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Is Castroism a Political Religion?

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Introduction

For 45 years, Fidel Castro has presided over a one-party, one-man dictatorship in Cuba. Given the longevity of his rule, it would appear that a dense network of beliefs, rituals and ideology – in short, a political religion – has developed to justify and support the regime. Indeed, there are many dimensions to Castroism that resemble a political religion, both theoretically and in comparison to other empirical cases. Examples include the symbolic iconography of the revolution, from major holidays like May Day and the anniversary of Castro's armed insurrection on 26 July 1953, to the veneration of revolutionary heroes, such as Che Guevara and, from another era, Jose Marti. Most important of all, of course, is the cult of personality that surrounds Castro himself. Communist ideology, itself one of the quintessential political religions, has provided one of the foundations for the legitimation of Castro's regime, just as it afforded Cuban leaders the blueprint for political structures and policy. But Castro has also relied on other ideas to legitimate his rule. He has constantly used and reinforced Cuban nationalism, replete with a clearly defined enemy, the capitalist United States of America. The latter has been a haven for the 'worms and parasites'¹ who fled the island after 1959. The Cuban regime has also revealed messianic ambitions, trying to export its revolutionary model and post-colonial anti-Americanism throughout the developing world, and especially in Latin America.

Despite these affinities with the concept of a political religion, however, Castroism also demonstrates particular nuances. It has always been idiosyncratic, highly contradictory and extremely personalistic. Unlike other revolutionary twentieth century founders of political religions, Castro had neither a coherent plan at the outset, nor a developed

doctrine (replete with iconic texts such as the *Communist Manifesto* or *Mein Kampf*), nor a comprehensive program beyond the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista, the destruction of the traditional élite and, most importantly, his installation as 'supreme leader.' 'History will absolve me!',² Castro declared in the famous speech based on his trial after the failed 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks, a speech that constituted a fundamental indictment of the Batista regime, containing only vague programmatic references. Thus, far from a committed ideologue, Castro was, and continues to be, a self-proclaimed man of action, relentless in his pursuit of power, exhibiting an extraordinary intuition for revolutionary agitation.³

Although there is some question as to what kinds of political views he held while conducting his guerilla campaign in the Sierra Maestra mountains before the seizure of power, he later claimed that in the 1950s he was a 'utopian Communist' and then an 'atypical Communist.' This implies that, despite his professed sympathies, he was not willing or ready to accept the discipline of the Communist party. In fact, Castro only formally embraced communism in April 1961, and, if at this point he threw himself (literally and unexpectedly) into the arms of the Soviet Union, this was because he needed a stronger ally to defend himself against the United States and the Cuban exiles who had settled there. Even so, as a copious scholarship amply demonstrates, his relationship with Marxist-Leninism and the Soviet Union was often strained. His policies have been erratic and inconsistent, and the institutionalization of the party and regime appears minimal. Nevertheless, like other communist systems, the principal lines of authority have always been rigidly vertical and hierarchical. Castro may be *fidelista* to the core, but the instrument for the exercise of his power has been the state.

Compounding the difficulties one faces in characterizing Castro's ideology is the issue of changes and phases over time. Indeed, we observe no fewer than three variants of Castroism, all of which roughly correspond to the various phases of his rule. First, there is the revolutionary variant that accompanied the seizure of and consolidation of power during the 1960s. The second is the more orthodox Communist version, sometimes referred to as 'bureaucratic socialism' that characterized the 1970s and mid-1980s, which also coincided with the regime's 'internationalist' interventions in places like Angola, Ethiopia and Nicaragua. The third variant coincides with the demise of the Soviet Union and its bloc. Over the past 15 years, erratic and frequently contradictory economic reforms have been combined with sharp nationalism, an even more intensive focus on Castro as person and leader, and a strident anti-Americanism.

Castro has repeatedly been able to update and reinvigorate this anti-Americanism, as in his responses to the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 and, especially, to the Elian Gonzalez incident in 2000. Elsewhere, one of the authors has characterized this phase as one of charismatic and truncated post-totalitarianism.⁴

This ideological heterogeneity and evolution over time complicate any analysis of Castroism. Yet, there are also more constant influences, a hard core, in all periods clearly showing that Castroism approximates a political religion. Statism, nationalism, anti-Americanism and, above all, his persona, have been the constant factors. To accommodate the Cuban case, we examine the theory and concept of a political religion and propose several modifications and refinements. Our central insight is that regimes or movements should be mapped on two continuous axes. One axis is a continuum with the ideal-typical and most completely realized political religions like German National Socialism on the one side, and 'mere' ideology on the other. The second axis ranges from traditional to non-traditional religion, and tries to capture the relationship between traditional religion or religious forms of legitimation with less orthodox forms. With this modified typology, we evaluate the degree to which Castroism approaches, but does not reach, a fully developed political religion. Alternately, we can examine how intervening factors – Castro's personality, Latin American geopolitical and cultural traditions, and world historical time (*Zeitgeist*) – have impeded full realization.

Theory and concepts

Though the term political religion has an honorable lineage, dating back to the philosophical ruminations of Eric Voegelin and authors like Nikolai Burdiev, the concept has not gained widespread acceptance among most political and social scientists. There are three reasons for this lack of resonance. First, there is still a lingering disdain regarding cultural, ideational and historical phenomena among many political scientists. Too often, culture is considered a residual category where all unexplained factors end up. Alternately, culture is considered impossible to specify and immune to rigorous, quantitative analysis. Major conceptual and empirical advances in recent years, associated with authors like Ronald Inglehart, Russell Dalton, Thomas Rochon, Robert Putnam and Samuel Huntington, have largely silenced such skeptics. Second, the study of political religions has been closely tied to a handful of totalitarian ideologies, such as Nazi Germany, fascist Italy,

