neglecting the larger historical, political, and economic circumstances that have shaped Cubans' experiences.

### **The Indigenization of Cuban Protestantism**

Both Catholic and Protestant Latin Americans are using an “inculturated” theology in order to adapt and reorganize imported religious systems for their own specific ends (Garrard-Burnett 2004). This theology refers to as a process of “vernacular hermeneutics,” whereby everyday people utilize a discourse of self-respect and self-affirmation rather than a “slavish conformity to received ideas, or abject helplessness over one’s colonized state” (Sugirtharajah 2001:177). Guatemala is an excellent case in point; the “scorched earth” policy during the period simply known as “La Violencia”

(“The Violence,” 1981-1982) forced indigenous leaders to completely reconsider the Mayan experience vis-à-vis the Guatemalan state, and have a “fundamental reassessment of the role Mayan people might play in postwar Guatemalan society and culture” (Garrard-Burnett 2004:128). The Presbyterian pastor Vitalino Similox outlined a treatise and framework for Mayan “cultural recovery” under the rubric of a Mayanized Christianity, so that—in Gustavo Gutierrez’s (1984) term—the Maya could “drink from their own well” (Garrard-Burnett 2004:140).

The following chapters illustrate how Cubans also want to “drink from their own well” of cultural, material, and religious resources and creativity. The Cuban Western Baptist Convention, for example, which has historically maintained strong economic and ideological ties to the Southern Baptist Convention in the U.S., has begun a significant re-evaluation process on precisely what it means to be Protestant in Cuba. This process involves several notable shifts and changes in Cuban Protestant thought and practice. Cuban Baptists clearly acknowledge their historical ties to U.S. missionaries; indeed, some have expressed the notion that they “owe a great deal to the first American missionaries, the pioneers who helped start the Baptist work in Cuba.”<sup>2</sup> However, Cuban Baptists are now explicitly concerned with developing *algo cubano*: something uniquely Cuban that is not directly tied to external and foreign ideas and practices.

These responses of adaptation and creativity are not “new” in and of themselves; communities within the early Christian movement, for example, would often meet in “house churches,” and many women actually rose to positions of leadership with

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<sup>2</sup> Statement from a graduate of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Havana, March 2009.

considerable authority in these communities (Irvin and Sunquist 2001:35). A similar phenomenon is occurring today within Cuban Protestant house churches, prayer meetings, and small groups referred to as “cells” by both Cuban Baptists and Pentecostals. The specific social, political, and economic context in which these Cuban house churches have developed, however, is what makes these methods and responses by Cuban Protestants different from, say, the Christian communities within the first millennium. The underlying framework of “indigenization” is indeed similar, however, and can help us better understand not only contemporary Cuban Christianity, but the nature of Christianity across the globe. Scholars on world Christianity argue that “the worldwide presence of Christianity today is not primarily the result of attempts by powerful churches to replicate themselves worldwide but the result of indigenous response and grassroots movements” (Kim and Kim 2008:11).

Using house churches, prayer meetings, and small “cell” groups, Cuban Protestants are forming their own models of evangelization and practice. They are also stretching these evangelical practices beyond the traditional call to evangelize to include providing social welfare programs and material aid to fellow Cubans. This Christian social activism, in which Cuban Protestant theology moves beyond just the individualized call for personal salvation, raises important questions surrounding the Cuban state’s traditional position as social welfare provider and protector. This in turn reflects Cuba’s changing socioeconomic landscape, one in which the Revolutionary state has been forced to adapt to larger economic pressures of globalization, the world market, and the work of foreign aid organizations and companies (Hearn 2008:135). It also, however, indicates an “indigenization” of Protestantism, whereby Cubans at the

grassroots level struggle to find their own autonomous ways to meet the material and spiritual needs of the Cuban populace. As Cuba enters the “global market,” increased international connections and the sharing of ideas and material goods has not only forced the state to grapple with its long-held ideological views of Cuban autonomy and self-sufficiency; religious groups at the grassroots level are also grappling with what it means to be Protestant within the Cuban context.

Qualitative interviews with Cubans suggest that conversion to Protestantism after the fall of the Soviet Union involved more than simply an escape from difficult circumstances through a religiosity solely focused upon the afterlife. Rather, Protestant Cubans stated that they needed—and received—a “new hope” in turning to religion during the economic crisis in Cuba that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Revolutionary hope of creating *El Hombre Nuevo* (A New Man) was grounded upon the idea that Cubans should selflessly work for the betterment of not merely themselves, but for the creation of a better society. Cubans of all ages and backgrounds have been, since the Revolution’s beginning, socialized to hold onto the hope that a more egalitarian and just world is possible. When the Soviet Union collapsed, that hope turned to despair for many as Cuba’s socialist economy struggled to keep itself afloat.

In response to this difficult and precarious situation, Cuban Protestants have emphasized the need to create their own forms of practice and evangelization that can aid their fellow Cubans not just in the hereafter, but in the “here and now.” This “tangible hope,” although not rooted within the scientific materialism of Cuban Revolutionary Marxism-Leninism, nonetheless developed within the context of a civic and political religion that has permeated all levels of Cuban culture, politics, and society.

I argue that the “indigenization” of Protestantism in Cuba cannot be separated from this larger context. The explicit desire to create forms of worship, practice, and thought that are separate from foreign influence in general, and North American influence in particular, reflects a larger Revolutionary discourse that has long been critical of U.S. intervention and influence in Cuban affairs. Being a Cuban and a Protestant may or may not mean explicit adherence to or membership in the Communist Party; it often does not, although in the post-Soviet era the opening of dialogue about religion has revealed that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, being both Cuban and Protestant does involve a perceived need and desire to focus on the tangible and material needs of fellow Cubans; in this respect, the scientific-materialist and explicitly religious hopes converge.

### **Theorizing Indigenization**

It is perhaps useful at this juncture to clarify what I mean by “contextualization” or “indigenization” of Protestantism in Cuba, and anticipate some theoretical questions and criticisms. I chose the title Cuban Protestantism for this work for a number of methodological reasons. Firstly, I analyze the ways in which Cubans have taken Protestantism—with its long history of cultural and economic ties to the U.S.—and molded, adapted, and re-formulated it according to their own unique situation. I say “unique” in the sense that the Cuban case (as opposed to other cases of Protestantism in Latin America) presents us with a very particular set of historical circumstances: a Revolutionary government that was, up until changes in 1992, a self-declared atheist state; a political economy that was intricately connected to the former Soviet Union until its collapse; and a 50-year diplomatic and economic break with the United States.

Secondly, I argue that the rapid spread of Cuban Protestantism—along with recent developments in evangelization practices—should not simply be equated with the automatic spread of U.S. cultural and economic influence. This argument has waned somewhat in recent years, but during the 1980s especially there was a tendency within the academic literature to explain the “explosion” of Protestantism in Latin America in terms of U.S. imperialism. To some extent, this argument was not unfounded for the time period; some scholars, for example, have analyzed at length a number of ideological and political connections between U.S. conservative evangelicals, the C.I.A., and military regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Stoll 1990).

The 1984 North American Congress on Latin American Report (Dominguez and Huntington 1984:24) argues that U.S. businessmen involved in organizations such as Campus Crusade (*Movimiento Alfa y Omega* in Central America) had rather ambitious plans for the region—plans that included an “ambitious marketing scheme to sell Jesus Christ—and the American Way—to the entire world.” Even as late as the mid-1990s, Brouwer et al. (1996:10) argued that that the global faith of Christianity is also a social product that missionaries bring with them, that is clearly stamped “Made in the U.S.A.” In a number of ways, the argument that Christianity in Cuba—and Protestantism in particular—has carried with it the “footprints” of U.S. influence is not unfounded, either. The current debate, among Cuban and U.S. academics alike, seems to revolve around to what extent that influence remains.

Does the “indigenization” of religious thought and practice create something new? This question reflects a long-standing debate in the academic literature surrounding issues of “syncretism,” religious change, and the impact of “foreign” elements upon

“local” cultures and traditions. Some scholars have rejected the term syncretism altogether; although it has been used to describe complex encounters between European Christianity and native religions and cultures in the Americas, the term carries with it the implication that some religions are “pure,” in contrast to others that are inherently “mixed” or syncretic (Peterson and Vásquez 2008:8). Within the Cuban case, I argue below that there are both old and new elements within Cuban Protestantism, and that “indigenization” is tied to a larger Cuban Revolutionary discourse.

The term “indigenization,” along with “contextual theology” has been more recently used in order to capture the complexities within cultural and religious encounters. It can refer to a) the attempt by foreign missionaries to frame Christian ideas and practices in ways that resonate with local cultures and traditions; and b) the interpretation and re-interpretation of Christian theologies and practices by individuals and groups in light of local realities and contexts. In terms of identifying “new” versus “old practices, however the actual process of “indigenization” is arguably as old as Christianity itself. St. Paul, that traveling and cosmopolitan missionary who was probably one of the first proponents of “inculturation” theology and the importance of autochthonous understandings of Christianity, said in the first chapter to the Corinthians, 9:22 (NIV): “To the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” The phrase “When in Rome...” surely applies here.

In the contemporary Cuban case, I use this latter frame of reference for understanding the “indigenization” of Protestantism. Let me return once again to the aforementioned question about the creation of something “new” or unique in the Cuban

context. What makes Cuba noteworthy of our analysis if the “indigenization” of Christianity across the globe is nothing new or particularly unique? Cuba’s case is noteworthy due to both internal and external elements. Externally, *lo cubano* (cubanness) has had to struggle to define itself against the backdrop of both the Revolution and a complex (and often ambivalent) relationship with the United States. Internally, being Cuban has meant, since Fidel Castro entered Havana in 1959, being part of the Revolutionary process. Latin American nations have certainly had their share of revolutionary movements, but none of them, until Cuba, resulted in a self-identified “scientific-materialist” state, with the population growing up in an atheist environment. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, it set in motion a series of events in Cuba that resulted in not merely a severe economic crisis, but an existential and moral crisis as well. The Cuban Revolutionary state, in order to lessen the severity of the economic crisis, put in place a set of economic austerity measures that resulted in a number of things at the practical level: the legalization of the U.S. dollar, the creation of joint ventures with international companies, and allowing some small-scale private enterprise. At the ideological level, however, some of these measures came into conflict with Revolutionary and socialist ideals.

Some Cuban sociologists have noted this explicitly. The consequences of the economic crisis had a social and spiritual as well as a material dimension: it led to the appearance of new social and economic classes, which in turn highlighted feelings of inequality; it corresponded with a growing “consumer tendency” among Cubans, above all within more prosperous sectors of the economy such as the tourism industry; and it coincided with increased “antisocial” and “delinquent” activities, along with currents of

thought and attitude that reflected a sense of discouragement, frustration and evasion (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:16). Within this economically unstable and ideologically challenging environment, Protestantism, so closely associated with U.S. foreign missionaries prior to the 1959 Revolution, rapidly expanded in a secular and (until the 1992 ratification of the Constitution) atheist state.

This dissertation argues that the expansion of Protestantism in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Union cannot be explained solely by the history of foreign missions in Cuba, precisely because a number of Cubans converting to Protestantism during the early to mid-1990s had grown up with little or no connections to U.S. missionaries whatsoever. In fact, many had grown up in an environment that explicitly discouraged belief in a transcendental supernatural realm, but paradoxically still held onto a type of socialist utopian belief that emphasized the transformation of human beings. This very particular historical and economic situation is what makes the Cuban case worth studying, and it has also played a direct role in shaping Cuban Protestantism.

In the following chapters, I will illustrate some of the ways that Cuban Protestants have grappled with and adapted to this peculiar circumstance of growing up within a Revolutionary, scientific-materialist environment. Specifically, this involves three sets of interrelated practices and organizational methods: using the space of the home for worship and prayer meetings (Chapter 3); a renovation of worship styles and music in Protestant liturgies to include Cuban genres such as the *guajira*, *bolero*, *danzón*, and the *habanera* (Chapter 4); Pentecostal and charismatic evangelization methods and practices that utilize networks of houses, small (“cell”) groups, and spiritual retreats (Chapter 5); and the promotion of Protestant social welfare programs (Chapter 7).

Through specific practices and evangelization methods, Cuban Protestants are grappling with, and negotiating, precisely what it means to be both Cuban and Protestant within the post-Soviet era. In order to understand this process, however, we must place Cuban Protestantism within a larger historical context: the history of North American Protestant missionary work in Cuba, the Cuban Revolution, and the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent economic crisis.

### **The Roots of Cuban Protestantism**

The first great “wave” of Protestant growth in Latin America involved the encouragement of free trade, foreign missionary enterprises, and a great influx of Protestant immigrants to the region (Berg and Pretiz 1994:56). The second wave, clearly arising out of the influence of the first, saw the creation of Protestant schools and churches that were organized mainly through connections with U.S. denominations. The establishment of schools, hospitals, and churches through the aid of foreign Protestant influence and resources went hand in hand with a certain “civilizing” objective that liberal Latin American political leaders whole-heartedly embraced: utilize education not only as a commitment to evangelization, but as a counter-measure to Catholic ecclesiastical influence and Spanish hegemony (Yaremko 2000:6). In the third wave of Latin American Protestantism, the region witnessed an influx of interdenominational faith missions and graduates from U.S. Bible Institutes, who continued to maintain close ties to U.S. mission boards while helping to build Latin American churches modeled on their foreign counterparts. The fourth wave of Latin American Protestantism was the “modern equivalent of the old tent meeting approach,” (Berg and Pretiz 1994:60) with intense (and often outdoor) evangelistic campaigns and the increasing influence of Pentecostalism.

For Cuba, the second and third “waves” of Protestantism were most acutely felt following the Spanish-American War, when U.S. missionaries established a firm presence in Cuba throughout the island. They were a diverse group of individuals, families, and collectives: small investors and entrepreneurs, industrialists and minors, land owners, and heads of companies large and small (Pérez 1999:242). A plethora of denominations arrived: Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, and Quakers. To avoid confusion and conflict, these denominations staked out “spheres of influence” and control, dividing the island nation into zones: Northern and Southern Baptists claimed what would later become, respectively, the Eastern and Western Conventions; Episcopalians chose Matanzas and Santiago de Cuba; Presbyterians, Congregationalists, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South focused on Western Cuba; and the Southern Methodists, Friends, and Northern Baptists focused their energies in the *oriente* (east) (Pérez 1999:242; Yaremko 2000:6).

When North American missionaries arrived in Cuba, they brought certain cultural forms—indeed, an entire vision of a way of life—with them: self-discipline and moral uplift, progress and reasoned faith in human progress, and self-improvement through education. What gave U.S. cultural forms their particular resonance was due to precisely the fact that they took hold locally and seemed directly relevant to everyday life in an environment previously shaken by the wars for independence. In addition to a focus on spiritual salvation, there was widespread discourse on the need to “civilize” Cubans and encourage a particular form of self-disciplined lifestyle combined with a perceived need to directly address the material conditions of the “here and now.” The North American evangelical project was “fundamentally engaged in a project of

transformation" (Pérez 1999:251). Revolutionary Cuba, of course, has long been engaged in a project of socialist transformation, principally through Ernesto "Ché" Guevara's discussion on the "New Man." This project of human transformation differs in a number of significant ways from that of U.S. evangelical missions, most notably in its stance towards capitalism. In theory, however, both aim to fundamentally transform human nature and values.

Perhaps without even realizing it, the U.S. missionary project that sought to bring everyday Cubans into the fold of North American economic and cultural values also simultaneously enabled Cubans to "envision alternative possibilities and shape expectations derived from the ethic of hard work and good deeds" (Pérez 1999:250). Many Cubans who converted to Protestantism, then, had been ideologically and intellectually prepared to expect, through "the power of rational argument and positive knowledge, by principles of equality and equity," not simply "otherwordly" spiritual salvation, but material well-being (Pérez 1999:254). This process of becoming involved in the everyday material as well as spiritual life of Cubans had long-lasting consequences that may still be felt today. This process has taken on a myriad and complex set of forms that can be difficult to disentangle and understand in light of the long, complex, and often tension-filled relationship between the United States and Cuba.

Some scholars of religion have asserted that it no longer makes sense to speak of the current spread of Protestant and Evangelical movements in Latin America as the importation of a foreign product. Thus, "it is no longer Protestantism in Latin America, but Latin American Protestantism" (Casanova 2001:436). This Latin American

Protestantism is as much localized and autochthonous as it is simultaneously embedded in larger, global scripts of Christian dialogue and practices. For its part, Cuban Protestantism is no different; in spite of a long history of foreign presence on the island through U.S. missions, it took on a “Cuban face” some time ago. Alberto J. Díaz, a Cuban who established the first Baptist church in Havana in 1883, had spent time in the United States following Cuba’s Ten Year’s War and struggles for independence from Spain. In 1940, the Quaker minister and educator Merle L. Davis explicitly noted both the small number of foreign workers in the missionary field, and a “turning over” of leadership positions to Cubans (Pérez 1999:255). One of the most prominent scholars on the history of Protestantism in Cuba reminds us that "the year eighteen hundred and eighty-three saw the birth of the presence and permanent ministry of Cuban Protestantism on the island. It was not started by North American or English missionaries, as was the case in the rest of Latin America" (Ramos 1989:22).

Protestantism may have only had a genuinely “Cuban character” before 1898 and after 1959 (Yaremko 2000:xiii). Although Cuba was indeed “flooded” with U.S. missionaries after the 1898 war, there was a small but growing indigenous Protestants movement in Cuba, driven largely by nationalist Cubans who had returned from exile in the United States. These efforts, however, would later be subsumed under the work of Protestant mission boards in the United States, “dividing” the work between denominations. This had the effect of “exchanging that early nationalist identity for a deep connection between Cuban and U.S. Protestantism” (Corse 2007:3).

In the Western part of the country, which included the capital of Havana and surrounding areas, this connection was particularly felt among the Western Baptists,

who had long historical connections with the Western Baptist Convention in the United States. The Cuban Revolutionary government would later be highly suspicious of this connection. In 1965, forty preachers and thirteen laymen were arrested, including Herbert Caudill, the American superintendent of the Southern Baptist mission work in Cuba. The charges leveled against him were harsh: espionage, subversion, and counterrevolutionary activity. However, Caudill had been a strong defender of the Revolution during its early years, and if he had suddenly changed his mind, he had kept his opinions to himself (Corse 2007:83).

After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, churches in Cuba, both Protestant and Catholic, were forced to undergo a dramatic change. Numerically, many left: 70% of Catholic priests and 90% of the Catholic religious, together with 50% or better of Protestant clerical and lay leaders, left the island (Crahan 1979:161-162). The churches that were most deeply affected by this exodus were those whose mission was closely tied to education; the school seizures by the Revolutionary government, which quickly secularized all forms of education, also resulted in a critical loss of internal structures for Protestant churches. Without these structures, Protestant denominations "would have to use new methods of religious education, many turning to the laity, a move that shifted some focus away from the traditional hierarchy" (Corse 2007:71-72). This situation provided the roots for an indigenous and autochthonous Protestantism after 1959. Prior to the Revolution, however, the development of a truly autochthonous Cuban Protestantism was hindered by largely North American control of leadership, organization, and practice.

## **Many Left, but Some Remained**

It is important at this juncture to point out that, in spite of the noted massive "exodus" of Protestant lay leadership and the faithful, some remained—and even returned—to continue their religious work in Cuba following imprisonment and forced labor within the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (Military Units to Aid Production, or U.M.A.P.).<sup>3</sup> Alberto González Muñoz, head of the Western Baptist Convention from 2002-2006, was one such individual. In 1965 González Muñoz was preparing for a career as a pastor. In order to fulfill what he assumed was part of the recently enacted compulsory military service, González Muñoz and eleven other students were sent to a U.M.A.P. work camp in the countryside of Camagüey, Cuba. Very quickly, however, he learned that this service would not be equivalent to normal military exercises, as he and other Cubans were forced to work long hours manually harvesting sugarcane. This acute need for sugarcane would later become part of the "10 million sugar harvest goal" announced by Fidel Castro in 1969. González Muñoz (1994:6), in a memoir entitled "La U.M.A.P. es También Historia Bautista" (The U.M.A.P. is also Baptist History), described the ordeal:

I can flat-out tell you that there were days in which we worked more than 18 hours. The tiredness and exhaustion were such that we had our own defense system. As the cutting was in pairs, each one with three plows of cane, one worked while the other found a place within the countryside to sleep a little. If some official passed by and asked, they would say that the partner was "taking care of physical business." That at least gave us some margin of time for rest...a comfortable bed isn't necessary when the body is exhausted, and we were. I lost 40 pounds during the first harvest.

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<sup>3</sup> The Cuban government created this organization in 1965 in an effort to "re-educate" those deemed unfit for compulsory military service. Included were political dissidents, clerical and lay leaders (both Catholic and Protestant), marijuana smokers, homosexuals, and anyone accused of "ideological diversion." The government disbanded the camps in 1968.

Within the memoirs, González Muñoz (1994) recalls struggling with a tangible gap experienced between officially stated intentions and the experienced realities of the camps; according to a speech written by Fidel Castro regarding the purpose and nature of the "re-educational programs," specific instructions were given as to how recruits were to be treated during the administering of military discipline. These instructions, González Muñoz argued, were clearly not followed. With the Jehovah's Witnesses in particular there were notable problems, for according to their practices they refused to salute a national flag, or wear a uniform. In response, according to González Muñoz's (1994:16) eyewitness account, "they stripped the Witnesses of their clothing, let them leave their socks on, and left them facing in the sun and heat without giving them any water, until they went falling one by one as the days passed." Reflecting upon this gap between stated values and intentions on the one hand, and practices on the other, González Muñoz (1994:6) stated that

Human beings have the disgrace of avoiding in practice that which they beautifully theorize. That very same thing happens in the Christian life. Many people criticize Christianity thanks to the Christians and reject the churches for their mistakes. The difference between what one should do and what happens, often is abysmal in many areas of life. The U.M.A.P. camps didn't escape that curse.

In a later memoir, González Muñoz (1996:35) did not harbor any bitterness or resentment towards those who had caused them suffering in the U.M.A.P. camps. Notably, González Muñoz also refused characterize the U.M.A.P. experiences as simply suffering as part of God's plan, and nothing more: rather, he felt a sense of empowerment knowing that

God was also taken to the U.M.A.P. camps, and was suffering in all the places that we were there; he bore it with us Christians, but also with the homosexuals, the drug addicts, the delinquents, and all that were

considered “social scum,” yanked from their houses and taken there—maybe with good intentions, but with wrong and cruel intent to re-educate.

Although González Muñoz recently emigrated to the United States, he chose to remain precisely during the years when many pastors and lay individuals fled.

Reflecting on this temptation to leave, González Muñoz (2007:70) acknowledges that "the hope of leaving brought us happiness and enthusiasm, in the middle of the despondency brought about by the circumstances. It wasn't right for the work in the moment in which it was living! Neither was it consistent with the calling of God that we claim to have, nor the suffering that we claim to experience for the sacrifice suffered."

González Muñoz's memoirs reveal a more complex religious milieu within Cuban Protestantism than first glance would suggest. Firstly, it points the important fact that not every religious leader or lay individual "packed their bags and left the island" (De la Torre 2002:97). Secondly, the type of religiosity that these memoirs present challenges "other-worldly" and transcendent aspects within Protestantism. If this were not the case, then González Muñoz perhaps would have left upon being released from the U.M.A.P. camps, fleeing the difficulties within the churches in the 1960s, not the least of which included a vacuum in leadership and a severe dismantling of internal organization. As it was, González Muñoz remained; he maintained that a genuine faith required concrete action within the "here and now," in working towards the re-building of Protestant work in Cuba, by Cubans themselves. This effort to establish a Protestantism deeply rooted in Cuban realities has only grown since the 1959 Revolution, but particularly within the past two decades.

## **Post-Soviet Religious Revivals and the Decline in Atheism**

The fall of the Soviet Union marked a watershed moment for Cuba. It did more than coincide with a severe drop in imports from the former USSR; it shook the very consciousness of the Cuban people. López Vigil (2007), in analyzing the relationship between the economic crisis of the 1990s and the sudden emergence of religious revivals, characterized the situation in this manner:

All these tendencies became generalized in the 1990s. Atheism was now breaking down from below and within. Cuban society suddenly lost reference points that it had believed were stable, almost eternal. The USSR committed suicide, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union shriveled, Europe's real socialism crumbled, the Sandinistas lost power, and with the end of the allied East, Cubans watched the threatening West strut around as omnipotent as a god. It was logical to return to the hereafter if so much was falling apart in the here and now.

This dissertation analyzes religious revivals and growth since the fall of the Soviet Union; in particular, it focuses on the narratives and practices of former atheists who "converted" to Protestantism and Evangelicalism during the economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, known as the "Special Period in a Time of Peace," or simply "The Special Period." However, I argue that Cubans' turn to Protestantism was less a "return to the hereafter" than a turn to "here and now."

I place the term "conversion" within quotations because the nature of the entire Cuban Revolutionary project, similar to Soviet forms of socialist utopianism, requires us to take a step back and carefully analyze precisely what Cubans were "converting" from. Until constitutional changes in 1992, the Cuban state self-identified as adhering to a "scientific-materialist conception of the universe" (Republic of Cuba 2008a). The Cuban Revolution's philosophy was—and in many respects continues to be—commensurate

with Marx's (1978a) critique of religion and Hegelian views of the relationship between ideas and society:

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness (Marx 1978a:54).

In other words, religion is a very real response to real suffering. However, it is also illusory, transcendent and "otherworldly" in its emphasis; it serves as a powerful mask of "this worldly" problems that cause human suffering.

In spite of the Cuban Revolution's Marxist-Leninist critique of religious ideas, Cuban socialist discourse has historically appealed to a utopian language that emphasizes the possibility of human transformation. Ernesto "Che" Guevara's notion of a "New Man" is predicated upon not only the transformation of individuals, but of society as a whole. In a meeting with group of young Soviet agricultural specialists, for example, Fidel Castro (1962) stated that

It is natural that a society which liquidated the exploitation of man by man produced a new type of young people, a new man. In you we see these young people, this man—the product of a new society—and we see this better than you yourselves, because for us this is indeed something extraordinary.

When the Soviet Union fell, however, the economic crisis that ensued placed a severe strain upon this discourse of a new Cuban human being. The Cuban state found itself forced to adopt a dual currency system, and put into place certain liberalization measures that precariously inserted the Cuban economy into global capitalist order. I argue that at this point, Cuba faced a "crisis of utopias:" a profound disjuncture between Revolutionary socialist ideals and economic realities.

At the grassroots level, this led to the situation of great confusion that López Vigil (1997) described as the sudden loss of “stable points of reference” in Cuba society. In short, everything was upside down, and nothing was what it “should have been.” Conversion narratives among former atheists in Chapter 2 reveal a key common element among those who suddenly “turned to religion” during the economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc: utter and complete despair and loss of hope—in either a better present, or a viable future. Tillich (1990:182) asserts that without hope, the “tension of our life would vanish, and with it, life itself. We would end in despair, a word that originally meant “without hope,” or in deadly indifference.”

At a larger level, this dissertation argues that when Cubans turned to religion following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they gained a new source of hope that moved them forward out of indifference, apathy, and despair. These emotional states were arguably highly detrimental to the Cuban Revolutionary project. If there was anything that the Revolution did not tolerate, it was indifference, for it “transported Cubans deeply into the realms of social experimentation. It propounded an all-encompassing and self-implicating paradigm of engagement from which it was all but impossible to stay aloof” (Pérez 2005:349). Apathy and despair rendered individuals in Cuban society unmovable, unable to proceed forward towards larger social change.

### **Tangible Hope**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, many Cubans turned specifically to Protestantism—a form of Christianity that has historically been associated with an “otherworldly” and “transcendent” religiosity. Indeed, Protestantism arguably does place an explicit emphasis upon individual sin and salvation, and their relationship to the afterlife; this focus has its theological roots within St. Augustine’s separation between

the sinful body and the eternal soul (Augustine et al. 1955), as well as certain strains of reformed Protestant thought that emphasized, over and above “earthly” concerns, the transcendent nature of the Kingdom of God. This type of religiosity is characterized as vanished hope: a “religion that confirms the hereafter in such a way that it militates against any protest from below” (Desroche 1979:10). In this type of spirituality, the hope for a better, alternate world will only arrive when we reach heaven. This perspective can, in some circumstances, lead to an upholding of the material status quo: poverty, illness, economic inequality, and human suffering in general are seen as “necessary evils” resulting from the fall of man in the Garden of Eden—and, accordingly, the solution to these evils can only come from a deep, personal conviction of one’s inherent sinfulness and the power of God’s salvation.

There is another type of hope, however: blocked hope, or a “hope in a religion that is so bound up with the here below that it is identified with its own confinement. Religion is identified with society, ‘Church and State’” (Desroche 1979:9). In this schema, institutional hierarchies, along with particular leaders and rulers, monopolize the realm of hope. Dreams for a new or better society are ensconced within—and only within—the material world. In between these two extremes lies an important but ambiguous hope with respect to this dissertation: “a social hope [that is] fringed with religious hopes (*espérances*)” within the messages of some socialist utopias (Desroche 1979:10). I argue that Cuba’s Revolutionary hope falls within this category; through socialist utopian language that blurs boundaries between the “sacred” and the “secular,” this social hope has long played a role within Cuba’s political, cultural, and economic

identity. It is precisely this hope that faced severe challenges during the “Special Period,” when Cuba saw a dramatic rise in conversions to Protestantism.

At a larger theoretical level, I make two key interrelated arguments surrounding the notion of hope, which are analyzed in-depth within the final two chapters. Firstly, I analyze the concept of hope as a concrete category of sociological analysis, rather than simply an abstract idea identified with some future state that is presently “intangible.” I argue, building on various anthropological, sociological, historical, and theological perspectives, that hope itself is both a creative process and a motivating force within society. Without hope social change is, in fact, impossible, for hope provides visions of alternative realities and expanded horizons beyond the present. Although in some cases hope can lead to a vision that is escapist—i.e., a “pie in the sky” type of religiosity and spirituality—this is not the kind of hope that is identified with social change.

A hope that is “tangible” is precisely a hope that serves as a real power and force for both individual and collective transformation. This tangible hope, however, can often face a plethora of obstacles and disappointments; indeed, as a number of scholars and theologians who have analyzed hope suggest, hopeful expectations are frequently never met. In spite of this, however, human beings keep moving forward nonetheless, in spite of perpetual disappointment. This “hope against hope,” as Tillich (1990) puts it, runs the risk of being severely criticized: why put one’s hopes, so to speak, in a false hope? The paradoxical and powerful nature of hope lies precisely within its unfulfilled state. Hope “puts personalities or groups in motion” (Desroche 1979:39). Without it, we remain in place—either simply content with our condition, or within a state of despair that is the opposite of moving forward.

As a second part of my analysis of hope, which I tie directly to the Cuban context, I argue that the turn to “religion” in general—and to Protestantism specifically—after the fall of the Soviet Union provided Cubans with a “new hope.” This hope, however, was neither the “blocked” hope of religion identified as society, nor the “vanished” hope of focusing solely upon the afterlife. In line with previous chapters that analyze how Cubans are taking larger Protestant scripts and “making them their own” through processes of indigenization, I argue in the final chapter that the “new hope” that Cuban Protestants speak of is a hope that is not a “pie in the sky” religiosity; it is very real and tangible. It is a Protestantism that is deeply tied to the “here and now,” for it focuses on the importance of providing for the material as well as the spiritual needs of fellow Cubans. This, in a number of respects, reflects the larger Revolutionary milieu in which Cuban Protestantism finds itself.

Finally, I seek to take the Cuban case study as a launching point for a larger discussion about the relationship between religion, social change, and religious revivals, particularly within communist, post-communist, and post-Soviet areas. I leave the definitional boundaries of what constitutes a "post-communist" society open; China, for example, remains a communist country, but its economic structure and relationship to the United States are noticeably different. In terms of the recent explosive growth in Christianity under the context of communism, however, we can draw parallels between the Cuban and Chinese cases, as well as between Cuba and the former USSR. Scholars are just beginning to reevaluate religious change in the post-Cold War context, and it is my hope that this Cuban case study will add to this growing scholarly inquiry.

## CHAPTER 2

### "FINDING RELIGION:" CUBAN CONVERSION NARRATIVES

#### **Rethinking Religious Conversion in the Cuban post-Soviet Context**

This chapter is particularly concerned with why, and under what circumstances, atheist Cubans turned to religion following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Specifically, it focuses on narratives among former atheists who converted to Protestantism during the “Special Period” economic crisis, when Cuba lost most of the material goods and resources that were previously imported from the Soviet Bloc. The Cuban case study forces us to re-think traditional theories of religious conversion: when formerly atheist Cubans “convert” to Protestantism, it might be assumed that they are making a switch from “no religion” or “no religious affiliation” to religion. However, this chapter argues that in Cuba there is a much more complex process of religious change and conversion occurring. Cuba’s Revolutionary ideology combined with scientific atheism, which has promoted the creation of an *Hombre Nuevo* (“New Man”), has blurred boundaries between the explicitly “secular” and the “religious.” A widespread Cuban civic and political religion has permeated all sectors of Cuban society—political, economic, and cultural—and this has helped shape the structural conditions through which transitions from atheism to religion have taken place. I argue that the term “transition” might capture this complexity better than the term “conversion.”

Some scholars of post-Soviet religiosity have found that conventional methods of a “religious market” approach, which measure competition in terms of religious pluralism and religious repression, cannot adequately account for growth in post-Soviet countries. Religious pluralism in post-Soviet societies must take into account atheism as a competitor if we are to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship

between revivals and social change (Froese 2004a:57-58). Kazmina and Filippova (2005) make an important contribution to the study of the “re-imagining” of religion in post-Soviet societies by comparing and contrasting Russian and Ukrainian case studies. They argue that current religious change and revivals must be placed within specific pre-Soviet and Soviet contexts. Notably, they found that even under the most severe of Soviet anti-religious policies, the state did not “eradicate religion;” it did, however, succeed in reshaping it (Kazmina and Filippova 2005:1056).

The Cuban case, when placed comparatively with other post-Soviet examples, raises similar sets of questions and issues. It also, however, raises other questions that involve a re-examination of both the “rational choice” and religious economies approach to conversion. Under these models for explaining aggregate religious growth (Stark, Iannaccone, and Finke 1996; Chesnut 1997; Gill 1998; Stark and Finke 2000; Chesnut 2003), faith-based organizations function much like economic “firms” that compete for the hearts and minds of “religious consumers.” In the case of Latin America, the recent development of a “free market of faith, [where] Latin Americans can now select from among a dizzying array of religious options” (Chesnut 2003:4), has been explained by rational choice theorists as a systematic de-regulation of the religious market and a decline in the Catholic Church’s monopoly status (Gill 1998).

Under this framework, religious consumers in this “free market of faith” choose between various traditions and practices the option that is most likely to fulfill their particular needs and maximize their social and religious capital (Stark and Finke 2000:119). “Conversion” within a rational choice approach, as Stark and Finke (2000:114) define it, refers to “long distance” shifts in affiliation across religious

traditions (i.e., from Christianity to Hinduism, for example). Notably, there is no definition here explaining shifts or conversions from atheism to “religion.”

More recently, a number of scholars on Latin America have raised important inquiries and analysis surrounding this “rational choice” model for explaining religious conversion. Rational choice theory, along with other theories of religion and culture that have more of an “instrumentalist” approach, do have considerable strengths. On the one hand, they do not describe culture (and religion) as an “opiate of the masses;” nor do they characterize actors as overly determined by unconscious external structures. On the flip side, however, rational choice theory (ironically) “contradicts the analytic existence of what it is trying to explain” (Smilde 2007a:48). It focuses upon what religion does—its uses rather than some “essential content” of religious ideas and practices. In order to avoid reductionism (i.e., religion and culture have no other purpose beyond providing pragmatic tool kits of resources), however, instrumentalist approaches assert that the “empowerment” functions of religion are latent, or are “not the overt purpose of religious participation but unintended consequences” (Smilde 2007a:48).

If this is the case, then what religion does for individuals cannot enter into individual preferences and choices, and therefore cannot fall under the rubric of rational action. If this is correct, then it would seem that we need to expand our analytical repertoire of what we mean by “rational;” some scholars have begun to do this through the of imaginative rationality: “a way to get things done by creating concepts” (Smilde 2007a:52). Through the notion of the “social structures of conversion” (Smilde 2007a:157), imaginative rationality seeks to avoid the assumed incompatibility between

structure and agency through looking at the ways in which social networks both encourage and impede religious conversion.

The Cuban case raises a number of thorny methodological and practical issues that challenge the viability of the rational choice approach to understanding both religious change and conversion. Firstly, it would be inaccurate to state that the institutional Catholic Church, unlike other parts of Latin America, has held a monopoly status in Cuba; on the whole, it has been relatively weak in comparison to less institutionalized and more popular forms of religiosity (Crahan 1979:158). Secondly, we cannot discount the role that the state-sponsored “scientific materialist approach to the universe” played within daily life in Cuba. Cuban socialist discourse, similar to Soviet notions of the “New Man,” didn’t merely focus on economic redistribution of resources; it made a moral and ethical argument surrounding the transformation of human beings and society. In this manner, Revolutionary ideology, even under the rubric of scientific atheism, may have functioned as alternatives to “religious” worldviews.

Lastly, the Cuban case forces us to carefully examine what we mean by “rational” within the “rational choice” perspective. Rational choice theory contains within it an underlying model of human personhood: “humans act in the context of opportunity and constraint to pursue their self-determined, self-oriented, material interests” (Smith 2003:141-142). In Cuba, however, this model of human personhood was challenged by Revolutionary discourse that emphasized collective interests, altruism, and a political economy focused on promoting “moral” rather than material incentives. This emphasis upon collective rather than individual self-interest did face severe challenges after the fall of the Soviet Union; however, it did not disappear. This becomes clearer within

conversion narratives among former atheists. Some, who were initially highly critical or even hostile to the notion of religion, came to embrace religious beliefs and practices as more than simply an individualistic means to an end.

### **Historical Background**

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cuba felt its reverberations. Aid from the Soviet Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, which accounted for about 85% of Cuba's trade, plummeted; commercial relations with the former Soviet Union declined by more than 90%; petroleum imports decreased by an equal amount, and GDP dropped by 34% (Pérez 1995b:383). This certainly amounted to a crisis in international trade, but on the ground in Cuba consequences proved devastating. In August 1990 the government of Cuba announced the need for certain austerity and rationing measures and the beginning of a “Special Period during a time of peace,” or simply “The Special Period” (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:17).

Cuban academics studying the impact of the Special Period on the nation have noted the watershed nature of the moment. Some have argued, for example, that the Special Period amounted to more than simply a sudden drop in GDP or loss of material resources. Rather, the economic crisis marked the very subjectivity of the Cuban populace (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:95). The “anguish” of that period, as one informant explained, was reflected in the brick wall that Cubans were thrown into: a moment in which quite suddenly, “everything had ended. There wasn’t fuel to cook with, there wasn’t food, there wasn’t medicine, there wasn’t clothing to put on, there wasn’t soap to bathe with, or detergent...everything was very difficult. Everything was very difficult.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication, July 2006.

The material and psychological desperation that so many Cubans suffered during this time coincided with a spiritual desperation and need in the population. This is reflected in numerous personal testimonies and conversion narratives that consistently draw connections and parallels between a complete loss of hope in either a better present or future, and the perception of a “spiritual” world capable of tangibly affecting the material one. Notably, although perhaps understandably given Cuba’s Marxist-Leninist history, a number of these narratives are from individuals who spent most of their lives growing up within an atheist or secular environment.

The “sudden turn to religion” during Cuba’s Special Period raises important questions and issues surrounding the Cuban state’s program of scientific atheism, as well as religious observance prior to and after the 1959 Revolution. According to research conducted in the late eighties by the Department of Social and Religious Studies of the Center for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS), “approximately 85% of the Cuban population reported some type of belief in or contact with the divine, while formal ties to structured religions remained under 16%” (Alonso 2005:244). According to this research, atheists accounted for only 15% of the sample.<sup>2</sup>

These statistics would indicate that in spite of official attempts by the Cuban state to promote scientific atheism through “re-education” programs, religiosity in Cuba did not simply “disappear.” This coincides with data found in Russia and other post-Soviet areas that suggests that even the most ardent atheism campaigns may not have resonated with individuals (Froese 2004b). Although the former Soviet Union may not have been particularly successful in forced secularization, it is important to note that the

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<sup>2</sup> These statistical studies remain “unpublished and circulate in manuscript form” (Alonso 2005:255).

Cuban case is different. The aforementioned statistics indicate that institutionalized religion, in contrast to more popular forms of religiosity and practice, has played much less of a role in Cuba. The Cuban case presents us with a different historical trajectory regarding the influence of institutionalized religion; in contrast to the Orthodox Church, which has long exerted significant influence in both Russian state politics and national culture, pre-Revolutionary Cuba tended to associate institutionalized religion in general, and the Catholic Church in particular, with foreign elements (Crahan 1979:158).

We are therefore confronted with a complex religious milieu in Cuba. On the one hand, statistics from Cuban research centers indicate that official attempts to promote scientific atheism and “re-educate” individuals did not simply eliminate religious beliefs and practices. It may have simply gone “underground;” since openly religious Cubans were forbidden to join the Communist Party until constitutional changes in 1992, then it is conceivable that some may have simply hidden their beliefs. Otherwise, it is difficult to reconcile statistics on the percentage of atheist Cubans with official Communist Party requirements.

On the other hand, the formerly atheist Cubans I spoke with during in-depth interviews in 2005 did seem to indicate that they genuinely subscribed to the Cuban version of scientific atheism. The “Cuban version” is directly tied to the larger Revolutionary project of creating a “New Man” and a new society, through working for “moral” rather than material incentives. Therefore, we cannot separate the state’s promotion of scientific atheism from its overall Revolutionary project. Since the Special Period, Cuba’s rapidly changing economy has increasingly entered into the global capitalist market, particularly through the promotion of international tourism. As these

economic changes have also coincided with ideological shifts at the state level, we must therefore analyze Cuba's post-Soviet religious revivals within the context of this new phase of global capitalism.

It is perhaps tempting to draw an automatic correlation between material scarcity and religious social change. Notably, Cubans did turn to churches during the Special Period for material aid, as congregations gathered resources among themselves and distributed food and clothing donations. In addition, there is evidence that individuals and groups firmly believe that religious beliefs and practices can offer solutions to everyday problems and issues; the same has been argued for Pentecostal healing as well (see Chesnut 2003). Indeed, some of my interviews with Cubans involve individuals who, for a variety of reasons, grew up atheist, turned to Santería or Regla de Ocha seeking solutions to psychological, physical, and spiritual problems, and later converted to Evangelicalism. This process was, however, not an automatic trajectory; some evangelicals find only a partial resolution of problems and may discontinue practice (Smilde 2007a:133-39).

In Cuba's particular case, conversion narratives suggest that individuals, some of whom were initially highly critical or even hostile to the notion of religion, came to embrace religious beliefs and practices as more than simply a means to an end. In the highly unstable and desperate environment that Cubans found themselves in during the Special Period, there is no doubt that many sought specific things: peace from severe anxiety, help with depression (which unfortunately often resulted in suicide among the populace), physical and emotional healing from a plethora of illnesses, and material and economic security. Some Cubans, as we will see below, began to turn to religious

world views and practices after having spent the majority of their lives within an atheist and secular environment. I am particularly interested in why, and under what circumstances, atheist Cubans turned to religion in the first place. My informants' time of conversion happened to coincide with the Special Period and the fall of the Soviet Union, thus suggesting a strong correlation between economic crisis and religious change. However, I argue that Cuban conversion narratives reveal a much more complex reality beyond a simple cause-and-effect analysis.