Communism and, earlier, Jacobinism. It has been difficult to divorce the concept from the specificities of these cases of atypical transformative politics in order to show the more general validity, and applicability, to cases like Cuba. Perhaps the biggest obstacle has been definitional ambiguity, the challenge of differentiating the term not only from conventional religion and from other cognate phenomena such as civic religion, but also from better-known close conceptual substitutes, replete with their own literatures, such as 'ideology' or 'nationalism.' Nevertheless, the political religion term has witnessed a renaissance in recent years, resulting from, and contributing to, a useful though still nascent conceptual refinement (Klinghoffer, Emilio Gentile, Michael Burleigh, George Mosse).⁵

To begin with some definitions

A political ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs, values and opinions, exhibiting a recurring pattern, that competes deliberately as well as unintentionally over providing plans of action for public policy making, in an attempt to justify, explain, contest or change the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community.⁶

Even this commonly used term is contentious, since authors use it in both a neutral, descriptive sense and a more critical manner, where ideology connotes a distortion of reality and tendentious, self-serving propaganda. Yet ideology cannot accommodate or exhaust cases where the scope, ambition and expectations of the agents behind the set of beliefs are so great, with such exalted degrees of emotional intensity and extraordinary expectations of attitudinal compliance and conversion, and where the group or leaders in question have revolutionary, world-changing or cultural pretensions.

Religion represents precisely this kind of heightening of belief, and a qualitatively different attitudinal and behavioral phenomenon. There are multiple and competing definitions of religion, but several commonalities exist among them. Substantive definitions of religion stress belief in spiritual beings, experiential ones focus on a common experience of finding the infinite in the finite, and, most appropriately for the purposes of this chapter, structural – functional alternatives (in the spirit of Emile Durkheim) highlight the unifying function of a common moral community. Thus,

a religion is a symbolic system (with associated beliefs and practices) which articulates the thought that there is a source of moral order

behind the world...there are important social and personal needs met...and its symbols have a typical content. They must purport to refer to transcendent realities which function as the ground of the natural order and the source or guarantors of morality.⁷

An alternative, and similarly useful, definition states that religions are 'control systems linking meaning and motivation...a sphere of activity where efforts are deliberately made to influence, manipulate and control people's thoughts, feelings and actions in accordance with various religious values.'⁸ Central to any religion or religious phenomenon is the provision of meaning, motivation, control and, above all, legitimacy.

It is also essential to address the processes through which a religion is formed, institutionalized and continually reproduced – processes best deemed as sacralization. Emilio Gentile argues that sacralization occurs when: (1) the sanctity and primacy of a collective secular entity is consecrated; (2) such conceptions are incorporated into a code; (3) members are considered an elect community with a messianic function; and (4) a political liturgy and sacred history are formulated.⁹ Even in the most postmodern and secularized environments, it would appear, there is some need for religion or an analogous phenomena that provides meaning or transcendence, while also, even minimally, helping with the needs for political legitimation (Voegelin, Billings and Scott, Marquand and Nettler),¹⁰ and this suggests that the need for the religious impulse and processes of sacralization will not soon disappear. Indeed, as Max Weber acutely observed a century ago, there is a constant need for one of three types of legitimate authority. Under modern or modernizing circumstances, traditional authority wanes and often incomplete, rational-legal authority (Weber's 'iron cage') lacks emotive bite. Charismatic forms of authority, of which religious phenomena are a perennial example, are perhaps even more common and needed today, as the examples of Hugo Chavez and Osama bin Laden attest.

If these religious needs and processes of sacralization may be accepted as givens, questions arise as to what elements are sacralized, and what accordingly are the results. There are three alternatives. The first focuses on the sacralization of political power, whereby traditional religion legitimizes power holders in a syncretistic manner, as for example with divine right monarchies, or Islamic theocratic states like Iran or Saudi Arabia. The second alternative is civic religion – an amalgamation and synthesis of traditional and newer secular phenomena – whose prominent examples include 'Americanism'¹¹ and the French *mission civilatrice*. Gentile classifies it thus:

Civil religion is a form of sacralisation of politics that generally involves a secular entity, but at times is connected to a supernatural being conceived as a god; it is not linked to the ideology of any particular political movement, but acknowledges the full autonomy of the individual from the collective; ... (it) appeals to spontaneous consensus... (and) exists side by side with traditional religions and various ideologies.¹²

As this definition suggests, authors often use this concept to differentiate between democratic and non-democratic versions of the sacralization process and results, but this point of differentiation does not map perfectly. For example, Francoism clearly contained a combination of secular and traditional religious tendencies as well as a partial acceptance of societal and political pluralism, yet this coincided in an undemocratic regime. Many forms of nationalism (pan-Slavism, pan-Germanism, political Islam, pan-Arabism) also contain analogous combinations (although certain forms cross over into the political religious category), yet they can be used to legitimize both democratic and non-democratic regimes. In our view, the pluralist or democratic dimension is less important than relationships with traditional religion, and it is useful to perceive these components as varying on a continuum.

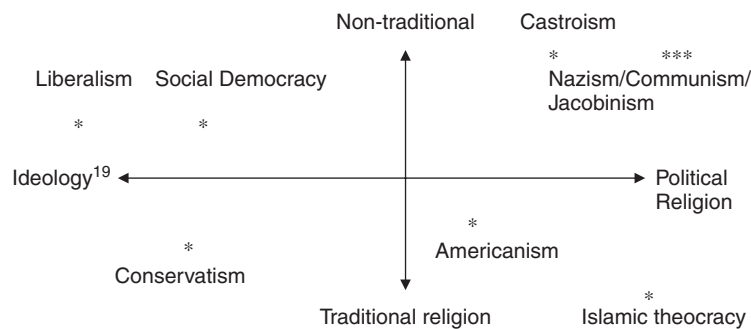
Political religion may be defined as the

sacralization of an ideology and integralist political movement that deifies the mythical secular entity; it does not accept coexistence with other ideologies and political movements... sanctifies violence... denies the autonomy of the individual and stresses the primacy of the community; it imposes a political cult and enforces obligatory observance of its commandments.¹³

The self is identified as an agent of Providence; there is a call to faith and a marked political eschatology.¹⁴ New rituals, indoctrination, icons and symbols are crucial for the political religion. Hence, ambitious scope, radical or revolutionary ambitions and unquestioning belief and compliance are key dimensions. As Michael Burleigh points out, none of the other cognate phenomenon (such as nationalism) transformed citizens from passive spectators into active participants, and nor did they define good and evil and the un/making of humanity. In a real sense, they were underfreighted with ambition.¹⁵ A reductionist, Manichean world of black and white/good and evil are characteristic of the world-view of political religions (and certain types of political regimes).