### **Religious Revivals and the Decline in Atheism**

In 1992 Cuba changed its constitution through an amendment, transforming Cuba from an officially atheist to a secular state (Crahan 2005:237). During the 1990s, the Cuban government gradually opened up dialogue with religious groups, particularly those who belonged to the Cuban Council of Churches, and 1998 saw the much-anticipated visit of Pope John Paul II. The Cuban state also encouraged the development of Afro-Cuban cultural and religious centers, museums, conferences, and performances through such institutions as the National Folkloric Group of Cuba (*Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*). This coincided with the Cuban government's desire to both encourage international tourism investment on the island, and emphasize the nation's historical roots to Africa, all the while maintaining the nation's identity as an officially secular state (Ayorinde 2004). Meanwhile, as the Cuban government gradually softened its Marxist-Leninist stance toward religion, its population grappled with the challenges of the Special Period.

Conventional models analyzing religious pluralism in post-Soviet areas must take into account competition with atheism (Froese 2004a). Prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, the doctrine of scientific atheism in Russia functioned as an alternative to

religion, maintaining a monopoly status through a combination of intensive re-education programs, the closing down of churches and religious schools, and the intention to create a new “Soviet human” consistent with socialist utopianism (Froese 2004a:66). A strikingly similar phenomenon occurred in Cuba, although with different historical trajectories in the relationship between the Cuban government and religious groups. Fidel Castro (Castro and Betto 1987:197) explicitly stated in a series of interviews with liberation theologian Frei Betto that conflicts mainly resulted from class issues and the identification of the Cuban Catholic Church as a pre-Revolutionary colonial institution whose clergy were primarily of foreign origin.

The process of experimenting “with new theological definitions and pastoral programs better adapted to the reality of Christians living in a socialist society” (Crahan 1979:157) has proceeded more slowly in comparison to other areas of Latin America where liberation theology has deeply taken root. This is due to the fact that Cuban churches were forced to react to the sudden and rapid change implicit within Cuba’s Revolutionary ideology and economic structure. Thus, it was only until the 1970s that Cuban churches began exploring some of the innovations in pastoral organization and lay participation that liberation theology addressed elsewhere in Latin America (Crahan 1979:157). Importantly, however, Castro has acknowledged through his conversations with Betto certain parallels between liberation theology and Revolutionary discourse. In discussing with Betto how to put revolutionary ideas into practice, Castro (Castro and Betto 1987:271) stated that

The question is how to implement an idea or a revolutionary social program. If what you mean is that, in the present conditions in Latin America, it’s a mistake to stress philosophical differences with the Christians—who, as a majority, are massively victimized by the system—rather than try to

persuade all who share the same aspiration of justice to unite in a common struggle, I'd agree with you.

Castro also agreed with Betto's assertion that socialism and communism, like religious ideals and practices, seek the development of man's spiritual life. "We seek," Castro argued, "man's broadest material and spiritual development. That is exactly how I've put it when I've spoken about education and culture" (Castro and Betto 1987:312). Until constitutional changes in 1992, the Cuban Revolutionary state did declare itself as basing "its activity and education of the populace in the scientific materialist conception of the universe" (Republic of Cuba 2008a). This scientific materialism formed the basis of Cuban Marxist philosophies, which drew their roots from positivism and went even further than their Soviet counterparts in "demystifying" reality and history, with scientific critiques of ideologies (Parsons and Somerville 1977:15-16).

Although the 1961 Cuban missile crisis undoubtedly strained relations between Cuba and the Soviet Union and led to a further divergence in philosophical methods, we may still find parallels between the desire to create a new "Soviet man" and Ernesto Ché Guevara's discourse on developing a new Cuban consciousness in "Socialism and man in Cuba" (Guevara and Deutschmann 1997). Under this framework, the new Cuban and Russian human being would selflessly and altruistically work not for the material betterment of their own individual selves, but for the common good of society. The development of a socialist economic structure, in other words, would manifest itself among the masses in the form of "moral" rather than "material" incentives.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and instigation of the Cuban Special Period, however, coincided with ideological changes at the state level. In 1992 Cuba reformed the 1976 version of its Constitution to state in Chapter 1, Article 8 that the government

"recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of conscience and of religion." Chapter 7, Article 55 also states that Cuban citizens have the "freedom to change religious beliefs or to not have any, and to profess, within the framework of respect for the law, the religious belief of his preference" (Republic of Cuba 2008b). However, it maintained the previous 1976 clause allowing for state regulation of religious institutions, which has since taken a myriad of forms ranging from house church regulations to specific permit requirements on the construction of new church buildings. At the local level, Cubans who had spent most of their lives adhering to the previous scientific atheist world view began to explore the possibility of the presence of "a spiritual world" that could both concretely affect their present circumstances and offer an alternative future reality. Atheism, in other words, began to lose its hold on the Cuban populace.

Froese (2004a) drew a correlation between the loss of Communist political power and a consistent decline in atheism within all former Soviet states. Without an official sponsor, scientific atheism essentially lost its appeal, and religious groups rushed in to fill the vacuum and compete for the hearts and minds of those previously under its influence. This competition can explain a "renewed appetite for religion" as well as the presence of renewed religious monopolies and state regulations of certain religious groups and activities (Froese 2004a:59).

Others however, warn us about larger statistical analyses concerning religious activity in places such as Russia. There very well may be "a large gap between the number of those who consider themselves to be believers and the number of those who actually practice" (Kazmina and Filippova 2005:1063). Interestingly, surveys among Russians found that "religion" is often associated with the Russian cultural imagination,

and that even those who explicitly claim to be “nonbelievers” trust the Russian Orthodox Church in matters of moral and social concern (Kazmina and Filippova 2005:1064).

Froese (2004a), however, also examined a rather large set of post-Soviet republics in addition to the Russian federation, and acknowledged that “the drop in the number of atheists does not perfectly match increases in religious memberships due to the portion of non-religious people who in 1970 were not convinced atheists but have subsequently joined religious groups” (Froese 2004a:58-59).

Although many of the lay and clerical religious leaders did leave Cuba shortly after Fidel Castro took power in 1959, the current wave of religious revivals did not arise out of a vacuum. Shortly after the 1959 Revolution, 70% of Catholic priests and 90% of Catholic laypeople, along with 50% or better of Protestant clerical and lay leaders, fled the island. However, other religious Cubans purposefully chose to remain; some even remained after the particularly difficult period of the early 1960s, when the Cuban government sent a number of seminary students, ministers, priests, and other religious laypersons to work camps known as the Military Units to Aid Production (U.M.A.P.). Even in the context of historical skepticism towards institutional religion, Christianity in Cuba notably “exerts a predominant influence which in moments of crisis can result in a reassertion of loyalty to the churches” (Crahan 1979:158).

### **Religion, Socialism, Religious Socialism, and Atheism**

Fidel Castro (Castro and Betto 1987) made it clear that some Christians actively participated in the Revolution's struggles, and that there wasn't necessarily an inherent conflict between Christianity and socialism. Castro (Castro and Betto 1987:19), who attended Jesuit schools in his youth, said the following to Frei Betto:

I'm rather well versed in Christian principles and in Christ's teachings. I believe that Christ was a great revolutionary. That's what I believe. His entire doctrine was devoted to the humble, the poor; His doctrine was devoted to fighting against abuse, injustice and the degradation of human beings. I'd say there's a lot in common between the spirit and essence of His teachings and socialism.

Castro did not seem to be criticizing Christianity or religion as such, but transcendent and utopian forms of religiosity. Castro (Castro and Betto 1987:16) alludes to this when stating that Christianity could be "a real rather than a utopian doctrine, not a spiritual consolation for those who suffer." Tillich (1971:41) explains that the connection between religion and socialism can be understood in a number of ways. The first is one of substitution: socialism as religion; another is what Tillich (1971) refers to as a "practical-political" type of socialism, or one that attempts to unite socialist political principles with organized Christianity.

Given Castro's (Castro and Betto 1987) aforementioned discussion on compatibilities between Christianity and socialism, we need to evaluate Cuba's scientific atheism in light of the values and practices promoted by the Revolution itself. We must then connect the Revolution's goals of creating a "New Man" with larger socio-economic trends since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this in turn will help us better understand the current shape that religious revivals in Cuba have taken. What we are currently witnessing in Cuba "cannot be delinked from concurrent worldwide trends in the context of global change" (Alonso 2005:244), because economic globalization has forced the Cuban government to make significant socio-economic changes. Some of these changes—certain "liberalization" measures, allowing some private enterprise, and the promotion of international tourism—have challenged Revolutionary utopian goals of creating a classless society based upon working for "moral" rather than material

incentives. Among religious institutions, we are witnessing a “sustained movement characterized by growing social insertion at both the theoretical and practical levels” (García Franco 2005:261).

The Cuban case forces us to re-think what we mean by both “religion” and “conversion” within the context of these socio-economic changes since the nineties. At a larger level, taking the decline of atheism into account through a “religious economies” approach may very well help us re-evaluate the relationship between religious pluralism, church-state relations, and revivals. Larger "macro-level" analyzes may very well help us re-evaluate the relationship between religious pluralism, church-state relations, and revivals by specifically taking the decline of atheism into account. At the local level of personal religious change and choice, however, I agree with Spickard's (1998:110-111) analysis of the benefits and pitfalls of religious market approaches to social change. They can provide a clear picture of large and aggregate processes, but what they cannot do is explain how individuals will act within specific settings.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent Special Period economic crisis may indeed have been a catalyst for the creation of a set of new social and economic conditions whereby Cubans began exploring different ways of seeing the world and acting within it. These two events in and of themselves, however, cannot alone explain the “switch” from atheism to religion in Cuba. If we factor in the socialist ideals within the Revolution itself, however, a clearer picture emerges: in a number of respects, both Christianity and Revolutionary socialism call for the dramatic transformation of human beings and society. During the years in which it most ardently encouraged scientific materialism, however, Cuban socialism eschewed any and all

“transcendent” forms of religiosity, arguing, in line with Marx (1978a) that “evasive” religiosity masked deeper material struggles in the “here and now.”

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Cuba suffered more than a drastic drop in imports. At the grassroots level, the narratives below reveal that Cubans began to experience feelings of frustration, apathy, and hopelessness. In short, they found it increasingly difficult to get up in the morning and move forward with daily activities, for fear that, in one Cuban’s words, “there was no point.” Some might argue that the move from atheism to religiosity involved either a form of escapism, or the mere fulfillment of specific material and psychological needs—a “rational” toolkit of resources, if you will. The narratives below, however, suggest that religious conversion during the Special Period involved a much more complex set of realities.

### **Conversion Narratives: Formerly Atheist Cubans**

#### **“My Psychologist Told Me to Go to Church”**

Miguel,<sup>3</sup> an Afro-Cuban Protestant pastor who had “never believed in anything,” described the “desperate” and “insecure” nature of the Special Period during the 1990s. As another informant explained, the economic downturn in Cuba precipitated a sharp increase in inflation: “there was a lot of money in the street, but there was nothing to buy.” Miguel explains that this particular situation, in which Cubans experienced extreme emotional and economic insecurity, caused people to “fall into frustration, depression, and hopelessness.” Notably, during the course of our interview the words “peace,” “looking for peace,” and “searching for peace” occurred 9 different times. He explicitly drew a correlation between the economic, social, and psychological

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used in this study. Conversion narratives are from June 2005.

environment that Cubans faced during the Special Period, and a lack of internal peace and security. “All of that environment,” he explains, “caused people that had never believed in spiritual things, now they are at the forefront. Cuba is a country that’s very...that is to say, in all these years of this Revolutionary system, atheism has resonated with much of the population.” Miguel stated, however, that atheism, in the context of Cuba’s Special Period, was unable to provide him (and others) with the peace and security he sought.

They have seen that the situation is so above what a human being can do...I in particular was a fruit of that. The situation of the country finally carried me to the point of seeking help through the Afro-Cuban religion...I can testify to this, and I know many people that, for example currently in my church—I have people, more than one, various people that have arrived, because they’re not believers, that the psychologist recommended that they go to church. Because the psychologist realizes that many people are needing peace...so many people are going to church today in Cuba in search of the peace that they don’t find in the world.

Seeing a psychologist himself in 1991 due to the extreme anxiety and frustration he felt during a period in which he was “out, on hands and knees,” Miguel explained the road that took him from “believing in nothing,” to Santería:

I had never believed in anything, and so, there arrived in our life next to our family some people that were Santería priests in Cuba—*babalawos*, and spiritists, too. And these people began to preach to us about their religion. And we realized that there existed spiritual worlds that we had never believed in.

Santería revolves around *ashé*, a spiritual force found within living beings and objects, and personified in the *orishas*, or African spirits (Murphy 1993:131). Practitioners maintain a relationship with their respective *orishas* who “rule their head” and guide them throughout their lives. They are the “power-to-make-things-happen” (Thompson 1983:2), and represent “raw energy, awesome power visually and materially discernible” (Murrell 2010:108). Within the context of Cuba’s severe economic downturn that very

suddenly placed limits on what was practically possible on a day-to-day basis, this “raw energy” and the “power to make things happen” had a profound effect upon Cubans.

Individuals will initially turn to pneumacentric or “spirit-filled” religions such as Santería, Candomblé, and Umbanda if secular channels did not solve their problems (Chesnut 1997). These problems are “poverty-related pathogens” related to physical illnesses and financial difficulties (Chesnut 2003:114). In fact, healing poverty-related afflictions may constitute the primary purpose of the spirits within African diaspora religious traditions, and consulting directly with these supernatural beings is viewed by practitioners as “more potent” than other means and remedies (Chesnut 2003:114).

This emphasizes the functional aspects of African-derived religious practices—what they do and the specific benefits they offer to their “clients,” rather than their particular cosmologies and world-views. Some scholars argue that in contrast to Pentecostalism (nd to some extent the Catholic Charismatic Renewal), African diasporan religions are decidedly not religions of conversion and proselytization (Chesnut 2003:118). Practitioners might very well use preexisting social and familial networks to “recruit new clients” (as would appear to be the case with Miguel and the Santería *babalaos* who “preached” to him), but they do not conduct the sort of “door-to-door evangelism” consistent with Protestant evangelicals. This is due to the relatively “amoral diasporan doctrine” (Chesnut 2003:116) among African-derived religions that does not draw a sharp black and white division between good and evil. Thus, the evangelistic call to “convert” from a previously sinful life to a new one free from the bonds of evil would not resonate with African-derived world-views.

Some of these observations and analyses do resonate with Miguel's narrative, although his framework is more difficult to apply to the Cuban case where an atheist "converts" to Santería. Throughout Latin America, practitioners of African-derived faiths are "united by their religious background," namely nominal or non-institutional Catholicism (Chesnut 2003:110). Unlike Evangelicalism that demands a decidedly sharp break with one's Catholic past, African-derived religions do not. In Miguel's case, however, his "realization that there existed spiritual worlds" did indeed represent a break from an atheist past. The observation that spiritual and supernatural healing initially brings individuals to the doors of a Candomblé *terreiro* or a *babalawo*'s home in Santería (Chesnut 2003) can be applied to Miguel's case insofar as he sought specific solutions to the problems he faced. The nature of the problems that he faced, however, arguably straddled the line between psychological and spiritual: anxiety, frustration, insecurity, hopelessness, and a "lack of peace."

In contrast, Chesnut (2003:113) uses Brown's (1986) work on Umbanda in Brazil to argue for the instrumental nature of diaspora religions, pointing out that Brown found fewer than 6 percent of her respondents who sought help at an Umbanda center for spiritual problems. In Miguel's case, he grew up within an atheist environment, had the "perception of the spiritual world" during the acute crisis of the Cuban Special Period, and turned to the African-derived religion of Santería in search of what appears to be psychological and spiritual healing. Miguel's description of the move from Santería to evangelicalism raises even more complicated questions regarding the choices and circumstances surrounding religious conversion:

I began to have spiritual experiences, like in the world of darkness, and things that tortured me even physically. I had already had the perception of

the spiritual world. And then, each moment became unbearable. I tried to reject it. I was learning of, that is to say, experiences with the spiritual world, but that I didn't want. That bothered me the most. And so, the people that had been preaching to me [at work] began to tell me that if I accepted Christ, those spiritual experiences would go away. That [the experiences] had brought more spiritual disruption.

And I began to reason. And there arrived a moment in which reaching peace became so unbearable...imagine two things: for me the spiritual situation I had and the situation of the country's environment were both unbearable. To the point that in that state it was practically desperation. I saw in me clearly the answer that they had given me: accept Christ, and I would find peace. I wouldn't have any more negative experiences. And I did just that.

If we were to adopt a “rational choice” perspective, the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería initially, followed by Protestantism later, offered Miguel a particular “good” and benefit that he sought as a “religious consumer:” internal peace. Miguel seemingly weighed his options in a rational manner, and chose to participate in a religion (or not) that would effectively provide him with the peace that he desperately sought amid Cuba’s highly unstable economic environment. The problem, of course, is that the notion of “peace,” along with other “intangibles such as salvation, truth, and ultimate meaning” (Peterson 1997:163) cannot be fully measured by a simple cost-benefit analysis.

The benefits of rational choice theory is that it emphasizes the role of human agency and the ability of individuals to influence the external structures around them, instead of being produced by them. It also avoids the pitfall of a reductionist Marxism that reduces all religious experiences to false consciousness. On the downside, however, the theory tends to assume a static and uniform definition of what we mean by “rational,” along with the idea that we all have the same stable and measurable set of

preferences—regardless of specific historical, cultural, and economic contexts (Spickard 1998:106).

If we cannot reduce Miguel's participation in Santería or Regla de Ocha to a simple cost/benefit analysis, then it is perhaps equally as reductive to assume that his "perception of the presence of a spiritual world" never would have occurred without a crisis. Certainly there is no denying that his experiences, like those of other informants below, occurred during the economically difficult years of Cuba's Special Period. Most are brought to the Regla de Ocha faith "by personal recruitment, curiosity, family connection, crisis, and trauma" (Murrell 2010:116). However, this "crisis-solace" model of religious conversion only goes so far when it comes to explaining religious change and innovation (Levine 1993:17). From the perspective of Yoruba cosmology in Regla de Ocha, it is not devotees who "choose" their own *orishas* in the same way that they might "choose" religion, even during a personal crisis; rather, it is the *orishas* who choose and claim them personally (Murrell 2010:113). We should bear these complexities in mind, particularly with respect to "rational choice" and economic models of analysis in explaining religious change and conversion.

Some of what Miguel stated resonates with the "crisis-solace" model: during the particularly harsh years of Cuba's Special Period, Cubans experienced heightened states of emotional, economic, and social insecurity. Thus, some might view the "move" from atheism to religion as a desire to seek a measure of spiritual and psychological stability and solace. As a plethora of literature on Latin American evangelicalism has explained, religious practices have indeed provided individuals and groups with feelings of social solidarity and tools for economic survival and solace amid conditions of

upheaval and uncertainty (Willems 1967; Roberts 1968; Mariz 1994). However, framing religious conversion solely in terms of cultural and economic survival makes one wonder, "why religion is involved at all" (Smilde 2007a:6).

### **On Lenin Portraits and Bibles**

Diego, a Baptist who converted to Protestantism in 1995, has led a physically challenging life. Suffering from the after-effects of surgeries gone awry, he was left with a hump in his back, and at one point was even bed-ridden for two years. Although his mother was Protestant, Diego "was always annoyed to hear anything about the Bible. For me it was backwards, it was something that made no sense." He noted that at one point, however, even his mother had abandoned religious practices. During his time of forced bed rest, the pastor of the church that his mother had once attended would visit him, and on one occasion gave him a Bible to read. "I had all the time in the world to read," he explained. "I couldn't even walk, I had to remain lying down without moving. I couldn't even sit up in bed." Nevertheless, Diego had no intention of reading the Bible given to him. Instead, he would ask his mother to bring him a portrait of Lenin that he had, and place it next to his bedside. When said pastor came to visit Diego, he told him "I do not want to know anything about the Bible. Please, do me a favor and don't talk with me about that anymore."

Following several back operations, Diego began to suffer from acute emotional stress when certain friends began to ignore and reject him.

I wasn't the young man that was cool, that went out with them to the discotheques...I lived in a world in which I was away from normal life for three years. And I was out of contact for a long time with the world and people. And they began to reject me.

Upon entering his mother's room one day, he noticed a Bible laying on a table. His first impression, similar to his previous reaction upon being given one from the pastor, was "I'm not going to read that, because that's a lie."

But something told me, "read it, read it." And I read it all, not just one time. Completely, completely. So, in the middle of my head there were immense things, without understanding the majority of them, but there was a verse that answered my question about who God was. It said who God was and from that point on my life completely changed...Jesus says here, Revelation 22:13: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last."

According to Diego, this moment marked his evangelical conversion experience.

What is particularly interesting about Diego's story is how his mother, whom he has always lived with, initially grew up Protestant but discontinued religious practice as an adult. While his mother did not seem to actively push a scientific atheist worldview upon her son, Diego nonetheless adamantly subscribed to its tenets. His father, notably, "was always a little more reactionary towards the evangelical."

Certain social networks can influence the possibilities for conversion through a mechanics of "conformity effects" (Smilde 2007a:170). Interaction between an Evangelical and a non-Evangelical can range from a simple sharing of ideas to outright conflict. Most commonly, a "spatially present" Evangelical can be the bearer of symbols, concepts, and practices that resonate with the non-Evangelical during a particular situation or while confronting a problem (Smilde 2007a:175). In Diego's case, however, he was interestingly spatially present with a former Protestant mother and a father who remained antagonistic towards Evangelicalism. At this particular juncture, network influence seemed to be going in the opposite direction from moving towards conversion.

Diego underwent a particularly difficult period of loneliness and rejection from fellow peers following his back surgeries. Smilde (2007a:94) noted this as well; among his Venezuelan respondents who for various reasons felt different, awkward, or socially out of place, emotional isolation and loneliness played a direct role in turning to Evangelicalism. Following his aforementioned Bible reading experience and subsequent conversion, Diego decided to attend the church that his mother had attended long ago during her earlier Protestant years. At this point, network influence seemed to have fallen in line with what Smilde (2007a) observed: his mother returned to Protestantism following an extended period of skepticism towards religion in general, and his father underwent a conversion experience similar to his own. Incidentally, the church's pastor happened to be the same one who had given him a Bible during his years of forced bed rest, which he had rejected and requested a portrait of Lenin instead. Diego describes the process of attending the church for the first time as one of simultaneous joy and agony.

A big battle started there, because the devil was saying in my ears, "What are you doing sitting here in the middle of all these people singing these little songs? You're not from here, you're not from here." But the Lord said that I was, that I belonged to him. And the devil even came to say to my life, that I should commit suicide. That I had no reason to live. He would say to me, "Kill yourself, kill yourself." I could hear a voice that said, "Kill yourself, you're not worthy anything."

Diego explained that he was particularly struck by the way those within the church received him, "with so much love." Growing up an only child, coupled with his periods of severe loneliness and rejection from fellow peers, helped shape the structural conditions that contributed to his overall conversion experience. Notably, Diego's conversion narrative also suggests that religious practices and discourses provided him with a new sense of self-worth and purpose for living. He emphasized that before he

arrived at his current church, he was “a person at the limit...of his capacity to withstand any more pain and the desolation that he had in his life.”

### **“I Heard about Jesus Christ for the First Time”**

Adela, a young Pentecostal woman in her mid-twenties, grew up “believing that God didn’t exist.” Adela was raised in a household by an explicitly atheist father and a mother who, while not a self-declared atheist, did not share any particular religious vision or notion about God with her. Growing up “with no knowledge” that God existed is striking and unique to Cuba’s particular social and political environment. Following the 1959 Revolution, all religious instruction became secularized, and in 1961 the Cuban state instigated a national literacy campaign that not only sought to achieve nation-wide literacy, but also to instill within the Cuban populace the idea that any and every Cuban could achieve the seemingly impossible (Arnope and Graff 2008:175). Thus, a well-educated and literate populace became an integral part of the Revolutionary process, and was directly tied to Cuban personal and collective and national identities.

Adela, a studious and conscientious young woman, explained how even as a teenager, she was able to set and fulfill “short, medium, and long-term goals.” Concerning her goals, she stated that she could

Take them by the hand, and I would go walking towards them. But one stage of my life I was an adolescent. An adolescent, I was sixteen years old...and apparently, for my age I had achieved everything that I had set out to, right? Everything that I had desired in my heart, I had achieved. And along the way, I began to feel an emptiness. An emptiness, an dissatisfaction. I didn’t understand what was happening. I couldn’t understand why, if there weren’t any apparent motives for me feeling that way, that I would feel that.

Notably, during this time Adela's maternal grandmother converted to Christianity. It is possible, then, given the aforementioned discussion of the role that familial networks play within the conversion process, that Adela's connection to an evangelical family member played a role within her overall experience. It was not until after her grandmother converted, for example, that she first visited a church and began to equate her previous feelings of emptiness with a lack of God's presence in her life:

I started in a church, and for the first time in my life I heard about Jesus Christ. God did some very special things with her [the grandmother]. God healed her...he did many beautiful things with her life and I could see the great hand of God. I believed in God, I believed that God existed. And...in those moments I felt that what I was missing was Him. That I had felt so unsatisfied and so empty, that what my life needed was to get in the hand of God more than anything else.

Of the conversion narratives mentioned so far, Adela converted to Protestantism the latest, and the particularly bleak years of the Special Period did not seem to play nearly as much of a role within her narrative compared with others. However, she did share with them a common underlying characteristic among Cubans growing up within a scientific atheist environment: a distinct lack of belief in either a higher being or beings, a spiritual world capable of affecting the material world, or both. It is also significant that her narrative, similar to the two previous ones before her, deals explicitly with her mental and emotional state before her conversion experience. "Lack of peace," "emptiness," "feeling alone," "anxiety," "fear," and "insecurity" appeared consistently throughout interviews with Cuban informants. Such emotions, of course, cannot be confined to any one particular person or group, regardless of any particular worldview or ideology held. They do provide us with a glimpse into Cuba's overall social and psychological environment at the time. The risk, however, is to conclude or generalize

about the relationship between emotional, psychological, and physical crisis on the one hand, and religious change on the other.

In Adela's case, she was admittedly quite happy with her particular place in life, at least until she began having sudden and seemingly inexplicable feelings of emptiness and dissatisfaction. Following conversion to Pentecostalism, Adela explained that not only had she never been so happy in all her life, but she also stated that God had provided her with the wherewithal to accept and participate in the plans that He had for her, and remain happy doing so regardless of the situation. Interestingly, Adela characterized this as a type of freedom, "something slightly paradoxical," as she put it, that involved a relinquishing of the control and order she assumed she had always had.

Let us recall for a moment the narrative of our first informant Miguel, the Afro-Cuban Protestant pastor who stated that Cuban psychologists were actually recommending that individuals go to church because they "have seen that the situation is so above what a human being can do." This perceived limit to what is humanly possible within specific conditions and circumstances at first glance seems to contradict certain strains of utopian social philosophy. It was Marx (1978b:595) himself, however, who stated that men do indeed make his own history, but "they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past." Marx's (1978a:54) famous argument that religion represents both a protest against real suffering as well as "an opium of the people" is clearly relevant here.

The economic collapse in Cuba during the nineties created significant material scarcity. However, this material scarcity in of itself, while an important contributing

factor, did not singularly cause a religious revival (Alonso 2005:244). Cuban narratives suggest that the life-altering shift from “not believing in a spiritual world” to religious beliefs and practices involved new horizons and limits of the humanly possible. I argue that this is directly tied to a “crisis of utopias,” when the Revolutionary hope of creating a “New Man” ran squarely up against economic globalization and socio-economic changes in the nineties. We must examine the “Special Period” crisis as more than simply a lack of material goods; it created difficult situations of despair and hopelessness that led to human inertia rather than concrete action and moving forward within history. I argue that this is what played a crucial role within Cubans’ “turn to religion.”

### **On Bicycles, Blackouts, and *Bodegas***

The severe lack of material resources and food during the Special Period combined with Cuba’s rationing system to make for a decidedly difficult and desperate time for Cubans. Put in place in 1962 but not intended to remain permanent, the Cuban government provides each household or family a *libreta*, or ration booklet used to buy a very select amount of food at subsidized prices in a *bodega*, or specialized store for distributing rations. Although specific amounts have varied depending upon location, year, and availability, pre-Special Period levels for selected products included 5-6 lbs. of rice, 1.25-1.5 lbs. of dry legumes, 1 cup of cooking oil, and 4 ounces of coffee. The Special Period, however, saw a significant drop in available food within the bodegas, to the extent that more than 10 years after its inception, ration quota amounts have yet to return to their previous levels (Alvarez 2004). This clearly led to a desperate situation of severe hunger within the populace, and many turned to the churches for aid. Diego, from our aforementioned narrative, explained that

[The money] didn't have any value. And so people, many were desperate. Many were in anguish, and in a particular time during the Special Period, some brothers asked us for a donation...of oil, of something to eat.

With an astounding liquid monetary rate where Cubans could not use their cash holdings for consumption, it's particularly notable that members of some local churches were able to independently gather what little they had to redistribute to those who came to their doors in need. With a severe shortage in petroleum resulting in significant transportation issues, Cubans faced great difficulties in trying to get from place to place. Diego recalled that the only way to get to church—or anywhere, really—was a bicycle:

We would go to a church that was some 10, 12 km away from our church. Sometimes 15 or 20 of us would go at night on bikes to that church to give a program, to participate there, to do work there...I remember that during that time of the Special Period, many times the electricity would go out. And we had to give the services without electricity. With only some resources, with candles, things like that.

In describing how people came to church during this difficult period, Diego acknowledged that many did go to church needing, and asking for, material donations. Diego stated that when they ran out of donations, "some of the people that had gone [to church] by way of those things didn't come anymore. But others that went looking for the food had found Jesus Christ. And they remained in church." How are we to make sense of why some people would leave and others would remain, given the significant material scarcity prevalent throughout the Special Period? Cubans remained in church because their "turn to religion" provided them with new sense of hope for concrete individual and social change, which had diminished significantly during the nineties.

### **A New "Special Period?"**

When I returned to Cuba in June of 2010, I noted that conditions in Cuba had been deteriorating under the effects of yet another acute economic crisis. The crisis this time

had not been the result of a collapsing Soviet Bloc, but a conglomerate of multi-dimensional problems on both a local and a global scale that have drastically cut the amount of food and products that Cuba imports from foreign countries. Although most people are aware of the economic embargo against Cuba, many might not realize that it excludes the export of food and agricultural products from the U.S. to Cuba; some of these products include corn, wheat, soybeans, oil, and beans. The U.S. recession of 2009, coupled with two major hurricanes in 2008 that inflicted significant damage upon Cuba's agricultural production, have severely restricted both food imports as well as local production.

In 2010, "U.S. corn, wheat and soy-meal exports to Cuba were all off by at least 50% for the first two months of 2010 compared to 2009" (Cash-Strapped Cuba Cuts US Food Imports Drastically 2010). In 2009, total U.S. agricultural products to Cuba plummeted by more than 108 million, from a record high of 715 million in 2008. In addition, the U.S. recession has also limited the amount of economic remittances sent from Cuban Americans to their families—which, along with foreign tourism, has long contributed significantly to the amount of hard currency available for purchasing power in Cuba. Finally, weak global economies have contributed to a decline in tourism expenditures to Cuba. In order to encourage local production of food and resources, President Raul Castro is discouraging Cuba's dependence upon foreign imports, through an economic plan that bears a certain resemblance to the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) policies that many Latin American countries adopted throughout the 20th century.

In addition, Raul Castro announced in August of 2009 that Cuba would need to make cuts in government spending on education and health care, to save money in an economy that is increasingly strapped for cash. Some of these cuts include subsidized food programs, such as the free lunches in workplace cafeterias that the government has long provided to many of its workers. They also include cuts to the *libreta* ration book; in November of 2009, potatoes and peas were dropped from the list of rationed foods available in the local *bodegas* (Haven 2009). If Cubans want these items, they must purchase them from the government at what's known colloquially as "sobreprecio" (over the price). These critical cuts in education, health care, and other government subsidies raise important ideological questions surrounding the future of the Cuban Revolution's utopian notion of the "New Man" and the emphasis upon working for "moral" rather than "material" incentives.

As of the summer of 2010, the ramifications of this economic crisis were visible at the grassroots level. Rice, long part of Cubans' staple diet along with beans, had become increasingly scarce. Not only was there a distinct scarcity of rice within local markets that operate using the local Cuban *peso*, but if a Cuban with access to the *convertible*<sup>4</sup> wanted to purchase rice in one of the wealthier "dollar" stores generally reserved for foreigners, they would not find rice there, either. Although there has been an attempt made at local production, this has in no way offset the recent slash in imports. Although rice continues to be listed as part of the *libreta* ration system, even this has been cut due to sheer lack. A typical example is as follows: previously, a family

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<sup>4</sup> Cuba currently has two currencies: the local peso that is roughly equivalent to 25 U.S. dollars, and the *convertible* (or CUC), which is on par with the U.S. dollar. Cubans' monthly income is paid in pesos, not convertibles; generally, unless they have families abroad who can send them this money, Cubans do not have access to CUC.

of 3 would (depending upon availability in the *bodegas*) receive a monthly ration of roughly 5 pounds of rice per person per month, or 15 pounds total. Given the current shortage of rice, however, the total rationed amount has in some places been cut by 3 pounds; if Cubans want more rice, they must either make do without, or, if available, they can purchase from the state the remaining 3 extra pounds cut from the ration—but at over price (*sobreprecio*). Cubans' monthly income, however, is the equivalent of 15 to 20 dollars per month; this, combined with recent government cuts in subsidized food, is contributing to a growing crisis that some Cubans fear will lead to yet another “Special Period.”

### **The Cuban Case in the post-Soviet Context**

Although this chapter contains narratives from Cuban Protestants, it can also help us understand larger issues of religion and social change. From the Cuban case, we learned that former atheists who had once adhered to a scientific materialist view of the world “became aware of a spiritual world” during the especially harsh years of the Special Period economic crisis. This particular case study can serve as a tool of comparison with post-Soviet and communist areas such as Russia, Eastern Europe, and China. In analyzing religious revivals in post-Soviet areas, we must consider the issue of atheism as a competing factor within the changing shape of religious pluralism and revivals (Froese 2004a). I argue that the doctrine of Cuban scientific atheism functioned as an effective alternative to religion until the fall of the Soviet Bloc; there are enough notable similarities between Cuban Revolutionary socialism and religious discourses to suggest that a “transition” from atheism to “religion” was possible.

The Cuban case is important if we are to gain an understanding of how and why, for example, we are also seeing rapidly-growing religious revivals in communist and

post-Soviet areas such as China and Russia. Religion may not have disappeared, even during the most ardent campaigns of scientific atheism (Froese 2004b); it may have simply been "re-shaped" instead of eliminated (Kazmina and Filippova 2005:1056). These issues involve an analysis of how convincing atheism as an ideology truly was for individuals and groups at the grassroots level. This is a challenging assessment to make, and one that greatly depends upon specific national, political, and social contexts. Conversion narratives from formerly atheists Cubans do suggest that the "scientific materialism" promoted by the Cuban Revolutionary state was effective to the extent that individuals were able to claim that they had "grown up atheist" and were previously "unaware of a spiritual world."

However, Cuban Revolutionary ideology, with its specific focus upon radically transforming individuals and society through a moral as well as an economic framework, arguably complicates traditional definitions of atheism as uniformly "un-religious." Although appealing to a specific form of humanism and critiquing "transcendent" forms of religiosity, even Fidel Castro has underscored certain compatibilities between Cuban socialism and religion. Therefore, the "turning to religion" by formerly atheist Cubans should force us to carefully re-evaluate what we mean by "religion," as well as conversion to and from religious activity. More comparative, in-depth case studies are needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of religion and social change in a post-Soviet world.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CUBAN HOUSE CHURCH PHENOMENON

#### **On Space and Place**

Although there has been a noticeable shift lately in the field of religious studies towards the analysis “material religion,” scholars still know a great deal more about the history of theology and church-state relations than “religion as practiced, and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women” (Hall 1997:vii). This has partly been due to a methodological emphasis upon “official” theologies, practices, and organizational methods: institutional church-state relations, written documents from religious authorities, and theological suppositions from well-known figures throughout history. Another reason for our lack of understanding “lived religion” as it is practiced at the grassroots level has been a longstanding methodological distinction between “sacred” and “profane” spaces (Eliade 1957). This distinction runs deep: images of religious pilgrims pouring holy water into car engines in order to protect drivers on their journeys apparently disturbs students taking religion courses (Orsi 1997:5). Such an action represents a blurring of traditional boundaries between sacred and profane spaces, and—for some students—doesn’t qualify as “religion” at all.

This concern with boundaries and definitions has also influenced the way that “church” has been identified, both inside and outside of academia. Traditionally conceived, many religious individuals and groups attend “church” within an official building recognized as such by state and local governments, along with those participating. From a small, storefront church to a giant, converted basketball arena,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lakewood church is a non-denominational “mega church” located in the former Compaq Center in Houston, TX that was once home to the NBA’s Houston Rockets.

religious buildings—as they are traditionally conceived—are bounded by specific territorial definitions of space. They are also bounded by authoritative discourse regarding what constitutes a church building, which has obvious implications for civil matters such as a tax-exempt status. Definitions of what qualifies as a “sacred space” and what does not have vast implications beyond tax-exempt status, however. Contested locations can become “modern sites of struggle over nationality, economic empowerment, and basic civil and human rights to freedom of religion and self-determination” (Chidester and Linenthal 1995:3). Sacred sites are intimately entangled with the “profane:” economic development, tourism and advertising, property ownership, and even national identity (Chidester and Linenthal 1995:1-3). Thus, defining what counts as an official religious space or sacred site involves more than academic debate surrounding differing methodologies; there are very real implications for individuals, communities, and nations.

In Cuba, there are also specific regulations regarding what constitutes a church building. Every church must register with the Cuban government as an “association,” with a properly issued and official building permit; adding onto a church building (to provide more space for worshippers, for example) also requires a government permit. Obtaining these permits, however, can be a lengthy and laborious process that takes years to complete. The number of Cubans attending church, however, has increased dramatically in the past two decades, to the extent that churches are facing an endemic lack of space with which to hold worshippers. Partly as a pragmatic response to this situation, religious Cubans are holding services and meetings within homes. Kitchens,

living rooms, and patios, typically associated with “profane” and everyday spaces and not necessarily as “churches,” are being transformed into sacred spaces.

Through a break and isolation that separates religion from everyday life, North American society prefers its boundaries, segments, and division: church on Sunday, work outside of the home for most of the remainder of the week; clubs, prayer groups, social committees, and charitable meetings outside of the home, with “private” activities confined to the home (McDannell 1995:1999). Sharp boundaries are thus drawn between outside/inside, public/private, and sacred/profane. In contrast, homeschooling breaks down these boundaries, through an integration of “faith, morality, and knowledge to such an extent that religion becomes a total way of life, not merely a belief system” (McDannell 1995:2000).

The domestic space of the home becomes a haven of sorts, where one may “withdraw” and “have peace” from the external world with its “daily trips, with its injunctive erection of signs, its nuisances, its real or imagined fears” (Certeau et al. 1998:147). Despite this supposedly clear distinction and opposition between the outside, external world and private, interior spaces, De Certeau (Certeau et al. 1998:148) argues that the home—what he refers to as the “enclosed garden”—is not to be conflated with the space of a “forbidden city.”

If it does not want to become a synonym for a terrible house arrest, separated from the living, the private space must know how to open itself up to the flow of people coming in and out, to be the passageway for a continual circulation, where objects, people, words, and ideas cross paths; for life is also about mobility, impatience for change, and relation to a plurality of others.

The space of the Cuban home is similar in its relation to the “outside” world. On any given day in a Cuban neighborhood, friends, family, and neighbors will wander in

and out of houses. They ask for, and share with one another, goods and resources that are typically rationed or in short supply: fruit, coffee, milk, yogurt, sugar, bread, and other staple items. Occasionally a neighbor will drop by on their bicycle, and rent from their backpack recorded copies of Mexican *telenovelas* (a type of soap opera), brought via family, friends, or acquaintances from Miami. In the middle of the day, one may hear *cubatón*<sup>2</sup> blasted from open windows and doors, along with an occasional Backstreet Boys album. In short, Cubans are constantly moving in, out of, and around the house—to look for food, to socialize, and to share with one another the joys, burdens, frustrations, and nuances of daily life. They are accustomed to doing so; the “private” space of the home, in fact, is less private and far more social in day-to-day interactions.

To this we must add another element that is part and parcel of daily life in and around houses: Cuban neighborhoods are divided into “zones” or sections, and each of these zones is monitored by a local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). The job of a local CDR is twofold: 1) to ensure the development and implementation of social welfare projects, such as neighborhood dengue fever and mosquito-born illness awareness; and 2) to monitor activities within a particular block, and report those activities to larger government bodies. Notably, this includes monitoring and reporting on the internal workings of the household, principally to ensure that no one is engaging in potentially “counter-revolutionary” activities. This further

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<sup>2</sup> Cubatón (also known as *reggaeton a lo cubano*) is the Cuban version of the very popular Caribbean dance-style and urban rap music known as reggaeton. It blends Cuban percussion rhythms such as salsa, son, and timba with traditional reggaeton.

illustrates that there is rarely a hard and fixed line between public and private spaces in the context of Revolutionary Cuba.

It is within this milieu that we are to understand the growth of “house churches” in Cuba. When Protestant Cubans began using the space of the home for worship, prayer, and evangelization, they did so partly as a response to two interrelated issues: government regulations surrounding the issue of church building permits, and an endemic lack of space with which to hold worshippers within those buildings. In this sense the “house church phenomenon” in Cuba represents a pragmatic response to structural limitations: it is often very difficult to obtain church permits, and there is literally not enough space to hold the increasing number of Cubans wishing to attend church—a situation that became acute during the economic crisis of the early to mid-1990s. More than a pragmatic response to structural difficulties, however, I argue that worshipping within the space of the home represents a strategic response on the part of Cuban Protestants to form sets of practices that are specifically adapted to the Cuban context. They want, in other words, to create something *cubano*, to organize, practice, and worship in a manner that underscores Cubanness (*cubanidad*). Rather than merely importing and replicating in an unreflective manner foreign methods of Protestantism, Cuban evangelicals argue that house churches are, in fact, more appropriate for Cuba’s specific economic, social, and political context.

### **What is “Church?”**

The twenty-first century has seen the development of autochthonous Latin American churches with “little or no history of organizational relationship with a foreign denomination or mission board...[that have] sprouted from the Latin American soil itself” (Berg and Pretz 1994:61). They are fluid and mobile in their organizational structures,

spontaneous in their liturgical practice and worship, and deeply contextualized to fit within particular historical, economic, and political circumstances. Berg and Pretiz (1994:61) provide an apt description of a service within a “fifth wave” Latin American Evangelical church:

There is no missionary to remind him that the service should be over at 9 o’clock or that the message should have three points. Cats and dogs wander underfoot and the children are noisy until they fall asleep. But the heart burden of the poor is poured out with tears and shouts. The group becomes too large for the lay-pastor’s living room, so it moves out to the patio under a covering of palm branches.

This could easily be a scene describing a contemporary Cuban Protestant service. Historically, the Protestant services and practices that have “sprouted from Cuban soil” have roots within the economic crisis that occurred following the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Fidel Castro declared that Cuba had entered the so-called “Special Period” in 1990, petroleum imports from the former USSR, as well as other goods and resources, plummeted. At the local level, day-to-day getting around became increasingly onerous for Cubans: incredibly long lines for buses (known as *guaguas*) that did not run consistently, little fuel for the private vehicles that very few Cubans had access to or could afford, and dependence upon bicycles and make-shift lawn-mower motors attached to those bicycles to facilitate faster travel. By all accounts from anyone familiar with “making do” during this incredibly difficult period, Cubans were inventing all manner of creative ways to survive on a daily basis. Notably, this creativity and need for invention and ingenuity seems to have extended beyond the need to figure out a way to simply get from point “A” to point “B.” The economic crisis of the “Special Period” entered into the realm of religious practices as well.