Thus, by definition, a political religion can exist only in an un-free, non-pluralist, often totalitarian political system, corresponding to Voegelin's notion of collective politics. Gentile observes that a totalitarian regime is accompanied by the militarization of the party, a concentration of power in a charismatic leader, all-encompassing capillary organizations that embrace collective indoctrination and an anthropological revolution – all of which employ coercion (sanctified, purifying violence), demagoguery and propagandistic pedagogy.¹⁶ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan also stress the key characteristics of constant mobilization, active persuasion and conversion (the new man).¹⁷ A political religion claims an absolute monopoly on truth, belief and legitimacy. No dissent is allowed, and those who disagree are an enemy to be disqualified, expurgated and destroyed. There are no moral safeguards here, rather a moral imperative. In what is an essential difference with a civic religion, moreover, political religions (although all variations are inspired by and indebted to the forms and practices of conventional religion) envision themselves as direct competitors and replacements of traditional religions. There is no possibility or prospect for cooptation, cooperation or synthesis. Again, the relationship to traditional religion emerges as a central concern. Political religion also places intense focus on the charismatic leader, who becomes the quasi-religious father of the country. As Voegelin has observed, political religions differ from traditional forms by taking out most of the hierarchical mediation between God and the individual. Belief and dogma are generated, interpreted, transmitted and modified only through the supreme leader or, as Arthur Koestler put it in *Darkness at Noon*, by Number 1.

In an effort to move beyond some of these definitional ambiguities and to expand the conceptual range to a wider variety of cases,¹⁸ we propose to move beyond the common tendency to present these conceptual categories as mutually exclusive. Our proposal is to envision two continuous axes that comprise a rudimentary typology.



For us, the essential components of and/or conditions that facilitate a political religion include:

1. the existence of a non-democratic regime with little to no pluralism;
2. a regime that fuels intense nationalism;
3. a regime that clearly defines its enemy or enemies;
4. a single, monopolistic party – and capillary organizations for indoctrination;
5. a charismatic demagogic leader, the *Führerprinzip*;
6. a clear and well-developed doctrine – with revolutionary, world-changing (the ‘new man’), cleansing and messianic ambitions;
7. well-developed symbols and iconography – with rituals and rallies to reinforce these;
8. the regime must also be an explicit competitor to traditional religious forms of legitimation.

It is also necessary briefly to review the common conditions of cases that have facilitated the emergence of political religions. In our view, a combination of two inter-related factors appears necessary. First, a modicum of modernity with the concomitant erosion of traditional authority is always present, yet these processes have not evolved enough to have completely destroyed the old power élite. This is the classic revolutionary situation. Moreover, as authors like Barrington Moore, Wehler, Gregory Luebbert and Alexander Gerschenkron have long argued, the nature of the specific modernization process matters, particularly, whether development was more evolutionary (as in Britain and the United States) or more drastic (Germany and Russia). The latter cases are more prone to a revolutionary crisis and the salvation that political religions can provide. Second, countries that experienced political religions all had belated or incomplete nationhood: Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbia. In Central and Eastern Europe this was largely due to the complicated ethnic settlement patterns in the old empires. Meanwhile in the other cases, expansionist drives were thwarted by the lack of a frontier or status quo, by the colonial powers (Germany, Japan) or the colonial powers’ ruling and/or exit strategies that thwarted national realization (Vietnam, Korea). Each case went through an extraordinary identity crisis, spurred on by perceptions of an unfulfilled national destiny (thwarted by other powers or ethnicities). The interaction of these two factors, rapid but incomplete socio-economic modernization and unfulfilled national identity creates conditions under

which religion or religious phenomena become especially important to provide needed meaning and to re-legitimate the system.

Founders of political religions exploit the unstable situation and tap the need for meaning, justice or resolution for which such societies yearn. Such leaders also take Weber's maxim to heart, namely that empirical reality is always a combination of real and ideal factors. Political religions, with their charismatic authority, do not just provide psychological comfort, but they are also a major means to impose absolute, coercive, but somehow legitimate, power. They help to create very real transformative and salvational regimes. To be clear, we are not proposing a causal explanation or prediction. For every successful attempt to create a political religion, there are many more that fail. Moreover, there is a big difference between the successful emergence of a political religion and its institutionalization into a sustainable doctrine or culture over time.

This conceptual discussion structures our analysis of Castroism. We now turn to a consideration of the central questions. Is Castroism a political religion? To what degree does Castroism correspond to, or deviate from, the components outlined above?

Preconditions and themes of Castroism

Just over a 100 years old as an independent nation, Cuba had a turbulent political history. Having won independence in 1902 (after Spain was defeated in the Spanish–American War), its sovereignty was still visibly truncated until the abrogation – in 1934 – of the so called Platt Amendment which had been inserted into the American Constitution and allowed the United States to intervene directly in Cuban affairs. The failure to consolidate democratic rule, rising authoritarianism, socio-economic tensions (especially between the urban hub of Havana and the rest of the country), an almost exclusive reliance on sugar as the core of the economy, extensive corruption, cronyism and rising political violence marked the first four decades of national life. Though a democratic constitution was implemented in 1940, the next 12 years did not signal the consolidation of democracy in Cuba. Rather, political chicanery and corruption in the Grau and Prio administrations, along with the rise of organized political gangs, undermined the newly installed structures and contributed to its demise via a 1952 coup by the same General Fulgencio Batista who had been constitutional president between 1940 and 1944.