Every Cuban church must be properly registered with the government as an official “association.” During the “Special Period,” however, central and “official” church buildings were often located at great distances from Cubans’ homes. Despite difficulties in travel and lack of transportation, however, many Cubans during the economic crisis did make the challenging trip to church. As one of my Baptist informants noted, the only real way to get to church (or anywhere) during this time was via bicycle, sometimes for 12 kilometers or more. As more and more Cubans “turned to religion” and entered church doors, particularly during the acutely harsh years from approximately 1992-1995, official church buildings increasingly began to run out of space with which to hold their members.

Cuban churches also face long waits, costly permit requirements, and lack of material resources needed for the proper government permit in order to physically add onto the building itself for more space. Partly due to the pragmatic need for more space, Cuban Protestants began holding services and meetings within *casas culto* (house churches), *casas de oración* (prayer houses). Everyday kitchens, living rooms, and outdoor patios—with make-shift benches and chairs covered with empty grain sacks—became new central locations for practice and worship from the “Special Period” on. Children would run in, out, and around private living spaces, often participating themselves in services; hosts and hostesses clinked dishes together in the kitchen as they tried to prepare what little coffee they had for their participating guests; and one would hear the phrase “¡se fue la luz!” (the lights went out!), referring to the frequent

“blackouts” Cubans faced during the Special Period due to acute oil and energy shortages.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, under new laws put in place since 2005 under Directive 43 and Resolution 46, all house churches (*casas culto*) must register with government officials in order to receive the proper permit to operate. In addition, no two house churches of the same denomination may be located within 2km of each other. Even with the proper legal permit, house church services are subject to monitoring and supervision by government authorities (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2009). From the perspective of the Cuban government, officials have been concerned about the monitoring of contact between Cubans and foreigners in general, and between Cubans and those from the United States in particular. This skepticism and concern can be traced historically to both the long-standing tenuous relationship between Cuba and the U.S., as well as the Cuban Revolution’s use of anti-imperialist language and discourse.

In addition, the Cuban government has viewed the rapid expansion of some Protestant house churches with suspicion. This suspicion is partly due to a move on the part of the United States government, which has recommended “expanding international and other sources of support for civil society in Cuba through greater use of willing third-country organizations and greater outreach to religious and faith-based groups” (Report to the President: Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba 2004). Notably, it is also due to a perception within some parts of the Cuban government and intelligentsia that Protestant house churches and “informal” practices are promoting a certain type of

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<sup>3</sup> Although reportedly not as dire as during the “Special Period” crisis, Cuba has recently been facing “critical” energy shortages according to government officials. According to the Cuban Council of Ministers, if immediate austerity measures are not put into place, the Cuban people could face planned blackouts similar to those during the “Special Period.” See Frank (2009).

religiosity that runs counter to the Revolutionary system and view of the self in relation to society. Some have argued, for example, that house churches and cell groups are “circulating literature that promotes the preaching of an evasive religiosity, with messages directed towards people to elevate individuality” (Berges Curbelo et al. 2006:208-10).

This chapter argues, however, that Cuban house church practices involve more than simply a concern for individual piety and salvation, and an eschatological hope in a pleasant afterlife. There is also an explicit emphasis on providing for the spiritual as well as the material welfare of fellow Cubans at the community and national level, in the here and now. Religious meetings and prayer services held within private homes do not represent, in of themselves, an inherently new phenomenon; as we will see below, we can identify similar movements in the context of Communist China. Cuban house churches do, however, represent a three-fold response to a set of unique and inter-related circumstances: 1) the historical relationship between the United States and Cuba, which directly influenced the Cuban Revolution; 2) the 1959 Revolution itself, which placed the collective transformation and material welfare of the Cuban populace at the forefront; and 3) the aftermath of the Cuban “Special Period” that forced Cuban Protestant churches to strategically move their focus from centralized church structures to the space of the home.

More than simply a pragmatic response, however, Cuban Protestant leaders and lay individuals alike maintain that house churches are more appropriately suited to meet the specific material and spiritual needs of Cubans at the local level. House church worship and practice is also, notably, opening up spaces for alternative narratives

regarding what exactly constitutes a church, and the models for a church. Whereas Cuban Protestants had previously incorporated foreign (and U.S.) models of worship and practice into their services, they are beginning to question the usefulness and appropriateness of those models for the Cuban context. This Cuban context involves a) specific definitions from the Cuban government regarding what constitutes an officially sanctioned and licensed church (“religious association”); and b) critical lack of space in these official churches, due to increasing numbers of worshippers and participants since the “Special Period.”

Cuban leaders and participants are developing a “Cuban model” for house church expansion and organization, one that is adapted to local material and spiritual needs in light of the Cuban government’s specific regulations on church buildings. Thus, the house church phenomenon<sup>4</sup> in Cuba can be seen as both a strategic and a creative response to Cuba’s specific historical, economic, and cultural situations at the local, national, and international levels. At the very local level, house churches are directly responding to Cubans’ material and spiritual needs, particularly since the “Special Period” economic crisis; at the level of the state and nation, they are addressing Cubans’ needs in light of specific government restrictions and regulations on church buildings, and in a revolutionary environment that stresses the importance of the collective and the Cuban community; and lastly, at the global and international level, Cuban house churches are questioning the use of foreign (and specifically U.S.) models and practices that are divorced from the aforementioned Cuban context.

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<sup>4</sup> I prefer to use the term “phenomenon” rather than “movement.” The term “movement” can imply that house churches as a whole represent a type of cohesively organized social movement with a specific agenda or force behind their organization. The empirical evidence suggests, however, that their nature is much more diffuse and fluid. See below for Hunter and Chan’s (1993) analysis of house churches in China, who take a similar analytical approach.

## The “Numbers” Question and Terminology

The closest parallel that we can draw between house churches and prayer meetings in Cuba with other similar organizational methods is probably with Protestantism in contemporary China. Hunter and Chan (1993) have analyzed the rapid growth of Protestantism in China since the 1980s, particularly the growth in home-based worship and meetings. The strength of their work lies not only in their analysis of Chinese house church growth and expansion, but the relationship of this growth to Chinese traditional religiosity, society, and politics. Of particular note is their discussion on indigenous Christian movements, made up of independent churches seeking to separate themselves from Western and foreign influence and control. Common even within the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of these independent churches coincided with the Chinese “Three Self Patriotic Movement.” (TSPM)<sup>5</sup> The aims of “Three Self” Movement were explicit: “Under the leadership of the government to oppose imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism...to purge imperialistic influence from within Christianity itself; and be vigilant against imperialism, especially American imperialism, in its plot to use religion in fostering the growth of reactionary forces” (Hunter and Chan 1993:23).

The Chinese house church movement, which really took off in the 1980s from a variety of a socio-economic, political, and cultural factors, remains largely outside of official government structures like the Chinese Council of Churches and the TSPM. Similar to the fluid, informal, and flexible nature of Cuban home-based worship and

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<sup>5</sup> A term first proposed by Anglican clergyman Thomas Venn and later adopted by a Cantonese Christian, this movement involves three main principles: the development of Chinese churches that are “self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.” The movement also explicitly sought to remove foreign influence from Chinese churches, affiliate itself with the People’s Republic of China, and ensure ideological continuity between religious practice and the ideals of the Cultural Revolution.

practice, the Chinese house church phenomenon has generated a considerable amount of confusion regarding reliable sources for even preliminary (and sometimes questionable) estimates for the number of house churches, some of which range anywhere from 50-100 million (Hunter and Chan 1993:4). Hunter and Chan's (1993:64) description of Chinese house churches sheds light on the challenges of researching this phenomenon:

The house church movement, which operates outside these [official government] structures, has generated considerable emotion. Some groups abroad have given a rather romantic gloss to the situation, while TSPM sources tend to claim that the movement barely exists and that insignificant groups of isolated eccentrics meet outside its own purview. It is difficult to describe these meetings in terms of institutions. They are diffuse, spread through cities but more particularly through the countryside. Temporary local leadership structures and informal networks seem to rise, fall and be replaced. They are subject to somewhat erratic outbursts of persecution from the security apparatus and try to keep a low profile, although in most places they are not underground.

Since the “Special Period,” Cuba has seen similar significant growth in the number of Protestant and Evangelical “house church” (*casas culto*) services. Pinpointing an exact number of these services, however, has become increasingly difficult due to their fluid and mobile organizational structure, their qualitative similarities with other types of meetings and religious small groups, and the difficulties that churches have had in obtaining the proper permits required from the Cuban government in order to be considered an official “house church.” The 2009 International Religious Freedom Report from the U.S. Department of State notes that the Cuban government has officially registered some 1,640 house churches, with the status of some 3,000 still pending at the end of the reporting period (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2009).

Source documents from the Western Baptist Convention, which includes the major cities of Havana, Matanzas, and Piñar del Río on the western side of the island, indicate an increase in the number of house churches (*casas culto*) and prayer meetings (*casas de oración*) from 278 in 1994 to 1,192 in 2006 (González Muñoz 2007:212). Notably, these same documents note the importance of defining “membership” within central Baptist churches (as opposed to house churches or prayer meetings), which some have defined as including only those “baptized members after a confession of faith, and doesn’t take into account the attendance of children, those not baptized, or sympathizers and frequent visitors” (González Muñoz 2007:212). In analyzing the expansion of Cuban Protestant house meetings and the numbers of those attending, we are thus faced with the dilemma of what counts—and does not count—as membership within those spaces.

Within my own fieldwork in a semi-rural town near Havana, I experienced first-hand the difficulties in conceptually and practically distinguishing between the terms *casa culto* and *casa de oración*. The town in which I conducted participant observation in yearly trips to Cuba from 2005-2010 has five main Baptist churches; beyond those main, central church buildings, there are numerous church services held within Cubans' homes. These are notably often led by lay leaders, rather than officially trained seminary pastors. It eventually became clear to me, through frequent discussions with both official and lay Baptist leaders, that the majority of the services I had been attending were technically referred to as prayer meetings (*casas de oración*) held within homes that are still affiliated with a larger official Baptist church. Within the same town that I conducted research, the number of prayer meetings affiliated with one Baptist

church alone had increased from 8 in 2006 to 30 in 2009. I asked a participant within a *casa de oración* to define what distinguishes this prayer meeting from an actual house church, or *casa culto*.

The house church (*casa culto*) wants in the future to be a church, and we don't. We want to help people to know the Lord, but without thinking that this place could be a church in the future—you know? It's a little difficult...because, for example, if one is 2 kilometers from a church, the State tells you that you don't need a house church, because a person can go to the [regular] church, they don't need to go to another place.

As noted previously, however, the regular and centralized churches are facing an endemic lack of space with which to hold participants. They also face a similar reality of an increasing population density, where there can be multiple congregations within a 2 kilometer radius of any Cuban house (González García 2008:12). Thus, partly out of necessity, Cuban Protestants have had to shift their focus of concentration away from central, institutional church buildings (that can no longer keep up with growth) to what a Baptist leader refers to as "the church of the locality" (González García 2008:15): self-reproducing, dynamic spaces within Cubans' homes that, in one *casa de oración* lay leader's words, "brings the church to the people, instead of bringing people to church."<sup>6</sup> Notably, Cuban Baptists have also explained that *casas culto*, which are operating under the intention of later becoming an "official" church, must obtain the proper permit from Cuban authorities in order to be considered a legal association. *Casas de oración*, or "prayer houses," however, do not technically need this permit.

In the 2005 report from the President to the National Assembly of Western Baptists, González Muñoz (2005) had a very interesting discussion surrounding

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, July 2006

"Concerns regarding the new house church regulations," which is worth quoting at length:

Many brothers have expressed worry about the new House Church regulations. We have spoken of this with the authorities, and they tell us that they are not in charge of closing or impeding meetings, but to legalize their presence and put everything in order, and they insist that when a permit is denied, one can investigate or look for a solution, or a new house. Personally, I feel that according to the characteristics of our mission, the great majority of our so-called "House Churches" are really "Prayer Houses," where we meet informally, occasionally, or once a week and haven't exactly agreed on the solution in question.

Even so, I have informed pastors and the provincial representatives, that they should present a permit request for the houses that do fulfill all of the conditions that require a resolution in order to receive the corresponding authorization entitled "Vivienda de propiedad personal autorizada para servicios religiosos" (Personal dwelling authorized for religious services). As far as I know, if they have officially closed one of our House Churches, I'd consider it to be more of an exception than a generalization, and our houses are functioning without being bothered.

A typical prayer meeting (*casa de oración*) meets within the home of a Cuban who is usually a member of, or at least affiliated with, a larger official and centralized church structure. Typically held once or twice a week, these localized meetings draw anywhere from half a dozen to 30 participants, both male and female, with a broad cross-section of ages ranging from small children to the elderly. Some *casas de oración* services are specifically geared towards a particular age group like the elderly. When asked about the nature of one of these prayer meetings, a lay participant who has hosted them in her home explained that "in [this] *casa de oración* the elderly come together to pray for one another, carry each other's burdens, and help one another in the neighborhood."<sup>7</sup>

This explicit push towards direct involvement within local Cuban communities indicates a certain shift within the Protestant vision in Cuba, one that a) places an

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication, July 2006

emphasis beyond just personal and individual salvation, without ignoring this central theological tenet and b) reflects a desire on the part of Cuban Protestants to create their own, autochthonous models of evangelization and practice that are directly tied to Cuban (as opposed to foreign) social, political, and economic realities. These shifting emphases also illustrate a larger trend within Cuban religious groups, who are both gaining popular support and an increasingly public character through a “religiously affiliated community activism” (Hearn 2008:136-137).

### **A Typical *Casa de Oración* Prayer Meeting**

It is a muggy October evening in Cuba, but thankfully not quite as oppressively hot as it is during July and August. A group of about 12 adults, not including myself and two or three children, gather outside on a patio for the weekly house prayer meeting affiliated with one of the larger Baptist churches in town. The participants are mostly middle-aged women, but there are also several men present as well. There are a few chairs available, but not quite enough for everyone. At a few minutes past eight o'clock, the Cubans who live in the home we are visiting, along with a few others, scramble to locate extra iron chairs in and around the patio area. There are no cushions available to sit on, but they have creatively managed to cover the iron chairs with sack material gathered from bags next to the house. I recognize Russian letters on the sacks, and I surmised by their size that they were probably cement sacks. Before the prayer meeting begins, there is chatting between those arriving, mostly about the power and water outages of the afternoon in some parts of the neighborhood.

One of the members of the larger Baptist church eventually gathers everyone together and invites them to sit in a circle. He is a lay leader—not officially trained in seminary, although he has expressed interest in the “filiales del seminário:” extensions

of the local Seminary that allow Cubans to take courses via correspondence (I have been told that this is particularly useful given the difficulties in transportation that people face). The lay leader (I will refer to him as Fernando) begins the prayer meeting service through a prayer of thanksgiving for those present, as well as an appeal to God to watch over those who could not attend. Following the prayer, he asks if anyone has any specific requests or problems to be prayed for. Several women raise their hands: the first requests that the group pray for her health, as she has been suffering lately from a generalized anxiety condition that I have heard Cubans refer to simply as “los nervios” (the nerves). Fernando, who is taking notes, writes down the request (and all others thereafter). Another woman raises her hand: she asks the group to pray for her son, who is in the hospital after a traffic accident. There are numerous other requests, mainly for healing from physical ailments, mental anxieties, and depression. A final prayer request is made for this particular prayer meeting, as well as others within the local community: that the Lord would bless all those present, guide their leaders, and multiply their numbers. Fernando asks for volunteers within the group to pray for each of the separate prayer requests made within the group.

Following ten to twenty minutes of prayer, Fernando gives what in a larger church might be considered a “sermon,” although in this prayer meeting context Cubans refer to it as Bible readings. On the whole, Cubans in this town have some difficulties gaining access to printed Bibles, although the larger Baptist church has a few, small copies available that we are encouraged to share. For today’s prayer meeting, Fernando discusses the topic of fear: the common fears we all face, the Bible verses that specifically address fear, and how to overcome it. Fernando provides seven reasons

that people should have no fear: 1) We shouldn't fear idols, or “false gods” (1 Corinthians 8:3-6); 2) We shouldn't fear trials and tribulations (James 1: 2-4); 3) We shouldn't fear those that oppose the work of God (Deuteronomy 1:28-31); 4) We shouldn't fear death (Philippians 1:23); 5) We shouldn't fear being abandoned or losing the love of God (Romans 8:37-39); 6) We shouldn't fear our own weaknesses, for God is our advocate (Romans 8:25-27); and 7) We shouldn't fear our future (Philippians 4:19-20 and Matthew 28:20).

When Fernando opened up the Bible study for discussion, it was this last and final point that seemed to strike people most deeply: Will the economy improve? Will there be food in the *bodegas* the next month? How will I get the needed insulin for my diabetes? Will there be more power outages? During the remainder of the service, Fernando invited participants to personally reflect upon the Bible verses he mentioned, and how each of these verses relates to their own individual experiences. Nearly everyone was quite candid with their own personal worries and circumstances, which corroborates the analysis of a Baptist informant when asked to explain the increasing popularity of house meetings and small prayer groups:

The *casa de oración* (“prayer house”) allows for those that are a little timid, who have difficulty speaking because they feel that they don’t know...the *casas de oración* allow for that. Because everybody knows everybody else, the group is really small. When you ask someone to pray, sometimes they say “No,” but anyway...after a little while, they make the effort and do it...and they gradually lose the fear. And so this allows people to get to know each other much more.

### **The Popularity and Expansion of Cuban Protestant House Meetings**

Participation within Protestant house meetings and small groups clearly offers certain benefits: a sense of solidarity and community with other Cubans in the same neighborhood, renewed feelings of purpose and self-worth, and knowing that one is

cared for, looked after, prayed for by fellow Cubans. There are also, however, certain costs in participating. As mentioned previously, Cubans do not technically need government permits to hold prayer meetings within homes (as opposed to actual house churches, which do need the proper permit). However, at the level of everyday practice, state authorities have monitored prayer meetings within some Cubans' homes, mostly in order to a) monitor contact between Cubans and foreigners; b) ensure that house meetings are not contributing to what's generally referred to as "disturbing the peace," and c) making certain that there are not "too many people" gathering together at any one time.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the transportation situation in Cuba continues to be difficult, and most Cubans get from point "A" to point "B" by walking, by bicycle, or—in many cases—by hitchhiking after waiting in long lines on the side of the road. Cuban Protestant and Evangelical practice often involves making community and neighborhood visits, frequently on foot. Lay leaders and fellow members of both central church buildings as well as *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* invite local members of the community to participate in prayer groups and services held in homes. This is commonly referred to as "bringing the Church to the people," or what one Baptist pastor called "bringing the Church to the base."

In an interesting parallel development, the rapid growth of Protestantism in Central America has been partly due to the presence of small-group "base communities" (Cook 1994:150). These Protestant "base ecclesial communities," similar to the Catholic base

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<sup>8</sup> Participants and leaders have noted that generally, one can have 12 participants in a casa de oración service without any problem. Any more, however, could potentially attract suspicion or concern from the State as to why Cubans are meeting in homes rather than in "regular" churches. Repeatedly, however, Cuban Protestants have insisted that their aim within prayer meetings is to simply "enable and pray for one another," and not to form separate churches as such.

communities throughout Latin America, have developed within the context of endemic violence and socioeconomic crisis. This endemic violence is not the only factor that has drawn together Central Americans into Catholic and Protestant base communities; it is “also hope that brings them together. A hope so great, that a Protestant layman testified that “for the first time we can feel it profoundly. This people which...had been silent and bent over...[have] overcome this situation to rise up proudly amidst the pain, with hope” (Cook 1994:153).

Cuba, unlike Central America during the 1970s and 1980s, did not suffer from the widespread violence that decimated entire villages of mainly indigenous communities. However, throughout Latin America “Protestant growth in a context of socioeconomic crisis has increased the possibilities for awareness of the need for social change” (Cook 1994:152). Similar to other parts of Latin America, Cuba’s growing Protestant churches have “found it necessary to subdivide into small groups for nurturing and mutual support” (Cook 1994:153). In El Salvador, for example, a large Baptist church had been working for several years with solidarity groups (*grupos de solidaridad*): rural, non-denominational cooperatives that also served as Bible reflection groups (Cook 1994:154). These *grupos de solidaridad* bear a notable resemblance to Cuba’s *casas de oración*: small groups of Cuban Protestants who meet together within the space of the home to pray for one another, extend networks of mutual support and solidarity during an economic crisis, and, as one Cuban lay leader put it, “bring the church to the community.”

This notion of “bringing the Church to the community” came up consistently during interviews with Cuban Baptists who are forming and participating in church and prayer

meetings held within their homes. In analyzing why *casas de oración* have increased in numbers and the nature of their appeal to everyday Cubans, both leaders and participants have consistently explained that house meetings provide intimate, comfortable, and familiar spaces for Cubans to come together. One Cuban Baptist who has led several *casas de oración* meetings explained that given the “many problems” they face on a daily basis, Cubans are in need of “affective intimate relationships.” A leader of a local Pentecostal church (that initially began as a *casa culto*) analyzes this idea further, and is worth quoting at length:

They take this strategy of a house from a person who [has] agreed to it, so essentially they begin worship in that house, but there is like a hunger—that is what’s promoting the house churches that they are making. And for example: it begins with a small house with 12 people—practically the size of the family. And we begin there...there’s a hunger; a hunger for the Word of God, for God...it’s not normal—something that’s not normal...perhaps because of the tribulations that happen to people...perhaps because of the same poverty, the same necessity...all of these series of things cause people to hope for something. I came to that, perhaps I accepted because of a certain hunger.

And people go to the house churches a lot looking for help from somewhere. Looking perhaps for a solution to a problem that they have, looking perhaps for some advice. Many times as spiritual retreat...I don’t know, perhaps the environment of the person who’s house the house church [is in] provides some sort of psychological support...sometimes for psychiatric support...because in reality there isn’t any. What they call spiritual support, perhaps God uses that. So that people come close to Him, see Him as help from something.

So, there they begin to grow. They begin to grow...people have better access—churches up [where you are] are gigantic—an access that’s around the corner. It’s within the community, it’s within the most intimate space that you can call it. The house church is of the most friendly kind. A person can go sometimes in sandals, sometimes simple, in simple clothing, and it’s perhaps more comfortable than a far-away church. So they go there, and they receive that advice...there they receive that pact with God. And that is how house churches begin to grow.

This notion that a type of “hunger” is directly contributing to the growth of religious house meetings has been discussed and analyzed not only by religious participants themselves, but by prominent Cuban sociologists who seek to understand the concrete conditions within contemporary Cuban society that have helped contribute to religious revivals and change. Religious groups in Cuba are not only deeply connected to Cubans’ everyday social lives, but they also offer alternative systems and symbols of meaning:

There is evident a particular necessity for religious life within the population, and within that [life] the religious option presents attractions that legitimize their utility. One observes changes in symbolic orientations towards the social, such as a religious product in the sense of going above individual and family environments. Religiosity penetrates the quotidian, but also [offers] projections for the future, expectations, strategies, and even lifestyles. It offers models for conduct and relations...in conclusion, the relevant data on the religious awakening consists of a greater influence in contemporary Cuban society. It's included, possibly, in the reproduction of concrete society (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:62).

The aforementioned Pentecostal church leader also notes how Cubans are attracted to the “intimate” space of religious meetings and services. He makes an interesting contrast between house churches in Cuba and some of the large, “mega churches” within the United States, and suggests that smaller house meetings provide more “direct access” within local communities. His analysis echoes that of three Baptist *casa de oración* “lay” leaders and participants who, while not having any formal seminary training, are either holding house meetings within their own homes, or are traveling around local neighborhoods to services in the homes of other participating Cubans. A Baptist man in his 40s who leads *casas de oración* also believes, similar to the Pentecostal pastor, that the smaller space of a house meeting is more conducive to “learning more about the Word of God...because when there are big churches, you can’t

really reach the people.” He went on to explain that having eight to ten people in a house service is ideal because it allows participants to “feel more like family.” This emphasis on the “family-like” structure of *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* becomes even clearer within another explanation by a Baptist *casa de oración* participant:

The prayer house is like a mission of the Church, a way to bring the church to the neighborhood, to the community: it’s much smaller, more intimate. So, when we give a service (“*culto*”) and even when I leave and invite the neighbors, the work that the brothers do in the *casa de oración* is fundamental, because they know how to reach each house around them—the closest ones—and invite people and motivate them through the problems that they really have.

This participant went on to explain that outside of the context of meetings within homes, one might not be aware of—or even really know at all—one’s neighbors, or be cognizant of their needs for solutions to daily problems. A *casa de oración* leader, however, is very aware of them. The *casa de oración*, they argue, is “something alive. It’s not simply a service for—let’s say—simply taking up space, but it is really something alive. It’s something where you have to interrelate with people.”

One Baptist woman, in her early to mid-40s, holds regular *casa de oración* services in her home, specifically for elderly Cubans in the neighborhood. She emphasized the “close communication” between her *casa de oración*, the central Baptist church through which it operates, and the local elderly members of the community that surround her home. When discussing the intimate nature of house meetings, she explains “because [the *casa de oración*] is of the community, neighbors unite together more (“se solidariza más”), and that helps them to grow.” There is also an explicit emphasis within Protestant house church and prayer meetings on providing for the material as well as the spiritual needs of those within the surrounding community. Elderly Cubans who are ill and needing assistance, for example, will turn to

fellow participants within prayer meetings in order to simultaneously seek concrete solutions to their health problems, and have others in the neighborhood pray for their well-being.

This emphasis on religious social welfare programs and greater social engagement by Protestant groups has grown since the “Special Period” economic crisis of the early to mid-1990s. Some scholars maintain that one can draw a link between free gifts and material goods offered in post-1990 Cuba, and growing participation within church activities (Hearn 2008:144). This social engagement indicates a response by the churches to “powerful psychological needs in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse” (Hearn 2008:144). Increased social engagement and the development of religious social welfare programs has also, however, become an important focal point for the Cuban state. The economic crisis of the 1990s forced the Cuban government to engage more openly with “independent community initiatives, from neighborhood gardening schemes and dance troupes to religious mutual aid and welfare projects” (Hearn 2008:5). With plummeting imports, rising inflation, and a critical lack of hard currency to pay for goods and resources, the Cuban state began—out of sheer necessity—to rely more heavily upon social welfare resources that traditionally have fallen outside of the purview of institutional state control. Religious groups and associations have therefore become focal points of interest to the Cuban Revolutionary state, at both an ideological as well as an economic level.

Scholars appear to be debating, however, the larger social and economic impact of more “informal” home worship practices. Hearn (2008:116) argues that “despite the success of Christian community outreach programs, Cuban religious life remains

characterized by a high incidence of home worship and informal practice.” In addition, it remains unclear how strongly participants within “church affiliated” activities actually self-identify as loyal members of the larger Christian establishment (Hearn 2008:146).

The Cuban sociologist Ramírez Calzadilla (2000:63) distinguishes between three different types or “levels” of religious participation and organization: 1) “spontaneous” participation; 2) “semi-structured” worship of miraculous figures and sacred objects; and 3) official, organized institutional worship, with corresponding beliefs. Ramírez Calzadilla and Pérez Cruz (1997:12-13) argue that that spontaneous practices are “generally unsystematic, independent from religious groups and institutions, marked by a strong mythical-magical-superstitious component, and a lack or absence of liturgical and doctrinal development.”

With respect to Protestantism in Cuba, Ramírez Calzadilla (2006:62) distinguishes between several different types: the first type, which he calls “Traditional,” refers to the historical Protestant churches that have been tied to foreign missionaries. The second type, “Renovada o Intermedia” (Renewed or Intermediary), describes Protestant churches and groups that seek links with Cuban national culture, the advancement of social positions, and the planting of service projects. The third type of Protestantism, under the label “Charismatic,” seems to fall under Ramírez Calzadilla’s (1997) category of religious practices that have a strong “spontaneous” component. There is a tendency within the Cuban academic literature to characterize certain strains of Cuban Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity as “evasive,” or focusing more upon the “hereafter” rather than the “here and now.” Nevertheless, “even though there are primarily evasive positions, these are not characteristic of all [Protestant] leaders.

There've also produced schematic ruptures, contextualization of beliefs, and projection towards transformative social action and belief" (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:64).

Distinguishing between different types of participation and organization can be helpful for understanding the ways the more informal practices are separate from larger, official institutions and structures. At the "micro" and local level, however, I argue that it runs the risk of missing the ways that "informal" and "spontaneous" practices, particularly within the context of private home worship, can contribute to larger social change and influence within the surrounding community. It can also gloss over understanding important linkages between individual symbols, ideas, and practices on the one hand, and larger institutional structures of material and symbolic power on the other. It is important to analyze these linkages, along with the ways in which religious symbols, norms, and ideas exert a social influence through practice in everyday life (Levine 1992:320). At issue here is the power of religious ideas, that are at once individual and collective, to not simply reflect reality. They are a "template for [reality]; a paradigm, not a mirror" (Levine 1992:319, 323).

In her work on progressive Catholic base communities in El Salvador, for example, Peterson (2001:29) found that active participation within small Bible study groups enabled participants to move beyond the daily practices of the domestic space and into the collective sphere. Through directly relating Bible study and discussion to their daily lives, participants—and women, in particular—were able to share their problems, analyze possible solutions, and participate in larger community projects to improve conditions not just for their own lives, but for the lives of their families, neighbors, and perhaps even their country. Although at first glance Evangelicalism and liberation

theology seem to be operating on completely different planes, they actually run a “strangely parallel” course to one another (Lancaster 1988:113). Liberation theology has been explicit in an emphasis on community and its push for social and economic justice for the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed within society; in this sense, it can be overtly political. Often viewed in contrast to this, Protestantism and Evangelicalism have a theological emphasis upon a personal and individual salvation with God, in combination with a strong emphasis on personal accountability with both God and one’s church community.

On the surface, the differences between progressive Catholicism and Protestantism suggest a dichotomy that places one in the context of overt radical social change (liberation theology), and the other as inherently apolitical and “otherworldly” in its emphasis (Evangelical Protestantism). However, Evangelical Protestantism’s emphasis on the individual—who, according to the theological concept of the “priesthood of all believers,” has the ability to interpret the Bible without the need of an intermediary between themselves and God—does not necessarily represent a “religion of individualism” (Lancaster 1988:111). This is the way that some of the academic literature has characterized Cuban Protestant and Evangelical home-based worship: that it promotes a religion of individualism over and above the Cuban collective. I argue below that this is not the case.

Similar to the way progressive Catholic base communities are organized, Evangelical Protestant practice does three central things: 1) it simplifies the core belief; 2) it centralizes spiritual authority around the Godhead; and 3) it decentralizes the church’s political authority and bureaucratic organization—which can sometimes lead to

a confusing number of informal “sects” and small groups (Lancaster 1988:113). Religious practices that are more “informal” in nature are often flexible, mobile, and more closely tied to grassroots mobilization efforts rather than larger “official” hierarchical structures and institutions. Without sustained observation over time, in-depth participant-observation, and qualitative interviews, however, it is indeed a challenge to evaluate the larger social and/or political impact of such grassroots religious practices.

The Catholic *comunidades de base* (base communities) found through Latin America are “small, religiously focused groups of friends and relatives” (Levine 1992:12-13). In terms of analyzing the potential for larger social change, however, we should not assume, *a priori*, that these groups are “necessary cores of change.” Rather, we should focus instead on analyzing the conditions under which such change can happen within these contexts. Similarly, I would suggest that we should not assume, *a priori*, that more “informal,” home-based worship and practice among Cuban Protestants have less of a potential for larger social change within Cuban society than “semi-structured” or “officially” organized institutional worship (or, conversely, that it inherently possesses any one type of potential over another).

As the aforementioned qualitative interviews with both lay leaders and participants have shown, Cuban Protestants who organize and participate within local *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* do consider themselves to be part of a larger community of Christians, and are directly concerned with providing for the moral as well as the material needs of fellow Cubans in their communities. Precisely what sort of long-term impact (social, economic, political) these small house-based practices might have

remains to be seen; in other words, it might not be fruitful to begin with assumptions about the “inherent” qualities that any one group or sets of practices has in terms of their potential for larger social change (Levine 1992).

We might, in fact, “be missing the mark if we simply ask whether evangelical groups can become a political force or whether they can directly influence elite actors and state institutions” (Smilde 2007b:104). Larger social impacts might be better captured if we examine the ways that bits and pieces of dominant and “official” discourses of meaning and practice are reformed and reconstructed through alternative rationalities and narratives (Smilde 2007b:104). I argue that Cuban Protestants are, as Levine (1992:16) described in his analysis of CEB’s, using “meaningful vocabularies of moral concern” in order to directly connect the supernatural to Cuba’s own particular historical, social, and economic circumstances. Cuban *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* arguably fall within Calzadilla’s (2006) “Renewed or Intermediary” form of Protestantism; although some may be affiliated with larger “official” Protestant churches that have historical ties to foreign missionaries and denominations, in practice they are seeking to link themselves with Cuban cultural traditions and practices.

### **The Cuban Model for Protestant Evangelization and Practice**

Some Cuban academic literature analyzing today’s religious scene recognizes the autonomy of some new church groups, but nonetheless remains critical of their historical missionary connections with the United States. Arguing that the “footprint” of North American missionary work still remains strong within Cuban Protestant churches, some authors maintain that house churches and small groups are circulating illegal religious literature and promoting a type of religiosity that elevates the individual over the collective (Berges Curbelo et al. 2006:210). It is true that the imprint of past

missionary work and influence has not completely disappeared from contemporary Cuban Protestant worship and practice. In some Cuban Baptist services, for example, one may hear Spanish-language versions of contemporary “praise music” often heard within North American evangelical services. However, there is evidence that Cubans themselves are viewing new Protestant movements and practices as an opportunity to create something adapted to Cuba’s own particular context.

This “teología cubana” (Cuban theology), so to speak, places an emphasis not simply on a personalized, individual salvation, but on “helping and loving one’s [Cuban] neighbor as one’s self.” This emphasis on the collective reflects, I would suggest, simultaneous influence from Christian theologies as well as socialist discourses on the importance of community involvement and collective solidarity. When participants and leaders of *casas de oración*, for example, characterize them as being a part of the community and encouraging Cubans to unite together more (“se solidariza más”), their vernacular language bears the imprint of being embedded within the Cuban Revolutionary context, even if house church practices in of themselves do not appear to be explicitly political. In addition, Cuban Protestants are indicating that “there needs to be a “change in mentality” (*cambio de mentalidad*) within Cuban Protestantism, and “a change in the way of approaching things and looking at the world.”<sup>9</sup> Through *casas culto* and *casas de oración*, Protestant social welfare and community programs, and the use of Cuban musical styles and genres within worship services, Cubans—and notably Western Baptists in particular—are purposely moving Protestantism in a direction away

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<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with house church leader, March 2009

from foreign influence and towards Cuba's own particular social contexts and contemporary realities.

In a number of ways, this is similar to the inculturation theology among indigenous Mayans, who have taken dominant discourses of colonialism and imperialism within European Christianity and re-interpreted them according to a "Mayanized theology" (Garrard-Burnett 2004). It has long been common place for a local group, nation, or culture to take external and foreign world views and mold and adapt them to local circumstances (at times rendering the "original" product quite heterodox). With respect to local interpretations of Christianity and the Bible, it is fair to say that "there has never been an interpretation that has had no reference to, or dependence on, the particular cultural codes, thought-patterns or social location of the interpreter" (Sugirtharajah 2001:191). If anything, this process is especially so for Cuba, a Revolutionary state long critical of external hegemony and imperialist influence. For both Protestant leaders as well as everyday lay participants, the push to take a "foreign" and "imported" religious system and "make it their own" is deeply tied to a perceived need to understand Cuba's distinctive historical circumstances, and directly relate a larger Christian narrative to local Cuban language, metaphors, and practice.

The Cuban "Special Period" economic crisis, as noted within Cuban academia and outside of it, clearly set into motion a number of changes and necessities by everyday Cubans in order to survive and "make do" with what little they had. State permit requirements, combined with sheer lack of space to hold growing numbers of church-goers, forced Cuban "religious associations" to re-think their modus operandi. It led to a shift in focus away from centralized church buildings and structures, to home-worship

and prayer meetings: *casas culto* and *casas de oración*. González Muñoz (2007:187), head of the Western Baptist Convention from 2002-2007, states that (at the time of publication), half of the total number of churches that the Western Baptist Convention has officially organized meets within homes. He explains that

The phenomena of house churches in Cuba...originated in a spontaneous manner during a specific moment [in time]. It was intended to be a critical solution during a time in which the transportation difficulties prevented [Christian] *hermanos* from attending the churches. A circumstantial response to the need for worship and fraternal communion among believers, they rapidly became the impulse vehicle for change (González Muñoz 2007:186).

What may have started out as a pragmatic need for more space has expanded, according to both leaders and lay participants alike, to include a much broader vision for the way Cuban Protestantism should be: deeply connected to Cuba's current realities, separate and different from previously imported foreign structures and methods, and directly tied to local communities. González García (2008:5) of the Western Baptist Convention has also argued for an explicit change in methods within Cuban Protestantism: "In recent years we have used models that brothers from other latitudes have utilized to elaborate and implement within their own contexts, and then have shared [with others]. It is time that, under the direction and vision of God, we design our own model." This "Cuban Model" combines the official institutional structure of the "Historical Church" with "Iglesias Caseras," or what he refers to as the "churches of the locality."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> By "Historical Church," González García (2008) does not necessarily refer to what scholars commonly call "Historical" or "Mainline" Protestant denominations, such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists (although it could theoretically include these). By the term "historical," he is referring to Cuba's main Protestant churches that the Cuban state, for example, would consider to be official and central church buildings. The term "Iglesias Caseras" refers to the services and practices held within Cuban homes, such as the *casas culto*. I would include *casas de oración* (prayer meetings) within this term as well.

Interestingly, González García (2008:15) utilizes the vernacular nomenclature of the Cuban public health system in order to describe these two different, yet complementary, types of church structures: the network of house churches and prayer meetings would be akin to family *consoltários* (consultations), while the central, “Historical Churches” would be like the hospitals and specialty clinics<sup>11</sup> within a specific locality and neighborhood. Like the family “base consultations” that are still connected to larger neighborhood *policlínicos* and hospitals, Cuban house churches and prayer meetings are semi-autonomous and remain connected to larger official churches. This is a process of vernacular interpretation: “making hermeneutical sense of texts and concepts imported across time and space by means of one’s own indigenous texts and concepts” (Sugirtharajah 2001:182). This is done through a combination of local worldviews and ideas, language, symbols, legends, ritual and performance.

In Cuba, the strengths from “official” and more “informal” church structures complement one another (González García 2008). The larger, “official” structure of an historical church—within a central church building—provides a type of “institutional umbrella” under which home-based worship can operate. Given the Cuban state’s current legal restrictions and requirements on issuing permits to religious “associations,” historical and central churches provide a “tranquilizing element:” a safety net, if you will, through which more informal home-based prayer meetings and services can operate (González García 2008:24). In addition, historical churches also aid in the development of specialized and professional religious ministries, and provide local communities with

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<sup>11</sup> In Cuba, these specialized, local community clinics are known as *policlínicos*. Beyond primary care within hospitals, *policlínicos* offer a wide array of care in specialized areas such as pediatrics, dentistry, gastro-intestinal medicine, and others.

a central location for believers to come together and worship publicly (González García 2008:15). Home-based worship, or the “Iglesias Caseras,” on the other hand, ensure that the larger, historical church remains up to date and connected to local community needs—both materially and spiritually. This analysis of the benefits of home-based worship and practice echoes the assessments of the Cuban Protestants and Evangelicals I interviewed. The “Iglesia Casera” (house church) offers an environment that is “much more informal, intimate, and familiar that invites [people], and not an aggressive, intimidating, or unfamiliar [one], as is the case in the services of some Historical Churches” (González García 2008:26).

Some scholars argue that the number of home prayer meetings (*casas de oración*) in Cuba hasn’t increased because they are multiplying in and of themselves; they are growing in number because “mother churches” (i.e., the “Historical Churches”) “produce, locate, endorse, protect, and even dissolve them” (González García 2008:43). This echoes the explanations of other Cuban Protestants who explained the differences between house churches (*casas culto*) and prayer meetings (*casas de oración*): none of the latter function as a church. They do not have a self-image as such, nor do they self-reproduce or have autochthonous and self-reproducing leadership and governance. Therefore, “you cannot classify them as basic units of growth and multiplication” (González García 2008:43). A great majority of home-based worship groups already possess the quantitative requirements to be considered officially recognized house churches—what’s lacking are the qualitative elements to “function as churches and self-reproduce” (González García 2008:45). The closest a small group can come to having the capacity for self-reproduction are those that belong to churches that have adopted a

“cell structure” (González García 2008:43). Interestingly, during a return visit to Cuba in 2009, I noted that some Cuban Baptists had started using the term cell group (*grupo celular*) instead of *casa culto*.

Both “dynamics”<sup>12</sup> of religious ministry—the historical churches and home-based worship and practice—can work effectively with one another in order to help religious groups to become more familiar with the surrounding community, equip and train local leaders, and provide an intimate and familiar environment for participation at the grassroots level. This again has notable parallels with Latin American popular Catholicism. It is important to analyze the links between popular groups and “big structures:” institutional organizations such as churches, the state, or major economic groups, that have control over both symbolic and material resources (Levine 1992:317). Progressive Catholic small base communities, often influenced by liberation theology, did not operate in a vacuum: they were connected to larger structures within the Catholic Church that helped provide organization tools and resources that encouraged community solidarity and collective action. Similarly, smaller Protestant and Evangelical house churches, or Cuban “Protestant base communities,” need the larger “big structures” and organizational tools that the historical churches have, and vice versa (González García 2008). My local fieldwork and participant-observation within Baptist and Pentecostal small groups and larger central churches seems to corroborate this perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> González García (2008) prefers to use the term “dynamics” rather than “levels,” to emphasize the organizational flexibility within the interdependent relationship between official historical churches and home-based worship and practice.

As noted in the aforementioned discussion on my fieldwork within *casas de oración*, at the grassroots level it was very difficult to qualitatively distinguish between house churches and prayer meetings. At issue here, from a theoretical as well as practical perspective, is what exactly constitutes a Cuban “church.” From the perspective of the Cuban government, an official “church” is one that is registered as an “association,” with the proper permit. A “church” can also be within a “house,” so long as it has also obtained the proper registration. Less informal meetings, however (prayer groups and Bible studies) do not technically count as “churches.” This situation, in turn, raises a whole host of questions on what we mean by a religious group—in this specific case, religious groups in Cuba—but also applicable more generally: is “religion” primarily a private, personal matter, or does it have larger social implications beyond the space of one’s kitchen or living room? The fact that Cuban religious groups are increasingly entering into the social sphere through social welfare programs suggests that there are larger implications for Cuban civil society beyond individual house church meetings.

This definitional question of what counts as a “church” in Cuba is not merely one of semantics: given the current permit regulations that the Cuban government has specified regarding what counts as an official church structure (and what does not), Cuban Protestants—and religious groups in general—must grapple with a central question: who are we as Cubans, and what are we doing? Ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation among Western Baptist Cubans in particular reveals that Cuban Protestants are seeking to create their own forms of practice and organization that are separate from foreign influence, and directly tied to Cuba’s post-Soviet context.

## **The Indigenization of Cuban Protestantism through House Meetings**

Religious practice and worship within the space of the home is certainly not a new phenomenon. In Cuba, practitioners of African-derived traditions such as Santería/Regla de Ocha regularly use their homes as centers of worship and practice: within the context of public houses of worship where a community of worshippers may participate, through more personal and private sites of devotion to a particular *orisha*, or both. In the context of popular Catholicism, it is very common to see, either outside on a Cuban's lawn or within the home itself, statues, shrines, and other material goods dedicated to one or more Catholic saints. The case of Cuban Protestant home-based worship, however, is complicated. This is due to the nature and political organization of the Cuban state itself, and its relationship to certain religious groups with a history of U.S. and foreign influence.

As Cuba has become less isolated from an increasingly globalized world, there has been a tendency within Cuban Protestantism to rely upon foreign and external models of evangelization and practice (González García 2008:18). In 2006 during my fieldwork near Havana, I noted that several of the *casa de oración* prayer meetings that were affiliated with one of the larger Baptist churches were using a “Cuban version” of Warren’s (2002) “A Purpose Driven Life.” Through an original donation from a church in the United States, the Baptist church was able to make and print, through the Cuban Baptist editorial press, about 200 texts for use in home-based services.

A prayer group leader explained that while the actual message and content in both U.S. and Cuban versions of the text has remained the same, the physical format of the U.S. version is “stronger...of better quality.” This description is most likely due to the difficulties that Cubans generally have in obtaining material goods and resources. In

addition, the way in which Cuban Baptists have used Warren's text within their small groups differs slightly: originally designed to teach and read from one chapter per day, Cuban home-based groups have expanded the time frame to one chapter per week. This, they argue, allows more time for *casa de oración* participants to debate and discuss the content of the chapters, share ideas, and relate the Warren's text to their own personal lives and daily issues.

Recently, however, Cuban Protestants have begun to question the use of foreign models, and their applicability to Cuba's own particular contexts. One Cuban who graduated from Havana's Baptist Theological Seminary, for example, acknowledged the long historical and economic relationship between U.S. missionaries and the Baptist work in Cuba. "We still welcome resources and material goods from abroad if they're given to us, because that can help us obtain things that are still very difficult to get here, like cement to add onto church buildings. But, while we welcome those resources, we want to be able to determine how to use them. We want to run our own show."<sup>13</sup> Cubans have taken notice of the recent "bombardment" of new administrative and organizational structures from abroad, including the aforementioned texts from Warren (2002) and others:

It is, in fact, a way of demonstrating that we are good professionals. It is true that we Cubans are experts in adaptation, but even so we suffer the consequences of adopting structures [that are] totally disconnected and divorced from our realities (González García 2008:18).

This disconnect has resulted in a detrimental social isolation of Cuban churches from local communities (González García 2008:10). When analyzing one of the reasons why Cuban Protestants have relied so much upon previously imported models, González

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, October 2008.

García (2008:12) asserts that Cubans have suffered from a lack of autochthonous methods and means with which to train local leaders on a larger scale, so that they in turn may plan and utilize their own local strategies for Protestant practice.

Cuban Protestants, both leaders and lay participants alike, argue that the “Cuban model,” which combines the structure and organization of the official “historical” Protestant churches with the more contemporary home-based services and small groups, is more appropriately suited to Cuba’s particular realities. These realities involve the following: a complex set of government legal codes surrounding church permits and house-based worship and organization; an endemic lack of space with which to hold worshippers in central church buildings; the growing perception among Cuban Protestants that their practice should include providing for the material as well as the spiritual welfare of fellow Cubans; and a growing number of contemporary and “non-traditional” worship practices that use uniquely Cuban styles of music and liturgy.

As noted from Protestant leaders as well as participants, house-based religious groups in particular attract Cubans by providing an intimate, close-knit, and “family-like” environment. *Casas culto* and *casas de oración* also provide opportunities for group reflection, self-expression, and the “carrying of each other’s burdens” within spaces that are directly tied to local neighborhoods and communities. Although they explicitly recognize the importance of central “historical” church buildings, Cuban Protestants have shifted the center of their focus and practice in order to “bring the church to the base.” The term “base” here, similar to the local base communities within Latin American popular Catholicism, emphasizes the nature of what “church” means: it is more than simply an institution or a physical building; church also refers to a community

of believers, united together with each other in solidarity (Levine 1992:146). This focus on “solidarity” is significant; within the Cuban context, Revolutionary values have long encouraged Cubans to solidarizar (unite) in order to build a better society. It was noteworthy, therefore, when a Cuban *casa de oración* participant stated that because prayer meetings are within neighborhoods, “se solidariza más también unos vecinos con otros y eso ayuda a que crezca” (neighbors unite together with one another, and that helps it grow). This movement to “unite” reflects an explicit desire among Cuban Protestants to bring the church to the “base,” or to the people—rather than simply bringing individuals to a central church building. The shift towards the “base” within *casas culto* and *casas de oración* was partly pragmatic and out of necessity, due to the ramifications of the “Special Period” economic crisis and an endemic lack of space within central church buildings to hold increasing numbers of worshippers. Home-based worship also represents, however, a push by Cuban Protestants to increasingly insert themselves into the social sphere.

### **Continued Growth**

In 2006, I had noted that the number of *casas culto* and *casas de oración* affiliated with the main Baptist church I worked with was 8; by 2009, this number had increased to more than 30. Notably, this did not include the house churches affiliated with the four other main Baptist churches in town. If we assume the other churches are operating at similar growth, then the Baptist denomination alone would have at least 150 house churches and prayer meetings. This raises issues about the recent 2005 regulations from the state, which stipulated that no two house churches can be within 2 kilometers of another. As noted previously, not every small group that comes together within a Cubans' home has the aim of eventually becoming an officially registered church (or

association, according to government terminology); some of these small "cell" groups are simply extensions of larger, "official" churches. Clearly, however, they are replicating quite rapidly. When asked about the current nature of these expanding groups, one Baptist "cell" group leader explained that they are hoping to encourage even more lay leadership within house meetings; this type of organizational structure, he contended, would most easily lend itself to self-replication.<sup>14</sup> This structure blurs boundaries between the "official" and the "unofficial," thus making any large-scale statistical analysis of Protestant church membership and participation highly challenging.

I am particularly interested in analyzing the reasons why house churches are multiplying so rapidly in both Cuba and China, even under the context of continued regulation and monitoring by the state. Prayer, personal testimony, and accounts of supernatural healing have played a particularly important role within Chinese house churches (Hunter and Chan 1993:7). Within the Cuban case, I also found that healing—particularly from mental afflictions such as depression and acute or chronic anxiety—played a central role within Cuban house church and prayer group meetings. This can perhaps explain one of the reasons for their popular growth; as Cuban house churches and prayer meetings are organized within specific neighborhoods, their informal structure allows for ease of access to those who might otherwise be unable, or unwilling, to meeting within a larger official church setting. Within this informal and familiar setting, the Cuban Baptists and Pentecostals I interacted with stated that the

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, March 2009

house church structure made it significantly easier to "carry one another's burdens" and pray for divine healing and intervention.

At a larger sociological level, the rapid growth in house churches in Cuba might suggest the presence of an alternative organizational structure that is expanding in spite of government restrictions and regulations. This poses some interesting challenges to supply-side and religious marketplace approaches to religious revivals and growth; according to these theories, we should see a correlation between decreased state regulation and religious pluralism and competition. However, the Cuban and Chinese cases, and perhaps even the case of the former USSR as well, points to the opposite occurring: religious revivals are coinciding not with state de-regulation, but with religious control and regulation under communist states (Froese 2004a). I would suggest that the attempt to regulate and institutionalize house churches and similar informal gatherings has forced a diffusion of Christian practice towards the grassroots and local level, embedding it deeply within local contexts.

## CHAPTER 4

### "A LO CUBANO:" CUBAN CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

#### **Rethinking *Cubanidad***

Contemporary Cuban scholars analyzing religion in general, and Protestantism in Cuba specifically, have often pointed to the historical North American "footprint" that missionaries from the United States have left in Cuba (Berges Curbelo et al. 2006:208-210). Some North American scholars have made similar arguments, illustrating how, after the 1895 War for Independence, the lines between U.S. Protestant missionary objectives and North American imperialism blurred (Yaremko 2000:220). Interestingly, Fidel Castro (Castro and Betto 1987:186) has stated that, with the exception of certain groups with "special characteristics,"<sup>1</sup> the Revolution has consistently had "good and easy" relations with Protestant sectors of the population. Antagonism between the Revolutionary government and religious groups, according to Castro (Castro and Betto 1987:182) stemmed not from religious beliefs in and of themselves, but from religious institutions of power that were tied to foreign (and largely wealthy) elements.

However, some Cuban academics have been critical of the recent spread of Cuban Protestant "house churches," prayer meetings within private homes, and small evangelical "cell groups." Part of the issue appears to be the critique that Protestant and evangelical groups are promoting a certain type of "evasive religiosity" that runs counter to Revolutionary ideals (Berges Curbelo et al. 2006:208-210). In contrast to a focus on the material present, an "evasive religiosity" is more explicitly concerned with the afterlife. At another level, however, the critique appears to be more political in

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<sup>1</sup> By "special characteristics," Castro is referring to religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, who took issue with Cuba's compulsory military conscription.

nature: with the insertion of the Cuban economy into the world market since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba has become less isolated to the circulation of material goods, ideas, and people. Although a significant break occurred between North American churches and Cuban Protestant churches following the 1959 Revolution, the post-Soviet era has seen an expansion in ties once again between local churches in Cuba and larger congregations in the United States. Facing an acute shortage in building construction materials in particular, local Cuban Protestant churches are utilizing funds from North American mission boards and private donors in order to resume long postponed construction work (Corse 2007:141).

However, as a former seminary student explained, funds for building construction cannot be used until local Cuban churches receive the proper permits from government authorities, which can often take years. Most notably, this former student also made clear an important point regarding connections between local Cuban churches and North American monetary aid: "We welcome the funding, since many churches here have very little income to work with. However, we do not want foreign churches telling us how we should arrange our churches or conduct our services—'Put a piano here, and have the alter here.' Unlike what occurred during the 19th century, we want to run our own show."<sup>2</sup>

This last comment is illustrative of how Cuban Protestants, who often willingly acknowledge a long history of economic, cultural, and religious ties between the U.S. and Cuba, are seeking to create methods and practices that are uniquely *cubano* (Cuban). From Pérez's (1999) larger analysis concerning Cuban national identity, I

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, October 2008

argue below that the development of this Cuban Protestant consciousness is intricately bound up with the search for new ways to articulate power and carve out autochthonous spaces of self-determination and identity—in relationship to both previous U.S. influence, as well as current Cuban political and economic realities. The Cuban case is particularly intriguing because very early on, “Cubans found themselves deeply implicated in, and at times inexorably drawn into, the material environment and moral systems of North American origins, circumstances that have contributed to shaping the people that Cubans have become” (Pérez 1999:xii). In other words, the United States, in providing a hegemonic cultural and economic narrative for Cuba to resist, has played a direct role in Cuban national identity formation.

This chapter analyzes the historical and contemporary processes through which *cubanidad* ("Cubanness") has come to be understood, by both Cubans on the island as well as those who have emigrated. Defining *cubanidad* is inextricably bound to North American religious, cultural, and economic history, precisely due to the historically complex relationship between the United States and Cuba. Contemporary Cuban Protestants, who acknowledge a long history of North American missionary work in Cuba, are beginning to emphasize the need to "break away" from this previous influence to form their own sets of religious practices and organizational methods. Through the incorporation of musical styles and genres that are uniquely "*cubano*" into their worship services, Cuban Protestants are analyzing what it means to be both Protestant and Cuban. They are also questioning the use of religious literature from the United States that has recently been circulating locally as a result of Cuba's re-insertion into the global economy. I argue that these developments reflect a desire on the part of

Cubans to assert their autonomy in relationship to the United States, which is part and parcel of a longer historical process of defining *cubanidad* as a counterpoint to North American cultural, religious, and economic influence.

### **What is “Cubano?”**

In his essay "The Human Factors of *Cubanidad*," the well-known Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz (2002) argues that "Cubanness" refers to more than simply being born within the physical territory known as Cuba. Acknowledging that culture is a dynamic social construct, Ortiz asserts that *cubanidad* refers principally to "the peculiar quality of a culture, that of Cuba" (Ortiz 2002:2). Ortiz is known for his influential model of cultural change, what he refers to as transculturation. Within this model, European, African, and indigenous elements have combined together within Cuba's particular political and historical context to create an *ajíaco*, or stew. New elements may constantly be added to the dish, thus continually altering its taste (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:72).

Interestingly, Cuban government officials, academics, and intellectuals have actually redefined the Cuban nation as an ethnic and cultural community since the fall of the Soviet Union (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:72). Describing *cubanidad* in this way, rather than tying Cuban nationality to a specific political community, has recently allowed various cultural and religious communities to carve out new social and cultural spaces based upon a discourse of multiculturalism.

There is a poignant (and rather ironic) example of this process (Hernandez 2009:73-74). In Havana in 1998, someone had obtained a circulated copy of a "Test of Cubanidad," supposedly designed to teach those attending government workshops new ways of thinking about what it meant to be Cuban. Some of the questions were as follows: "At what time is the daily *cañonazo* (cannon) blast in the Havana harbor?"

"What do people sing when they die?" "What happens to the shrimp that fall asleep?"

Upon administering the test, it was realized that the highest-scoring participants were older, and not younger, Cubans. Several months later, at a conference on cultural identity at the University of Havana, literary critic Ambrosio Fornet told of a supposedly recent story where the U.S. Border Patrol held a meeting to differentiate Cubans from Mexicans attempting to cross the border. They hired a Cuban to devise a set of questions to which only Cubans would know the answers, which happened to be the exact same "Test of Cubanidad" that was circulating around Havana. This test, in fact, had actually been created by a middle-aged Cuban exile in order to evaluate their own "Cubanness;" and yet, the existence of the test was being used on both sides of a political divide, with a commonly shared assumption: the central "marker" of Cuban identity was not a particular political community, but a shared cultural community principally based upon popular culture (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:74).

There is, however, a growing generation of Cuban Americans—too young to have fought either for or against the 1959 Revolution—who are not just in Miami, but are scattered throughout Europe and the Americas (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:77). This transnational generation includes artists, writers, musicians, and playwrights who have settled abroad since the 1980s and do not consider themselves "exiles." For this generation, "the usual paradigm of island versus exile was increasingly unsatisfactory" (Hernandez Reguant 2009:77). The notion of diaspora became more salient within Cuban American everyday speech, and in some cases refers to a larger Latino diaspora within the United States, of which Cubans are a part. In this case, this notion of

diaspora refers principally to the country of adoption. For others, the reference to a "homeland" still remains central, and is deeply connected to a shared cultural memory.

This resonates with other analyses of the term diaspora, particularly as it applies to the Cuban context. The notion of diaspora "points most fundamentally to a group with some shared culture which lives outside the territory that it considers its native place, and whose continuing bonds with that land are crucial for its collective identity" (Tweed 1997:84). Notably, Cubans who are part of this diaspora can fall into a wide variety of categories: "voluntary, impelled, or forced; permanent, temporary, or circulatory" (Tweed 1997:84). Some may feel rather ambivalent about returning to Cuba; others, such as many of the Cuban Americans in Miami who responded to surveys in 1992, had even stronger feelings: they didn't want to return to Cuba to live even if democracy and capitalism were restored (Tweed 1997:87).

Novels and narratives from Cuban Americans since the fall of the Soviet Bloc still contain within them themes of nostalgia, belonging, and references to a homeland. In narratives such as Cristina Garcia's (1992) novel, the term diaspora contains within it roots that are simultaneously physical and spiritual (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:78). Beginning in the early 1990s, a series of literary and artistic projects circulated in Cuba. One, entitled *Memorias de la Postguerra* (Postwar Memories), involved an evaluation by Cubans both on and off the island of the term "post exile:" the notion that the term "exile" could not delineate clear boundaries between those still in Cuba and those who had left (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12). The discussion implied that an internal type of exile could exist, particularly within the context of Cuba's post-Soviet economic collapse. These examples further illustrate the complexities inherent in defining Cuban identity: it

is connected to the "homeland," conceived of in both an imagined and a literal, physical sense; it is external, rooted within transnational and immigrant experiences; and it is internal, inextricably bound to Cuba's post-Soviet economic and cultural situation.

For those on the island, Cuban identity since the fall of the Soviet Union is intertwined with the complexities and ambiguity of "late socialism." The Special Period was a time of profound ambivalences and confusion: a "hyperrealist collage of postmodern aesthetics" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12), where Cubans took objects and discourses and creatively recycled them "for uses totally different from that for which they had been intended." Within this complex and ambivalent environment, traditional limits began to break down: boundaries between "high" and "low" culture, socialist practices and capitalist discourses, became blurred (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12).

Flashy advertising slogans catering to international tourists stood right next to Revolutionary slogans; the local *bodegas* that distribute rationed food and products to the Cuban populace contrasted sharply with "hard currency" dollar stores; and local Cuban musicians, artists, and writers developed a "double consciousness" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12). On the one hand, they sought to pragmatically cater their cultural productions for an international audience, in the effort to obtain much-needed revenue to survive; on the other hand, they attempted to carve out spaces of power and identity formation that at times ran up against both official Revolutionary discourse as well as "Western" standards of authenticity.

In Cuba's period of "late socialism," local musicians are attempting to carve out spaces of identity within a larger set of complex and often competing local and international images. Cuban hip-hop culture is in some ways similar to Fernando Ortiz's

*ajaco* stew: it is a hybrid formation situated within a Caribbean context, blending Afro-Caribbean musical forms such as reggae, rumba, samba, jazz, salsa, son, timba, machata, meringue, and others (Zurbano 2009:156-157). It is also, however, emblematic of a subculture of resistance: Cuban rap lyrics and themes reveal an "anguished solidarity" among those on the social and economic margins of Cuban society, who have not had access to official cultural and academic institutional spaces of production. Zurbano (2009:150) elaborates further:

They are texts hungering for social exchanges with the country's most elite heritage. They are born of an insatiable interrogation where they mix the local, universal, transnational, and marginal with politics and the market, race with ecology, language with community, ideological discourse with sexuality and religion. In sum, we face an aesthetic-ideological phenomenon that recycles everything and suggests a new space for dialogue and integration, both within and outside of Cuban culture and society.

Under extremely precarious economic conditions where they have produced concerts often with "nothing more than a simple rhythm track in the background," (Zurbano 2009:155) Cuban hip-hop artists have produced extremely popular songs that address the complex issue of racism in Revolutionary Cuba. The MC Molano song "¿Quién tiró la tiza?" (Who threw the chalk?) is one of the most salient examples: the response to the proposed question in the lyrics was "El negro ese, no fue el doctor" or "That negro, it wasn't the doctor." The critical lyrics raised to the forefront the problematic issue of racism within the everyday lives of predominantly young, black, and disenfranchised Cubans. Thus, Cuban hip-hop "expresses not only material deprivation but also a deterioration and subversion of the utopian vision of the Cuban Revolution's emancipatory project" (Zurbano 2009:148). Faced with post-Soviet realities of socialist discourses mixed with an increasingly globalized economy, Cuban

music and cultural production reflects the ambiguousness within Cuban identity formation.

### **¿Quiénes Somos? (Who are We?): Cuban post-Soviet Identity**

Cuban Revolutionary discourse has long criticized the notion of Cuba's dependency—either ideological or material—upon foreign nations. When the Republic of Cuba passed the Nationalization Law on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1960—a move that without a doubt fundamentally affected U.S.-Cuba relations even to the present day—the Cuban state unequivocally declared that in addition to the expropriation of all previously-owned U.S. property, they reserved the right to “adopt without hesitation, also the measures that it may deem pertinent for the defense of the national sovereignty and the free economic development of our country” (Cuba. Nationalization Law. July 6, 1960 1961:822-823).

From 1960 until the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba maintained what some might characterize as a highly dependent economic relationship with the Soviet Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). This involved the selling of Cuban sugar to the former Soviet Union at a fixed price, in exchange for industrial goods and raw materials from the USSR. With respect to Cuba's dependence upon the Soviet Union, Tsokhas (1980), however, argues that we should not assume that Cuba simply exchanged one form of economic dependency (the U.S.) for another (the USSR). Although Cuba became increasingly more reliant upon the Soviet Union, “[she] often did so on her own terms” (Tsokhas 1980:320). In order to avoid conflating different forms of economic dependency, “it is perhaps more accurate to speak of a convergence between the views of a section of the ruling party in Havana, the economic problems created by its attempts to Revolutionize Cuba, and the objectives of the USSR. This is

an important divergence from the old relationship with the United States" (Tsokhas 1980:321).

Nevertheless, Cuba and the Soviet Union entered into an ideological as well as an economic relationship—a commonly shared socialist vision that called for the creation of a new Soviet and Cuban “man.” Both Cuban and Soviet socialism maintained a distrust of “things Western:” in the case of the former, a repudiation of U.S. capitalist consumption, products, and styles; in the latter, the influence of foreign bourgeois cosmopolitanism. In the Soviet case, official discourse from the state made a rather ambiguous distinction between “internationalism” and “cosmopolitanism,” the former representing a “good” form of international culture, and the latter being equated with Western imperialism (Yurchak 2006:163). Late socialism in Soviet Russia was fraught with paradoxes and ambiguities. Some “Western” cultural influences were criticized for their bourgeois values; others were “celebrated for their internationalism, circulated through unauthorized networks and official state channels, transported from abroad and invented locally” (Yurchak 2006:162). In other words, defining Soviet identity in relation to—and against—“the West” remained an integral part of the Soviet socialist project itself.

Cuban Revolutionary discourse is similar in its definition of what is “authentically” Cuban in relationship to what is not. Individualism, consumerism, the desire to have “nicer things” and buy material goods—these attributes, according to the traditional Revolutionary narrative, fall outside the definition of “Cuban;” rather, those characteristics belong to the “West,” or, more appropriately, the United States. In spite of official state discourse that remains highly critical of U.S. cultural and economic

influence, daily life at the grassroots level in Cuba is filled with complexities and ambivalence. Like the Soviet youth of the 1970s and 1980s who embraced Western rock and roll (Yurchak 2006:207), today's Cuban youth have embraced a number of U.S. and foreign clothing and musical styles: *los chicos emo*, who wear "piercings," black clothing and fingernails, and listen to "hardcore" or "punk" musical styles; adolescents who walk with Adidas and mp3 players; and a growing number of Cubans—adolescent or not—who will save nearly half of a year's wages in order to purchase a cellular telephone.<sup>3</sup>

Although the U.S. embargo remains in place, Cuba is not isolated from circulated goods, resources, and people. Cuban Americans in particular will make trips to visit family on the island on one of several daily charter flights from Cancun, Miami, or the Bahamas.<sup>4</sup> At the airport check-in for any one of these charter flights, Cuban Americans can be seen with giant suitcases filled with a plethora of goods and items: medicine, clothing, toys, toiletries, snacks, presents, and other material goods. Separate, larger items—which come with hefty fines when brought into the Havana airport—can include flat-screen televisions, DVD players, and even full sets of car tires!

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<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the Cuban government allowed its citizens to legally purchase cellular phones for the first time; previously, those who had access to cell phones and contracts operated within the black market. Notably, however, it is still quite expensive for Cubans to both maintain and use a cell phone: \$10 every two months to maintain the line (not including credit for usage), and approximately \$.60 per minute to make a call within Cuba. Thus, most Cubans who do have cell phones use them as more of a "beeper device," rather than a means to make long phone calls. Foreigners, however, may call any Cuban cell phone for around \$1-\$2 per minute, but at no cost to Cubans.

<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the Obama administration lifted some of the previous travel restrictions for Cuban-Americans that had been in place since the Bush administration in 2004; these previous restrictions stipulated that Cuban-Americans could visit their immediate family members only once every three years. They were also restricted in the amount of money they could carry with them to Cuba. However, the more general travel ban on travel to Cuba for those in the U.S. remains, unless they have the appropriate license from Office of Foreign Assets Control (part of the U.S. Treasury Department).

It is perhaps surprising that the Cuban government even allows the importation of these items, considering their larger, ideological goals that emphasize economic equality within the Cuban populace. At a practical level, however, the Cuban economy is desperately in need of the “hard currency” that both foreigners and Cuban Americans provide. This shift in official public discourse and practice has its roots in the post-Soviet “Special Period” economic crisis of the early 1990s:

During these years of crisis public discourse sought to distance politics and the economy from national culture, and to that effect it redefined the latter. Differently from the standard Revolutionary position, Cubanness was often presented as a matter of culture and heritage, rather than as an ideological commitment to Revolution. This discursive turn, which translated into specific cultural policies, stemmed from both the government’s need for support and legitimacy during a period of extreme economic crisis and the need to reposition Cuba within a post-Soviet world regimated by capitalist regimes of value (Hernandez Reguant 2009:70).

Interestingly, there are parallels between this shift in Cuba identity formation and what has occurred in countries previously under the former Soviet Bloc; in the post-Soviet era, national intellectuals are emphasizing national culture and pre-Soviet history as a means to re-define a connection between nation, state, and territory. Faced with a severe economic crisis, a cohesive national identity based upon a rigid and unbending revolutionary project also became unsustainable in Cuba (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:71-72).

Thus, since the 1990s, Cuba has attempted to maintain a precarious balance between a) defining national identity in terms of Cuban cultural history, rather than one specific political community; b) preserving certain key elements of the socialist project, specifically free education and health care; and c) gaining much needed hard currency through foreign tourism, investments, and remittances. The latter necessity, in conjunction with the insertion of the Cuban economy into the global market of circulating

goods and resources, has placed a particular strain upon the traditional Revolutionary notion of what it means to be *cubano*. Post-Soviet economic changes have “reached deeply into the psychology of people. Men and women across the island were required to develop new survival strategies” (Pérez 1999:xii), and were forced to question the assumptions and commitments that had deeply shaped both everyday life and notions of Cuban identity itself. *Inventar* (invent) became the word of choice, referring to the complex ways that Cubans negotiated a dramatically new economic and moral order (Pérez 1999:xii).

### **Lo Cubano, El Yanqui, and La Yuma**

Within official state news channels and sources, “Yanqui” is the term that refers to the United States.<sup>5</sup> At the grassroots level of Cuban discourse, however, there exists a commonly spoken, “street term” and nickname for U.S.: “Yuma.” Depending on the local context, “yumas” can refer to either people from the U.S. specifically, or to any non-Spanish speaking foreigner. Shortly after Fidel Castro entered Havana in 1959, Cuban teenagers began using the term Yuma as a nickname for the U.S.; although no one can precisely identify where this term originated from, some speculate that it may have its roots in the original, 1957 film “310 to Yuma,” or possibly other popular Western films as well (Kopp 2007). The name Yuma carries with it a more affectionate connotation than its “Yanqui” counterpart, which further reveals the highly complex relationship that Cubans at the grassroots level have with the United States.

When explaining that I’ve traveled to Cuba, I have more than once been asked, “how do Cubans feel about Americans? Don’t they dislike the U.S.?” I have found that

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<sup>5</sup> The U.S. economic embargo is more commonly known in Cuba as the “blockade,” or the “Yanqui blockade.”

in practice and at the everyday level, many Cubans have a special relationship with those in the U.S., through networks of family, friends, and religious groups; thus, they are perhaps more likely to view those in the U.S. as fellow brothers and sisters as opposed to enemies, even if they happen to mention disagreement with U.S. policy regarding the economic embargo. In addition, they will often express great curiosity and interest regarding U.S. history and politics, both past and present: “What was your Revolution like when you gained independence from the British?” “We’ve heard you are experiencing an economic recession. How did this happen?” “How do you feel about your President?” “When he leaves office, who will take his place?” Most recently, Cubans were very concerned about the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, if and how it was being stopped, and if it was going to in any way affect the coast of Cuba.

In spite of positive feelings at the grassroots level towards those in the U.S., some Cubans maintain that even a working relationship with their neighbor to the North should not mean a return to “the way things were” prior to the Revolution. One elderly Cuban woman, for example, explained that prior to Revolutionary reforms in education and healthcare, she “had nothing in the *campo* (countryside). No access to doctors, no higher education. And the Americans, they owned a majority of businesses here.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, there remains an explicit emphasis upon maintaining key values that are felt to be *cubano*, even under the context of opened relations with the United States.

Within today’s globalized world, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for Cuba to remain isolated, even within the context of a controlled socialist economy. Movement of Cuban Americans to and from the island, along with the circulation of goods,

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, March 2009.

information, and resources, has raised significant questions regarding Cuba's Revolutionary identity: who are we, and where are we going? Within the context of religious groups, this has led to a re-evaluation of contemporary practices in light of historical and present realities.

### **Being Both Cuban and Protestant**

In illustrating how Cuban leaders and lay individuals have sought to re-evaluate "what it means to be Protestant in Cuba," we must bear in mind a larger historical context. The connections and encounters between the United States and Cuba are complex and multifaceted, and the nature of this encounter has played a direct role in shaping both Cuban identity and nationality (Pérez 1999). The history of Protestantism in Cuba reflects this process; it clearly shaped how Cubans came to understand their relationship to the U.S., but it also shaped how they came to see one another (Pérez 1999:5). I do not want to suggest that being Cuban (and being a Cuban Protestant, specifically) is solely based upon how Cubans look at themselves in relation to the United States. However, when a Cuban Baptist house church leader states that it is time for a "change in mentality," and that the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions have sought to create *algo cubano* ("something Cuban")<sup>7</sup>, his assertions rest on a history of Protestant missions in Cuba that sought to directly shape the mentalities and moral vision of the Cuban people.

The historical evidence for this is clear: although Protestant organizational leadership remained primarily within the hands of Cubans themselves prior to 1898, after the Wars for Independence the United States began to play a much greater role in

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication, March 2009.

Cuba's religious, cultural, and economic affairs. In 1902, North American mission boards comprising a wide variety of denominations met to "divide up" and "map out" Cuba into specific spheres of influence: Northern and Southern Baptists focused their efforts on the eastern and western sections of the island (respectively), the Quakers and the Northern Methodists concentrated on the east, and Presbyterians, Southern Methodists, and Congregationalists on the west. This "dividing up" of Cuba into zones of religious authority suggests a certain amount of North American imperialistic influence. The 1902 meeting of mission boards may not have constituted a direct conspiracy, however; rather, that the assignment of territories was meant to "avoid chaos and destructive competition" (Martínez-Fernández 2002:168).

Regardless of denominational motivation, it became increasingly clear that foreign Protestant missionaries operating in post-war Cuba viewed the time period as a unique opportunity. The so-called "mainline" denominations—Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopalian, in particular—quickly built schools, set up hospitals, and strongly advocated literacy projects, vocational programs, and English-language classes (Pérez 1995a:42). Following Cuba's War for Independence, much of the island lay in ruins—and North American religious groups stepped in to provide much-needed social and economic infrastructure. Some scholars have made connections between U.S. Protestant social work in Cuba and certain "modernizing" tendencies. While not completely discounting the notion that religious groups would seek to genuinely aid Cuban churches and their members, U.S. hegemonic control of Cuba during the occupational periods also provided "open doors" for U.S. Protestant missionaries to "save" Cubans from the "burden" of Spanish and Catholic control (Yaremko 2000:5).

There is even the argument that goes above and beyond a modernizing element into the realm of annexation: education functioned as the cultural component of larger [U.S.] annexation plans for Cuba (Pérez 1995a:41).

The development of a consciousness of what it meant to be Cuban was deeply intertwined with the search for new ways to articulate power, and the “need to devise different possibilities through which to envisage a new future” (Pérez 1999:7). This process of self-determination was intricately tied to the battles for independence from Spanish colonial rule, and involved the appropriation and adaptation of North American forms to local needs (Pérez 1999:7). Much later, when Fidel Castro triumphantly entered Havana in 1959, the air in Cuba was already filled with revolutionary expectation. The Cuban Revolutionary environment had a direct impact upon defining *cubanidad* (Cubanness):

This was a triumph more of will than rationality and in its own way was a replaying of a logic particularly Cuban, with antecedents in the nineteenth century: that the potential and the promise of nationality—of being Cuban—was within reach if only the “weight” of North American hegemony could be lifted (Pérez 1999:114).

In other words, *cubanidad*—what it means to be Cuban—is directly related to North American hegemony, and its possible removal. The current stance of some Cuban Protestant groups like the Western Baptists, who have a long history of close cultural and economic connections to the Southern Baptist Convention in the U.S., can thus be seen as a type of push for self-determination. They, like the Cubans before them who were struggling with issues of identity in light of Spanish colonial rule, are searching for new ways to express power and self-determination regarding what precisely it means to be Protestant and also Cuban.

This last point became clearer during a visit in 2009 to another local Baptist church, next to a *lugar de ancianos* (subsidized housing for the elderly).<sup>8</sup> The church building where services are currently held is actually an annex, located behind the original church itself (described by the pastor as “dangerous” due to its state of much-needed material repairs). The annex, with recently renovated ceilings, installed fans, painted walls, and long pews, had a raised concrete platform for both the pulpit and space for the church’s music ministry. At the end of each pew—there were about twenty on each side—lay a new, autochthonous Cuban creation: a book with the title *Alabanza Cubana* (Cuban Praise), a set of “uniquely Cuban” hymns and worship songs (Lazo Feria et al. 2005). At the top of the hymnal above the title lay a marking celebrating 100 years of Baptist mission work in Cuba (1905-2005). When asked about the origins of the Cuban hymnal, the pastor described how the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions got together and asked themselves, “Why don’t we produce *algo cubano?*” (something Cuban).

### **“Let Us Sing Cubanía to the Lord...”**

Around the year 2000, several members of the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions came up with an idea: gather together in one hymnal the most frequently used songs in today’s Cuban churches and *casas culto* (house churches). In the course of this undertaking, they believed that Cubans had been “blessed by the Lord with a great creativity, an internal rhythm and very particular musicality, just like the optimism expressed in the joy that presents itself even in the most difficult moments,

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<sup>8</sup> Cuban Protestants have had, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a history of organizing and working with day centers and homes for the elderly. In the Baptist church I visited next to the *lugar de ancianos*, ministries for the youth and elderly formed a central part of their organization and practice.

which had been captured in each of the compiled hymns and songs" (Lazo Feria et al. 2005:v). Many of the songs and music currently used within both regular churches as well as house church worship have been composed by Cubans themselves "from various generations and from all over the country, from the westernmost to the easternmost parts" (Lazo Feria et al. 2005:vi). Other, non-Cuban and foreign songs are sung as well, but Cuban churches have great difficulty in importing them—a difficulty, according to the editors of the hymnal, that is a "product of the special situation that affects our country" (Lazo Feria et al. 2005:v).

The hymnal came to fruition for the centennial celebration of the Baptist mission work in Cuba (1905-2005). It can be seen as both a pragmatic and resourceful tool for church services, as well as an illustration of the way in which worship in both regular *templos* and houses churches reflects the importance of distinctly Cuban musical genres such as the *bolero*, the *danzón*, the *guajira*, the *habanera*, and the *son*. The Cuban *bolero*, which should be distinguished from the Spanish *bolero*, originated in the late 19th century. It is known for its direct lyrics and complex guitar styles, and it very quickly gained popularity and fame within nearby Mexico and eventually to other parts of Latin America (Sublette 2004:252-253). The *danzón* developed from the Cuban *contradanza*, also during the 19th century. Interestingly, those who fled to Cuba following the Haitian Revolution from 1791-1804 brought with them to the Cuban *oriente* African-derived song and dance rhythms such as the *catá*, a word of Bantu origin. Notably, the *catá* rhythm, with its 3/3/2 syncopation, influenced both Haitian and Dominican *merengues*, as well as the Cuban *danzón* and *bolero* (Sublette 2004:134).

By the 1830s, the *contradanza* in Havana had developed into the creole Cuban *danza*, with a gentler tempo and written in 2/4 time (Sublette 2004:135).

The *guajira* genre has a double meaning: the name itself is associated with the popular Cuban song “Guantanamera” by Joseíto Fernández. It also refers to a style of country music from Guantánamo (Sublette 2004:489), although Fernández himself was a *habanero* (Sublette 2004:488). The *habanera* musical genre and style has its roots in the Cuban *contradanza*, but with a tango twist: the underlying rhythm cell added to the *contradanza* would be the same tango rhythm that would show up later in the Argentine tango. The *habanera* variant of the tango cell rhythm reflects a specific emphasis that Cubans musicians made by tying the second note to the third (Sublette 2004:134). The Cuban *son*, like the *contradanza*, bears similar African-derived roots. It is notably different, however, from the other aforementioned genres: unlike the complex and stylized *danzón* that required both an organized orchestra and written arrangements and sheet music, the *son* “required no literacy and no charts” (Sublette 2004:343). It could thus be brought up and used spontaneously anywhere, a clear necessity when Cuban colonial authorities had banned the use of African instruments in public (Sublette 2004:334).

In the contemporary Cuban context this is also important, as many house church (*casas culto*) and prayer meeting (*casas de oración*) services do not have access to either highly skilled musicians, complex musical instruments, or the proper sheet music accompaniment. In the back of the *Alabanza Cubana* hymnal are tables of chord structures: alphabetical solfege systems (“Do, Re, Mi”) that allow for easier harmony accompaniment if a particular church (or *casa culto*) does not have access to musical

instruments beyond one's own voice. Perhaps most notable, however, is the sheet music accompaniment for each of the aforementioned Cuban musical genres: the basic notes and rhythms for the *bolero*, the *danzón*, the *guajira*, the *habanera*, and the *son*. The hymnal also lists before the genre accompaniments an index of the Cuban hymns that were written specifically for these genres.

The very first hymn in the *Alabanza Cubana*, for example, was written in the *guajira* style. The title, appropriately enough, is "Alabanza Cubana" (Lazo Feria et al. 2005:1). Below the title of each of the hymns is a Bible verse, who's general theme relates to the musical hymn; for "Alabanza Cubana," the verse is Psalms 19:1, traditionally attributed to David for a director of music: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands." I have translated the lyrics below:

Verse 1: Upon waking up in the morning/ Warm and springlike/ I hear the mockingbird, his morning song/ The murmur of a brook to the shadow of a palm/ They tell me that my Cuba lifts up its song.

Verse 2: You made all life/ You preserve all being/ My eyes can see sublime miracles/ You feed the birds/ You give rain and the heat/ You inspire with your moon, you light up with your sun.

Chorus: Every work of your hands/ Sings praise/ Because in your providence/ Your preserve your hope.

And I want, Jesus Christ/ To unite with the harmony/ That arrives in your presence/ With beautiful *cubanía*.

There is no direct English equivalent for the word *cubanía*, but the closest would probably be "Cubanness." The presence of the word is especially notable here within the hymn, written specifically for a musical genre that developed in Cuba; behind it lies the idea that there is a distinct way of being Cuban, and that the Christian composers of the hymn want to encourage an incorporation of this "Cubanness" into the worship of God. We see a continuation of this theme in another hymn entitled "Cuba, Isla

"Preciosa" (Cuba, Precious Island), composed specifically for the *habanera* style by two sisters, Zuley and Zulia Pereira:

Cuba, you are the precious island/ Your sun, your sand, how beautiful they are/ You are the Pearl of the Antilles/ Oh, Cuba, raise your eyes to the Lord!

Verse 1: Cuba, don't forget that Jesus Christ loves you/ Look for Him today/ It's getting late in the morning.

Verse 2: Come now with your desires and with your burdens/ With your sadness and with your joy.

Chorus: Jesus waits for you, for you/ Jesus waits for you, for you/ Cuba, there's life in Jesus (Lazo Feria et al. 2005:237)

This hymn, like the first, encourages Cubans to recognize what is beloved in their country's beauty, but also recognize the God who created it.

The *Alabanza Cubana* reflects the changing shape of Cuban Protestantism: it contains elements of both the new and the old, in a format that is uniquely designed to correspond with Cuba's own particular circumstances. It is "old" in the sense that it has incorporated in one, unified place specifically Cuban musical genres and rhythms passed down from generation to generation, often through oral tradition. They hymnal also contains borrowed foreign traditional hymns that have been sung in church services for some time, reflecting Cuba's 19th-century history of Protestant missions and practices from mainline denominations such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, as well as the Baptist Mission Boards and Southern Baptist Convention in the United States.

The *Alabanza Cubana* is "new" in the sense that it contains new hymns composed by Cubans explicitly for Cuban musical genres. It also has within it tools that directly reflect Cuba's particular contemporary circumstances: in the topical index, for example, there is listed a section and a corresponding hymn number for church dedication (Lazo

Feria et al. 2005:445). The title is “Dedicación de Templo (O Casa),” which indicates that Cubans view both regular churches (*templos*) as well as houses (*casas*) as equally worthy of official dedication to the church’s work. Below the title of the dedication hymn (“Este Templo Dedicamos”), is the verse 2 Chronicles 7:5: “And so [Solomon] dedicated the Temple of God” (Lazo Feria et al. 2005:375).

The Baptist pastor who’s church had the *Alabanza Cubana* at the end of each pew analyzed the changing nature of Cuban Protestant worship style and practice: historically, it had been primarily a very “traditional” one, reflecting Cuba’s historical connection with foreign( and specifically North American) influences. Now, however, they were beginning to incorporate certain changes. In worship music, for example, they were beginning to incorporate more “contemporary” musical styles: during their services, they used symbols, drums, and “Cuban rhythms” (like the aforementioned genres of the *guajira*, the *habanera*, and the *son*). “We have to change methods,” he says. “In the past it was more difficult, but now Protestant work in Cuba really is moving in a new direction—an autochthonous one.” This Baptist pastor’s statements parallels other analyses by Cubans on the musical innovations and changes within today’s Cuban Protestant churches:

In recent years an innovation has developed within musical customs and worship in the majority—nearly all, with different nuances and scant exceptions—of congregations. Baptist churches were reluctant to changes in worship styles, as in the hymnology, expressions, musical styles, and the use of different instruments. The services were always very formal, in Anglo-Saxon style brought from the North American missionaries that helped in the development of the denomination [in Cuba], who brought [with them] a strong pietistic and conservative influence (González Muñoz 2007:189).

In recent years, however, Cuban Western Baptist churches have “opened up to the use of applause and other [physical] manifestations such as clapping rhythmically,

raising one's hands, and using corporal expressions in their worship meetings, something completely inadmissible years ago" (González Muñoz 2007:191). There has been a shift from "traditional" to more "contemporary" forms of worship and practice among Cuban Protestants. Through the incorporation of more charismatic forms of worship, the use of distinctly Cuban liturgies, dance programs, music, and hymnals, Cuban Protestants are facilitating "a stronger sense of connectedness and locality among worshippers" (Hearn 2008:145).

Notably, some Cuban Christian musicians are also gaining national and international attention. Notably, music ministries have played very active roles within Cuban churches in recent years (González Muñoz 2007:190-191). We can attribute recent growth in musical groups to the elevated level of artistic and musical education throughout Cuba, along with the fact that many churches are benefitting from the knowledge of professional musicians. Interestingly, although choral singing has declined a bit within Western Baptist churches, a good number of singers from secular choirs in the country are Christian (González Muñoz 2007:190-191). One notable case of a formerly secular musician who became a Christian is the case of Rosendo Díaz Cuellar, known as "el gallo de la salsa" for his involvement in the famous Cuban group "Manolito y su Trabuco." Cuellar turned to evangelicalism during a period of crisis and physical illness.

After suddenly losing his voice and visiting a number of medical professionals as well as Cuban *santeros* and *babalawos* in search of a cure for his damaged vocal chords, the famous singer regained his voice after members of an evangelical church in

his neighborhood prayed for his healing.<sup>9</sup> Cuellar's case, as well as those of other Christian musicians who have entered into the public sphere, provides us with an example of how Cuban churches are "making Christianity their own." Beyond some of the more direct material benefits that Cubans have received in evangelical churches (particularly donations during the "Special Period" crisis), participation within Cuban religious groups provides an alternative space for self-expression social recognition (Hearn 2008:146). Encouraged and driven by the incorporation of Cuban musical styles, energetic live music, and charismatic forms of worship, "worshippers outwardly express spiritual emotions and speak without restraint about their personal experience of God" (Hearn 2008:145).