The 1952 coup cut short a presidential campaign in which it was almost universally anticipated that the victor would be the *Ortodoxo* party, whose political symbol was the broom, as opposed to the ruling *Autenticos*. Among the early and most virulent opponents of the Batista coup and regime was a young law graduate and abortive *Ortodoxo* candidate to Congress, Fidel Castro Ruz. Even from early on, Castro exhibited an extremely personalistic, yet inspirational, leadership style.²⁰ He eventually armed and led a small band of guerillas in a failed attack on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago on 26 July 1953 (from which derives the name of his political movement), and was then imprisoned for two years. After his release, he fled to Mexico where he raised funds, recruited more followers (including his brother Raul and Ernesto Che Guevara) and returned to Cuba in 1956 on the ship named *Granma* (later the name of the state-run newspaper). Castro conducted a guerilla war in the Sierra Maestra mountains in the east of the country, against the largely inept Batista army, buttressed by urban guerilla groups and a pervasive and growing anti-Batista public opinion. By 1958, the official army was in disarray, general strikes began to paralyze the cities, university students led protests and, in March 1957, even assaulted the presidential palace and tried to assassinate Batista. Eventually the United States, long a pillar of the regime, began to withdraw its support. Batista fled on 1 January 1959, and Castro entered Havana on 8 January, marking the beginning of his dictatorship.

The early years of the 'Revolution' (1959–1962) were full of turmoil and deep-seated changes: the nationalization of industry and agricultural holdings was swiftly followed by a massive exodus of the professional and middle classes, as well as many religious believers. Above all, relations became strained and outwardly hostile with the United States; amply exemplified by the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. These events radicalized and entrenched Castro, the self-proclaimed national liberator of the first 'free territory in the Americas.' Indeed, the early and mid-1960s were a period of revolutionary euphoria, with the focus based on a radical transformation of society and the creation of a 'New Man.' Viewed on a more global scale, the 1960s were also a period when Castro and his closest associates, among them Che Guevara, came to see Cuba as a rival to the Soviet Union and China. This small group of Cuban revolutionaries increasingly regarded their island as a paragon, which had more to say and to teach the Third World (and especially Latin America) than either of the Communist giants. This stance created substantial friction with the Soviet leadership. However, the

1967 death of Guevara in Bolivia while pursuing his *guerrillero* dream, growing economic problems and vulnerability and the need to assure himself of international support, all led Castro to reconcile Cuba with the Soviet Union. The 1970s saw a strategic convergence between Cuba and the USSR. Though it would be far too simplistic to view Castro as merely a pawn or surrogate for the Soviet Union during this period, it is nevertheless clear that he not only presided over Cuba's integration into the Communist economy and trade zone, but also committed Cuban troops to far-flung places where they served as a Soviet surrogate for intervention.

Change again set in during the mid- and late 1980s, first with a domestic process of ideological 'rectification' and institutional renewal, and then with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which provoked a deep economic and ideological crisis. Given that the Soviet Union subsidized the Cuban economy to the tune of 30–40% of its GDP by 1989, many thought the regime would inevitably collapse in the absence of such support. Surprisingly, Cuba and Castro weathered a difficult period of transition (the so-called 'special period'), during which the regime undertook some economic reforms (among them, the decision to allow the free circulation of dollars and the opening of farmers' markets). Such measures were only half-hearted and, in the case of the farmers' markets, Castro could not help but show his disdain and contempt for what he was convinced was a measure that re-introduced capitalism on the island. Not surprisingly, as soon as the economic situation improved slightly by the mid- to late 1990s, the regime tightened the screws of this and other 'free-market' sectors.

As we argued above, a regime must be totalitarian, or at least non-democratic with a totalitarian edge, for the political religion term to be applied appropriately. Institutionally, the Castro regime has approximated this ideal type. It is a one-party state with the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) the sole legal political organization. There is extensive state ownership (76% of all employment is with state entities), little independent civil society and no acceptance of pluralism. There are no free and fair elections, and there is little distinction between Party and state. Castro is omnipresent as President of the Republic, First Secretary of the Communist party, *comandante* and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, presiding over the Council of Ministers, the Council of State and the Politburo. He relishes micro-management of the economy, evidenced by his 40-year pattern of visiting factories and cooperatives, while freely dispensing advice and instructions. As an otherwise sympathetic observer, the Polish journalist K. S. Karol put it in 1970:

He has chosen a most demanding way of life for himself, rushing all over the country, explaining here, trying to keep up flagging spirits there, and preaching the virtues of disciplined action wherever he goes. But his achievements in the field are rather slim, especially compared with the tremendous effort he has put into them. The enthusiasm he kindles whenever he appears vanishes again soon after he leaves, and does not stand the test of the setbacks and hard realities of daily life. The discipline he tries to encourage is evanescent, and how, indeed, could it be otherwise in the absence of genuine discussions or any degree of real understanding? Worse still, many of his own interventions and decisions, made on the spur of the moment, show a great deal of confusion and everything but alleviate the most pressing problems. A single person cannot be an infallible expert in all fields of technical endeavor, cannot be competent on questions of cattle breeding and irrigation, on the best method of cutting sugar cane and on the advantages of coffee plantations in the *Cordon de la Habana*, not to mention a thousand other spheres calling for special knowledge of the soil and of the political realities... This is the point: the building of socialism cannot be the business of one man or of a single group of men, however well-intentioned.²¹

Castro always has centralized control of the coercive apparatus of the state in his person, and has never shared power in any meaningful way; neither with his brother, Raul, first vice-president and defense minister, nor with Guevara. He has ruthlessly eliminated any potential competitors, like the military hero Arnaldo Ochoa, executed in 1989. This constant, yet selective use of repression and violence is another hallmark of a totalitarian regime. In the Cuban case, the geography of an island where it is easy to control who enters and leaves; with nearly 15% of the population in exile (the capitalistic middle class; also meaning that the kinds of opponents to the regime that others like Pol Pot murdered, are abroad); a *Stasi*-like network of informants organized around the ubiquitous *Comites de Defensa de la Revolucion* (CDRs); with some (heroic) dissidents but no opposition; and with a siege mentality fueled domestically and internationally – under these circumstances, control is possible with merely selective repression. A totalitarian regime is also one that endeavors to indoctrinate and mobilize the masses. Castro's success in this realm is unprecedented. The PCC has a membership of 770,000 (out of a total population of about eleven million), which, combined with its youth organizations, means that one in six Cubans between the ages of 15 and 65 are members.