### **Speak *Cubano!***

In an increasingly globalized world, Cuba, particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union, has become increasingly less isolated from the circulation of material goods ideas, and people. Due to historical ties between North American mission boards and local churches in Cuba, there has been a tendency within Cuban Protestantism to emulate North American models of evangelization and practice. I noted a salient example of this when I initially began conducting participant-observation in local Cuban Protestant church services. Circulating both within larger "official" churches as well as smaller services and prayer meetings that met within private homes was a "Cuban version" of Warren's (2002) popular text. Through an original donation from a church in

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<sup>9</sup> This story was related to me during a Baptist *culto* (service), by a *casa de oración* leader. During one of the main Sunday evening services in the central Baptist church, they played a Rosendo Díaz music video.

the United States, the Baptist church was able to make and print, through the Cuban Baptist editorial press, about 200 texts for use in home-based services.

A prayer group leader clarified what was meant by the term "Cuban version" of Warren's text: he explained that while the actual message and content in both U.S. and Cuban versions of the text has remained the same, the physical format of the U.S. version is "stronger...of better quality." This description is most likely due to the difficulties that Cubans generally have in obtaining material goods and resources. In addition, the way in which Cuban Baptists have used Warren's text within their small groups differs slightly: originally designed to teach and read from one chapter per day, Cuban home-based groups have expanded the time frame to one chapter per week. This, they argue, allows more time for participants to debate and discuss the content of the chapters, share ideas, and relate the Warren's text to their own personal lives and daily issues.

Interestingly, although perhaps not coincidentally, an evangelical church in Gainesville Florida with historical connections to the Western Baptist Convention in Cuba (its pastor served as the President of the Convention in Cuba from 1997-2001) has on the title of its webpage "Baptist Evangelical Church: A Church with Purpose" (Iglesia Evangélica Bautista 2008). Messages within church services strongly resonate with Warren's notion that each individual is made "by God and for God," with a distinct "cosmic purpose that God has designed for eternity" (Warren 2002:19-21).

More recently, however, Cuban Protestants on the island have begun to question the use of foreign models, and their applicability to Cuba's own particular contexts. When the Eastern and Western Baptist Conventions came together to produce the

"Alabanza Cubana" hymnal in 2005, their decision was twofold: to produce a "uniquely Cuban" material text to be used in worship services, rather than simply importing material from the United States; and to solidify a shared vision of evangelization among Cuban Baptists, one that uses internal networks of local denominational churches, *casas culto* and *casas de oración* in order to evangelize non-Christian Cubans and "win 1 million souls for Christ" by the year 2010. Evangelical Christians take very seriously Jesus' injunction within the "Great Commission" to go forth and baptize in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit<sup>10</sup> (Vásquez 2003:157).

Cuban evangelicals also take this injunction to heart. At the time of this writing, Cuba still maintains a population of roughly 11 million people; this fairly large number, combined with the difficulty that Cubans generally have in exiting their country or traveling abroad without proper permission and visas from both Cuban and foreign governments, makes the particular goal of global evangelization a challenging one for most Christian Cubans. An evangelization vision known as "Cuba 2010" among Cuban Baptists—evangelize to 1 million people by the year 2010—has both an external and an internal dimension. From an external standpoint, Cuban Baptists have explicitly expressed a desire to send their own missionaries abroad. The pastor of a local Baptist church that has used the *Alabanza Cubana* hymnal in both the "official" church as well as within localized networks of *casas culto* and *casas de oración* expressed a sentiment that I have heard on multiple occasions, but particularly during the 2009 year: Cuban Baptists readily acknowledge the history of U.S. missions in Cuba, particularly those that helped contribute to the development of the *Obra Bautista* (Baptist work). While

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28: 19-20.

acknowledging this history, they express a fervent desire to conduct their own missions and send Cuban Baptist missionaries abroad. As previously noted, however, Cubans cannot leave the island without a proper permit from government authorities.

In light of this reality, the “Cuba 2010” vision is principally, at least at the present time, one of internal evangelization. It began, according to a prayer manual published in 2008 by the Cuban Western Baptist Convention, with a commitment to “pray for the next fifty days for my beloved *Patria* (country): Cuba” (Pérez 2008:3). On this personal commitment page at the front of the manual, the authors adjusted a verse from Isaiah 62:1, replacing Jerusalem with Cuba:

For Cuba's sake I will not keep silent, for Cuba's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation blazing like a torch (Pérez 2008:3).

Under the title “A Promise of Prayer is a Promise of Love and Perseverance,” is a list of several goals, three of which involve general words of encouragement, and three of which are specific to the Cuban context: 1) “For love of Cuba, I will not falter nor tire in my clamor for [Cuba’s] favor;” 2) My goal in prayer is that the salvation and justice of God light up over my nation like a torch;” and 3) While I pray, I will trust that the Lord will change the circumstances of people within our society who walk without hope, wounded, depressed, frustrated, and confused” (Pérez 2008:3).

Although this is an individual prayer manual, it was meant to be used within both the centralized historical churches as well as *casas culto* and prayer meetings as part of the larger “Cuba 2010” evangelization campaign: “With this campaign of 50 days of prayer for Cuba, we will be starting the plan “CUBA 2010,” a project that seeks to reach a million Cubans for Christ and [bring them into] 100,000 churches, by Christmas 2010” (Pérez 2008:5). According to the manual, Cuban Baptists (Western and Eastern)

initiated this prayer campaign on Sunday, the 23rd of March, which would continue until seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, on May 1st, 2008 (May 1st happens to be Labor Day in Cuba). On May 11th, 2008, the Day of Pentecost, the campaign culminated in a simultaneous and collective service at the same hour "in every Baptist church in Cuba and the world, asking for the power of the Holy Spirit for a spiritual transformation in our beloved country" (Pérez 2008:4).

Daily prayer topics and points of focus include evangelization within the context of a wide range of issues, such as coping with illnesses, attending to the elderly, honoring one's father and mother, and becoming a Christian leader. Throughout the prayer manual, however, lies a much more specific framework and argument: being *cubano* has its own particular idiosyncrasies that Christian Cubans should be aware of—and carefully analyze—in order to contextualize their religious message to non-Christian Cubans. "Day 6," for example, has an excerpt entitled "Characteristics of the Cuban."

Included among the characteristics list were such phrases as "Cuban's don't run: they burn rubber;" "Cubans don't obtain: they resolve, invent;" "Cubans don't talk a lot: they give molar (schmooze)" (Pérez 2008:15). At the bottom of the page, under the title "To think about" is the question, "How would the Cuban be, if he/she used their enormously rich way of communicating to praise God?" This Baptist prayer manual is using a discussion on Cuban colloquial language in order to encourage Cuban Christians to evangelize through a greater understanding of their own quotidian and everyday culture. In other words, "When in Havana, speak Cuban."

This push to "speak *cubano*" not only reflects a desire by Cuban evangelists to utilize local colloquial language and culture to spread their message. More than simply

an evangelization tool, it underscores a recent push by Cuban Protestants to carve out autonomous spaces of power and authority that are separate from the United States. While acknowledging historical connections between North American mission boards and the growth of Baptist work in Cuba, leaders within the Western and Eastern Baptist conventions have recently questioned the importation of North American methods and materials. This push to use *algo cubano* ("something Cuban") represents a re-definition of Cuban identity in light of a long, complex, and often ambivalent historical relationship with the United States.

## CHAPTER 5

### CUBAN PENTECOSTAL PRACTICE AND EVANGELIZATION

#### **When the Fire Fell in Los Angeles**

When the black Louisiana native William Joseph Seymour traveled from Houston to the City of Angels in 1906, he set in motion a series of events that eventually culminated in the development of Pentecostalism—one of the most rapidly growing forms of Christianity in the world today. Seymour began organizing prayer meetings after having been locked out of a storefront church in Los Angeles for his controversial Holiness teachings (Cox 1995:54). Notably, the groups of mainly black domestic servants and washerwomen who would catch the fire of his messages did so within house church meetings that began on Bonnie Brae Avenue (Cox 1995:55). Seymour had no money, no storefront church, and no skillfully crafted publicity campaign within a city that would eventually apply the terms “colossal” and “stupendous” to tiny pictures of celluloid (Cox 1995:57).

When the fire eventually fell on Seymour and his friend Edward Lee at the little house on Bonnie Brae Avenue, it spread quickly, apparently needing nothing more than word of mouth. Eventually, the visitors (some genuinely interested, others simply curious, and still others there to get a good chuckle) frequenting the house church became so numerous that they could not fit into the house; they had to move onto the porch, and then eventually were forced to locate a vacant wooden-frame building at 312 Azusa Street: the location of the Azusa Street Revival that scholars associate with one of the main focus points for the inception of Pentecostalism (Cox 1995:56). What brought people to Azusa Street? In of itself, the elements attracting people to the “fire spreading in Los Angeles” were already present: a deep-seated current of millennial

expectation running throughout the U.S., and a history of Holiness preaching in the area. It was “the particular combination that made it unique,” set within the context of the times (Cox 1995:60). The particular context was early 20th-century Los Angeles: a city with a history of mestizo, black, and Spanish ancestry that had exploded in population due to the combination of the coming of the railroads, the discovery of gold in the area, and the influx of immigrants. The city of Los Angeles was “a fertile field for the seeds Seymour would sow” (Cox 1995:50).

In addition to the more obviously measurable changes in demography, there was another notable reason why Los Angeles would have been considered a tinder box waiting to spiritually explode. The city had become “an arena of clashing dreams and rival eschatologies, where utopian socialists, real estate hawkers, script writers, and revivalists hustled the same crowds” (Cox 1995:51). It was, in other words, a city of paradoxes: it was filled with rival visions about what constituted “the good life” and a better future. The lowly, the downtrodden, and the disenfranchised who crowded into Seymour’s house church meetings first on Bonnie Brae Avenue and later in a former warehouse at Azusa Street were “hungry for a new hope” (Cox 1995:57). The previous, old hope had rested on an “effervescent eschatology of sunshine and wealth [that had] gone flat” (Cox 1995:58), and this was particularly so for individuals marginalized by poverty, disillusionment, and racism. The new hope, which notably was still eschatological in nature, carried with it a focus on two elements simultaneously: the imminent return of Jesus and the future establishment of the Kingdom of God in its total fullness, and God’s immanent presence in this world.

This new hope was also a vision for those who held it, an alternate vision of what the Kingdom of God in this world should be: “a racially inclusive people to glorify God’s name and to save a Jim Crow nation lost in sin” (Cox 1995:58). Seymour, who seemed to have lit the match on the timbers of a “supercharged religious atmosphere” in Los Angeles, did not create this new hope. He didn’t have to, because it was already present and talked about wherever he went (Cox 1995:114). In this sense, it wasn’t inherently “new,” *per se*, as it was already present, in a form, in those who held onto it. This is what Tillich (1990:185) would refer to as a “seed-like presence of that which is hoped for.” That which we hope for “is at the same time here and not here;” it is not here yet, and the hope might remain unfulfilled. “But,” he says, “[the hope] is here, in the situation and in ourselves as a power which drives those who hope into the future” (Tillich 1990:185).

Holding onto this hope was not without its struggles; it is, as Tillich (1990:184) explains, “hoping against hope.” Seymour faced harsh words and sharp condemnation, often from those who were once his closest friends and supporters; the interracial, highly emotive and “agitative” atmosphere of Pentecostal worship had apparently horrified some (Cox 1995:61). The wounds from former friends nearly broke him; Seymour even adjusted his central theological focus on the gift of speaking in tongues (glossolalia) as being the clearest evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit (Cox 1995:63). There was, in his mind, a deep-seated gap between what was and what should have been: how could those who had supposedly received divine baptism break away and put up racial barriers—the very barriers he believed the Holy Spirit was wanting to remove?

Clearly, however, these tensions did not stall the growth of the revival that grew out of Azusa Street. Quite the contrary; it expanded rapidly, in a flurry of “raw religious emotion” that rarely left people—insiders or outsiders—indifferent. The “uninhibited emotion” that prevailed among Pentecostals in worship contributed to a feeling among some of those reporting on the Azusa revival that it was sheer chaos and disorder—or, as one reporter put it, “hideous” (Wacker 2001:100). For insiders, however, the experience represented a direct and uninhibited contact with the divine, or “worshipping a God with skin” (Wacker 2001:87). The tensions and conflicts that Seymour encountered must have dampened his spirit; the fire that went out beyond LA, however, did not go out. When Jesus did not immediately return following the birth of the Pentecostal movement that explicitly focused upon the coming Kingdom of God, Pentecostalism itself did not disappear, because the hope that had been there already persisted (Cox 1995:111).

### **Why Is the Fire Spreading?**

In Latin America, explanations for why Pentecostalism has spread vary widely depending upon one’s methodological approach and perspective: some have maintained that the growth of Protestantism in general, and Pentecostalism specifically, is tied to feelings of moral rootlessness and anomie that have resulted from severe social and economic dislocations in Latin America (Willems 1967). Other scholars question the anomie thesis altogether, beginning with the assumption that there is genuine class conflict in Latin America, and that “Pentecostalism does not merely alleviate the alienation from society many people feel. Rather, it transposes it into another key...it is social protest expressed in religious form,” and it illustrates how

individuals and groups have been able to creatively make use of religious and symbolic power (Cox 1995:178-179).

Others argue that Pentecostalism represents a continuation of patterns of authority and practice from a previously established pattern of popular and folk Catholicism, whereby the Pentecostal pastor transplants onto an urban environment older rural patronage systems in a manner that attracts those on the economic fringes into a place of refuge (Lalive d'Epinay 1969). The opposite argument emphasizes Pentecostalism's break with hierarchical structures and social divisions, and that this form of Protestantism represents "an ecstasy, a breaking beyond the static" through speaking in tongues and divine healing (Martin 1990:202). More recently, the scholarly literature has shifted: Pentecostalism is "neither a foreign import nor a local branch of a transnational religious firm...but an authentic Latin American product" that has been particularly successful due to its ability to root itself in a local culture while uprooting it at the same time in a larger, transcendental epic narrative of the battle between good and evil (Casanova 2001:436-437).

If the heated arguments back and forth about the nature and appeal of Pentecostalism indicate anything, it is perhaps the confusing (and often paradoxical) nature of the Pentecostal movement itself. If outsiders, journalists, reporters, and those struck by sheer curiosity (or horror) were confused during the Azusa Street Revivals, it is perhaps not surprising that confusion (and curiosity) has persisted through the present day, with scholars continuing to ask themselves: what exactly is the appeal of Pentecostalism, and particularly in areas of the "Global South" where it appears to be spreading so rapidly—in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, China, and areas of the

former Soviet Union? Cox (1995:179) asks this explicitly, particularly upon pondering the success of Pentecostalism in areas such as China, Russia, and Ukraine: “If Pentecostalism is a sort of “seizure of religious power,” one that takes control of what [Rolim] calls the “means of symbolic production” of the dominant religion, and if it removes this authority from the hands of the traditional wielders, then how does one explain its growth in these formerly Communist countries?” My fieldwork indicates that through networks of house church meetings, small groups, and Pentecostal healing campaigns, Pentecostal and Charismatic forms of Christianity are spreading rapidly because Cubans desire “a new hope” of individual and social change. The “old” Revolutionary hope of transforming society, although clearly still at work, has faced the difficulties and complexities of an increasingly globalized world economy.

My central thesis is related to Cox’s (1995) discussion on the Azusa Street revivals in Los Angeles, and how Pentecostalism tapped into “a new hope” among, in particular, those who were disheartened, disillusioned, and disenfranchised within the paradoxical environment that was the “City of Angels.” I argue that Protestantism in general, and Pentecostalism specifically, has spread rapidly since the Cuban “Special Period” precisely because the “Special Period” represented a time of competing eschatological visions about “the good life,” human improvement, and gaps between the way things were, and the way things should have been. Like early 20th century Los Angeles, Havana had become a city of paradoxes, but under very different political and economic circumstances.

### **When the *Fuego* (Fire) Fell in Cuba**

Contemporary Pentecostalism in Cuba, similar to other forms of Protestantism and Evangelicalism in Cuba, has grown rapidly since the “Special Period.” As one

Pentecostal pastor put it (who's present church began as a *casa culto*), there has been a hunger, an “awakening” that has contributed to the growth of Evangelicalism in Cuba. This “awakening,” he noted, has also been tied to “the type of vision of work in Cuba” that involves more than simply encouraging people to convert “to fill up pews.” Through “a much more solid organization,” Evangelicalism in general, and Pentecostalism in particular, has grown through house churches, small “cell” groups, and evangelization methods that focus on a combination of health and healing campaigns and a variant of the “priesthood of all believers” theology that has been adapted to Cuba’s present context.

Similar to the Baptist denomination, Pentecostalism in Cuba did not develop in a vacuum. The Assemblies of God, which had its roots within the development of Pentecostalism in the U.S., formed in Cuba under the jurisdiction of the Department of Foreign Missions of the Assemblies of God in the United States (Ramos 1986:434). Notably, however, it was the work of a group of Puerto Rican evangelists who arrived in Cuba in 1933, along with other Pentecostals in the Caribbean, who seemed to have had a significant influence upon the development of Pentecostalism in Cuba in comparison with other foreign missionaries. The contemporary Cuban evangelization vision described in this section, for example, was originally brought to Cuba via missionaries from San José, who were highly influenced by popular evangelization campaigns and *sanidad divina*, or divine healing.

The development of Pentecostalism in its early years in Cuba possessed a decidedly ecumenical bent, as the work in Cuba united under the efforts of Caribbean evangelists, North American missionaries, and Cuban pastors. While the Puerto Rican

workers did receive some amount of material aid from districts affiliated with North American churches, Cuban Pentecostals themselves received little in terms of resources from foreign missionaries, and the majority of their incomes came directly from their small congregations. In 1950, a former Presbyterian Cuban who received the Pentecostal experience while visiting Puerto Rico returned to work under the Assemblies of God. Ezequiel Alvarez would later become one of the most influential figures of the Pentecostal movement in Cuba, and his tenure marked an important Pentecostal revival period from 1950-1951 (Ramos 1986:435-436).

This influential revival contained within it elements now very familiar to other evangelical missions and campaigns throughout the world today, but which are less salient (although notably growing) within Cuba's contemporary context: outdoor campaigns where thousands of people congregated in stadiums, the use of radio stations to promote evangelization, and "divine healing retreats." In central and eastern Cuba, in El Oriente and Camaguëy, municipalities and cities offered their open stadiums for use; in Puerto Padre, for example, the number of people attending the *cultos* would exceed the urban population of an area (Ramos 1986:437). The Cuban state has controlled radio and television broadcasting since the Revolution, and Cuban churches have rare access to these resources.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the Pentecostal revivals from 1950-1951 set in motion a series of influential events and practices that may be felt up to the present day in term of contemporary Cuban Pentecostal evangelization strategies and techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Jaime Ortega, for example, has broadcast on Cuban radio—most notably during Pope John Paul's 1998 visit to Cuba.

In 1956, Ezequiel Alvareaz was designated superintendent of the Assemblies of God work in Cuba, which came to be known from that point on as the Iglesia Evangélica Pentecostal de Cuba. The Pentecostal church in Cuba began to take on an explicitly national character: it was not simply a Pentecostal denomination that was in the country, but [one that] sought to be of the country (Ramos 1986:439). At this point in time, foreign missionaries were still arriving in the country, but Cuban Pentecostal churches on the whole continued to maintain themselves and grow out of Cuban soil in an autochthonous manner. This is confirmed by Massón Sena (2006), researcher within Cuba's *Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana* (Center for Investigation and Development of Cuban Culture). Massón Sena (2006:174) interviewed Rafael Columbié Cobas, the National President of the Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal, who stated that

Our church is from a clear ecumenical calling, and through its origins began to work with the poorest classes in the population, in their condition of autochthonous churches, [and] has certain elements of *cubanía* in its liturgy and membership.

This “ecumenical” calling, as well as the notion of a certain amount of *cubanía* (Cubanness) within Pentecostal liturgy, would indicate the influence of two currents running through the history and contemporary nature of Cuban Pentecostalism. On the one hand, there is clearly a history of regional dialogue in the Caribbean between Pentecostal and Charismatic missionaries and leaders, including the presence of Cubans who received the “Pentecostal experience” while abroad elsewhere in the Caribbean. On the other hand, some Cuban Pentecostal churches today have lost virtually all contact with the agencies that sent the first missionaries to Cuba, or that contact, when present, is minimal (Ramos 1989:118).

Since the 1959 Revolution in particular, independent churches in Cuba have mainly been Pentecostal, although independent churches have united with other groups (Ramos 1989:110). In other words, Pentecostalism in Cuba took on a “Cuban face” some time ago; according to Rafael Columbié Cobas, the Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal in particular was a church that “was born alongside the Revolution and has no foreign umbilical cord” (Massón Sena 2006:174). Outside of Cuba, scholars have increasingly argued that Pentecostalism has become “fundamentally a Latin American phenomenon” (Anderson 2004:63), with recent studies indicating that Catholicism has more foreign priests in Latin America than Pentecostal churches have foreign missionaries.

It is important to note that we should neither label Pentecostalism in the South as simply a North American creation or importation, nor gloss over the fact that the movement in the South is distinct from that of the North. It is true that there is more North American involvement and influence in Pentecostalism in both Central America and the Caribbean, due to their geographical proximity to the U.S. In spite of this geographical closeness and influence, there are still many “characteristics and emphases that have formed in these particular contexts that are distinct from North American forms of Pentecostalism” (Anderson 2002:64). The sheer amount of diversity and schisms within Pentecostalism makes it exceedingly difficult to draw uniform assumptions regarding the nature of Latin American and Caribbean Pentecostalism, or to place the nature of the movement within categories created in the North (Anderson 2004:64). Sometimes it is quite difficult to distinguish between “inside” and “outside” influences, or to “tell how much the theology of these independent or isolated groups

has been influenced as a result of their relations with denominations or other independent churches" (Ramos 1989:111).

### **Contemporary Cuban Pentecostal Worship and Practice**

The history of Pentecostalism in the Caribbean is complicated; a quarter of the population of islands such as Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Haiti are Pentecostal, whose denominations often have North American connections, "but with significant local character" (Anderson 2004:79). Caribbean Pentecostalism reveals "the importance of local preachers and women leaders and missionaries, who pervade the stories of Pentecostal churches in the region" (Anderson 2004:79). Cuban Pentecostalism also reveals this complexity. On the one hand, foreign missionaries and workers from other parts of the Caribbean have brought into Cuba Pentecostal and charismatic forms of worship, practice, and evangelization; on the other hand, Cuban Pentecostal men, women, the youth, and elderly have taken larger, Caribbean Pentecostal "scripts" and practices and incorporated and adapted them to Cuba's particular social and political circumstances. With an endemic lack of space in officially church buildings and structures, Cuban Pentecostals, along with other evangelicals, are carving out spaces for worship and evangelization that encourage autochthonous and self-replicating "cell," or small groups.

### **Cell Groups**

Within global Pentecostalism, the most vital and rapidly growing churches are those that adopt what's known as a "cell group model" for organizing their members (Miller and Yamamori 2007). This model, which directly places the work of church ministry within the hands of lay people, is a pragmatic way of coping with growth; the cell group structure "decentralizes the task of ministry to the laity, thus relieving the

clergy of the burden of ministering to thousands of people" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:194). Some scholars warn, however, that the use of "mixed methods" (i.e., decentralized cell groups alongside a hierarchical structure) is usually not successful; either a Pentecostal church wholeheartedly embraces the cell group model and completely re-organizes itself around it, or it stays with the "committee model, with lots of supervising clergy" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:192). Cuban Pentecostals, however, are successfully using both "official" churches and cell groups for both organizational methods and evangelization.<sup>2</sup> In fact, as we will see below, Cuban cell groups function as a primary method of evangelization.

This differs somewhat from what Miller and Yamamori (2007:194) found, who stated that "cell groups seldom exist for the primary purpose of evangelism." Instead, cell groups become what they call "the church without walls," an extension of the official church itself (Miller and Yamamori 2007:194). Divided into geographic zones and homogenous groups of church members living in a particular neighborhood, the cell group typically meets within someone's home. Within this intimate and personal space, a "group facilitator" leads a Bible study, followed by an open group discussion that allows participants to directly apply passages of scripture to issues and problems that members are currently facing, such as personal illness, issues at work, family problems, and other daily troubles. Cell groups "become like extended families...a moral community of significant others that places demands on its members" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:195).

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<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the Baptist use of "official" centralized churches alongside *casas culto* and *casas de oración* as part of the "Cuban model" of organization and practice.

In terms of leadership structure, global Pentecostal cell groups can serve as a living “laboratory” for leadership development (Miller and Yamamori 2007:194):

Rather than concentrating leadership in the hands of a few people at the top of the pyramid, the cell group structure allows every seventh or eighth person in the congregation to have some direct leadership role, and furthermore, in a growing church there is always upward mobility as cell groups divide and new leaders are brought on board. This is a far cry from the usually stagnant (and usually aging) leadership that dominates most pyramid-structured organizations.

As we will see below, Cuban Pentecostal cell groups contain some of the same characteristics that other scholars have found in their study of cell groups globally: a decentralized structure with an explicit focus on lay leadership; small, homogenous groups of participants who generally meet in homes; intimate and personalized meetings that seek to address concrete problems and issues through Bible study, collective reflection, and praying for one another’s needs. However, Cuban Pentecostals are taking the cell group organizational method and adapting it specifically to the Cuban context: namely, through an evangelism campaign known as the “Vision of the 12,” along with healing campaigns and spiritual retreats known as *encuentros*.

### **“The Vision of the 12”**

According to a Cuban Pentecostal woman in her early 30s who leads local evangelization campaigns, the “Vision of the 12,” or the “Vision of the Apostle” is a form of evangelization originally brought from San José, Costa Rica. Another Cuban Pentecostal in her mid-20s explained the significance of the vision and its connection to the apostolic practices of the early Christian church:

It’s a vision to bring to people knowledge of Jesus. It’s a vision that’s called “the vision of the 12” because we work the way that Jesus worked with his disciples, while he was [in his] ministry here on earth for three years. And in three years he was concerned with not only calling and preaching to many people, but he trusted 12 people. And those 12 people were with him

during three years...and so we, that's what we do in the work. We want to not only bring to people knowledge of the Lord; we want beyond that to make people disciples—real disciples.

In the Cuban context, this “Vision of the 12” operates in the following manner: a small, “homogenous” group referred to as a *grupo familiar* (familiar group) or a *grupo celular* (cell group) is divided between men and women; adult women minister to other adult women, adult men to other adult men, single Cuban women to other single Cuban women, etc. The young Pentecostal woman in her mid-20s explained to me that these small “cell” groups allow Cubans to minister to one another in an intimate, familiar, and comfortable space that allows people to “serve one another, understanding [many] needs that we have in all areas: spiritual needs, emotional needs, [and] physical needs.” Three people can start a “cell” group, and those three people in turn “agree to pray for another three [people].” She further explains that cell groups provide Cubans with more than simply time for prayer, but for communion:

The cell group is, above all things, a groups where we can feel in communion with one another...where we can share how we feel, the goals that we have. So many things that the *hermanos* can do. And in the cell groups the environment [encourages us] to feel that way. To feel the love of God, to help one another, to share.

Similar to the Cuban Baptist *casas culto* and *casas de oración* discussed in the previous chapter, Cuban Pentecostal cell groups provide an intimate and comfortable atmosphere with which to discuss daily issues and struggles ranging from singleness, marriage, and sexuality, to being a Christian within the school and workforce. They may also meet anywhere: during participant-observation of a Pentecostal cell group among young, single Cuban women in 2005, the meeting met on the back porch of a house. This “Vision of the 12” method of evangelization and practice has thus proven to be a

particularly effective strategy for using the private space of the home, where Cubans lack sufficient space within official church buildings to hold services.

It is also noteworthy that in order to form a “cell” group, a Cuban man or woman does not necessarily have to undergo formal seminary training. Thus, both Cuban men and women, through a contextualized version of the “priesthood of all believers,” use the “Vision of the 12” evangelization process in order to become “apostles of Christ.” Cuban Pentecostal women are frequently leaders in cell groups, evangelization campaigns, and what is known as the *encuentro*: a Pentecostal retreat that utilizes the “Vision of the 12” evangelization method in order to attract more women to become involved with divine healing campaigns. Notably, Cuban Pentecostal cell groups, in conjunction with this “Vision of the 12” campaign, are functioning in a relatively autonomous manner. Some cell groups may be connected to a larger “official” Pentecostal church, but—in theory—any 3 individuals may start a cell group, with or without formal seminary training. The idea is that each person in a group of 3 prays for and encourages 1 other person to attend the group, until “12 Apostles” have been recruited. The process then repeats itself, and small cell groups self-replicate on their own. This, I would argue, is one of the reasons why Pentecostalism in Cuba is spreading rapidly today. Another reason for rapid growth involves larger-scale healing campaigns, or spiritual retreats known as *encuentros*.

Through the multiplication of cell groups and the “Vision of the 12” evangelization method, Cuban Pentecostalism provides lay individuals and groups—both women and men alike—with leadership opportunities and the ability to become a “disciple for Christ.” Using very small-scale networks that can begin with 3 people and multiply to

12, homogenous groups of men and women, youth and elderly, minister to one another through prayer, service, and larger-scale healing campaigns called *encuentros*. Prior to these large-scale retreats, Cubans hold a series of *pre-encuentro*, or “pre-retreat” classes, geared towards new believers that have joined the cell groups. Following the *pre-encuentro* classes, Cuban men and women then attend a much larger-scale *encuentro* that, according to young Pentecostal women in her mid-twenties, involves a process of “ministering liberation,” or a “cleansing of the soul.” She elaborated further:

What they do in the retreat is, it has to do with the cleansing of the soul. All of it. There they give a series of conferences that work with all the areas of a person, even issues of sexuality and everything. Everything—from childhood to old age. Whatever age the soul is. All of those areas. They are a series of well-prepared conferences by the faithful that are helping with all this right now.

And so they immediately give conferences on each topic, and they minister within each area. They administer liberation in all areas that have affected the person. All types of areas: in emotional areas, in sexual areas, in relationships between you parents, your brothers, the elderly...in everything. There one can see that the person has already been influenced, the person has already been ministered to. And the ministration continues...the last day of ministration with you is very big. Logically, women minister to women...in the women’s conference. The men have a separate conference.

“Liberation” is a common theme heard within Pentecostal narratives. Within the context of Latin America, large numbers of individuals contend with “pathogens of poverty:” physical illness and lack of access to health care, abject poverty, alcoholism, and physical violence within the home (Chesnut 1997). When asked what “liberation in Christ” meant, one Cuban Pentecostal whose church initially began as a *casa culto* explained that “it means first and foremost for me [that] liberty in Christ [is] part of the mind. It’s part of the fact that Christ has liberated [one] from sin, all those series of things. But liberty in Christ [is also] part of the mind of a person.” Cuban Pentecostals

also emphasize other forms of liberation as well: liberation from physical illness, strained relationships, and the scars of sexual and physical abuse. It is significant, however, that particularly in the aftermath of the Special Period crisis, Cubans are describing “liberation” as a mental as well as spiritual process.

### **The Cuban *Encuentro***

In 2005, I had the opportunity to attend a Cuban Pentecostal *encuentro* with approximately 150 other women ranging in age from late teens to those 50s. For Pentecostal Cubans, the *encuentro* serves both an individual as well as a collective purpose. Miller and Yamamori (2007:143) arrived at a similar conclusion: they found that “Pentecostalism is simultaneously a communal experience and an individual encounter with the spiritual dimension.” On an individual level, the *encuentro* seeks to “cleanse the soul” and “minister liberation” through a series of conferences that address concrete issues and problems dealt with from infancy to old age: physical and mental illnesses, sexual and physical abuse, family discord, marital troubles, and financial difficulties, to name a few. During one conference, for example, one of the leaders led everyone in a collective prayer, encouraging participants to “raise their hands to the Lord” and “pray for their earthly fathers.”

Perhaps you had a father who never took you to school, or asked you how your day was. Maybe he never gave you the love you sought—a hug, a kiss, instead of a present. Maybe he was *machista*, and very controlling. He may have abused you as a child—abused you sexually, or physically. It’s time now to forgive your earthly fathers. Let us forgive them of whatever hurts or wrongs they may have done us. Let us receive the love of our Celestial Father.

This encouragement of forgiveness was an integral part of the *encuentro*; failing to forgive others could serve as an “obstacle to spiritual freedom.” Other obstacles included a wide range of issues, many of them psychological in nature: depression,

obsessive-compulsive disorders, lack of trust, inferiority complexes, fighting, feelings of guilt, cynicism, excessive worrying, and anxiety. Interestingly, the Cuban women at the *encuentro* were encouraged to “rebuke the evil spirits” that were behind these problems and issues. This involved a physical act: writing down on scratch pieces of paper each of the problems and issues that participants faced, and the names of individuals who had either caused the participants pain, or who had been on the receiving end of a painful experience.

At the end of the series of conferences, all those attending the *encuentro* collectively threw their pieces of paper into a large bonfire. At the International Church in São Paulo, Brazil, Miller and Yamamori (2007:154) witnessed similar events: each person at attendance during a Tuesday evening service was given a handkerchief-sized piece of white cloth, and was instructed to write on the cloth a “curse” that had been hindering their Christian life during the week. The following Tuesday, attendees would collectively burn the pieces of cloth, thus releasing them from the power of the “curse.” Although this could be interpreted as simply a symbolic act of cleansing, “it raises the interesting distinction between demons that are believed to literally exist and demonic “curses” that might be viewed metaphorically” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:155). Miller and Yamamori (2007:155) also interviewed Pentecostals, for example, who described the need for people to be delivered from the trauma of rape or child abuse, which seems to resonate with some of the “deliverance” conferences during the Cuban Pentecostal *encuentro*. However, “it is questionable whether this type of trauma is identified in the mind of believers with actual demons; rather, the need for deliverance refers to an incident in a person’s life that is controlling them, much like a demon might

have power over an individual's emotions and ability to function" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:155). We cannot definitively determine whether or not the demons that Pentecostals speak of exist literally, or metaphorically. We can, however, complicate some of the more reductive explanations given by some social scientists regarding this phenomenon (Miller and Yamamori 2007:156).

Interestingly, during the collective act of burning during the *encuentro*, a number of Cuban women broke out into seemingly uncontrollable laughter—what they referred to as the *gozo del espíritu* (the “joy of the Spirit”). This “blessing” in the Spirit preceded the “final blessing” of speaking in tongues: at the end of the *encuentro*, participants were encouraged to pray for the gift of glossolalia (speaking in tongues). This singing or speaking, speaking, or laughing “in the spirit” allows individuals to break out of the limits of humanly-constructed language and “communicate with the infinite” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:147):

For people accustomed to rational, linear thought patterns, speaking in tongues may make little sense, because the phenomenon is decidedly non-rational—although not necessarily irrational. Obviously human experience is filled with numerous nonrational activities such as laughing, crying, or dreaming, yet we would scarcely think of removing these experiences from the human experience.

This analysis begs an important question: what do we mean by “rational” vs. “non-rational” experiences? What determines the boundaries of rational analysis? This is an important question, particularly in light of the Cuban state’s historical connection to scientific materialism. Within the “Western” sense, what is considered “rational” has been tied to a larger discourse of philosophical dualism. This dualism involves the separation between the matter and spirit that we can trace not only back to Descartes, but to Plato and the religious discourses of early Christianity (Vásquez 2010:23). It is

assumed within this framework that if spiritual and material worlds are separated, “rational” elements that can be “empirically verified” are only located within the material realm. However, other cosmologies and worldviews do not make this separation between the sacred and the secular so explicit. In fact, the two realms are inextricably interconnected, through all levels of human behavior and organization: political, economic, cultural, and “religious.” Definitions of “rational” are also tied to specifically “Western” notions of individuality and self; in the United States, this has been translated into the notion of a free and autonomous individual self, able to pursue “rational” actions and choices free from external control. The Cuban case challenges some of these traditional notions of self in relation to society, as well as what we mean by “rational” and “real.”

The notion that spirits are very real—that they exist within the realm of human experience and can tangibly affect the material world through “blessings” and “curses”—is by no means new to Pentecostal discourse and practice.<sup>3</sup> What is notable here is the specifically Cuban context in which this “spiritual world” is operating: some Cubans who had “grown up atheist” underwent a rather sudden conversion experience during the “Special Period” economic crisis of the early 1990s, and turned to Evangelicalism. Take the case of Consuela, a Pentecostal woman in her early 30s whose conversion experience involved “God having direct contact” with her. In her late teens, Consuela became involved in a gang where she committed a series of robberies, and spent some

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, it is also not a new concept within African-derived religions that have played a very important part role in Caribbean religious thought and practice. *Santería* (Regla de Ocha), *Palo Monte*, and *Espiritismo* are African-derived religions in Cuba that maintain historical ties to West and West-Central African cosmologies. In these systems, malevolent forces—often tied to the purposeful neglect of one’s ritual duties to spirits, ancestors, and one’s community—can inflict illness, natural disasters, and discord between individuals and groups.

time in a Cuban jail. Without any prior contact with missionaries or evangelism, Consuela “heard God speaking to her” one day during a moment in which she suddenly felt an inexplicable pain in her whole body:

I felt a strong pain, and it was as if everyone else around me were dead. And the only one that remained alive in that moment was me. Nobody moved; I called out, but nobody heard me so that they’d know, so that they could help me with the pain that I was feeling, a strong pain. And the Lord spoke to me. And he said, “Consuela!” And I said, “Who calls me? Who’s calling me?” And it was [God] that was saying, who was calling me and saying to me, “Why don’t you flee that life that you’re living?”

One would be remiss, perhaps, without noting certain similarities between Consuela’s narrative and the Apostle Paul’s conversion on the “Road to Damascus.” Paul (previously Saul) reportedly fell to the ground upon hearing a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” After inquiring who the Lord was, Saul was told that it was Jesus whom he was persecuting, and that he was to go into the city and await instructions.<sup>4</sup>

In a number of respects, this narrative involving a sudden conversion experience is not new among evangelicals. In the case of El Salvador, patterns of violence and anti-social behavior endemic during the civil war became displaced from combat zones to neighborhood streets (Vásquez and Gómez 2001:167). Following an often dramatic conversion experience, former gang members join localized networks of Pentecostal churches that also operate transnationally. In this context, conversion to Evangelical Christianity provides former gang members with a safe, alternative space with which re-order their previously broken lives in the context of transnational immigration,

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 9:1-6.

globalization, deregulated capitalism, and El Salvador's still fragile post-civil war society (Vásquez and Gómez 2001:166).

Consuela's case, however, raises some important questions: if she personally had no contact with evangelists or church groups prior to her conversion experience, how are we to explain her suddenly hearing "the voice of God" one day? From the perspective of the social sciences, we are unable to "empirically" prove that she did hear God's voice. However, Consuela adamantly believes that she did, and this in turn has affected her personal and social practices. This has important implications for Cuban civil society, because it expands definitional boundaries of what it means to be a Cuban citizen beyond traditionally narrow definitions of Party members, or those that explicitly adhere to scientific-atheist ideology. From an analytical perspective, I am interested in more than just the social effects of Cubans' religious experiences; I want to analyze the notion of conversion itself within Cuba's post-Soviet context. This requires broadening our current repertoire of analytical tools of understanding processes of conversion and religious experience.

It would seem that social scientists have several options here. We could conclude that Consuela experienced some type of psychosomatic manifestation related to social and/or emotional disturbance, perhaps commensurate with her experiences as a gang member. This explanation is certainly possible, although perhaps not entirely satisfying, since it tends to reduce religious experience to the realm of internal psychology. Secondly, we could place her conversion experience within the context of Cuba's economic crisis; the "Special Period" did see an increase in crime, rates of alcoholism, drug addiction, and depression. Coincidentally, Cuban Pentecostals addresses some of

these very same issues within their *encuentros*; Consuela herself was one of the leaders during an *encuentro* that I attended. However, Cuba's economic crisis alone did not cause a religious renewal, although it certainly was an important contributing factor (Alonso 2005:244). I contend that we should avoid reducing religious experience and practice to macrosociological factors, or assume that crisis alone functions as an independent variable for religious change.

I propose that we take Consuela's religious experience as she has related it to us, if not at face value, then at least seriously. This might involve acknowledging that "there may be realms of experience that need to be incorporated within our theories of human behavior" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:109). Methodologically, I approach Pentecostal growth—as well as religious growth in general—in Cuba from a perspective that attempts to strike a balance between a "macro" and a "micro" level analysis. At the larger "macro" level, the Cuban case involves the historical presence of scientific materialism and Revolutionary discourse, both of which functioned not merely as economic and political determinants, but as value systems. This in turn must be connected with larger global economic changes, and their impact upon Cuban socialism. These larger issues and processes have helped shape the local context of conversion, by opening up new realms of human experience for Cubans at the grassroots level.

The post-Soviet environment in Cuba has called into question what it means to be human, human beings' relationship to society, and the Revolutionary hope of a better present and future. The "Special Period" economic crisis amounted to more than simply a severe lack of material resources; it caused Cubans to fall into states of despair and

hopelessness that negatively affected both mind and body. Like other parts of Latin America, healing is a crucial part of the appeal and spread of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. Healing has taken a different trajectory in Cuba, where socialized medicine and access to medical doctors has long been part of the Revolution's goals. In the context of Cuba's post-Soviet economic downturn, some of the afflictions that Cubans have faced have been physical. Often, however, they are mental in nature: depression, feelings of hopelessness, despair, apathy, and thoughts of suicide. This is indicative of the larger moral crisis that Cuba has faced since the "Special Period," where Cubans have been forced to reconcile the hopes of Revolutionary equality with the realities of economic globalization within Cuba's uneven, socialist economy.

### **Theorizing Healing**

Healing in its myriad of forms—physical, mental, and spiritual—has long played a pivotal, if not a central, role within Pentecostalism. Miller and Yamamori (2007) heard during the course of their fieldwork a number of accounts and narratives that seemed to defy traditional “Western” categories of explanation: people being raised from the dead; individuals regaining consciousness after suffering from brain aneurysms that resulted in comas; and a prison inmate with a psychiatrically-confirmed case of schizophrenia who was healed of their schizophrenic tendencies after reading the Bible to a blind cell mate (Miller and Yamamori 2007:111). It is possible that some accounts of healing “could have been the result of spontaneous remission of disease, individuals who were in epileptic comas, or circumstantial evidence that got exaggerated over time” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:153). On the other hand, “there may very well be mind-body interactions that religious intervention facilitates” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:153).

From a methodological perspective, these scholars attempt to maintain the challenging balance between “supernatural” explanations of healing with “naturalistic” explanations. A more radical suggestion might be to assert that these are not alternative explanations, but complementary (Miller and Yamamori 2007:158). The energy released during Pentecostal worship “is closely akin to what psychiatrists refer to as the libidinal force of life” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:142). In contrast to viewing religion in purely functional terms as a form of psychic compensation, Pentecostal worship can be generative, engendering “energized commitment to social service flows” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:142). Interestingly, Pentecostal worship and practice might not be a return to “primitivism” or “pre-modern” practices. Rather, it is instead postmodern: a unification of the traditional mind-body dualism that has long characterized certain strains of Christian thought:

It encourages people to merge mind and body into a unified expression that honors emotional and physical elements as integral elements of worship. From this perspective, what looks like old-fashioned worship that is located primarily within the head and does not involve all the senses. Joyous ecstasy is fully compatible with contemporary life and in fact adds a dimension to life that often does not exist in a modern, secular, truncated worldview (Miller and Yamamori 2007:142).

Perhaps, then, we should break down the historical dichotomy between mind and body, spirit and matter, and understand how “flesh and spirit are intermingled” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:158). Theologically, this is a very Christian idea—the notion that God was made manifest in human form. However, adding the variable of the realm of the Spirit “to one’s theoretical tool kit” doesn’t necessarily mean ruling out the use of traditional social science variables (Miller and Yamamori 2007:159). Possession by the Holy Spirit, speaking in glossolalia (tongues), and supernatural healing represent a dynamic system of communication that promotes the healing and transformation of

one's entire being: mind, body, and spirit. Through healing in constant prayer, mind and body are unified, and the individual is united to the community through the acknowledgement that healing is a communal activity (Martin 1990:166).

Csordas (2004:167) elaborates further on this mind-body connection in his thesis about religion. The term "religion," he explains, is an incredibly loaded term:

But let us be aware that in religious studies the stakes in the battle between explanation and understanding are even higher than for the same battle in anthropology. In religious studies the scientific account is pitted against the theological commitment, and to admit that religion has any existence *sui generis* implies the theological conclusion.

The problem with this battle in of itself, Csordas (2004) argues, is not that phenomenologists of religion are too psychological in their approach, or that they are inherently biased and ethnocentric theologians. The problem is fundamentally a methodological one that comes from what he calls "reifying alterity:" making "otherness" (or the notion of transcendence, if you will), into an object that is "out there" and separate from ourselves as subjects. In what he refers to as "intimate alterity," Csordas (2004) flips the immanence-transcendence debate on its head—or perhaps more accurately, he illustrates their interdependence. What makes us fundamentally human is that we are already in the world from a stance of alterity. In other words, we inherently "embody otherness" as a part of ourselves. Paradoxically, our search for that which is "transcendent" and "wholly other" is not an effort to make the "unknowable" knowable. "It is immanence and not transcendence that constitutes the true otherness of animal oblivion to which our consciousness aspires" (Csordas 2004:168).

What does this idea of "intimate alterity" mean for Charismatic or Pentecostal healing? In the practice of "resting in the Spirit," for example, a person is "overwhelmed" by the divine presence, typically falling backwards. One could,

obviously, provide a psychoanalytic explanation for this phenomenon. Csordas (2002), however, goes further than this: from empirical work done among Charismatic Catholics and ritual healing in Navajo Society, he argues that forms of religious healing are not only “analogous to those of formal medicine and psychotherapy, but that there is also something explicitly religious about religious healing, something that has a profound capacity to affect the transformation of culture and self” (Csordas 2002:2).

Through the notion of “cultural phenomenology,” we can collapse the distinction between the mind and the body that has long been endemic not only within academic studies, but within philosophy and theology as well (Csordas 2002:4). For Csordas (2002:3), the purpose of religious healing is not so much the elimination of an object (a problem, an illness, a disorder), but the transformation of a person—a bodily being that is a product of culture no less than of biology. If this is true—if religious healing has the capacity to transform human beings in society that are biologically as well as culturally embodied subjects, then we need to further examine the relationship between individual religious healing and larger social change.

Let us place this theoretical perspective within the context of Cuba’s Pentecostal *encuentros*: the spiritual retreats that emphasize achieving “liberation” through a systematic rebuking of evil spirits and “curses.” These “curses” are notably identified with certain mental and physical traumas suffered during one’s life. Miller and Yamamori (2007:156) found a similar phenomenon in Bangkok, Thailand through a Pentecostal pastor who distinguished between two types of “deliverance:” one form involved deliverance from psychological wounds and traumas that could exert negative control over a person’s life; the other form did indeed involve delivering people from

literal possession by demons.<sup>5</sup> There is a similar phenomenon among Charismatic Christian forms of healing: rather than the typical ethnographic description of evil spirits as “outside” objects who internally possess subjects, “the healer stresses “release” from bondage to the evil spirit over “expulsion” of the spirit that invades and occupies the person” (Csordas 2002:67).

Within the Charismatic healing system, the issue of control appears to be the central issue. Problems, issues, and trauma are characterized as a loss of control to demonic influence; the objective in religious healing is to release the individual from the bondage of that influence and surrender control to the will of God, whose strength returns self-control and wholeness to the individual (Csordas 2002:67). This is what one Cuban Pentecostal woman (who had grown up atheist) meant when she stated that “true freedom” involved, ironically, a giving up of control over one’s life and circumstances, and “feeling happy doing it.” She noted that this process was a “little paradoxical.”<sup>6</sup>

This understanding of healing as a release of control does not answer our aforementioned inquiry about whether or not demons and evil spirits empirically exist. It does, however, “help us understand certain features of experiential indeterminacy in dealings with evil spirits” (Csordas 2002:67). Degrees of control—to what extent and to what point an emotion such as anger becomes an evil spirit of Anger, and how much of an influence it can have over a person’s life—are characterized; this might explain the distinction heard between different type of “deliverance.” However, there doesn’t

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<sup>5</sup> See also Garrard-Burnett 2007

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, June 2005.

appear to be specific, objective criteria for these degrees of control in practice. Religious healers do not “diagnose” a problem in the exact same way medical physical might; they “discern” what the issue is (Csordas 2002:67). Also, if we return to Csordas’ (2002:3) theory on religious healing, its objective is not to simply “remove” the problem within the body, but to transform the person. This is crucial for understanding the growth of Pentecostalism in Cuba, precisely because of Cuban Revolutionary goals to transform human beings and their relationship to society.

### **Healing Minds and Bodies: Explaining Pentecostal Growth in Cuba**

The 1959 Revolution brought about a number radical changes to Cuba’s previous social and economic order: redistribution of wealth and resources; universal health care and access to doctors within the countryside; a food rationing system; and the promotion of equal opportunity and participation between men and women in the home and workplace through the Federation of Cuban Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas) (1960) and the Family Code (1975). At the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Cubans at the grassroots level not only faced severe material and food shortages: they were suddenly forced to mentally re-evaluate their present in light of an uncertain future. In light of Revolutionary discourse that emphasized both a call to sacrifice and the need to struggle for the larger society, many Cubans wondered whether a better present or future was possible.

The Cuban Revolution was all-encompassing; it was a “relentless process of struggle and sacrifice, often on a heroic scale, against insuperable odds, in the face of chronic scarcities, shortages, and rationing, against internal mismanagement and external pressure” (Pérez 2005:353). The case of Cuba forces us to re-examine traditional explanations for the spread of Pentecostalism, or at least place them within a

very particular context. The Cuban Revolution resulted in significant changes in national education, health care, and equality for women; we can in some respects contrast this with the “pathogens of poverty” that Chesnut (1997) discusses in his analysis of the growth and spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America. In the Cuban context, however, the spread of Pentecostalism—particularly with respect to healing—must be placed within Cuba’s unique post-Soviet context.

To understand the growth of Cuban Pentecostalism, we must return to the social, political, and economic context of the “Special Period” economic crisis. As we saw in Chapter 2, some Cuban sociologists have characterized the Special Period as so traumatic that it “marked the very subjectivity of the Cuban populace” (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:95). The Special Period crisis was more than simply severe shortages in food, petroleum, and numerous other goods and resources; it was a crisis in values. Revolutionary discourse, through Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s notion of “The New Man,” had one central and main objective: the transformation of human beings and society. From a moral and ethical perspective, the Cuban Revolution appealed to altruistic elements within a specific utopian socialist vision, one that emphasized working for “moral” rather than “material” incentives.

During the Special Period, however, Cuba saw a number of social and economic changes that posed challenges to this vision, not the least of which involved a plummet in imports from the former Soviet Bloc and a severe drop in the international price of sugar. In order to bring in much-needed “hard currency” to off-set this economic downturn, the Cuban government began to actively promote “sun and sand” tourism, in conjunction with international joint ventures for hotel building projects, restructuring of

buildings in “Old Havana” (*Habana Vieja*), and other efforts to encourage tourism. Significantly, the Cuban government decriminalized the U.S. dollar in 1993; up until that point, it was illegal for Cubans to either possess or use it, thus significantly contributing to an overwhelming informal or “black market” economy. Decriminalizing the dollar was seen as an effort to both curb the informal economy and circulate much-needed hard currency within the system. In addition, the Cuban government created special “dollar stores” for those able to purchase goods and resources not found elsewhere (Hernández-Catá 2001; Caraway 2003).

Promoting tourism on the island posed a number of economic and ideological challenges to the Cuban state; the Revolution had, after all, aimed to correct the social and economic inequalities endemic in Cuba’s 1950s society, when it was known as the “Las Vegas of the Caribbean” (Facio et al. 2004:122). In addition to the well-known closing of casinos, the Cuban government passed Law 993 in 1961, which effectively outlawed prostitution (Facio et al. 2004:125). In addition, in August of 1960 the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) was created, aimed at eliminating social and economic inequality between men and women, and—most notably—integrating Cuban women into the workforce: women became doctors, lawyers, engineers, technicians, university professors, and workers in sugar factories, mills, and in other light industries (Facio et al. 2004:125).

The Special Period economic crisis, however, placed a severe strain upon both economic and social relations in post-Soviet Cuba. An increased number of foreign tourists on the island brought with it a number of conflicts and ideological contradictions with utopian socialism: a growing discrepancy between Cubans who had access to U.S.

dollars, and those who did not;<sup>7</sup> an increased sexualized division of labor that coincided with *jineterismo* and the visible presence of sex workers in Havana, who are willing to provide sex access to foreign tourists in exchange for material compensation (Wonders and Michalowski 2001:559); and the commodification and racialization of women's bodies—particularly darker-skinned Cuban women (Facio et al. 2004:129). With the promotion of tourism as a primary form of generating economic revenue came what's commonly known as the "Cuban brain drain:" those within medical, educational, and other professional fields have left in order to pursue options within the tourism industry—including prostitution. The Special Period economic crisis was indiscriminate in who it affected: men and women of all educational levels, political viewpoints, and family backgrounds pursued *jineterismo*; sex work could potentially bring in more money in one evening than most Cubans earned in a year (Facio et al. 2004:121; Nuñez-Sarmiento 2010). From an ideological perspective, this situation seemed shocking and even contradictory; sex tourism in Havana, and Cuba's role in the global sex trade in general, potently illustrates that "the forces of globalization are so far-reaching that they are being felt even in a socialist society that was once able to claim the elimination of prostitution and the reorientation of prostitutes to non-sexual labor as one of its earliest revolutionary accomplishments" (Wonders and Michalowski 2001:559)

What did the Special Period mean for Cubans mentally as well as physically? It meant broken minds as well as bodies. Many were, as one Cuban put it,

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<sup>7</sup> This discrepancy might explain why, from an ideological perspective, Fidel Castro decided to re-criminalize the U.S. dollar in 2004. Today, however, there is still a growing disparity between those who have access to the Cuban *convertible* (CUC), which is on par with the U.S. dollar and generally reserved for tourists and international transactions, and those who do not. Cubans who either work within the tourism industry, or have family abroad can gain access to the CUC.

“hopeless...anguished.”<sup>8</sup> To put it simply, things were not as they should have been: unemployment skyrocketed; at the grassroots level, Cubans began to fall into despair, hopelessness, and apathy; levels of suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence increased; and doctors, lawyers, professors, and other professionals seemingly had no choice but to leave the fields in which they were trained to pursue work that was, in one Cuban woman’s words who had studied English literature for five years, “not very satisfactory” (Facio et al. 2004:120). At an everyday level, it was not merely Cuba’s beautiful beaches and classic 1950s cars that became “commodified” in the attempt to insert the island into the global economy; it was the bodies of many Cubans themselves, particularly those who entered into *jineterismo*.

### **Healing Broken Minds and Bodies in post-Soviet Cuba**

Religious healing, as we have seen, plays a fundamental role within Pentecostal worship and practice. From what Csordas (2002:64) refers to as a “nondualistic paradigm of embodiment for the study of culture,” we must collapse the distinction made between mind and body, subject and object, in order to gain a better understanding of the transformative power of religious healing. Methodologically, the human body is not merely an important object of study. A “paradigm of embodiment can be elaborated for the study of culture and self” (Csordas 2002:64). This approach to understanding the relationship between the body, culture, and self—as well as religious practice—is a challenging one; Csordas (2002) is essentially attempting to strike a balance between phenomenological approaches (Merleau-Ponty 1962) to the study of religion, and sociological approaches (Bourdieu 1977).

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, July 2006

I would argue, in line with this paradigm, that we need to seek a theoretical “middle ground” between the phenomenological and the materialist approaches to the study of the spread and growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal movements in Cuba. This is particularly important if we are to place empirical data on Cuban Pentecostalism, such as the use of cell groups and *encuentros*, within the context of social and economic change in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, reducing religious experience and ritual healing to the realm of psychoanalysis simply cannot grasp the full picture of the effect and power of religious practice; this is particularly so if we start to break down previously assumed divisions between mind and spirit, subject and object, and immanence and transcendence. On the other hand, reducing religion to society can be as equally misleading. In taking issue with Durkheim’s (1995) definition of religion, Csordas (2002:82) argues that by “restricting the human experience of otherness to the category of the social, however, Durkheim committed a major error of reductionism.” He committed this reductionism by arguing that society creates the sacred by characterizing it as something “wholly other” and outside of the individual in society, thereby establishing an absolute moral authority (Csordas 2002:82).

It is interesting that both methodological perspectives on the study of religion—the phenomenological and the materialist—can ironically arrive at the same assumption regarding the “sacred,” even though they are supposedly operating from widely different perspectives. Both can assume that there exists “subjective” versus “objective” realms of knowledge and experience, through a distinction that has been made between subjects (human beings) and objects (things). Within the academic study of religion, there has been a tendency, for example, to draw a distinction between supernatural

(i.e., “wholly other”) and natural (i.e., “objective”) explanations for religious phenomena. Pentecostalism, however, breaks down this distinction; it “unites spirit and matter” in a way that suggests that these explanations are not separate, but complementary (Miller and Yamamori 2007:158).

As we have seen in the case of *encuentros*, Cuban Pentecostalism emphasizes “liberation” and deliverance from the “curses” of mental and physical afflictions: depression, mental illness, physical and sexual abuse, anxiety, frustration, familial discord, and others. The post-Soviet Special Period economic crisis in Cuba saw an increase in precisely these same problems and issues. In addition—and perhaps most significantly—the complexities and contradictions within the Special Period economic crisis coincided with a crisis in values, as Cuba’s socialist utopian vision for transforming human beings and society ran up against the harsh realities of economic austerity and global capitalism. Cubans at the grassroots level during the Special Period were confused, frustrated, and broken—in body, mind, and spirit. Quite simply, they were losing hope in either a better present or a better future.

Pentecostalism, which emphasizes transformative healing through prayer, speaking in tongues, and both individual and communal worship, provided Cubans during the Special Period with powerful, “this-worldly,” and tangible forms of religious healing that united body and spirit. What we might call the “transcendent”—what both theological and academic studies of religion have described as that which is “wholly other”—was not “outside” the realm of human and immanent experience; rather, it was deeply enmeshed within it, through the practice of Pentecostal healing. This religious healing sought not to simply remove “outside” problems and issues; it sought—and

seeks—to transform the individual. I argue that similar to other forms of Pentecostalism found globally, this uniting of matter and spirit has played a crucial role in the rapid spread of Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity in Cuba. In addition, networks of “cell groups” and large-scale spiritual retreats have provided Pentecostal lay men and women alike with important decentralized leadership roles; through these organizational methods, Cubans have localized the theological notion the “priesthood of all believers” through the use of cell groups and the “Vision of the 12” evangelization strategy. In order to better understand religious change in Cuba, we must take both of these factors into account: larger, “macro” sociological and economic issues, as well as local narratives and practices.

## CHAPTER 6

### TANGIBLE HOPE

#### **Why Hope?**

The title of this dissertation encourages a re-evaluation of what we mean by the concept of hope. Philosophically, hope has often been interpreted abstractly; the assumption that hope has no empirical foundation "has led many philosophers to make a purely moral argument for hope" (Miyazaki 2004:12). In other words, hope as such is a notion that cannot be empirically verified through "rational" proof, and presumably therefore lies outside the boundaries of concrete social scientific analysis. Within Christian thought, there was a notable shift from a concrete hope in the second coming of Christ to an abstract hope for an afterlife (Moltmann 1967; Miyazaki 2004:12). Within the United States in particular, certain forms of Protestant Christianity emphasize a private form of religiosity, grounded within Western philosophical notions that separate the "sacred" and the "secular," the public and the private (Peterson 2009:46).

The Cuban case complicates these traditional understandings of hope and religiosity; in this chapter I therefore employ a multivariate and interdisciplinary approach in order to help us better understand why Cubans have turned to religion in general, and to Protestantism specifically, in the post-Soviet era. From a theoretical perspective, I engage the philosophical and theological literature that analyzes hope as a concrete process and force for both individuals and collectives, rather than simply an abstract and "otherworldly" concept. This, I argue, is a better way to understand the kind of hope that Cuban Protestants turned to after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the "Special Period" resulted in a "crisis of values, and of conduct" (López Vigil 1997).

Secondly, the Cuban case also complicates traditional Western notions of a

private and individualistic piety. We saw this most concretely within the house church phenomenon, which explicitly blurred boundaries between "public" and "private" spaces. The Cuban case also challenges certain individualistic notions of human nature that are tied to a calculating, "rational" pursuit of self-interest. The Cuban Revolution, for example, directly challenges this notion of personhood through its discourse on the development of a "New Man." The type of Protestantism that Cubans have turned to since the Special Period differs from the private and individualistic piety dominant within the United States, and this has directly shaped the type of religious practice that is operating on the ground in post-Soviet Cuba. This religiosity is exemplified through a type of hope that is concrete and capable of contributing to larger social change, rather than an abstract concept focused solely upon the afterlife. Therefore, this chapter also analyzes what hope means sociologically, and how hope as a "religious good" might differ from other forms of what sociologists refer to as social capital (Bourdieu 1977; Putnam 2000). My aim is to bring the notion of hope within the realm of sociological analysis, using the Cuban case as a launching point for a larger discussion about religion and social change.

### **What is Hope?**

If we assume that there is no empirical ground for hope, then "on what grounds and for what should one hope" (Miyazaki 2004:12)? Empirical data—a fundamental part of knowledge formation within the scientific method—is data that can be observed through the senses, measured, and tested through experimentation and hypotheses. Thus, in terms of the notion of hope, we are confronted with a set of central questions: what is hope, exactly, and how can it be observed and measured? Can we even do so? At first glance, the answer would appear to be no: hope, at least in the traditional

philosophical sense, has not been conceptualized in empirical terms, but in the abstract; it is an idea—and perhaps even a completely existential idea—that falls within the category of faith and morality in general, and a faith beyond human knowledge specifically (Miyazaki 2004:13).

For many philosophers, the lack of empirical evidence is the root of the problem for hope (Miyazaki 2004:12). However, framing the problem in this manner reveals the underlying limits of philosophy itself: it is retrospective rather than prospective in character (Miyazaki 2004:13). It has been unable to grasp the future-oriented nature of hope, precisely because it assumes that that which is "not yet" cannot be empirically observed and measured within the temporal horizon of the "here and now." Miyazaki's (2004) reading of Bloch's (1986) work, which "analyzes a variety of hopeful visions ranging from daydreams to fantasies about technology to detective stories and the Bible" (Miyazaki 2004:49), interprets hope as a process and a method of knowledge, rather than as an object per se. Through analysis of Fijian migration narratives, gift-giving rituals, and Christian discourse and practice, Miyazaki (2004) analyzes how the Suvavou people were able to maintain—and, indeed, produce—moments of hope within their own particular postcolonial experience. In spite of consistent government rejections in response to demands for compensation for the loss of their ancestral lands, residents in Suva continue to issue petitions.

At first glance this may appear to be a futile effort or hope—a lost cause, or a hope not grounded within reality. However, within the Fijian context, the Suvavou people are seeking ways to present their requests to the government (and themselves) in an "effective" manner. For the Suvavou people, "an effective manner of request has

become a search for the truth and vice versa" (Miyazaki 2004:49). Thus, their hope, so to speak, is inextricably grounded within a search for self-knowledge. The "official" account of their self-identity, contained within government documents, belongs within the temporal realm of the past; from the point of view of the present, it is not open to reinterpretation (Miyazaki 2004:109). In order to grapple with this temporal incongruity, the Suvavou people deployed specific ritual strategies that included, for example, proposing a series of questions that triggered internal debates among government officials about land claims (Miyazaki 2004:79).

This process of questioning—and awaiting a response—is deeply tied to an indigenous theory of attendance and response that other anthropologists have observed in Fiji (Miyazaki 2004:98). This theory is also at work within a distinctly Fijian form of ritual gift-giving, in which the gift-givers temporarily place their own agency in suspension, followed by a subsequent moment when the gift-receivers recuperate the former's agency (Miyazaki 2004:99). These rituals and strategies are for concrete examples of "replicating a past unfulfilled hope on another terrain...the method of hope, in other words, is predicated on the inheritance of a past hope and its performative replication in the present" (Miyazaki 2004:139). The power of hope within this context lies precisely within its ability move Fijian people forward in a prospective momentum.

Viewing hope in this manner, as process of knowledge formation that can be observed within human behavior, forces philosophy (as well as other disciplines) to reorient itself towards both the present and the future (as opposed to a retrospective focus on the past). This reorientation, however, requires us to move away from viewing the past-present-future relationship in a linear and teleological fashion (Miyazaki

2004:19), and to explore the possibility that the things we experience in our present and everyday lives contain within them glimpses of all three temporal planes—the past, the present, and the future.

If we assume that hope is something intangible and not empirically verifiable with the present, we also assume that hope belongs squarely within an "otherworldly" and future realm that we cannot see, feel, or experience. As the previous discussion on philosophy's temporal orientation suggests, however, this assumption is problematic. It forecloses the possibility of analyzing the possibility of hope as a transformative force that is directly connected to human transformation and social change. I argue, building upon Bloch's (1986) philosophy, that hope is real and measurable in the sense that it can be experienced within concrete moments of everyday life. It also plays an indispensable role within social change; as a propelling force and process, it motivates both individuals and collectives to act within the "here and now."

### **Anxiety and Despair as Lack of Hope**

Bloch (1986:74), within his three-volume analysis of human knowledge, consciousness, and transformation, argues that there are four emotions that fall within the category of "expectation:" anxiety, fear, hope, and belief. These emotions, he explains, contain a focus and drive that is long-term, "whose drive-object does not yet lie ready, not just in respective individual attainability, but also in the already available world, and therefore still occurs in the doubt about exit or strategy" (Bloch 1986:74). It is interesting here that emotions such as hope, anxiety, and fear should fall within the same analytical category, given that their respective connotations suggest both positive and negative emotions. All these emotions are focused upon an object or outcome within what the "Not-Yet" category: what is yet to come, but still implying a real future

(Bloch 1986:75). Fear and anxiety are negative expectant emotions, and they contain mood-based elements in common with hope. Hope, however, "stands as one of the most exact emotions above every mood...it drowns anxiety" (Bloch 1986:75). It does this by projecting current (and often disappointed) realities onto other horizons of possibilities. Recalling Miyazaki's (2004) analysis of Fijian ritual production of hope, the importance and significance of hope lies precisely within its temporal resetting quality. Hope, in other words, maintains a prospective momentum of moving forward by replicating a past unfulfilled hope onto another terrain (Miyazaki 2004:139).

Despair, however, is the "hardest borderline mode of fear, the absolutely negative expectant emotion. And only this, not anxiety, really refers to nothingness" (Bloch 1986:111). In other words, despair goes above and beyond the negative expectant emotion of anxiety; anxiety still contains within it an emphasis upon some expected future outcome or object, however uncomfortable the feeling may be at the time. Despair, however, does not technically fall within the category of expectant emotions. It does more than simply presuppose a negative end result; it negates the future possibility of any result other than what is currently experienced on a temporal horizon. Despair thus represents a state of paralysis, of inaction, and lack of moving forward within history. The power of hope, then, lies precisely within its ability to propel human beings forward out of states of despair; it prompts "radical reorientation of knowledge to the future" (Miyazaki 2004:130). Referring to a process and rather than simply some future end result or object, however, hope is a real and tangible force within the present; it is "ultimately a practical, a militant emotion, it unfurls banners" (Bloch 1986:12).

During the Special Period economic crisis especially, the Revolutionary utopian hope of creating a new "Cuban man" (and woman) within an egalitarian system ran sharply up against contradictions within "late socialism." In order to off-set the economic crisis, the Cuban state has implemented a "dual" currency system; Cubans working for the state are paid in local *pesos*, but tourists carry the more valuable *convertible*, which is roughly on par with the dollar. Referred to as the "brain drain," Cuban professionals—doctors, lawyers, academics, and others—have turned to the tourism industry in order to make a higher monthly income than they would earn for the state, which is about 20 dollars per month in Cuban *pesos*. Cuba's mixed economy, which promotes consumption of Cuba's "sun and sand" through international tourism, has increased the discrepancy between those who have access to hard currency and material goods, and those who do not. I argue that this has resulted in a crisis of utopias: competing visions for "the good life" within late socialism that have resulted in acute and long-term states of anxiety, despair, and hopelessness among Cubans at the grassroots level.

If Bloch (1986) is correct in characterizing despair as an absolutely negative state that negates the future possibility of any result other than what is being currently experienced, then Cubans during the Special Period simply stopped moving. In short, they lost hope that a better world was even possible. As we will see Cuban Protestants gained a "new hope" that pulled them out of paralyzing states of despair. Beyond even this, however, this new hope was not an abstract utopia focusing on the afterlife, but a concrete and motivating force for helping fellow Cubans both materially and spiritually.

## The Theology of Hope

In an analysis of several of the most influential thinkers on hope, Capps (1976:34) boldly inquired, "What happened? What ever happened to hope? At one time, it almost seemed as if Ernst Bloch, Jürgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, and the others had unlocked a secret. It was as though they had discovered a way to get into the future before the future happened. It was as though one could live in the future while the future was still not-yet." The "turn to hope" was notably nothing new; the philosophy of hope had its real roots with classical Greek philosophy—which in turn implies that Bloch's suggestions were drawing upon an already existent and deeply embedded genealogy (Capps 1976:35).

Significantly, because of Moltmann's (1967) theology of hope, "Christian intellectual understanding will never be able to violate a commitment to the reality of change" (Capps 1976:46). Moltmann (1967:25) maintained that hope was very real, and that it was a process:

Thus hopes and anticipations of the future are not a transfiguring glow superimposed upon a darkened existence, but are realistic ways of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities, and as such they set everything in motion and keep it in a state of change. Hope and the kind of thinking that goes with it consequently cannot submit to the reproach of being utopian, for they do not strive at things that 'have no place,' but after things that have 'no place as yet' but can acquire one.

Moltmann (1967) also shares with Bloch (1986) a similar perspective on despair, but from the perspective of Christian theology and eschatology: the "sin of unbelief is manifestly grounded in hopelessness" (Moltmann 1967:22). Although traditionally it has been assumed in Christian theology that sin in its "original" form consists of pride, in wanting to be like God. This, however, is really only a part of the story: the other major part of sin is actually "hopelessness, resignation, inertia and melancholy" (Moltmann

1967:22). Provocatively, Moltmann (1967:23) suggests that the real problem, the "sin which most profoundly threatens the believer," is not the evil that a person does. Rather, it is the good that they do not do, in not believing themselves capable of fulfilling the promises made to them by God. This notion has theological, practical, and social implications, for it suggests that hopelessness, as a state of despair, precludes the possibility of good action—not simply towards one's self, but to others as well.

Moltmann would later, during a major conference on hope in New York City in 1971, dramatically switch his attention "to the actual conditions of poor, hungry, outcast, and significantly, oppressed, displaced, and disestablished persons" (Capps 1976:44). This was notably not inherently new; a number of the key theological and philosophical advocates of the "hope movement" had themselves experienced displacement, oppression, and even moments of hopelessness and despair themselves (Capps 1976:36). The letters and papers of the German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who joined the political resistance movement against Nazism before being executed in a concentration camp, are cited as inspiration and implicit precedent for the works of theologians of hope (Capps 1976:37). In a letter written to his student Eberhard Bethge dated July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944 (while he was awaiting trial), Bonhoeffer (Bonhoeffer et al. 2010:488) stated that

I am still preoccupied with the claim—which with him is certainly no cliché—that no person can live without hope, and that people who have really lost all hope often become wild and evil. This leaves open the question whether hope in this case equals illusion. Certainly the significance of illusion for life is not to be underestimated, but for the Christian I think the only important thing is to have well-founded hope. And if even illusion has sufficient power in people's lives to make life go on, how great, then, is the power that an absolutely grounded hope has for life, and how invincible such a life is. "Christ, our hope"—this formula of Paul's is the strength of our life.

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer and Bloch overlap in “striking ways” (Capps 1976:37), principally with respect to the theme of bondage and oppression, and release from that bondage as the cornerstone of human salvation. Squarely within the Marxist tradition, Bloch (1986:150) identified human bondage with alienation, and the salvation of humanity with “that yearning and overhauling image of the world without alienation.” Bonhoeffer, who shared with Moltmann an emphasis on the “presence of God in exclusively human, this-worldly form,” (Capps 1976:xiii), characterized bondage in this way, on the notepaper of his Tegel prison cell: “Contempt for the world turns into bondage of the world; on the basis of contempt for the world one renounces changing the world and thus sustains it as it is” (Bonhoeffer et al. 2010:39).

This statement from Bonhoeffer bears a striking resemblance to Moltmann’s (1967:23) critique of despair as “seeking to preserve the soul from disappointments.” In despair we assume that there is no hope, and try to “remain on the solid ground of reality.” It is in adopting this “so-called realism dictated by the facts [that] we fall victim to the worst of all utopias—the utopia of the status quo (Moltmann 1967:23). Despair, and the depression that comes along with it, represents the temptation to maintain the status quo, “to retreat into a more comfortable and manageable universe, to shrink the world into something I can control” (Peterson 2009:1). The point being, of course, that we cannot control things as we would often like, through the “celebrated reason of stark facts, of established objects and laws” (Moltmann 1967:25). Despair, and the risk of falling into “contempt for the world” (Bonhoeffer et al. 2010:39), characterizes hopelessness; it also precludes the possibility for social change, within the temptation to “keep things as they are.”

In Moltmann's (1993) later work, one finds an explicit emphasis on the suffering of God in the Passion story, and the crucifixion. This shift from theoretical discussions about hope to suffering and affliction "was as though there was no use in talking about the future, process, or hope unless one also talks about suffering" (Capps 1976:45). Moltmann (1993), in addressing the "death of God" question within German philosophy (and no doubt influenced by Bonhoeffer), asserts that "it is necessary to remember the martyrs, so as not to become abstract. Of them and of the dumb sacrifices it is true in a real, transferred sense, that God himself hung on the gallows, as E. Wiesel was able to say. If that is taken seriously, it must also be that, like the cross of Christ, even Auschwitz is in God himself" (Moltmann 1993:278).

The theology of hope movement notably "gave wings to a theology of liberation" (Capps 1976:xiv). Its proponents, after experiencing "more acute sensitivities to the deep agonies of the secular city, especially in those settings where oppression and alienation are most blatantly pronounced" (Capps 1976:xiv). This is perhaps not surprising, for the most prominent proponents of the movement were especially sensitive to suffering and oppression; they were very much in line with the theologians of hope who "made immanence normative" (Capps 1976:xiii). Liberation theologians were concerned with the relationship "between salvation and the historical process of human liberation" (Gutiérrez 1988:29). Reflecting upon the "opening" of the Church following the proclamations from Vatican II (1962-1965), the aim of the Church, and those within it, was threefold: 1) to situate the Church better within the context of the modern world; 2) to understand salvation not simply as an idea, but as an historical process; and 3) to understand the term "liberation" in a broader and more

comprehensive sense, to include liberation and transformation not simply from individual sin, but from the social structures of sin: oppression, marginalization, and injustice.

Within the theology of hope movement, "the form of oppression being challenged was corporate rather than individual. All of mankind was depicted as being locked into oppression. Those seeking a firm basis for hope wanted to be able to announce that there was a way out" (Capps 1976:39). Liberation theology affirmed the same view of oppression and its possible way out of it. Interestingly reflections on the hope movement have already assumed the past tense (Capps 1976:46). The movement was designed for a specific time period, and to fit the conditions of that period. Indeed, the 1970s and 80s were ripe periods for the growth of other theologies that grew out of the theology of hope; within the Latin American context in particular, Catholic (and some Protestant) *comunidades de base* (base communities) drew upon Liberation Theology for understanding the social, political, and economic conditions of the time. These were conditions of widespread political violence, disappearances, torture, and economic inequality—lenses through which proponents of liberation theology viewed the Kingdom of God, and the hope within it, in highly immanent rather than transcendent terms.

Conditions have changed today, with the growth of Protestant and Evangelical and Charismatic movements within a region traditionally thought of as Roman Catholic. However, certain key issues and problems persist, and are growing: an ever-widening gap between the rich and poor; retreating state sectors incapable of providing health and educational programs; widespread diseases such as AIDS and malaria; child trafficking and slavery; domestic violence and abuse; and environmental degradation.

In light of these seemingly endless and exponentially growing problems, Capps (1976:46) asks a pertinent question: "Can hope ever serve as the central principle in either political, social, religious, theological, or conceptual organization?" Anyone who "loves something in this threatened world—our children, our students, wild nature, humanity in general—are right to worry. What is much less sure is whether we are right to hope" (Peterson 2009:1).

### **Do We Have a Right to Hope?**

In the midst of trying and seemingly impossible circumstances, is hope real? Or is it simply an illusion, preventing us from confronting concrete material realities? I argue, in line with theologians and philosophers of hope, that certain hopes grounded within the human experience are very real, and are capable of motivating individuals and groups to concrete action within the "here and now." Tillich (1990:185) interestingly distinguishes between foolish and genuine hope:

Where there is genuine hope, there that for which we hope already has some presence. In some way, the hoped for is at the same time here and not here. It is not yet fulfilled, and it may remain unfulfilled. But it is here, in the situation and in ourselves, as a power which drives those who hope into the future. There is a beginning here and now. And this beginning drives toward an end. The hope itself, if it is rooted in the reality of something already given, becomes a driving power and makes fulfillment, not certain, but possible. Where such a beginning of what is hoped for is lacking, hope is foolishness.

Tillich's (1990) analysis of hope that is "at the same time here and not here" is very similar to Bloch's (1986) notion of the "Not-Yet" consciousness, which hope moves toward through expectation. Bloch (1986) contrasts hope with other expectant emotions such as fear; within fear, a particular future outcome can remain uncertain. Within hope, the uncertainty of the outcome still remains; hope does not equal certainty (Tillich 1990:186). However, unlike fear, hope does not "border on passive care, on the night

where nothingness is, but on the day which is the friend of man" (Bloch 1986:112). In other words, hope is a force that is already present within us, moving us forward actively in spite of the uncertainty of the outcome.

This is precisely what Tillich (1990:184) refers to when stating that in order to preserve genuine hope, "one has to go ever again through a painful and courageous 'in spite of.'" For Tillich (1990), enduring the "in spite of" moments—i.e., the maintenance of genuine hope in spite of no definitive assurance that our hopes will be fulfilled—actually takes courage. The courageousness lies in the patience that hopeful waiting implies and demands—a demand for "stillness within oneself." It is here that Tillich (1990:186) distinguishes between passive and active waiting, much in the same manner that he distinguishes between foolish and genuine hope:

There are two kinds of waiting, the passive waiting in laziness and the receiving waiting in openness. He who waits in laziness, passively, prevents the coming of what he is waiting for. He who waits in quiet tension, open for what he may encounter, works for its coming. Such waiting in openness and hope does what no willpower can do for our own inner development.

As we will see later in our discussion of hope within the Cuban context, this analysis of inner development and human transformation will play an important part in understanding the tensions, contradictions, and difficulties Cubans experienced during arduous "in spite of" moments during the "Special Period" economic crisis. In line with Capps' (1976:46) inquiry on the power of hope as an organizing principle and Tillich's (1990) discussion on genuine hope, I contend that we need to re-think the type of hope that Cuban Protestants have drawn upon. Cubans are not waiting in a state of passive hope for a better life to come; they are actively working to bring about a better world in the "here and now."

## **Immanent Utopias and Everyday Hope**

How are we to understand hope as a practical, real and tangible force? Let us recall Miyazaki's (2004) discussion on the problem of hope: on what grounds can we hope, if there is no empirical evidence for it? Building upon Miyazaki (2004) Bloch (1986), and Peterson's (2009) work on the relationship between everyday ethics and social change, I argue that in order to understand hope as a real and tangible force, we must reevaluate the "yardstick" by which we assume that it can (or cannot) be "measured." If hope can indeed be thought of as a method and a process rather than simply an object of analysis, then there is evidence for hope. There is evidence for hope within "mundane utopias—the moments when we experience something qualitatively different from utilitarian calculus and consumption—[which] provide embodied proof that a different, better life is possible" (Peterson 2009:5).

The notion of a "mundane utopia," as opposed to a utopia that is wholly transcendent, "entails a vision of a qualitatively different and better life without which we cannot think about creating better societies" (Peterson 2009:3). These are the "moments of grace" (Peterson 2009:68-70) we experience with friends, spouses, children, and even non-human companions—moments when our temporal horizons are lengthened and expanded beyond the individual self. These immanent and everyday utopias generate both humility and hope precisely because they force us to recognize ourselves as part of larger communities and processes (Peterson 2009:155).

The experiences within these everyday utopias generate humility because they are characterized by an openness that forces us to recognize the limits of our human agency, and our interdependence with other social animals. In our best moments with those whom we love, we are not homo economicus, guided and driven by means-ends

calculations; we are instead interdependent beings who cannot control the final outcomes of our destinies. This experience of "not-yet" "suggests a condition of permanent expectation, in which we need to continue "seriously hoping for" what we know is worth hoping for, without knowing exactly what will happen" (Peterson 2009:157). This is precisely how these immanent utopias generate hope: they provide real-world glimpses that another, better world is possible.

There is thus here a connection between hope and social change. In focusing on "immanent rather than transcendent grounds of hope" (Peterson 2009:159), we need to focus on "their potential and actual connections to the public sphere and to large-scale social change" (Peterson 2009:3). In other words, we are concerned with whether or not "the meaning and joy experienced in friendships and family life have anything to do with political activism and social change" (Peterson 2009:26). The hopeful answer here is "yes." Drawing upon the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Peterson (2009) asserts that in grappling with the relationship between a deep love for individual human beings and a deep love for larger collectives, Gramsci made an affirmation that "may be among the most revolutionary words that [he] wrote because it challenges our whole way of thinking about politics—and with it, the way we view love and human nature as well" (Peterson 2009:27). Gramsci asserted that love for collectives may in fact require more personal forms of love; this in turn opens up entirely new worlds of possibilities (Peterson 2009:27).

Immanent spaces of hope within our interpersonal relationships, or the notion of "embedded relationality" (Peterson 2009:154), can encourage us to desire, and even demand, much more from both our personal and our public lives (Peterson 2009:27).

These spaces promote and encourage an "education of desire:" concrete, everyday examples of non-utilitarian ethics and "un-self-interested giving and receiving" (Peterson 2009:160). Notably, the concern here is with how we can bridge the noted "gap" between ethical values and practice: the disjunction between wanting the world to be a better place in theory, and what so often happens in practice—disappointments, feeling overwhelmed, and structural limitations (economic, political, social, environmental).

Everyday, immanent utopias help bridge this gap by providing concrete examples of nonutilitarian and noninstrumental care. Within our best moments of interdependent relationships, in other words, we see the real possibility of viewing others as inherently valuable, as opposed to being a part of a "mean-ends" calculus. Among numerous other concrete examples of noninstrumental goods, we can look to the notion of play (Peterson 2009:156). Within both adults and children, play encourages mutual cooperation, develops the imagination, and helps us experience joy. This joy, notably, "is not known rationally or used instrumentally, but tasted" (Peterson 2009:156). It is, in other words, tangible and very real. If these immanent utopias do indeed provide both humility and hope, then hope itself can be considered just as tangible as the moments experienced within those everyday utopias.

Similar to play and other "noninstrumental" goods, hope itself can be a source for nonutilitarian ethics and social change. It accomplishes this by forcing us to recognize the limits of what lies within our realm of control. The not-yet" space of which both Tillich (1990) and Bloch (1986) speak of is similar to Marx's (1978b:595) argument that we are finite human beings with limits; we do create our own histories, but within conditions not of our own choosing. Hope, particularly with the spaces of "immanent

utopias" that stress interdependence with other social beings, is an active force with the ability to expand one's temporal horizons beyond the individual self. It is, in short, a motivating force for both individual and collective change.

The Cuban case challenges the notion that human beings are, or should be, primarily motivated by an instrumental, means-ends and utilitarian ethic. The Revolutionary hope of creating a "New Man" was fundamentally grounded upon the desire to produce "a citizen without personal interests, one who is not motivated by material profit but by moral incentives alone" (Blum 2010:177). Therefore, from a sociological perspective, we need an alternative set of analytical tools to understand the nature of hope as motivating force in Cuban society. This involves a theoretical shift in focus: we need to be concerned with not just with the material goods and resources that individuals and collectives seek, but those goods that have traditionally been conceived of as "intangible." Although hope as a concept has been conceptualized in this sense, I argue below that it is a real, concrete, and motivating force for human action and behavior, and the Cuban case helps illustrate this.

### **The "Black Box:" Economic Explanations for Innovation**

How does one measure an "intangible" resource, such as motivation? We cannot, after all, get inside individuals' heads. Religion scholars and social scientists have not been the only scholars to grapple with this type of question. Economists and economic historians have attempted to quantify and measure the impact of "technological innovation" on economic growth for quite some time. They have "long treated technological phenomenon as events transpiring in a black box...the economics profession has adhered rather strictly to a self-imposed ordinance not to inquire too seriously into what transpires inside that box" (Rosenberg 1982:vii). The difficulty

seems to lie within sorting out technical progress from other types of contributions to economic growth, such as capital formation, education, and resource allocation (Rosenberg 1982:23). One of the most notable economists who undertook this effort to delve into the "black box" was Robert M. Solow, who would become known for developing "Solow's residual" theory. Solow (1957) expanded the range of what traditional economic theory identified as technological change to include "slowdowns, speed-ups, improvements in the education of the labor force, and all sorts of things will appear as technical change" (Solow 1957:312).

Notably, this effort to measure the social returns of technological change and innovation is very similar to what social scientists have sought to do in examining, for example, the impact of religious ideas and practice on society (and vice versa). Marx, whose dialectical reasoning on the relationship between ideas and practice helped form part of the backbone of the social sciences, was not a technical determinist (Rosenberg 1982:37). Rather, Marx was deeply concerned with the nature of technology as a mediator between man and his relationship with the external, material world. The creation of new forces of production (which can lead to technological change) do not, however, emerge exogenously "or as some mysterious deus ex machina, but rather as a dialectical outcome of a larger historical process in which both the earlier forces and relations of production play essential roles" (Rosenberg 1982:38).

Marx, in other words, recognized a link between human behavior and transformation, new forces of production, and technological change. Rather than focusing on technological innovation as a history of single inventors with sudden, brilliant ideas, Marx is far more concerned with the larger social forces and modes of

production that have shaped the development of scientific and technological skills (Rosenberg 1982:48). This does not imply, of course, that individual contributions to technological innovation are meaningless; it simply requires placing them within a larger historical and social context.

For his part, Solow (1957) made a significant contribution to economics and economic history by placing the previously impenetrable "black box" squarely within the realm of social analysis. Similar to the way Marx brought the abstract realm of Hegelian ideas down to the level of social analysis within the material world, Solow attempted to formalize what we mean by "innovation." Previously, this term was an "indistinct and impenetrable stream whose source was in the domain of other branches of economics" (Mata and Louçã 2009:336). Since the 1970s, there developed an approach to understanding technological innovation that bears a very interesting resemblance to the "rational choice" interpretations (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1998) of religious change among some scholars. The microeconomic approach to understanding technological innovation, which has some of its roots within classical liberal economic theory, aimed to predict how "agents with stable tastes and technology will choose to respond to a new situation" (Lucas Jr. 1977:12).

Solow (1965) explicitly outlined the problems and difficulties of a "rational choice" approach to economics (Mata and Louçã 2009:340). In focusing on the "choices" of individual consumers, workers, and property owners, microeconomic theory assumes that "actors in the economic process are supposed to have unambiguous goals—such as earning and spending an income in the most satisfying way, or making the biggest possible monetary profit—and to pursue them consistently or 'rationally'" (Solow

1965:445). This focus, in other words, is on the ambiguous role of uncertainty as it applies to economic change.