Membership in the CDRs is over seven million, representing fully 85% of the population over the age of 14.²² In 2005, approaching 78 years of age, a somewhat physically debilitated Castro still continues to preside over mass rallies, including one on May Day in 2004, where more than one million people participated in Havana.

The Castro regime enjoys all of the institutional preconditions for a political religion. While, as we argued above, there has been a substantial evolution of the regime over the decades, with different phases and emphases, there remains a hard core of basic tenets that remains constant. It is to a consideration of these that we now turn, in order to ascertain the degree to which Castroism is a political religion.

The *Führerprinzip*

There needs to be more than the necessary institutional concentration of powers in the leader for a political religion to exist. The leader must be in full political and, just as importantly, ideational control. Not only must he express this role, but his followers and the masses must accept his status as the sole interpreter of the revolution, as more than a mere mortal, as someone endowed with a special vision, charisma. In other words, the leader must enjoy a unique role as an historical agent. A well-developed *Führerprinzip* also entails arbitrariness. The inspired, infallible leader, who is always right, can change his mind and policy, even flippantly. As Oliver Stone recounts, Castro points out that he tends to be self-critical, but 'not so much about being wrong, but about how we could have done things better, how we should improve.'²³ These aspects of political religious leadership have always characterized Castro and Castroism – already from his first political activities in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁴ Castro takes great pains to emphasize the honesty that characterizes his revolution, and it would appear, in fact, that there is little that embarrasses him. The one exception may well be his days as a university student, and the accusation that he was a participant in the political violence of the 1940s. As he recounted in 1955:

(Gangsterism) germinated within the Autentico Party and had its roots in the resentment and hate that Batista sowed during his eleven years of abuse and injustice (1933–1944). Those who saw the murder of their comrades wanted to avenge them, and a regime that was unable to establish justice allowed such vengeance. The blame cannot be placed on the young men who, moved by natural yearning and the legend of a heroic era, longed for a revolution that had

not taken place and at the time could not be started. Many of those victims of deceit, who died as gangsters, could very well be heroes today.²⁵

Like Hitler before him, Fidel himself does not emphasize his quasi-divine status, speaking almost always of the revolution and revolutionaries, of which he, of course is their representative. A political-religious leader also must be a charismatic orator, an adept manipulator of the crowd, with bombastic, apocalyptic, ambitious, yet self-righteous rhetoric. The leader does not directly emphasize his importance, but rather merely conveys the strong impression that only he is capable of the sacrifice and duty of saving his country. He is the privileged messenger of providence. Typical of such sentiments was Castro's speech at his trial after the Moncada attack in 1953, and later published as *History Will Absolve Me*: 'As for myself, if I had to give up my rights or my honor to remain alive, I would prefer to die a thousand deaths... Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me!'²⁶ Or, as he declared in 1953:

(The) Revolution comes from the soul of the Cuban people. Its vanguard is a youth that wants a new Cuba, *a youth that has freed itself from all the faults, the mean ambitions, and the sins of the past* (authors' emphasis). The Revolution comes from new men with new methods, prepared with the patience, courage and decision of those who dedicate their lives to an ideal.²⁷

Of course, the reality is more complex. Even though Castro does not shamelessly praise himself, he alludes constantly to his superhuman attributes: his vigor (despite his advancing age), the 8-hour speeches and his monikers, maximum leader and 'the horse,' have obvious sexual overtones.

Perhaps more importantly, it is in the writings of Castro's acolytes and followers that we see the lauding of the leader and his personal qualities, the pledging of their lives and eternal devotion; literally worshipping the paternalistic, all-knowing leader.²⁸ One such example occurred shortly before the trial and execution of General Arnaldo Ochoa. Ochoa, the former commander of Cuban forces in Angola, had been slated to take over the Western army in Cuba, but, instead, was then eventually arrested and executed with several others on charges of corruption and drug smuggling; though it may have had more to do with Castro's elimination of a potential rival. Accordingly, Raul Castro

literally screamed at the prisoner: 'Listen, Fidel is our father . . . Look, if Fidel Castro had not been born, neither you nor I would be sitting here because he produced what Che (Guevara) called the social cataclysm. A true revolution was produced from this social cataclysm.'²⁹

Guevara presents an equally revealing portrait with some of his references about Fidel Castro. Guevara accompanied Castro from the very beginning of the guerilla war in the Sierra Maestra, later becoming an influential figure in the new regime before going on to fight in other Latin American countries (dying in Bolivia in October 1967). He was also an 'organic intellectual' of the Revolution, authoritatively fleshing out ideas and substantiating the logic of Castroism, before eventually becoming an iconic cult figure both in Cuba and abroad. Who has not seen the photographs by Alberto Korda, or the sentimental and positive portrayal in the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*? And who has failed to see the posters and ubiquitous t-shirts of Che and not imagined we were seeing a twentieth century version of Jesus Christ?

Despite his own magnetic force and personality, Guevara may be considered an acolyte of Fidel Castro, constantly and comprehensively subordinating himself to the man he once described as 'telluric force.' Hagiographical statements by Guevara about Castro abound. As he affirmed in 1961, Guevara is to Castro what Goebbels was to Hitler. In 1961, Guevara asserted,

He is a man of such great personality that in whatever movement in which he participates he should be the leader, and this he has done during the course of his career . . . He has the characteristics of a great conductor, a quality which when added to his personal qualities of audacity, strength, valor and his extraordinary desire to always express the will of the people, have taken him to the place of honor and sacrifice that he today occupies . . . But he has other important qualities, as in his capacity to assimilate knowledge and experience, to understand the entirety of a given situation, without losing sight of the details, his immense faith in the future and the breadth of his vision to foresee events and anticipate the facts, always seeing farther and better than his comrades.³⁰

His September 1965 'Farewell Letter' continues the self-effacing adulation:

My only mistake of any gravity was not to have trusted more in you from the first moments in the Sierra Maestra and to have understood quickly enough your qualities as conductor and revolutionary. I lived

magnificent days and, at your side, felt the pride of belonging to our people in the luminous and sad days of the crisis in the Caribbean (1962). Few times did there shine more brightly a statesman than in those days. I am proud, too, of having followed you without vacillation, with having identified with your manner of thinking and with having seen and appreciated the dangers and the principles... In the new fields of battle, I shall carry the faith you have inculcated in me, the revolutionary spirit of my people, the feeling of fulfilling the most sacred of duties: to fight against imperialism wherever it may be... Thank you for your teachings and your example. I shall try to be faithful through the last consequences of my actions.³¹

Hardly a relic from the 'heroic' beginnings of the regime, the *Führerprinzip* is still alive and well in Cuba, exemplified by the pervasive slogan: 'With Fidel everything; against Fidel nothing.' The official Cuban government website notes that from the ranks of the younger generations in the 1950s 'a movement of a new type was born and at its head was Fidel Castro.' He also continues to seduce influential foreigners, a cast that over time has included Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and, most recently, Oliver Stone from the realm of arts and entertainment. The list also includes many influential politicians, especially in Latin America, most recently exemplified by Hugo Chavez.

The new man and the moral regeneration of Cuba

The next constant in Castroism reflects the pretension to transform not just the culture and behavior of Cubans, but their entire human make-up. True to revolutionary form, Castro has expressed this in a paternalistic fashion:

It is not a man of the jungle that *we want* (emphasis added) to develop, a man of the jungle cannot be of any benefit to society. It is not that self-centered, savage mentality that can in any sense benefit human society. The more human society fights against those self-centered, savage, and anti-social attitudes, the closer it will come to embodying a way of life that is ideal and good for all... And the old society fostered exactly those sentiments, exactly those attitudes. And if today there are still many who have those attitudes... unquestionably it is because of that heritage... *We want* (emphasis added) the coming generations to receive the heritage of a very different

attitude toward life, to receive the heritage of an education and a formation that is totally devoid of the sentiments appropriate to a man of the jungle.³²

Moreover:

We cannot encourage or even permit selfish attitudes among men (emphasis added) if we don't want man to be guided by the instinct of selfishness...by the wolf instinct, the beast instinct...The concept of Socialism and Communism, the concept of a higher society, implies a man devoid of any of those feelings, a man who has overcome such instincts at any cost, placing above everything his sense of solidarity and brotherhood among men...If we fail because we believe in man's ability, in his ability to improve, then we shall fail, but we shall never renounce our faith in mankind.³³

Rhetoric aside, Castro did, in fact, articulate a coherent plan to implement this 'anthropological revolution.' The regime would target youth, and the educational and political systems would be the means. In the speeches of Che Guevara, we find characterizations of youth as 'malleable clay,' combined with the assertion that 'the new generations will come free from original sin.'³⁴ In an October 1962 speech to the Communist Youth, Guevara insisted: '(You) young Communists...(will be) creators of the perfect society, human beings destined to live in a new world where all the obsolete, all the old, all that represents the society whose foundations have just been destroyed will have definitively disappeared.'³⁵

Obviously this emphasis on youth and vigor was not an invention of Castro. Revolutionary movements the world over, such as the Young Turks and the Nazis, have always fetishized youth with the associated imagery of novelty, idealism and vigor (as well as an impetuosity that does not abjure violence), and contrasted this with the gerontocratic and corrupt status quo. Moreover, Cuban political culture has long worshipped the image and role of youth (recall the *Ortodoxo* appropriation of the broom) to a much greater degree than many other political cultures (perhaps in response to the merely semi-sovereign status that the country had long faced). In reality, youth, epitomized by the especially active university student milieu (as in many developing countries a small, centralized and élitist group concentrated in the capital), played a massive role in the country's political life; they were, for example, central to the fall of Batista. Therefore, even though Castro was no innovator in this regard, his and his regime's total success in harnessing and maintaining the

image of youthful vigor (reinforced continually, most recently with the appropriation of Elian Gonzalez), is a large part of his success over time.

The models for the 'New Man' are none other than the *guerrillero* and the *revolucionario* – committed, youthful and willing to fight and die. 'The guerilla' declared Che, 'foreshadows the man of the future.'³⁶ In an almost perfect description of the totalitarian emphasis on constant mobilization, he then notes:

The Revolutionary must struggle every day so that this love for living humanity is transformed into concrete acts, into acts that serve as an example for mobilization... the revolutionary consumes himself in this uninterrupted activity that had no other end than death, unless the construction of the new society is accomplished on a world scale.³⁷

Castro has never abandoned his rhetoric about the 'New Man' and the 'new society,' effectively always putting himself on the 'progressive' side of humanity and the Enlightenment.³⁸ Such efforts continue today, even as he has positioned himself as a leader of all anti-globalization forces. He has the solution. As he told Oliver Stone: 'Either the present problems (of the world) must be solved, or humanity will not survive the twenty-first century. I am inclined to believe rationality will win out in the end.'