This discussion on "Solow's residual" points to a key and fundamental question that economists, no less than social scientists, have had to grapple with: how are we to "measure" things are seemingly "intangible" within human behavior and social processes, such as motivation, uncertainty, and, for our purposes here, hope? In what ways do religious beliefs and practices have a measurable effect upon economics, politics, and society? If we bracket the historical and philosophical mind/body dualism that has separated ideas from practice, then we can see the effects of "intangible" notions, feelings, and ideas. If the "sacred" and the "spiritual" are not viewed in the abstract, outside of the realm of the material world and human behavior, then we can work towards an analysis of the measurable effects of religious beliefs and practices upon various aspects of human behavior and organization. Recently, scholars have been developing the notion of "spiritual capital." This metaphor builds upon earlier research on social, human and economic capital, and "the growing recognition in economics and other social sciences that religion is not epiphenomenal, nor is it fading from public significance in the 21st century, and the importance to social/economic dynamics of human economic intangibles" (Spiritual Capital Research Program 2006).

I argue below that hope is a form of spiritual capital—a term that has arisen recently among a growing number of scholars seeking to understand the impact that "nonmaterial" resources have on economics, politics, and social change. The social sciences lack convincing accounts of human motivation, and have therefore been moving in a direction that emphasizes individual choice and consumption within

religious and cultural change (Smith 2003; Smilde 2007a:49). Hope, as a form of spiritual capital, challenges this "rational choice" perspective and can help us better understand the forces that lie behind human motivation. My aim is to place the notion of hope within the realm of social analysis, and I argue that it, like spiritual capital, has a "measurable impact on individuals, communities and societies" (Spiritual Capital Research Program 2006).

### **Social Capital**

Social theorists and economists have extensively analyzed over the twentieth century the meaning and influence of social capital: the networks of social bonds between individuals that generate norms of reciprocity and trust (Putnam 2000:19). By the end of the twentieth century, ordinary Americans had begun to develop a sense of "civic malaise:" participation within civic and community groups (business and professional groups, service groups, neighborhood associations, sports clubs, and political organizations) dwindled, particularly in comparison to the civil rights struggles and political engagement of the 1960s (Putnam 2000:25). There is one area, however, which remains the "single most important repository of social capital in America:" religious groups and institutions (Putnam 2000:66). Regular worshippers and those who claim that religion is very important to them have high levels of civic and community engagement (Putnam 2000:67). They are also "more likely to live longer, have fewer health and mental problems, steal less, volunteer more time, and give away more money than others" (Woodberry 2003).

It is important to point out that social capital is not without its "darker side," and it does carry with it "less desirable consequences" (Portes 1998:15): 1) exclusion of outsiders, often seen within the context of ethnic and cultural enclaves; 2) excess claims

on groups members; 3) restrictions on individual freedom, particularly through demands for group conformity; and 4) “downward leveling norms,” or the process of keeping individual group members from upward mobility and individual success in order to maintain group cohesion built upon a common experience of adversity (Portes 1998:15-17). Another, related issue to this “negative social capital” involves a tension (or gap) between more “particularized” forms of trust (those whom we know) and more “generalized” forms of trust (those whom we don’t know and/or are different from us (Hearn 1998:6). Hearn (1998:6) posits a practical question that arises from these problems and issues with social capital: “is it possible, or always desirable, for particularized trust to be transformed into a more generalized form?” Our particular interpersonal relationships are by no means problem-free. Our best moments, however, particularly within the context of love between parent and child, can “define our better selves” (Peterson 2009:77).

In spite of the fact that “there are no guarantees that interpersonal attachments lead to constructive political engagements” (Peterson 2009:64), there is still a grounded hope of this occurring. We can connect our best moments of “particular” care to larger economic, political, and ideological structures through everyday practices, such as riding a bicycle with one’s child to work, to the market, and even to leisure activities (Peterson 2009:66). These practices contain within them the seeds for educating new desires. In everyday spaces—“at the park, in grocery stores, at school events, we find common ground with people we might otherwise never have talked to. The social capital thus generated has political potential, if we learn how to mobilize it” (Peterson 2009:66).

## **Hope and Spiritual Capital**

In 2003, a group of interdisciplinary scholars, with the support of the Metanexus Institute and the Templeton Foundation, held a strategic planning meeting in order to discuss and clarify the meaning of the term "spiritual capital." The concept or metaphor remains broad in scope, and the definition a working one: "the effects of spiritual and religious practices, beliefs, networks and institutions that have a measurable impact on individuals, communities and societies" (Spiritual Capital Research Program 2006). There developed a working consensus that "spiritual capital may be a subset of social capital" (Spiritual Capital Research Program 2006). An underlying question during the research meeting nevertheless remained: does spiritual capital differ from other forms of capital (human, economic, social)? If so, how? In a working paper for the meeting, Woodberry (2003) argues that

"Spiritual capital" differs from the other forms of capital, not because religious groups don't have material resources, skills, trusting relationships, and cultural-valued knowledge – that is, financial, human, social and cultural capital. They do. But religious groups are concerned with more than these. For example, most religious groups purport to be more than mere social clubs. They often stress that their relationship with God is central and that the focus of group activity is precisely to emphasize and actualize that relationship. Moreover, participants often claim that people can access spiritual resources anywhere without respect to group solidarity per se. Both these suggest that what happens in religious groups is not fully encompassed by the concept of social capital.

If, as Woodberry (2003) asserts, most religious groups "purport to be more than mere social clubs," then what is that "something else" that religious groups have, beyond promoting social solidarity and trust? In their work on global Pentecostalism, Miller and Yamamori (2007:219) acknowledge that "anyone who has participated in a well-orchestrated political march, or, for that matter, a high-spirited football game, can attest to the very human experience of being caught up in a collective fervor." Yet, isn't

there something more that animates individuals and communities than mere human projection or Durkheimian social solidarity (Miller and Yamamori 2007:205-206)?

There are certain advantages in using the metaphor of "spiritual capital" in order to help us answer this question. Firstly, the metaphor helps us see religion as an investment and a distinct end (Woodberry 2003). It also helps us appreciate that although people may utilize religion to gain certain "goods," they may also be seeking benefits and resources that are not "measurable" via an economic yardstick: salvation, peace and—for the purposes of our discussion here—hope. There are also limitations to the metaphor, however. It may over-emphasize religion as a means to reach particular ends (Woodberry 2003). This is an issue that the "rational choice" approach to religion runs into, and we may need to re-think what we mean by "rational" in human behavior.<sup>1</sup>

From the standpoint of advantages, the rational choice approach shares with the metaphor of spiritual capital an emphasis on two themes: 1) religion is not "disappearing," as secularization theory would suggest; and 2) religious people are "not loony or deluded; they use the same reasoning processes as everyone else to gain the goods they seek" (Spickard 1998:100). From the standpoint of disadvantages, few sociologists equate religion with irrationality at any rate, which raises the pertinent issue of what type of "rationality" the "rational choice" approach is, in fact, advocating (Spickard 1998:101). Human beings "do not act only according to means-ends rationality" (1998:103).

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication, Virginia Garrard-Burnett, April 2009.

Spickard (1998:103) interestingly distinguishes between three different types of rationality: teleological, deontological, and what he refers to as "cathekontic," based upon the ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr. Teleological rationality is characterized by means-ends, utilitarian action; this is the type of rationality that a "rational choice" or a "religious economies" approach to religion uses. Within deontological, or "value-rationality," action is grounded in a transcendent idea or force, with little regard to benefit or cost. There is an important difference between the two types of rationality (Spickard 1998:104). Utilitarian action is goal-oriented and calculating; it is contingent upon benefits outweighing costs. Deontological action, on the other hand, involves pursuing a value or ideal regardless of the outcome, no matter what the cost. The third form of rationality, "cathekontic," is rooted within the metaphor of dialogue, and its ethics emphasizes "the social relations people have with one another and the rational consideration of the responsibilities that grow from these relationships" (Spickard 1998:104).

Within the notion of spiritual capital, all three forms of rationality could arguably be operating. However, I contend that an over-emphasis on the teleological, or utilitarian, form can lead to the pitfalls and limitations of the metaphor that Woodberry (2003) found: religion can be about "rationally" seeking certain ends; however, it is also about shaping which specific ends people seek: it can help people "to decide what they should want and the means they should use to reach those ends." There may always be, of course, a gap between values and practice. Some religious beliefs and practices, however, may provide resources to help people bridge this gap, particularly within the context of prayer groups, Bible studies, and mentoring relationships (Woodberry 2003).

Obviously, religious institutions and groups are not the only sources of belief and practice that can help us to "close the gap" between values and practice. The shaping and (re)shaping of ethical values can come from our everyday personal experiences with friends and family, which can "engender commitments and loyalties that translate into ethical values: commitments to something larger than our own self-interest" (Peterson 2009:134). This is important to note particularly with respect to another limitation with the metaphor of spiritual capital: the term "capital" could suggest that the main goal of religion is the accumulation of capital, or personal profit (Woodberry 2003). It could also gloss over other forms of rationality. The "everyday" form of ethics and action that Peterson (2009) analyses could fall under the "cathekontic" category; the moments of immanent utopias found during our best moments with children, spouses, significant others, and friends have the potential to literally "re-educate" our desires. Cathekontic action, and the ethics that can come out of it, does not ask "what can I gain," or "what are my duties," but instead "what are my responsibilities?"—not just to those related to us, but to larger communities as a whole as well (Spickard 1998:105).

Perhaps, then, we need a definition of spiritual capital that remains broad enough to expand our definition of what we mean by a "religious good" or resource, as well as "rational." Religious resources can certainly be personal in nature, and benefit particular individuals. They can also connect individuals to particular transcendent beings or ideas, to other human beings, to non-human species, and even to nature. In returning to our previous question of how spiritual capital differs from other forms of capital, I would suggest that spiritual capital contains sources of motivation and power that can expand temporal horizons and possibilities beyond the self, leading to both

personal and collective transformation. A social club may very well be enjoyable to participate in, and a political organization can encourage community building and change; both are valuable resources of social capital. However, the notion of social capital cannot fully account for the complexity of what motivates human beings beyond the mere pursuit of material interests.

Spiritual capital, which could be found within either an explicitly religious institution or space, or even outside of it in the context of interpersonal relationships, goes beyond social capital in terms of building collective trust and solidarity. It is a power and force that is active and transformative at both the individual and the collective level; it can shape the ends which people seek, and it can open up new horizons of the possible. If certain values, beliefs, and practices fall within a discourse that suggests a fundamental re-definition of human nature and its relationship to society, then what we are dealing with is spiritual capital rather than simply other forms of capital (economic, social, etc.). I would thus like to offer another working definition of spiritual capital, building upon the previous definition offered by the Metanexus strategic planning meeting. Spiritual capital, although it can be considered a subset of social capital, is much more radical. It provides motivating values and practices for action, beyond the pursuit of material interests, that promote a radical re-definition of human nature and society.

Hope, I would argue, is a form of spiritual capital: it moves temporal boundaries and horizons of the possible beyond the individual self, and is thus an active and motivating force for both individual and social transformation and change. This expansion of horizons beyond the self, through the recognition that we are inherently interdependent beings who are part of larger communities and processes, "generates

both humility and hope" (Peterson 2009:155). This hope is a tangible hope, grounded within very immanent and "this worldly" utopias of everyday relationships and action, that provide us concrete examples that a better world is indeed possible. This in turn helps shape the types of ends and goals that we seek, and not simply ends in and of themselves.

Rational choice and utilitarian approaches to understanding human behavior and ethics are "describing one particular mode of human motivation and action that reflects and embodies a specific moral order situated in a particular place in history and culture" (Smith 2003:33). In other words, rational choice theory assumes that human beings operate according to a utilitarian and goal-oriented rationality, and this assumption has often been extrapolated into a universal vision of "the problems people need to solve, the goals they seek to achieve, [and] the choices they confront" (Smith 2003:135). The notion of individual "agency" is "saturated with the categories of nineteenth century liberalism" and the "universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice" (Johnson 2003:115). While not denying the influence and power of these categories, it is important to note that they are culturally and historically driven notions of what it means to be a human being.

In the Cuban context, Revolutionary discourse posed a number of challenges to this liberal notion of selfhood, principally with respect to its emphasis on creating a "New Man" driven not by utilitarian ethics and the "rational" pursuit of material goods, but by a new, moral ethic focused on the larger collective. This Revolutionary hope has faced a number of difficult challenges, particularly during the Special Period crisis. However, I argue that Cubans' turn to religion in general, and to Cuban Protestantism specifically,

has created spaces of “immanent utopias:” moments of concrete action driven not by utilitarian and instrumental ethics, but by interpersonal relationships and a “cathekontic” type of rationality that asks not “what can I gain from this?” but “what are my responsibilities?” (Spickard 1998:105). I believe that from a sociological perspective, the notion of social capital is helpful in re-orienting our inquiry about “rational” human behavior, but it is not enough. This is where the concept of spiritual capital can come in, in order to expand our understanding of human motivation and behavior beyond the utilitarian pursuit of material goods and resources.

### **Hope Revisited**

Durkheim (Durkheim et al. 2002), while analyzing the state of anomie (normlessness and lack of social regulation) asserted that pursuing a goal that is unattainable is like walking towards infinity, leading to a "perpetual state of unhappiness" (Durkheim et al. 2002:209). On hope, he states that "man may hope contrary to all reason, and hope has its pleasures even when unreasonable. It may sustain him for a time; but it cannot survive the repeated disappointments of experience indefinitely" (Durkheim et al. 2002:209). But how exactly are we to distinguish between "reasonable" hope and "hope contrary to all reason?" Tillich (1971:184) understood this predicament: science, philosophy, and modern thought have undercut "imaginings of a heavenly place above and a hell below," which have become internalized. For Tillich (1971:184), "hope cannot be verified by sense experience or rational proof." Yet, at the same time we can distinguish "genuine" from "foolish" hope; the former is rooted within the reality of something already given; the latter, like a daydream which has no relation to the present state of affairs (Tillich 1971:185).

It is quite easy to confuse the terms hope and utopia; the dividing line between them is very thin (Desroche 1979:23). We may not possess "rational" arguments to justify either moral or political hope. We do, however, "know acts of hopefulness in which we affirm the possibility of something better" (Peterson 2009:2). Hope is utopian when we hold onto it "even when nothing in our world indicates progress is possible" (Peterson 2009:2). Recalling Durkheim's (Durkheim et al. 2002:209) opinion on "hope contrary to all reason," one has to wonder: when nothing in our world seems to indicate that a better world is possible, are we simply holding onto an illusion, walking towards no place and no definitive goal? If the answer is yes, then hope is always transcendent, "other worldly," and incapable of tangibly affecting the present. I do not contend that this is the case; hope, rather than simply being an individual's utopian fantasy in a pleasant afterlife, is far more than this. Peterson (2009:2) argues that although utopias are transcendent,

Some utopias are also immanent. They already exist, albeit in partial and embryonic form. We know relations of love and solidarity, even if these are fragile and fragmentary. We know connectedness with other people and with members of other species. We play freely and joyfully. We find satisfaction in taking care of those who need us and in being cared for.

These moments are real and very present within our everyday lives, and they offer us glimpses that another world is possible: one in which our goals and relationships are not necessarily defined by "rational" means-ends calculations. What constitutes a "rational" choice or decision has often been framed within the context of traditional "Western" notions of decision-making and goal-oriented calculation. This is a highly individualistic framework that should not be generalized to all times and all places. Within the Cuban context, for example, we have seen how Revolutionary ideology challenged the view of human nature as inherently pursuing individualistic goals. This

Revolutionary framework notably blurred the boundaries between hope and utopia, and the sacred and the secular. The events during the Special Period economic crisis, however, reintroduced an individualistic framework on a number of socio-economic levels. In the midst of this crisis, some Cubans who turned to religion were able to find "a new hope" that pulled them out of despair, provided them with new horizons of the possible, and demonstrated the presence and power of "immanent" utopias.

## CHAPTER 7

### HOPE IN THE CUBAN CONTEXT

#### **Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary Hope**

Cubans who turned to religion during the "Special Period" crisis stated that they had gained a "new hope." What was the nature of this "new hope?" In order to understand this "new" hope, we must analyze the old in relation to the new. The "old" hope was twofold, and rooted within Marxist-Leninist views of human nature and history. I place the terms "new" and "old" within quotations because in a number of ways, the two hopes are markedly different; in other ways, however, they contain parallels and similarities. These similarities are easily glossed over if we assume that a static and fixed line exists between what we would define as the secular and the religious, and immanent and transcendent. As we have seen, however, Cuban Revolutionary language arguably blurs these boundaries by appealing to metaphors that encourage the fundamental transformation of human nature.

The "old" Revolutionary hope involved a struggle against the unjust structures of society (political and economic) that alienate man from his "true self." As Marx (1978a:60) put it, man achieves a state of "true humanity" when "man is the supreme being for man," involving a "categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being." The root of dehumanization, according to Marxism, involves an alienation of man from his true self: man is not what he could and should be; he has "become estranged from his own essential nature" (Tillich 1971:90) through the estrangement of man's being from his labor within capitalist society. The Cuban Revolutionary hope involved the creation of a "New Man:" a new Cuban human being that, once freed from the alienation from their

labor, would selflessly work for "moral" rather than material incentives. The desire to struggle to create a better and more just society, in other words, would replace the desire for material goods in and of themselves. According to Revolutionary hopes, this new kind of Cuban citizen (*El Hombre Nuevo*) would be "a person with the humility and stamina of the campesino, yet who also had urban savvy, a classical education, and instruction in Marxist-Leninist ideology" (Blum 2010:180).

As we have seen, this hope of creating a new Cuban human being faced severe challenges during the Special Period economic crisis, and these challenges continue even into the present day. As Cuba was forced to insert its economy into the global tourism market during the 1990s, the temptation among Cubans to desire and seek material goods and higher salaries increased exponentially. This has been compounded by the more recent retreat of the state from certain public sectors, due to lack of cash flow to cover the expenses of maintaining Cuba's prominent social welfare programs. Due to these difficulties, government officials have struggled with how to pragmatically pull Cuba's economy out of the Special Period crisis, while not compromising Revolutionary ideology.

Part of this struggle within the Cuban Communist Party during the Special Period interestingly involved the idealization of the "Even Newer Man" (*Nombre Novísimo*) (Blum 2010:180). This "Newer Man" focused on "an urban man with campesino morals and a campesino soul" (Blum 2010:180). This dual focus—on the nostalgia of the countryside combined with the patria (homeland)—was to serve as a model for the "authentic" *cubano* within the complex realities of the Special Period (Blum 2010:203). Although still in line with communism, this loyalty was expanded beyond just the political

party and emphasized to a greater extent the philosophy of José Martí, the Cuban "Father of the Revolution" (Blum 2010:181).

Empirical and ethnographic data indicates that this campaign for an "Even Newer Man" among Cubans at the grassroots level during the Special Period had mixed and complicated results. Blum (2010:202), through archival work and her experiences with youth participating in Cuba's school to countryside program (Escuela del Campo, EAC), found a complex reality: within the context of a contradictory political and economic reality, Cubans developed a *doble conciencia* (double consciousness) in their effort to negotiate official socialist discourses with other, unpredictable and multiple meanings that did not necessarily correspond with official discourse. There was also a distinct generational gap: those who felt close to the 1959 Revolution—who fought in it, participated in the 1961 Literacy Campaign within the countryside, remembered the Bay of Pigs, and benefited from the social welfare programs put in place—still felt sincere allegiance to the values promoted by the "New Man" (and "Newer" Man). The younger generation, however, did not know of the Revolution in the time period *antes* (before) the Special Period; they were more familiar with Cuba's "dual" economy and the dual morality that has gone along with it. Cuban youth, "like chameleons," are "taking on the colors necessary to negotiate the *teque* (political rhetoric) in their society" (Blum 2010:223).

Like many things in Cuba, a glimpse into internal realities can most often be gleaned from through listening to the language and discourse that Cubans use while pursuing day-to-day activities. I found this to be the case during my yearly fieldwork trips to Havana province from 2005-2010. Within the "daily factory of conversation,

other new codes of reality were being created" (Blum 2010:224). Some examples include: *la shopping* for stores that sells goods for the equivalent of U.S. dollars; *jinetera*, meaning "jockey" and referring to a prostitute who is well trained to "ride" a tourist for profit; and, significantly, the recuperation of the term "Señor" instead of the Revolutionary term *compañero* or *compañera* (companion or buddy). This last change is significant; Blum suggests that perhaps the term *compañero/a*, "like the Che image plastered across billboards and t-shirts, has become a worn-out expression, emptied of its original significance" (Blum 2010:224).

Within daily life in Cuba, I also heard strikingly similar language. The use of the term "lucha" was a nearly daily part of the language I heard utilized among Cubans in response to the question "How's it going?" The answer, "*¡Allá en la lucha!*" was "sometimes given in a tone of conviction, and other times a tone of resignation, reflecting the *doble sentido* (double meaning) within most day-to-day encounters among Cubans" (Blum 2010:224). During the Special Period crisis, the power to answer that question with conviction rather than resignation was severely challenged. Market reforms in the early to mid-1990s raised popular expectations of better times ahead; they also, however, generated significant anxiety within the Cuban populace (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:5). Some individuals, particularly those with connections to the rapidly growing informal economy, grew richer; the gap between those who had access to "hard currency" and those who did not began to grow (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:5). This was a challenge economically, but this also challenged the "old" Revolutionary utopian hope of creating a new Cuban human being. If this was the "old hope," how can we understand the "new hope" that the characterizes the conversion

experience of those who turned to religion in the post-Soviet era? In order to understand the nature of this "new" hope, we must return to the events of the Cuban Special Period and the religious change that occurred within the context of crisis.

### **The "Special Period" Revisited**

As we have seen, the fall of the Soviet Union marked a watershed moment for Cuba. It did more than coincide with a severe drop in imports from the former Soviet Union; it shook the very consciousness of the Cuban people. López Vigil (1997), in analyzing the relationship between the economic crisis of the 1990s and the sudden emergence of religious revivals, characterized the situation in this manner:

All these tendencies became generalized in the 1990s. Atheism was now breaking down from below and within. Cuban society suddenly lost reference points that it had believed were stable, almost eternal. The USSR committed suicide, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union shriveled, Europe's real socialism crumbled, the Sandinistas lost power, and with the end of the allied East, Cubans watched the threatening West strut around as omnipotent as a god. It was logical to return to the hereafter if so much was falling apart in the here and now.

This dissertation has analyzed religious revivals and growth since the fall of the Soviet Union; in particular, it focuses on the narratives and practices of former atheists who "converted" to Protestantism and Evangelicalism during the "Special Period" economic crisis of the early to mid-1990s.

I place the term "conversion" within quotations because the nature of the entire Cuban Revolutionary project, similar to Soviet forms of socialist utopianism, requires us to take a step back and carefully analyze precisely what Cubans were "converting" from. Up until constitutional changes in 1992, the Cuban state self-identified as adhering to a "scientific-materialist conception of the universe." The Cuban Revolution's philosophy

was—and in many respects continues to be—commensurate with Marx's (1978a:54) critique of religion and Hegelian views of the relationship between ideas and society:

Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness.

In other words, religion is a very real response to real suffering; however, it is also illusory and—for Marx's purposes here—transcendent and “otherworldly” in its emphasis; it serves as a powerful mask of “this worldly” problems that cause human suffering.

In spite of the Cuban Revolution's Marxist-Leninist critique of religious ideas, Cuban socialist discourse has historically appealed to a utopian language that emphasizes the possibility of human transformation; Ernesto “Che” Guevara's notion of a “New Man” is predicated upon not only the transformation of individuals, but of society as a whole. In a meeting with group of young Soviet agricultural specialists, for example, Castro (1962) stated that

It is natural that a society which liquidated the exploitation of man by man produced a new type of young people, a new man. In you we see these young people, this man—the product of a new society—and we see this better than you yourselves, because for us this is indeed something extraordinary.

When the Soviet Union fell, however, the economic crisis that ensued placed a severe strain upon this discourse of a new Cuban human being. The Cuban state found itself forced to adopt a dual currency system, and put into place certain liberalization measures that precariously inserted the Cuban economy into global capitalist order. I argue that at this point, Cuba faced a “crisis of utopias:” a profound disjuncture between Revolutionary socialist ideals and economic realities.

At the grassroots level, this led to a situation of great confusion and sudden loss of “stable points of reference” (López Vigil 1997) in Cuba society. In short, everything was upside down, and nothing was what it should have been. Conversion narratives among former atheists reveal a key common element among those who suddenly “turned to religion” during the economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc: utter and complete despair and loss of hope—in either a better present, or a viable future. Without hope, the “tension of our life would vanish, and with it, life itself. We would end in despair, a word that originally meant “without hope,” or in deadly indifference” (Tillich 1990:182). When the Soviet Union collapsed, Cubans fell into states of indifference, apathy, and despair. These emotional states were arguably highly detrimental to the Cuban Revolutionary project, which promoted “an all-encompassing and self-implicating paradigm of engagement from which it was all but impossible to stay aloof” (Pérez 2005:349). Apathy and despair during the Special Period rendered individuals in Cuban society unmovable, unable to proceed forward.

### **Cuba, Despair, and Suicide**

Particularly during the early years of the Special Period, many Cubans unfortunately committed suicide; among those age 15-49, suicide became the second leading cause of death in the country (Pérez 2005:357). This, of course, begs the question: how is this situation similar to, and different from, the work of Durkheim (Durkheim et al. 2002) on anomic suicide? Economic distress does not always correlate with a higher suicide rate; rather, it actually tends to produce the opposite effect (Durkheim et al. 2002:204). Durkheim’s theory on anomie—a state of rootlessness whereby individuals in society lack regulation and order of activities in their lives—is partly relevant to the Cuban case.

Cuban society is highly regulated by the state; what appears to have occurred during the Special Period crisis was a shaking of the previous moral order of things. The entire Revolutionary project has demanded complete engagement of its citizens; it is an all-embracing commitment to solidarity and sacrifice, moving forward towards the creation of a “New Man” “imbued with selfless virtue motivated by social conscience” (Pérez 2005:348). The Special Period, however, threw everything upon its head: Cubans became apathetic, disillusioned with the promise of future prosperity. A 1971 prize-winning play by Carlos Torres exemplified Cubans’ general sentiments: “I am fed up with the promises of abundance every year that come to nothing...fed up with eating the same thing day after day, or eating nothing at all. Fed up with the ration card, fed up with the lines even to use the public rest rooms. Fed up with the lack of bus service, of the CDR, of the speeches, of the meetings, of the news of the sugar harvest....There is nothing” (Pérez 2005:348). To put it simply, many Cubans felt that there was simply no point to anything. Restlessness and anxiety about the future combined with apathy, idleness, and boredom. Special Period shortages of fuel and raw materials led to widespread factory closings; as a result, tens of thousands of Cuban men and women found themselves out of work and with nothing to do: “Tedium brought on a particularly debilitating type of listlessness” (Pérez 2005:355).

For many Cubans, both the present and the future remained uncertain: “the purpose of the future and indeed the future of purpose weighed heavily on men and women across the island” (Pérez 2005:355). To complicate matters, no one seems to be able to definitively point to the moment when the Special Period crisis actually ended; in fact, Fidel Castro has continued throughout the 2000s to refer to the Special

Period as ongoing (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:18). If an economic crisis—the "Special Period" during a time of peace"—is ongoing, however, this raises the issue of when it will end, or if Cubans can conceive of a future time when it will end. This situation of uncertainty has created sentiments of great anxiety within the populace—what Durkheim (Durkheim et al. 2002:206) would refer to as essentially walking towards infinity:

Since the distance between us and [the goal] is always the same, whatever road we take, we might as well have made the motions without progress from the spot. Even our glances behind and our feeling of pride at the distance covered can cause only deceptive satisfaction, since the remaining distance is not proportionately reduced.

It is within these circumstances that Durkheim (Durkheim et al. 2002:209) characterized "hope contrary to all reason" as incapable of sustaining human beings within the context of indefinitely experienced disappointments.

There is a distinction between anomic suicide (suicide brought on by a state of anomie) and other forms of suicide, including "egoistic" suicide. Egoistic suicide stems from human beings no longer finding a basis for existence in life (Durkheim et al. 2002:217). Anomic suicide, on the other hand, involves society's inability to regulate individual passions, which are limitless without some sort of external regulation. Economic crises do not result in an increase in suicides because they cause poverty, but because they disturb an equilibrium within the collective social order (Durkheim et al. 2002:206). This explains why sudden increases in wealth and prosperity can also lead to an increase in suicide rates.

We must recall that for Durkheim (1995), only an outside force—a moral force—is truly capable of exerting control over individual passions and providing stable points of reference whereby human beings recognize authoritative limits to insatiable, limitless

desires. The "sacred" for Durkheim (1995) is, in functionalist terms, what members within a society set apart from the "profane" through systems of rites, beliefs, and practices. Religion serves an important moral function for Durkheim (Durkheim et al. 2002:212):

It is actually the best school for teaching self-restraint. Forcing us to constant self-discipline, it prepares us to accept collective discipline with equanimity, while wealth, exalting the individual, may always arouse the spirit of rebellion which is the very source of immorality.

Religion contains a "binding" function as well: various beliefs, practices, and rites provide individuals with notions of solidarity between themselves and some external object such as an animal, plant, or deity (Durkheim 1995:166).

On a number of levels, the state that many Cubans found themselves in during the Special Period economic crisis appears to resonate with Durkheim's notion of anomie. However, can contemporary religious and social change in Cuba be fully understood using Durkheim's anomie thesis? Were Cubans during the Special Period simply suffering from anomie and rootlessness? I argue that more than simply anomie, Cubans faced a "crisis of utopias:" a profound disjuncture between officially stated discourses of Revolutionary equality, and the harsh realities of both the Special Period economic crisis and growing discrepancies in access to goods and resources. This involved a systematic loss of hope in the Cuban populace for both a better present and future.

### **Modernity and the Crisis of (Cuban) Utopias**

The "modern impulse" within the Enlightenment deeply influenced interpretations of human nature and autonomy (Vásquez 1998:22). The Enlightenment's version of the modern impulse involved a particular view of both history and humanity's relationship to

it: freed from the "naivety" of relying upon the supernatural in order to provide understanding and guidance for human actions, history became "an open field where humanity, drawing from its own resources, especially from its rational and critical facilities, can construct its own fate" (Vásquez 1998:23). Rather than being subject to seemingly arbitrary rule (supernatural or otherwise), humanity could, at least in theory, be governed only by the laws they themselves create, as autonomous and free subjects (Vásquez 1998:23).

In practice, however, post-Enlightenment's views of human autonomy distorted the relationship between humanity and history, leading to a "triumphant optimism and a fervent belief in progress, especially in the human capacity to shape and control fully the future" (Vásquez 1998:23). Buttressed by technological advances and scientific discoveries, post-Enlightenment modernity began to view history, and society's relationship to it, in a teleological fashion: the future will conform to a single telos (end) and a plan, capable of being grasped and understood fully through rational apprehension. This view of a "totally rationalized society, one fully transparent and pliable to human will," led to the construction of a type of post-Enlightenment utopia (Vásquez 1998:23). For the Church, pre-Vatican II Catholicism maintained this teleological and static view of history; post-Vatican II theology, however, affirmed the effectiveness of human action, alongside a distinctly immanent view of the Kingdom of God (Vásquez 1998:25). Human action, in other words, could fulfill the idea of God's will being done "on earth as it is in Heaven."

In the "crisis of modernity" within the context of Brazil, a variety of factors—both internal and external—began to challenge notions of "intra-historical transcendence:"

the capacity for human beings to act effectively within history (Vásquez 1998:2). Through larger shifts within the global capitalist system, the economic situation in Brazil deteriorated; local communities began to feel the effects of "structural adjustment programs" sponsored by the IMF and other international organizations, and the nation's debt increasingly mounted. It was during this time that the post-Vatican II Brazilian popular church's utopian vision, originally designed to fulfill a "preferential option for the poor," faced significant challenges. It progressive Catholic Church at that time was "not prepared to deal effectively with the radical changes in life conditions of the urban poor brought about by the recent shifts in the configuration of the capitalist world-system" (Vásquez 1998:171). Other external factors, including the spread of Protestant and Evangelical movements in Brazil, in combination with an increasingly confrontational stance from the Vatican toward progressive Catholicism (Peterson and Vásquez 1998), also placed significant challenges on the local Catholic *comunidades de base* (base communities) in Brazil that sought to put the popular church's utopian vision into practice.

I argue that, following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the beginning of the "Special Period" economic downturn, Cuba also underwent a "crisis of utopias." The political, economic, and religious circumstances between Cuba and Brazil were (and are) clearly different. Cuba, for example, has not seen the level of urban sprawl and very rapid population growth from the 1950s to present that Brazil has seen. There are, however, some notable parallels that I wish to draw between the two case studies, particularly with respect to the relationship between local religious developments on the one hand, and the rapidly changing and diverse global capitalist system on the other.

The complex and heterogeneous forms of capitalism that have characterized the Brazilian economy since the 1980s are both similar to and different from Cuba's mixed socialist/"quasi" capitalist adjustments of the Special Period. In Brazil, the "unstable" capitalist development in Brazil involves a "segmented hybrid" of some productive industrial sectors/regions combined with areas that still rely upon extractive and labor-intensive production (Vásquez 1998:174).

In the case of Cuba, the Revolutionary government managed, in spite of an extremely severe drop in GDP and loss of nearly all of the material resources imported from the former Soviet Bloc, to avoid a complete and utter collapse of the economy through what some scholars have referred to as a "somewhat contradictory combination of measures: first, a market-style promotion of foreign investment and tourism aimed mostly at relieving the foreign exchange crisis; and, second, heavy-handed rationing, labor mobilization, and economic planning to alleviate the consumption and production shortfalls in the domestic economy" (Purcell and Rothkopf 2000:33). I would argue that this "contradictory combination," is, like the Brazilian case, unstable—but in different ways and for different socio-economic and political reasons.

In Cuba, the combination of "market-style promotion of foreign investment and tourism" with the government's overall centralized economic system and Revolutionary values led to some rather odd and paradoxical situations at the grassroots level that went beyond hybrid forms of capitalist development. On the one hand, the Cuban government encouraged and promoted the development of international tourism in order to bring in much-needed hard currency and capital; this involved channeling significant resources and investments into four and five-star hotels, beach-front

properties, and tourism packages for visitors. "Sol y Playa" (Sun and Sand) became the unofficial motto, as tourists from Europe and Canada principally—but also interestingly enough from the United States—were encouraged to enjoy Cuba's fine beaches, historical buildings and sites, and cultural attractions.

On the other hand, the "flip side" of this scenario among Cubans themselves involved a number of challenging and paradoxical situations. In order to grapple with fuel and food shortages, the Cuban government advocated a "return to an ox-based agriculture, the promotion of bicycling a means of transportation, the reduction of the workday as well as of media broadcasts and organized entertainment" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:4). Alongside the encouragement of urban and organic gardening (Stricker 2007), the Cuban media even sought to reeducate the population's eating habits (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:4). In short, "Cuba became a hyperrealist collage" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12) that threw all elements into confusion. Billboards alongside the road advertising Revolutionary slogans stood side-by-side with advertisements for tourism, and local government-sponsored bodegas for distributing (severely) rationed products contrasted sharply with "hard currency supermarkets flashing brand-name items" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12). These socio-economic shifts represented neither a sudden nor complete transformation of the symbolic order. Rather, the socialist order continued, but within the context of a confusing "collage of assorted referents" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12).

What effects did this "mixed" socio-economic environment have upon Cubans' minds and bodies? By most accounts, it was a confusing repertoire of competing images and visions, through which Cubans creatively had to negotiate. Within popular

culture, the situation was "a fruitful inspiration for humorous commentaries" (Hernandez-Reguant 2009:12) rather than direct confrontation with the government. As Cuban artists and musicians grappled with how to cater their work to foreign consumption, they did so, paradoxically, within an environment that (according to core Revolutionary values) eschewed the encouragement of consumption behavior. This confusing situation of multiple referents was, for many Cubans, increasingly difficult to grapple with at the grassroots level; it affected bodies as well as minds.

Some Cuban men and women ran squarely up against competing realities and values, particularly with respect to the increasing commodification of bodies. On the one hand, the Cuban Revolution had prided itself on the re-orientation of prostitution to non-sexualized labor; on the other hand, declining returns from routine government jobs, rising material desires, and limited monthly incomes caused some Cuban men and women to make themselves sexually available to foreign tourists. By the late 1990s, one night of sex work could provide a Cuban double the monthly salary of a university professor (Wonders and Michalowski 2001:562).

How could average Cubans possibly come to terms with these competing values, signs, and symbols? As suggested within the earlier section, many of them unfortunately did not, deciding instead to end their lives, or to make the perilous journey across the Florida straits with no guarantee of survival. As one Cuban Baptist who converted to Protestantism during the Special Period put it, many people were "hopeless" and "in anguish." Selfishness, apathy, and despair have also been increasingly prevalent since the Special Period economic crisis; the same aforementioned Baptist characterized some everyday experiences as noticeably

different: "it used to be that people on the *guaguas* (local Cuban buses) would stand and give their seats up if they saw someone in need. Nowadays, they don't even bother."<sup>1</sup> The Revolutionary hope that Cubans would diligently and selflessly work for "moral" rather than "material" incentives was significantly challenged due to a combination of internal and external factors. Externally, larger shifts within the global capitalist system, in combination with the fall of the Soviet block and the U.S. embargo on Cuba, have placed severe strains and pressure upon Cuba's economic system. Internally, the Cuban government has attempted to strike a precarious balance between maintaining core Revolutionary values (social welfare programs, working for the benefit of the larger society) while at the same time restructuring certain sectors (but not others) of the economy to fit more in line with the market-oriented global system.

During the "Special Period" economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, many Cubans at the grassroots level lost hope in either a viable present or future. Their immediate situation—severe food shortages, lack of material goods, no fuel for transportation, and a growing sense of complete apathy and despair—placed challenges upon the Revolutionary hope of creating "A New Man" within the context of an egalitarian Cuban society. A cynical point of view might suggest that the entire hope of Cuba's Revolutionary utopia—to create an egalitarian society where ordinary Cubans worked not for material gain, but for the betterment of the larger society—fell flat during the Special Period crisis. I do not contend that this is the case; and it is, at any rate, empirically impossible to verify on a large scale. However, conversion narratives and in-depth interviews with Cubans do point to a common thread of apathy, despair, and

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication, June 2005 and October 2008.

hopelessness underlying day-to-day life during this time. In line with Bloch (1986), I argue below that within states of despair, it is impossible for human beings to move forward through expectation and conceive of other possibilities beyond the negativity of the present. This, I contend, even above any other issue, was the most detrimental to Cuba's Revolutionary goals; social change was impossible if the Cuban populace was experiencing paralyzing states of despair. The Special Period economic crisis was fundamentally a crisis of values and conduct (López Vigil 1997), and this impeded the fulfillment of the larger Revolutionary project of creating a "New Man."

Narratives from Cubans "converted" from atheism to Evangelicalism during this time spoke of "a new hope" being given to them within the context of the crisis. I argue below that Cubans' turn to religion in general, and to Evangelicalism specifically, in the post-Soviet era provided a "new hope" that can be characterized by following: 1) It pulled Cubans out of perilous states of despair and hopelessness, which severely curtailed their ability to move forward and act effectively within history; 2) It challenged certain post-Enlightenment and modernist views of an autonomous, individual self capable of understanding (and controlling) the world through "rational" thought; and 3) Like the "old hope," it encouraged the development of immanent and "this worldly" utopias through the development of social and spiritual capital.

### **"A New Hope"**

Diego is a *casa de oración* (prayer meeting) leader who hopes to eventually earn a Doctorate in Theology through the Baptist Theological Seminary in Havana; in chapter 2, we learned of his conversion experience during the Special Period economic crisis. In describing some of the difficulties and struggles that Cubans have faced since the fall of

the Soviet Bloc, Diego emphasized one problem in particular: the temptation to steal, even among Christians:

In Cuba one sees in many people the simplest temptation—or the most common, for example—to steal. People change the name and call it something else so that it will seem prettier. But it's not like that. The Bible says plainly: "don't steal." And Christians have to struggle with this. Because the devil presents that as if it were the only solution that you have in order to live, in order to survive economically. And so, you have to fight against that in your heart.

This temptation was certainly felt most acutely among Cubans during the Special Period, when even rationed goods were in extremely short supply. Prior to his conversion experience, Diego described himself as a person who "liked to arm [himself] because of that diabolical lie, the one that says that anyone could be your enemy; your neighbor over there is trying to harm you; that another guy is going to do a work on you so that you'll have problems." Indeed, Diego's experiences, along with a number of other Cubans interviewed, suggest that to some extent social as well as economic capital declined during Cuba's Special Period. Jealousy, anger, and mistrust of one's neighbor were predominant emotions felt within the Cuban populace. Hernandez-Reguant (2009:2) further analyses the general milieu of the period:

Across the board, its invocation brings up memories of deprivation and hopelessness; of hunger and heat; of wheeling and dealing, of dreams of a life elsewhere. Raising pigs in bathtubs, making omelets without eggs and pizzas with melted condoms, getting married for the state-allocated free case of beer, and other epic tales of survival, seldom void of black humor, form the lore of the time. As the state was forced to withdraw from everyday economic activity, leaving the population to fend for itself, many began to wheel and deal, unleashing a thriving black market of goods and services.

This lore from the Special Period seems to be quite widespread; incidentally, I heard a very similar story about Cubans secretly raising pigs in bathtubs for food from the aforementioned Diego; another Cuban, who was a young child during the Special

Period, recalls that in desperation for food, Cubans would "take the cloth part of a mop, fry it in a pan, and eat it."<sup>2</sup> Following his conversion experience, however, Diego asserted that God "gave him a new hope." Prior to this, he explains, "I came with that fear and with that jealousy in my heart...being free in Christ first and foremost signifies living without fear, of what man can do to you."<sup>3</sup> This last point is significant on a number of levels. Firstly, let us recall Bloch's (1986) analysis of expectant emotions: anxiety, fear, and hope. All are in their own way oriented toward the "not-yet," implying a real future but not guaranteeing it. Fear and anxiety however, do not contain the kind of forceful momentum that hope has, and they even have the potential to paralyze an individual; hope alone can "drown anxiety" (Bloch 1986:112).

### **"Hope against Hope:" Expanding the Limits of the Possible**

There are striking parallels between life in Revolutionary Nicaragua in the mid to late 1980s, and the economic situation in Cuba (during the Special Period as well as currently). During the economic crisis in Venezuela in the late 1980s, foods at subsidized prices were routinely unavailable in the state-supported markets, due to hyperinflation and a drastic drop in purchasing power. When available, packages of rice, beans, and sugar arrived late and only sporadically (Lancaster 1992:59-60). In short, finding food for one's family in the late 1980s was a constant struggle. In order for a household to survive, they must have more than rice, beans, and sugar (Lancaster 1992:60). Lancaster (1992:xiii) first encountered the Spanish phrase "La vida es dura"

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, June 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication, July 2006

(Life is hard) in a letter from one of his Venezuelan informants to his family. In Cuba, the phrase "It's not easy" (*no es fácil*) can be frequently heard throughout the day.

Rather than merely "not easy," one Cuban Baptist referred to the Special Period economic crisis as simply "impossible:" impossible to locate food, impossible to get from point A to point B, impossible to hold church services due to unbearable heat, no electricity, and an endemic lack of physical space. These circumstances "caused people to fall into frustration, depression, and hopelessness," as a Baptist pastor explained.<sup>4</sup> Conversion narratives from Cubans who turned to religion following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc describe "a new hope" given them from God, a hope that pulled them out of states of pain, desolation, and despair. They came to see themselves as inherently valuable beings with an interrelated purpose in life: to serve God, and to serve one another through Cuban prayer meetings, service for children and the elderly, and what little material resources they had during the Special Period economic crisis. In the case of Diego, the aforementioned Baptist, this hope prevented him from committing suicide. More than a refuge from Durkheimian anomie, however, this "new hope" had a "resetting quality:" it expanded horizons of the possible (Miyazaki 2004:127). Prior to their turn to religion, Diego and other Cubans were suffering from paralyzing states of despair—what Bloch (1986:111) characterizes as an "absolutely negative" state.