Of course, there is another, less metaphysical and far more coercive side to creating the 'New Man.' As Guevara wrote in almost Pavlovian style: '(The) mass must be submitted to stimuli and pressures of certain intensity... the dictatorship (is) exercised not only over the defeated class, but also, individually over the victorious class.' The objective is, of course, to 'liberat(e) man from his alienation.'³⁹ It was also Che Guevara who observed as early as 1960 that 'every revolution, like it or not, inevitably has its share of Stalinism.'⁴⁰

Accompanying this 'humanistic' effort to create a new and perfect man is the violent cleansing of the degeneration and filth characterizing the pre-revolutionary *ancién regime*. These themes of struggle against enemies within, and enemies without, have been a constant in Castroism, as with all political religions. Hitler expressed similar sentiments when he described 'Jews as vermin,' as well as socialists, the mentally handicapped, Jehova's Witnesses and homosexuals; all of whom needed to be purged from the German body politic for the real regeneration of the German nation to be possible. Similarly, there are numerous examples of the moral and moralistic tone Castro adopts with his respect to his friends and enemies. One of the most exemplary is his statement at the July 1989 session of the Council of State that upheld the conviction and

death sentence of Ochoa, which also shows Castro's cunning placement of himself in the deeper stream of Cuban history:

Ochoa's level of corruption...and his moral degeneration are...the most shameful page in our history... Treason is to sell your country, and they sold the country. Treason is to put the nation in jeopardy, and they placed the nation in serious jeopardy. Treason is to undermine the nation's morals and the revolution's prestige. They have been doing things that undermine the Revolution's morals and prestige... (They) morally destroyed the Ministry of the Interior... I think about those who fell in order to build a decent country, and not those who fell today, but those who fell 120 years ago. I think about those who fell at that time in order to create a republic where justice and law would prevail – a decent republic where there would not be corruption, impunity, dishonesty, embezzlement. They fell for an honorable, respectable country. They fell in two wars of independence, and they have fallen throughout this century. They are the ones I think about...the many valuables comrades who fell. I also think about the loved ones who lost them. I think of those who have died carrying out...honorable internationalist missions. It is on behalf of them, that we do not have any other alternative but to do what we are doing. It is on behalf of the ideals and of the fatherland that they loved, that we feel obligated to be severe.⁴¹

The moral tone of Castroism is not of recent vintage. From the very outset, the rationale for his opposition to the Batista regime, and the support Castro came to receive, was in reaction the deep corruption of successive Batista (1940–1944), Ramon Grau (1944–1948) and Carlos Prío (1948–1952) administrations, as well as the pervasive delegitimation suffered by nearly the entire traditional political class. The outflow of *Bastistianos* and the middle class after 1959 may be seen as part of the Castro purge, but his desire to cleanse Cuba was far more ambitious. In living up to the goal of creating a 'New Man,' Castro banned the gambling industry, tried to eliminate prostitution in Havana and persecuted homosexuals for decades, all in an attempt to cleanse the Cuban body politic.

Symbology

All true political religions attempt to recreate a symbology that can integrate and mobilize the masses, legitimize the new regime and

facilitate the world-changing ambitions of the leader. Castro has been comprehensive in these efforts, in ways both large and small. Like the Jacobins with their new calendar, the regime has re-named and designated the years. 2004 was the 'year of the 45th anniversary of the revolution'; 2003 was the 'year of the glorious anniversaries of Marti and Moncada'; 2002 was the 'year of the heroic prisoners of imperialism'; and 2001 was the 'year of the victorious revolution and the new millennium.' Castro has created his stage, usually the Plaza of the Revolution in Havana, and holds mass rallies, akin to parades on Red Square or the Nazi Party rallies at Nuremberg. Like the devotional objects of Catholicism, pictures of Fidel and Che may be found in many homes and most public buildings.

A political religion must also have its pantheon of heroes, to be worshiped and called upon to legitimate the present, and preferably a list that includes traditional and more recent heroes (so as to situate the political religion into the stream of national history and to give it the patina of age). Among the most important are Jose Marti and Antonio Maceo from the pre-independence struggle, and Che Guevara. The 'canonization' of Guevara began even before the news of his death had been confirmed. Guevara, Castro declared in October 1967, was:

...a master, an artist of revolutionary war...(T)he artist may die, especially when one is an artist of such a dangerous art as the revolutionary struggle, but what will in no way die is the art to which he consecrated his life, to which he consecrated his intelligence...his death will serve in the long run as a seed from which will come many men who have decided to emulate him... Let us say to Che and with him to all the heroes who were in combat and fell with him. *Hasta la victoria siempre! Patria o Muerte*⁴²

Indeed, Guevara became the canonized icon of the revolution *par excellence*. The circumstances of his demise corresponded to a glorious, revolutionary death: 'Naturally all of us who know Che know that there is no way of capturing him alive, unless he is unconscious, unless he is completely immobilised by some wounds.'⁴³ Today, Castro employs the memory of Che, as when he clamps down on peasant markets and other forms of non-state sanctioned private activity. He often uses the anniversary of Che's birth or death to make major speeches. When the Pope visited Cuba in January 1998, a massive poster of Che adorned

a building on the plaza where the pope was conducting a mass. Religion confronted political religion.

Castro continues to show his political acumen and masterful understanding of the dynamics of political religions. The latest and most evocative recent icon for the Revolution is Elian Gonzalez. In late 1999, the six-year-old boy, his mother and 10 others tried to escape from Cuba to the United States. Bad weather capsized the boat and all died except for Elian, who was picked up by the United States' Coast Guard. A protracted dispute arose over who would get custody and where he would stay, pitting distant relatives in Miami against the boy's father in Cuba. Eventually, the American Supreme Court ruled against the relatives and ordered the return of Gonzalez to Cuba. From the outset, Castro seized the tragic case as a political gold mine. The regime built a museum in his home town of Cardenas, and Castro delivers major speeches on the boy's birthday, 5 December or, as it is now called, the anniversary of the 'War of Ideas.' Elian has become more than a symbol; he is the instrument that an aging revolutionary has used to reach out to the younger generation, and thus to give new impetus to a tired regime. Again, Castro shows his grasp of the practical pay-offs of capturing youthfulness.

Violence, death, the nation

All political religions glorify death and the nation, and all venerate the dead. This is perhaps the least distinctive aspect of Castroism, given the long tradition of the glorification of violence in Cuban history. The national anthem itself ends with the stanza, 'to die for the fatherland is to live.' Castro was himself a product of an environment and political culture that glorified 'political action,' and one that wrote poems of nationalist immolation. What is different about him is that he took these attitudes more seriously, and has acted on these principles for more than 40 years. Castro ends every speech with the phrase 'fatherland or death.' For him, what matters is not death, but how one dies. This is exactly where the worship of the guerilla mentality fits in, a constant from the early days of the revolution to the present.