Apathy and despair were detrimental emotions with respect to Cuban Revolutionary goals; if Cubans felt that moving forward with work or life was simply pointless, then the possibility of a transformed society was automatically foreclosed.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication, July 2005.

This explains why, according to a formerly atheist Baptist pastor, "psychologists were recommending that people go to church" during the Special Period. The psychologists saw, as the Pastor explained, "that the situation is so above what a human being can do."<sup>5</sup> This suggests that during the Special Period, Cubans were re-evaluating secular modernity's confidence in the ability of human reason to determine appropriate courses of action.

### **Hope and Rethinking Control**

The "modernist impulse" within post-Enlightenment thought encouraged a particular view of human autonomy: human beings are "rational" subjects, capable of drawing upon their critical faculties and resources in order to construct their own fate (Vásquez 1998:23). Both secular and religious modernist thought has encouraged the notion that human beings can accomplish anything that they put their minds to (Peterson 2009:158). This was certainly encouraged within the Cuban Revolutionary context. During educational and socializing campaigns in the countryside in the 1960s, young literacy teachers were part of a social experiment designed to "produce a new kind of man, imbued with love for his country, ready for reform and desirous for increasing wealth in the community, realizing the value of labor and prizes it, honorable, devoted, and steadfast" (Blum 2010:179).

Adela, a young Pentecostal women in her 20s who grew up having "no knowledge that God existed," was not alive during the socialization campaigns of the 1960s. However, Adela embodied the same love of work (*amor al trabajo*) (Blum 2010:179) that Revolutionary values encouraged and cultivated during those campaigns: she

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, July 2005.

accomplished "short, medium, and long-term goals" with ease, loved learning for the sake of learning, and was, on the whole, quite happy. From an early age, she felt that she had "achieved everything that she was meant to have achieved," particularly education-wise. Nevertheless, along the way Adela "began to feel an emptiness, an dissatisfaction." This was a completely strange and unpredictable event to her, because she found no rational "motives for feeling this way." Most worrisome, she could not seem to control the situation, either. When her grandmother suddenly became ill, Adela began attending church, where "she heard about Jesus for the first time." After making the decision to "give her life to Christ," Adela contended that from that point on, she "had never felt so happy." According to Adela, turning over control of her life to God provided what she referred to as a "slightly paradoxical" sense of freedom:

People think that there is freedom in the world. That "I'm free to determine what I want," and that makes us free. But I think that freedom is more than this. Freedom in Christ is real freedom. Freedom to tell you what He wants you to do, to tell you want is good, to tell you what is just, to tell you what is holy. To have the strength, the disposition to be able to do what He knows is correct, and to be perfectly happy doing it. I believe that that is what freedom in Christ is. To do what is good, and to feel happy doing it.

From a secular and "rational" perspective, this notion of freedom does seem paradoxical, if not outright contradictory; one might ask, "how is it freedom to have a transcendent deity tell you the "correct" course of action, and then you follow it?" If we recall Spickard's (1998:103) analysis of different types of rationality, teleological (or utilitarian action) is goal-oriented and calculating. Ethical and moral action that arises from this "cost-benefit" calculation is not infinite; it is contingent upon benefits outweighing costs. Deontological action, by contrast, is value-oriented; it does not pursue choices based upon possible benefits or costs, but in pursuit of an ideal or value regardless of what it costs the individual (Spickard 1998:104). To some extent, the

post-Enlightenment view of human nature that places significant confidence in reason and "rationality" in order to orient action is teleological rather than deontological; it is teleological because it assumes that history, and those acting within it, are working towards a particular telos (ending).

The sense of freedom that Adela described involved a fundamental rethinking of both ethical action and human control; she experienced a recognition of human limits and autonomy, which she framed in terms of "letting go of control" and "turning it over to God." Although "it might seem paradoxical to suggest that embracing our permanent shortfalls in the pursuit of knowledge can provide hope," there is a connection between hope and recognizing human limits (Peterson 2009:159). Openness to the limits of our knowledge about the world—much less our ability (or inability) to control it can "free us from the cost-benefit calculation that dominates so many styles of moral decision making" (Peterson 2009:159). Religious faith can provide a ground for moral decision and action, a ground other than "Cartesian or Kantian confidence in human reason" (Peterson 2009:159). This ground can sustain a "holding power" for individuals in the face of disappointments and conflicts, and prevents the "burning out" that can occur if moral action is grounded upon calculations of effects. We can notably look to immanent rather than transcendent utopias for this ground for moral action; human and natural forces within interpersonal relationships "are as unpredictable and powerful as any deity" (Peterson 2009:159).

The Cuban Revolutionary hope of creating a "New Man" (and later a "Newer" Man) was not necessarily based upon a "cost-benefit" calculation of moral decision making. Arguably, it was also in line with Spickard's (1998:104) notion of "cathekontic"

form of rationality, in which ethical responsibility towards others grows out of our social relationships. If it did not rest upon a necessarily teleological view of human action, the Cuban Revolution was, however, grounded upon a particular teleological view of history. Within the Marxian view of history, the final emancipation of man from alienation—the creation of a "New Man," if you will—is "bound to a special period of time" (Tillich 1971:92). This view of history is one in which "history is a unique process with a unique goal:" the transition from primitive communism to a classless society (Tillich 1971:92). The Christian view of freedom and emancipation, however, is transhistorical insofar as "every social group stands in need of redemption and is incapable of delivering itself or other groups. The power of redemption breaks into the historical process vertically and is not its product" (Tillich 1971:91).

There are a number of notable comparisons between Christianity and Marxism. Both present the idea, for example, that "man is not what he should be," that there is a need to create a new human being. St. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, 5:17 (NIV) states that "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here." The methods and historical emphases on the creation of this new human being differ, however. This is not to imply that Christian notions of history and the coming Kingdom of God do not contain within them elements of immanence and a focus on the "here and now," or that Marxism never contains elements of what Tillich (1971) refers to as "religious socialism." The comparisons end, however, in terms of two very different possibilities for life: Christianity "views the human situation, including human history, from a stance between time and eternity" (Tillich 1971:96). Reconciliation between human beings and God is framed in terms in which

"the temporal is elevated into the eternal and the eternal becomes effective in the realm of time" (Tillich 1971:96). Marxism, however, interprets the human situation as completely bound to time, and can therefore only work towards an organization of society within the temporal boundaries of time. Being bound to space and time, the Marxist notion of reconciliation (or the creation of a new human being) is open to the disappointment that follows every utopia (Tillich 1971:96).

I argue that this is precisely what occurred during the Cuban Special Period economic crisis: ordinary Cubans at the grassroots level became disillusioned—not necessarily with Marxism per se (although some may have been), but with the hope contained within it: that, utilizing man's "rational" faculties and capabilities, "man can accomplish anything he puts his mind to." The contradictory political and economic realities of the period, in which official socialist discourse stumbled into alternative and competing values, created confusion at best, and despair at worst. The "new hope" that many found through religion during this time provided Cubans with a means to negotiate and make sense of this complex post-Soviet reality. In line with Miyazaki's (2004) analysis of hope, I argue that Cubans who turned to religion took the "old" past hope and replicated it onto another temporal horizon—that of eternity and the transcendent. At the same time, however, they grounded this eternal hope within the temporal realm as well, within the context of immanent and everyday utopias.

### **Cuban "Immanent Utopias" and Spiritual Capital**

As Cuba has adapted to the pressures of reinsertion into the global market, state subsidies and foreign investment have focused primarily upon commercial sectors designed to bring in much-needed "hard currency," such as tourism and nickel mining. Other sectors that have notably played a vital role within Cuba's social welfare system,

however, have fared less well: transport, housing, and health services (Hearn 2008:135). The Cuban civil landscape reflects a complex process of transformation "led by a government undergoing something of an identity crisis as the forces of economic globalization render the function and legitimacy of a centralized political system uncertain" (Hearn 2008:9). Looking internationally, a similar situation can be found elsewhere in the Latin American context; the Belgian priest and scholar Francis Houtart has argued that the globalizing "logic of the market" has encouraged the consolidation of religious groups and communities, in order to meet the spiritual as well as material needs of disenfranchised communities (Hearn 2008:141).

In the Cuban context, the state has looked to a variety of social and religious community-oriented programs, as well as domestic neighborhood organizations, in order to remedy the imbalance of focus in state subsidies. Although this has certainly eased pressure on the state's social service system and reduced material shortages, it has also "rendered established structures of ideological and legal authority vulnerable to the encroachment of organizations operating less directly under the state's political hegemony" (Hearn 2008:135). This is particularly evident within expanding social welfare and community development programs in Christian organizations. These organizations "identify greater social engagement as an opportunity for evangelization and for gaining greater leverage with the state on issues from civil rights to media control" (Hearn 2008:135).

In terms of analyzing the forces and reasons behind post-Soviet religious revivals in Cuba, Hearn (2008:9) draws an explicit economic connection, and argues that "the resurgence of religious practice in Cuba appears to be directly related to the economic

and psychological strains of the Special Period, providing stable structures of community and identity, and financial assistance from overseas religious nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)." According to this argument, international links and material resources are "central" to the expansion and legitimacy of Christian groups in Cuba, particularly since the Special Period. Free gifts, material goods, and newly authorized permission to travel through musical and other cultural activities have made joining Cuban Christian groups increasingly more attractive (Hearn 2008:144). However, religious social welfare work can encourage the formation of cooperative relationships, at times through interreligious dialogue, that could compete with the state's authority at the grassroots level (Hearn 2008:136). This is important, because it suggests that Cuba's shifting and transforming civil society is characterized by complex processes of negotiation and reevaluation between stated ideals and practical realities. The state, forced to negotiate with and even extend legal legitimacy to certain religious groups, nonetheless remains concerned about the formation of communities that might encourage the development of alternative identities with respect to the overall Cuban Revolutionary venture.

This explains why certain Cuban social scientists seem troubled by an increased number in Protestant house churches (*casas culto*). According to some scholars, Cuban house churches circulate literature that promotes an "evasive" religiosity, with theological messages promoting the importance of individuality over the collectivity (Berges Curbelo et al. 2006:208-210). In analyzing religion and social capital in Cuba, Hearn (2008:146) notably states that "despite the success of Christian community outreach programs, Cuban religious life remains characterized by a high incidence of

home worship and informal practice." The statement carries with it an underlying skepticism surrounding the potential of home-based worship and "informal practices" to either connect themselves to the larger Christian establishment, or to contribute to larger-scale social change. Hearn (2008) draws upon the work of Ramírez Calzadilla (2000:82), who characterizes home worship and informal practice as "spontaneous religion," and asserts that "an estimate cannot be made about the social weight of spontaneous religion, nor about expressions whose practitioners do not always recognize themselves as part of a religious group."

Hearn's (2008) and Ramírez Calzadilla's (2000) reluctance to draw any definitive conclusions surrounding the social implications of "informal" Christian religious practices is understandable. However, my in-depth fieldwork at the grassroots level with house church and cell group leaders and participants challenges any outright dismissal regarding the potential of these groups for wider social change, along with some common scholarly assumptions regarding their focus on the individual over and above the Cuban collective. I argue, utilizing Peterson's (2009:70) analysis of immanent utopias and "embedded rationality," that contemporary Cuban Protestant and Evangelical house churches, "cell groups," and prayer meetings provide immanent and tangible spaces of hope for both individual and larger social change. These "informal" groups, who are often still tied to larger "official" church associations registered with the state, are utilizing networks of house churches and prayer meetings in order to provide for the material as well as the spiritual needs of fellow Cubans.

These religious groups are also providing concrete examples of, and models, for, noninstrumental and nonutilitarian relationships. These types of relationships challenge

the more instrumental and "means-ends" values that have become increasingly more apparent since the fall of the Soviet Union and the insertion of Cuba's economy into the global market. As noted in earlier chapters, Cuba's "dual" economy has attempted to maintain Revolutionary ideals of selflessness and sacrifice, while simultaneously introducing certain market reforms that have placed challenges upon these ideals. In the attempt to negotiate the realities of fixed state incomes with material shortages and increasing desires for material goods (particularly from abroad), Cuba has witnessed a sharp increase in black market activities. At the level of self-identity and awareness, this process involved what Hernandez-Reguant (2009:2) describes as

A sort of anachronistic self-awareness—as socialist survivors in a sea of global capitalism—together with the national gloom over Soviet abandonment—further colored the experience as a radical break from the past. In the Special Period, there was a "before," which was stable, perhaps purer in its altruism and high ideals, a "now," which was confusing and unsettling, and a future that was, for many, another country.

One of the key reasons that Cuba has witnessed a resurgence in religious revivals since the fall of the Soviet Bloc involves not simply the attraction to the distribution of material goods and resources by church groups, although this has certainly played a role. I contend that religious groups in general, and "informal" religious groups of house churches and prayer meetings in particular, provide key sources of social and spiritual capital: they provide social capital through the promotion of social solidarity and networks of trust, or what one Cuban house church participant referred to as uniting together more ("se solidariza más"). They also, however, are spaces for the promotion and distribution of spiritual capital; beyond group trust and solidarity, they have provided Cubans with "a new hope" that a better world in there here and now is possible—a hope which many had lost during the most difficult years of the Special Period crisis. It is

also, notably, a hope rooted not within the “rational” pursuit of individualistic self-interest, but within the larger Cuban collective. This hope has been solidified with an emphasis not just upon individual salvation and a future afterlife in heaven, but within concrete interdependent relationship among Cubans in churches, houses, and neighborhoods.

This recent push towards greater social engagement reflects several larger shifts within Cuban Protestantism. The first is a perceived need to have what one house church leader referred to as a "*cambio de mentalidad*" (change in mentality), whereby Cuban Protestants seek to create practices and styles of worship that are uniquely *cubano*, rather than simply tied to foreign influence. Secondly, there is a growing belief among Cuban Evangelicals that instead of focusing solely upon individual salvation, faith and action must be linked through direct social engagement with the surrounding community. I saw this notion put into practice in particular with respect to outreach among Cuban Baptist churches to the elderly. Notably, although church-operated medical clinics ceased operation after American missionaries left, Protestant churches have continued to run homes for the elderly (Ramos 1989:138).

In 2008, I visited a home for the elderly (*lugar de ancianos*) that was next to, and directed by, a local Baptist church in a semi-rural town outside Havana. Notably, a number of Cuban Baptists who attend another Baptist church in town happen to work at this *lugar de ancianos* for a living, providing medical, material, and spiritual care to elderly living there. This church next to the *lugar de ancianos* has been participating in a process of unification (*unirse*) with the other four official Protestant churches in town, utilizing networks of neighborhood prayer meetings and house churches. A number of

these house church and prayer meeting networks are geared specifically towards the elderly within specific neighborhoods, in an effort to, as one prayer meeting (*casa de oración*) leader put it, "bring the church to the people, instead of bringing people to church."<sup>6</sup> Upon inquiring about the specific purpose and nature of these house churches, one participant responded that they are "specifically for people within this neighborhood to pray and carry the burdens of one another, come together in love, and help one another in everything."<sup>7</sup>

Cuban Evangelicals are indeed using social outreach programs as part of their evangelization efforts. I would also argue, however, that the growth of Christian social welfare programs is also tied to the development of a Protestant *teología cubana* (Cuban theology) that is increasingly focused upon a highly immanent and "this worldly" spirituality. From in-depth interviews and participant-observation with Cuban Baptists and Pentecostals, I would challenge the critique that Cuban Protestants are preaching an "evasive" spirituality—meaning, a spirituality that is focused solely upon the transcendent and is "other-worldly" in nature. This very well may be the case for some Evangelical groups, but not all.

### **A Progressive Cuban Protestantism?**

Although the theological frameworks underlying liberation theology and Pentecostalism seem contradictory at first glance, they also "might have mutually complementary strengths" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:213). In a number of ways, Pentecostalism does "operate with an entirely different set of guiding principles" than

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<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, March 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication, July 2006.

liberation theology (Miller and Yamamori 2007:214). While the metaphorical imagery of the former leans toward harmony and purity, the latter emphasizes opposition, conflict, and struggle, thus reflecting its Marxian orientation. Pentecostalism brings up images of Jesus as the head of the church, with each individual fulfilling his or her purpose as part of the body of the church; liberation theology, on the other hand, sees Jesus as a revolutionary prophet who calls upon the people of the church to struggle for systematic change in helping to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth (Miller and Yamamori 2007:214). Most importantly with respect to social change, Pentecostalism (and arguably other Protestant groups as well) maintains that real social change occurs incrementally, from the inside out: a personal, intimate conversion experience involving a change of heart and "turning one's life over to Jesus" will in turn lead to a change in moral values, which will then potentially lead to larger social change. Liberation theology, on the other hand, views social change more systematically; it can only occur through what Miller and Yamamori (2007:215) refer to as a "frontal assault" on corrupt and unjust political, economic, and social systems.

A more cynical interpretation suggests that there is not much space for overlapping goals between Pentecostalism and liberation theology. One viewpoint argues that Pentecostalism is simply a "tool of capitalist ideology," whereby it "creates sober, hardworking, honest employees who are pawns within a capitalist system" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:213-214). This might be the case where there are vast discrepancies and disparities between classes (Miller and Yamamori 2007:214). The Cuban case, however, is different—precisely because the Revolution has made an explicit effort to eliminate the gap between the rich and the poor. In addition, the

experimental process of adapting to the reality of Christians living under socialism has "proceeded slowly and with more caution than comparable activities in other areas of Latin America (Crahan 1979:157). In spite of the historically more conservative stance of Cuban churches, it strikes me as overly simplistic to suggest that the rapid growth in Protestant and Charismatic Christianity in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Bloc is due to the fact that Cuban Protestants are somehow uniformly attracted to the "American way," and are thus pawns within an imperialist, North American agenda. Empirically, I did not find this to be the case; quite the contrary, Cuban Protestants expressed an explicit interest in creating a Protestant identity that was separate from North American influence.

In terms of the relationship between Cuban Protestant groups and larger social change, Pentecostals (and arguably other Evangelical groups as well) are indeed confronting daily human needs; they are not, however, working at large systemic change. In Cuba's case, struggling for systemic change in the social structure could potentially involve a volatile confrontation with a centralized and authoritarian government. I am highly skeptical also of characterizing the Cuban Protestant house church and cell group phenomenon as a form of "resistance" towards the Cuban Revolutionary government.

I contend that the type of Protestantism Cubans are promoting is a response to Cuba's unique post-Soviet socio-economic conditions, and bears three main characteristics: 1) It is autochthonous and indigenous in nature; 2) It has pulled Cubans out of states of apathy and despair, emotional states that were highly detrimental to the Revolution's goals; and 3) It has provided Cubans at the grassroots level with "tangible

hope:" a hope grounded not just upon the "hereafter," but upon everyday relationships with fellow Cubans through religious social welfare programs. The "family-like" structure of house churches, prayer meetings, and small cell groups has provided what Peterson (2009:159) refers to as "immanent grounds for hope:" concrete moments where we realize our interdependence with other social beings, which in turn generates both humility and hope.

This very real and tangible hope has, in particular, helped heal the broken minds and bodies of the Special Period economic crisis. This hope helped to broaden the horizons of the possible for Cubans during this especially difficult time and, according to their narratives, has sustained them during difficult times since. In this respect, I argue that it played a crucial role within social change after the fall of the Soviet Bloc. Although Cuba's socio-economic and political future remains uncertain, those Cubans who claim to have found this "new hope" seem fearless in spite of the uncertainty. They have a genuine hope: a hope that, "if it is rooted in the reality of something already given, becomes a driving power and makes fulfillment, not certain, but possible" (Tillich 1990:185).

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

### The Cuban Case in Context

Cuba, the only remaining communist country within the Western hemisphere, is an interesting and unique case in and of itself—particularly in comparison with other Latin American nations. It is the only location in the Americas, for example, that explicitly promoted scientific atheism at the official state level, which resulted in a number of individuals in the population that “grew up atheist.” However, the Cuban case also has wider implications; in terms of the study of world Christianity, Cuba adds a neglected dimension to the study of the transformation of religiosity in post-Soviet and post-communist societies. It also allows for a comparative approach to the study of Christianity globally, both historically and geographically. Historically, the Cuban case sheds light on continuities and changes within Christianity itself, particularly through local and indigenous interpretations of Christian thought and practice. As Jenkins (2007:51) astutely notes, the global spread of Christianity cannot be explained solely by a desire to emulate the West:

If the faith had been a matter of kings, merchants, and missionaries, then it would have lasted precisely as long as the political and commercial order that gave it birth, and would have been swept away by any social change. In many instances, though, Christianity grew as a grassroots movement, appealing to a rich diversity of groups.

Indeed, indigenous interpretations of the Christianity and the Bible are nothing inherently new: “Biblical interpretation has always been culturally specific and has always been informed and coloured by reigning cultural values; Western scholars themselves have not always been entirely free from such tendencies” (Sugirtharajah 2001:190).

Despite the fact that the indigenization of Christianity is nothing new, there is somewhat of a general consensus among scholars of world Christianity that the “center of gravity” of Christianity is moving decidedly “south” away from traditionally conceived “centers,” such as Europe and North America. In short, Christianity by 2025 and 2050 will not look like it does today, and certainly not the way it appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: “by 2050 only about one-fifth of the world’s three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites” (Jenkins 2007:3). Geographically, the Cuban case adds an important comparative dimension to this shifting process in global Christianity; it mirrors recent developments, for example, in places such as communist China. Given that China has ten times as many Christians today since Mao’s forces took control of the country in 1949 (Jenkins 2007:81), then we would do well to understand the nature of this substantial growth of Christianity under the context of communism.

There are several key theoretical assumptions regarding the growth of Christianity that the Cuban case complicates and challenges. Firstly, the development of Protestantism in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Bloc does not reflect a desire among Cubans to simply emulate and copy North American forms of religiosity and practice, as has been suggested by some of the literature on Protestantism in Cuba specifically and even Latin America more generally; quite the contrary, I found among Cuban Baptists in particular an explicit desire to separate themselves from foreign influence. Secondly, it problematizes the idea that the collapse of communism resulted in a “vacuum” which religious beliefs and practices rushed in to fill. Within the social sciences, this notion of a “vacuum” coincides with certain predominant underlying frameworks for understanding the relationship between religious pluralism, revivals, and social change.

Lastly, the Cuban case forces us to re-think certain assumptions regarding the motivations that lie behind religious change and conversion. The turn to religion since the “Special Period” crisis cannot solely be explained by “rational choice” approaches to understanding religion and social change; from the beginning, Revolutionary ideology has explicitly challenged a key underlying assumption behind the rational choice paradigm: that human beings universally act, and make decisions regarding the goods they seek, based upon a “matter of self-interestedly maximizing material rewards and benefits” (Smith 2003:135).

If humans made decisions solely based upon the pursuit of material self-interest, then culture has nothing to do with motivating human action (Smith 2003:135). The empirical evidence across a variety of disciplines, however, suggests otherwise: people are motivated by cultural norms and values; they are also motivated by religious beliefs and practices. The trick, apparently, is to analyze how this occurs without falling into either an abstract or reductive trap, whereby “culture” or “religion” is either completely reduced to some other field of social relations (economic, political, etc.), or abstractly removed out of social analysis altogether. The Cuban case, I contend, can open up new avenues of research and thought on these issues, precisely because it forces us to re-think what we mean by “religious,” as well as what we mean by human nature (and the potential to change it).

### **Cuban Protestantism, Not Simply Protestantism in Cuba**

Building upon the work of Sanneh (2003), Jenkins (2007), and other scholars of world Christianity, I argue that Cubans have taken Protestantism and “made it their own.” Historically, there has already been a precedence for this; it was a Cuban—and not a North American—who established the first Protestant church in Cuba (Ramos

1989:22). The 1959 Revolution, which called for a radical overhaul of Cuban society, was on the whole met by reinforced conservatism within Cuban churches (Crahan 1979), although notably a number of Protestant individuals and groups played an important role within Revolutionary struggles (Castro and Betto 1987; Corse 2007; González Muñoz 2007). I argue, based upon participant observation within Cuban Baptist and Pentecostal house churches (*casas culto*), prayer meetings (*casas de oración*), and small “cell” groups (*grupos celulares*), that post-Revolutionary Protestantism in Cuba has become deeply indigenized and tied to Cuba’s unique post-Soviet economic and political contexts. Although the indigenization of Christianity in general is not a new phenomenon, the implications within the Cuban case force us to re-think traditional views of Protestantism, particularly the individualistic and private type of piety that characterizes dominant strains of North American Protestantism.

My in-depth ethnographic work complicates the claim that some Cuban scholars have made regarding “informal” practices within Cuban Protestantism, particularly within Cuban house churches: that Cubans are promoting a type of religiosity that privileges the individual over and above the collective (Berges Curbelo et al. 2006:210). This might be the case with some Cuban Protestant groups, but it is not what I found at the grassroots level. This was perhaps surprising, particularly within a denomination (the Western Baptists in Cuba) that has historically maintained such strong ties to North American denominations and mission boards. The spread of Christianity, however, cannot be explained by a desire to merely emulate the religion of the empire (Jenkins 2007:51). Although historically one cannot overlook the predominance of North American hegemonic influence in Cuba on a number of levels (economic, political,

cultural), I contend that the recent growth of Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, cannot be reduced to a desire to emulate all things American. To do so would be to gloss over what Cubans themselves have argued: that there is a perceived need to have a shift in focus away from importing North American methods and practices, and to develop a type of Christianity that is *cubano*—uniquely Cuban, and appropriate to the Cuban context.

I argue that the type of Protestantism that is developing in Cuba is not an “otherworldly” Protestantism focused upon God working solely outside of history, or a Protestantism that is focused upon an abstract hope in a pleasant afterlife. This is not a “pie in the sky” type of religiosity, or a mere escape from difficult circumstances; it is a force for both individual and social change. Through house churches, small groups, and religious social welfare programs, Cuban Protestants are creating what Peterson (2009) referred to as “immanent utopias:” concrete moments of interpersonal action that provide a very real hope that a better world is possible. The Cuban Protestants I spoke with are not, notably, calling for a radical overall of the existing social order in exactly the same manner that the Cuban Revolution called for. They are, however, redefining what it means to be Protestant, and Protestant within the Cuban context.

This context involves a number of specific restrictions and regulations on church organization and structure, particularly with respect to Cuban house churches. In spite of these regulations however, these informal, autochthonous Cuban Protestant groups are expanding rapidly. Perhaps, I would suggest, they are expanding not in spite of regulations, but because of them: Cubans are taking the larger regulatory infrastructure by the state and are diffusing and localizing it throughout local neighborhoods. They

are, in other words, indigenizing Christianity on the ground in Cuba within the context of state regulation and control of religious spaces, and this has coincided with an increase—not a decrease—in the number of Cubans who have converted to Protestantism. This has some rather interesting implications for our understanding of religious pluralism and diversity. The sociological literature that takes a “religious marketplace” approach to religion and social change assumes a correspondence between religious freedom and religious revivals, drawing upon the United States and the “West” as examples of religious diversity. If there is a correlation between religious freedom on the one hand, and religious revivals on the other, then why have we witnessed the explosive growth of Christianity under state control and repression of religion? The Cuban case suggests that we need to re-think this correlation; perhaps it cannot adequately explain religious growth in communist and post-communist areas.

### **A New Human Being**

What exactly is the nature of this distinctly Cuban form of Christianity among Cuban Protestants? I argue that it is a Christianity deeply embedded within an already-existing moral framework that the Revolution has sought to promote, but which lost some of its valence during the particularly harsh years of the Special Period economic crisis. This moral framework maintained that it was indeed possible for human nature to be transformed: to create a “New Man” bound not by the “rational” pursuit of individualistic self-interest, but by the will and desire to work and care for the larger Cuban collective. Christianity and Marxism differ on their respective views of history, but they converge on the idea that human beings are fundamentally alienated from what they should be (Tillich 1971). Arguably, they can differ on their methods of arriving at the ideal state of man that is free from bondage; they have at various points even

theoretically and philosophically disagreed on the precise nature of that bondage. While Marxism relies upon a type of secular humanistic philosophy to promote this change in human nature, Christianity emphasizes that God—working either transcendently, immanently through human beings, or some combination of both, brings this change about. This is no small distinction. However, upon closer examination, lines are blurred. Pals (2006:119), in an analysis of Marxism, offers an interesting characterization of communism:

Communism in essence claims to present not just a broad theory of politics, society and economics but a compelling total vision of human life, complete with a philosophical stance on humanity's place in the world, an explanation of all that is past in history, and a prophecy of what is to come.

In other words, communism, and the Marxism that has inspired it, represents “a total system of thought that itself resembles a religion” (Pals 2006:119). It critiques Hegel’s idealism and offers a vision, grounded within materialism, for what human life ought to be: “rich, creative, varied, and satisfying—an expression of the whole personality” (Pals 2006:127). The “ought to be” implies that we aren’t there yet; this notably parallels Bloch’s (1986) notion of the “Not Yet” as it applies to hope. There remains, however, the hope of arriving there. In Marxism, it is through persistent class struggle towards the eventual abolition of classes and the state; in Christianity, the hope is through the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Christianity and Marxism intersect when the break between the material world and the spiritual world is collapsed, when a more holistic view of human nature is advocated. Some forms of Christianity tend to “dichotomize body and spirit, giving priority to the spiritual dimension” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:64). There are also, however, forms of Christianity that maintain a holistic view human beings, that “that they are mind, body,

and spirit" (Miller and Yamamori 2007:63). In the "non-Western" world especially, we see this type of religiosity at work, and it is no doubt contributing to the rapid growth of Christian revivals within the "Global South" that includes Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. I argue that the type of Protestantism that is expanding rapidly in Cuba is precisely this type of religiosity—a Christianity that removes the breaks between the mind, body, and spirit, the "public" and the "private," and re-integrates human nature into a fulfilled whole.

The Special Period economic crisis, as a number of Cuban scholars have noted, resulted in more than a plummet in GDP; it caused a crisis in moral values (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006; López Vigil 1997). I would draw this line of thought out further and suggest that the crisis created another break between the material world and the spiritual world; in contrast to the Revolutionary goal of integrating the whole human being, the effects of the crisis re-introduced the individualistic, rational and calculating pursuit of material self-interest that the Revolution sought to eliminate in the first place. One of the main reasons, I contend, that Protestantism is spreading so rapidly in Cuba is because it has re-integrated the whole that was split into parts by the Special Period crisis. Rather than advocating a "pie in the sky" religiosity, Cuban Protestantism integrates the material and spiritual worlds in such a way that actually resonates, interestingly enough, with Marxist views of what human nature should be.

### **A "Spiritual Vacuum" Filled?**

Cuban Evangelicalism is now beginning to attract attention from prominent news sources. In July 2010, Cuban President Raúl Castro announced the release of dozens of political prisoners, after he met with leaders of the Catholic Church. These recent church-state negotiations were "a major boost to an institution facing increased

competition for Cuban worshippers" (Miroff 2010). Recent newspaper article titles such as "Cubans Flock to Evangelism to fill Spiritual Vacuum" suggests an underlying assumption regarding religious revivals within post-Soviet and post-communist areas: the collapse of communism resulted in a vacuum, into which religious beliefs swept in and filled. This framework in turn proposes a correlation between religious revivals on the one hand, and religious freedom and political opening on the other.

Following the logic of the rational choice and religious marketplace theory, when government restrictions over religious groups and practices are lifted, we should see a comparable rise in religious revivals. However, consistent and indisputable empirical evidence for this is unclear; in fact, the opposite phenomenon may be occurring: there may be a correlation between communist and post-communist control of religion and an increase in religious revivals (Froese 2004a). How are we to better understand religious change in these contexts? Furthermore, should we characterize the religious arena in post-Soviet and post-communist societies as "vacuums?"

From a historical perspective, I do not find the notion of a "vacuum" convincing within the Cuban context. Pre-Revolutionary Cuba was characterized by an interesting mixture: an overall conservative and reactionary Catholic Church, weak civil-ecclesiastical linkages and low priest to laity ratios, and even high percentages of rural workers who claimed "no religion" when surveyed about their beliefs. Nevertheless, a 1957 survey of 4,000 agricultural workers throughout Cuba revealed that 96.5% expressed belief in God (Crahan 1979:162). Thus, although the institutional Catholic Church may have been weak in Cuba in comparison to other Latin American countries,

we cannot discount the historical impact of more popular forms of religiosity and practice.

African-derived religious communities have arguably maintained a pervasive presence within both pre and post-Revolutionary Cuba; they also played an important role in the transition from slavery to free labor, within the Afro-Cuban ethnic and cultural associations (*cabildos de nación*) that slaves and free persons of color joined during the colonial period (Scott 2000). Afro-Cuban groups experienced some difficulties with the Cuban state during the early years of the Revolution, when scientific atheism was promoted and African-derived beliefs were often associated with "superstition." During these periods, it is more likely that religious practice went "underground" as opposed to disappearing altogether. From a historical perspective, the weakness of institutional religiosity in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, combined with the force of popular religious practices, suggests that post-Revolutionary religious change did not develop out of a "vacuum."

From an ethnographic standpoint, my fieldwork within Cuba suggests several other problems with conceptualizing post-Soviet and post-communist societies as religious "vacuums." Firstly, I do acknowledge that empirically identifying what percentage of a society believes, or does not believe, in God is methodologically challenging (Zuckerman 2007). Conversion narratives from qualitative interviews with Cubans do suggest, however, that some seemed to have genuinely subscribed to scientific atheism, which must be placed with the larger context of Revolutionary moral discourse. Secondly, this discourse affected, and became deeply intertwined with, multiple levels of society, politics, and culture, including religious culture. I argue that

rather than a "vacuum," Cuban society after the fall of the Soviet Bloc has been shaped by discourses of morality that are tied to Revolutionary calls for the transformation of both individuals and the collective. This blurs boundaries between the explicitly secular and the religious, and forces us to more deeply analyze the nature of scientific atheism within the Cuban Revolutionary context.

I contend that we need to re-evaluate what religious conversion means within the context of communist societies that have actively promoted scientific atheism through Revolutionary discourse and re-educational campaigns and programs. From a sociological standpoint, we need a better understanding of the relationship between individual motivation for religious change on the one hand, and larger, macro-level societal changes on the other. I believe that expanding our definitions of what we mean by "rational" within everyday behavior is a good starting point, and the scholarship currently being done on the differences between social and spiritual capital can help us in this effort. Within this dissertation, I offer a tentative re-definition of spiritual capital: the motivating values and practices for action, beyond the mere pursuit of material interest, that promote a radical re-definition of human nature and society. I argue that hope, which has often been conceptualized as an abstract or "other worldly" concept, can be a tangible force for both individual and collective change, and is therefore an example of spiritual capital. Within the Cuban context, the Revolutionary hope that called for the development of a "New Man" and a re-definition of human nature faced severe challenges during the Special Period economic crisis; however, the "quasi-religious" language of the Revolution, which blurred boundaries between the explicitly sacred and the secular, provided an already-existing moral framework that made a

transition from atheism to religion possible during the harshest years of the crisis. At the convergent points when Cuban Marxism and Christianity intersected, through a language that promoted altruistic loving and caring for one's neighbor, a "new hope" developed after the fall of the Soviet Bloc: a renewed hope that a better world was possible—not just in the hereafter, but in the "here and now."

### **Future Comparative Research: China and the Former Soviet Union**

In order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the nature of religious revivals within the post-Cold War era, we need more comparative case studies. Fortunately, scholars are just beginning to undertake this effort, but at present it is largely through isolated case studies rather than transnational comparative analyses. Within this increasingly globalized world, we will need not simply individual case studies, but in-depth comparative and even interdisciplinary work; only this, I suggest, will help us re-evaluate common assumptions and gain a greater understanding through comparative dialogue and sharing of knowledge. To that end, I believe that the Cuban case study will serve as a launching point for a larger discussion about the nature of religious revivals under communism, as well as the relationship between political and economic crises and religious and social change.

Specifically, there are two geographical areas that have undergone significant political, cultural, and religious changes that can be compared (and contrasted) with the Cuban case: Russia and China. Russia and the former USSR serves as an interesting comparison with Cuba; although both have notably different histories with respect to church-state relations, they do share the common Soviet and Cuban Marxist goals of creating a new, selfless human being that would work for the betterment of their

respective societies. In this sense they both shared similar moral visions for individual and social transformation, within the context of state-sponsored scientific atheism.

Within the case of Soviet Russia's "religious economy," one might expect the rapid spread of atheism. Froese (2004b), however, argues instead that Soviet communism was largely unsuccessful in "converting" the local Russian population to scientific atheism. Official state attempts to replicate religious ceremonies and rituals through "a new Communist sense of the sacred as an alternative to religion," merely "confused the population, many of whom mistook scientific atheism for a new religion and not an exit from religious belief altogether so that even those few who wanted to believe in the ideals of atheistic communism simply ended up praying to the gods of Lenin and Stalin" (Froese 2004b:48). This is an interesting argument that has important implications for understanding religious change in communist and post-communist areas.

Did populations within these societies "mistake" scientific atheism for a new religion, rather than abandoning religion altogether? If the answer is "yes," how then are we to understand the correlation between the collapse of communism and the rise in religious revivals? One could interpret these revivals "as a reflection of the degree to which Soviet citizens hid their true religious beliefs under communism" (Froese 2004b:44). We are then forced to evaluate to what extent populations within these areas genuinely subscribe to scientific atheism, as opposed to maintaining their religious beliefs while hiding them during periods of state repression. Although limited to a particular group of Baptist and Pentecostal Cubans, my ethnographic interviews with formerly atheist Cubans do suggest that some may have genuinely subscribed to a scientific atheist worldview.

The Cuban case study can add an important comparative analysis here.

Qualitative interviews with formerly atheist Cubans suggest a more complex picture than simply "praying to the gods of Lenin and Stalin," although I would concur with Froese's (2004b) point that post-Soviet populations may not have abandoned religion altogether. In the Cuban case, men and women of various ages explicitly stated that not only did they "grow up atheist," but that they a) genuinely subscribed to the tenets of scientific atheism, and b) had no concept of the spirit world prior to their conversion experiences. This suggests, at least from the way they are describing the situation, that the Cuban version of scientific atheism was, if not completely convincing to them, then at the very least it resonated with their respective experiences and worldviews. As noted previously, the Cuban version of Marxism-Leninism was deeply embedded within an all-encompassing moral Revolutionary project, complete with grassroots educational initiatives and also, notably, the discourse of Fidel Castro himself. The Cuban case might differ from what Froese (2004b) found in the case of Soviet communism, although more in-depth comparative work needs to be done.

Another potentially fruitful avenue of comparative inquiry is the case of China. As scholars on world Christianity have noted, by the year 2025 China could potentially have conservative estimates of 135 million Christians (Jenkins 2002:265). The People's Republic of China may very well represent "the greatest statistical mystery," with estimates of the number of Chinese Christians varying widely (Jenkins 2002:80). At the time of Jenkins' (2002) writing, the Chinese government itself gave an estimate of some 20 million people worshipping within officially-sponsored government churches; however, this takes no account of private house churches and unregistered religious

meetings (Jenkins 2002:80). Jenkins (2002:81) arrives at a middle figure of 50 million Chinese Christians between the low estimate from the Chinese government (20 million) and the higher estimate (100 million) by the United States State Department. Even if one accepts a more conservative estimate, China has nonetheless witnessed a "population boom" in the number of Christians, even during periods of significant anti-religious persecution (Jenkins 2002:81).

There are a number of interesting parallels to be drawn with the Cuban case, particularly with respect to the growing house church phenomenon found in both communist countries. In China, house churches represent a distinct challenge to the government's bureaucratic supervision (Hunter and Chan 1993:3). House churches also pose a great challenge to any cohesive methodology for data collection, precisely because they meet in private and do not recognize the leadership of either the official church or government bodies. In spite of the difficulties and variations in statistics, what is clear is that the growth of Christianity in China has been more rapid than population growth since 1949; the most conservative estimates have the number of Chinese Christians increasing sixfold, in comparison to a doubling of the overall Chinese population (Hunter and Chan 1993:71).

In the case of Cuba, I witnessed an "indigenization" of Protestantism through the use of social welfare programs, often based within local house church meetings. Thus, although the Cuban state remains wary of the intentions of house churches and type of religiosity they are promoting, I found that their informal and unregulated nature had an unanticipated result: the development of an indigenous and autochthonous Cuban Protestantism that is deeply embedded within a Revolutionary context. The Chinese

house church phenomenon appears to be more complicated, for there continues to be somewhat of a separation between "underground" and unregistered house churches on the one hand, and the Three-Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM) on the other. The Chinese Protestants formed the TSPM precisely because they were concerned with ending foreign influence within Chinese churches (Hunter and Chan 1993:58), and the TSPM is often viewed within the context of China's "official" Protestant church. This thus raises the interesting question of which form of Protestant organization (official or house church) has been most conducive to the indigenization of Protestantism in the Chinese context. In Cuba, there is no "official" state Protestant church as such, although some Protestants, as well as other denominations, are free to join the Cuban Council of Churches.

This dissertation proposes these two geographical comparative cases (China and Russia) as possible future avenues of comparison with the Cuban case. Rather than isolated case studies, collaboration between scholars has the potential to shed new light on the socio-political, economic, and cultural realities that have shaped religious change under the context of communism. As we move further into the 21st century, we will need a greater understanding of post-Soviet and post-communist societies, particularly given recent shifts in international relations that suggest the possibility of a more open dialogue between the United States, Russia, China, and Cuba. It is my hope that this study will serve as a framework for opening that dialogue, both inside and outside of academia.

APPENDIX  
SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: THE HOUSE CHURCH PHENOMENON

For house church (*casas culto*) or prayer meeting (*casa de oración*) leaders:

- When and how did this house church get started?
- How many and what type of people attend this house church? Youth, elderly?
- How many times do you meet?
- What material do you use during the service, like film, pictures, sheet music, or instruments? Where do they come from?
- Is this house church affiliated with a larger church or congregation?
- The number of house churches in Cuba is growing rapidly, correct? Why do you think this is happening?
- Do you think that there is a connection between house church services and familial Christian relationships?
- Are there people that don't know about the service and then convert?
- Do you need a permit to meet in this house church?
- What is the difference between a house church and a prayer meeting?
- Do you know how many house churches or prayer houses are here?
- Can anybody organize a prayer house?
- Does this prayer house participate in another form of evangelization, or is it only a service in this house?

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ms. Caraway was born in Austin, Texas and reared by her paternal grandparents. In the spring of 2001, she began her undergraduate career at the University of Texas at Austin, where she received a B.A. in Latin American Studies with honors in December of 2003. At UT-Austin, Ms. Caraway participated in a number of study abroad programs, including one to Havana, Cuba during the fall of 2002. During this time, she wrote an honor's undergraduate thesis entitled "Post-Embargo Cuba: Economic Implications and the Future of Socialism." In 2004, her grandparents moved to East Bernard, Texas, an hour southwest of Houston. In the fall of 2004, Ms. Caraway began graduate work at Tulane University in New Orleans, where she would later receive her M.A. in Latin American Studies in May of 2006. In the fall of 2006, Ms. Caraway began the Religion in the Americas doctoral program in the Religion Department at the University of Florida. Throughout her doctoral career, she has continued to make yearly trips to Cuba.

Ms. Caraway has presented her work at numerous national and international conferences, sponsored by the Latin American Studies Association, the South Eastern Council of Latin American Studies, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and the American Academy of Religion. Her teaching and research interests include world Christianity; religion in Latin America and the Caribbean; religions of Africa and the African diaspora; and religious revivals in communist, post-communist, and post-Soviet areas. She has a passion for teaching undergraduates, particularly on the diversity Christian cultures across the globe.