The rhetoric of the maximalist, radical man of action (a kind of uncontrollable *machismo*) has permeated Castro's thoughts and policies. At the time of the invasion of Grenada in October 1983, he ordered the Cuban military commander 'not to surrender under any circumstances,' and when the officer later did so, in the face of overwhelming American

troop superiority, Castro publicly cashiered him. Commenting on the breakdown of the Soviet system, he stated:

The duty of communists is to fight under any circumstance, no matter how adverse the situation may be. The Paris commoners knew how to fight and die defending their ideas. The banners of the revolution and socialism are not handed over without a fight. Only cowards and demoralized people surrender. Communists and revolutionaries do not surrender... We have never aspired to be recipients of the custody of the glorious banners and the principles the revolutionary movement has defended throughout its heroic and beautiful history. However, destiny assigns us the role of one day being among the last defenders of socialism; in a world in which the Yankee empire was able to make a reality of Hitler's dreams of dominating the world, we would know how to defend this bastion until the last drop of blood... They died fighting for true peace and security for all peoples; they died for the ideas of Cespedes and Maximo Gomez; they died for the ideas of Marti and Maceo; they died for the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin; they died for the ideas and the example spread to the world by the October Revolution; they died for socialism; they died for internationalism; they died for the dignified and revolutionary fatherland that is today's Cuba. We will be able to follow their example. Eternal glory to them! Socialism or death! Fatherland or death! We will win!⁴⁴

In the political rhetoric of Castroism there is a poignant life through death formulation accompanied by the constant focus on struggle, a trope that all political religions and dictators have emphasized, not least Hitler, with his machinery of death perhaps best exemplified by Nazism's Death's Head SS units.

As is evident from the various quotes we have reproduced in this chapter, the nation, patriotism, the fatherland and a rabid nationalism emerge as a constant, much more so than references to Marxism-Leninism. This intensely nationalistic focus is another hallmark of many political religions. As the official government website states:

In short, all the efforts of the counterrevolution and of the imperialism against Cuba had been useless, because they have ignored something vital in our history: the Cuban people's capacity to resist, its intelligence and the capabilities of the revolutionary leadership. Moreover, they have ignored the justness of the struggle of our people for its independence.⁴⁵

Enemies and competitors

Enemies and competitors are the final themes that we examine in our consideration of Castroism as a political religion. All political religions have a well-developed category list and image of their enemies, for whom the most detail is reserved, and against whom all of the cleansing, martial, violent and most memorable rhetoric is directed. Castro compares with all other political religious figureheads in this respect. There have been two main enemies Castroism has engaged over the past four decades. The first category includes the *gusanos y parasitos*, who compose the anti-Castro opposition in Miami, and who are variously referred to as thugs, counter-revolutionaries, Nazis and gangsters. The other enemy, perhaps more significant because to oppose it is to project Castro and Cuba on the world stage, is the United States. The hyperbolic intensity of his attacks on the United States is unabated. The official history of Cuba on the governmental website speaks of 'US aggressions and imperialism' and the 'stern, cruel and illegal blockade.' Before the revolution, Castro did not appear to be particularly anti-American, but after his seizure of power and the Bay of Pigs debacle it became his public signature. The earliest Castro anti-American reference came in a 1957 letter which was not released until more than ten years later. Writing to his colleague Melba Hernandez, Castro declared:

When I saw the rockets (supplied by the United States to Batista), I swore to myself that the North Americans were going to pay dearly for what they are doing. When this war is over, a much bigger and wider war will commence for me: the war that I am going to wage against them. I am aware that this is my true destiny.⁴⁶

The rhetoric only became more radical and constant over the years. Today it is a mainstay of the regime's propaganda.

Castroism and Catholicism

We turn now to an examination of the relationship between the political religion that Castro has constructed over the decades and conventional religion, in this instance the Catholic Church. The pretensions of a movement to replace traditional religion, and its demonstrable success in doing so, are crucial to the determination of whether Castroism has achieved a demonstrable political religious status. Castroism and

Catholicism are direct competitors. Moreover, religious institutions and the Catholic Church, in particular, have played an important role both as proto-opposition under diverse dictatorial regimes and, more generally, as key players in numerous transitions to democracy. This was the case in Italy during the 1940s, in Spain during the 1970s, in Nicaragua, El Salvador and the Philippines in the early to mid-1980s and in Eastern Europe from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. In addition to this role as national political force, the Church has also been a transnational agent and force. Under the leadership of John Paul II, the Vatican has vigorously presented itself as the exponent of a *terza via* between a vanquished 'state socialism' and a triumphant neo-liberalism. Thus, as the post-Castro era approaches, an analysis of the influence of the Church is crucial in understanding how the transition will play out.

Castroism and Catholicism had their most direct face-off in January 1998 when John Paul II visited Cuba. Before examining the dynamics and importance of this confrontation, however, a few words about the Cuban Catholic Church and its relationship to the Revolution are in order. The Papal visit had been under negotiation for nearly a decade, and the Pope knew that the Church he would find in Cuba was far different from the one he had led in Poland. The Cuban Church had been weakly institutionalized and had already had a reduced social base during the colonial period. Far from being a repository of nationalist values as was the case with Poland or even Spain, it had been under the leadership of Spaniards (more specifically, Galician clergy) who had opposed national independence. Historically, the Church had also enjoyed very little penetration in the rural areas, where syncretic African religions (what may be loosely termed *Santería*) continued to flourish. As Margaret Crahan has noted, Cuba in the 1950s had the lowest proportion of nominal Catholics in Latin America (72.5%), the lowest percentage of practicing Catholics (5–8%) and the highest percentage of non-members (19%).⁴⁷ The Cuban Church had also placed far less emphasis on pastoral work, concentrating resources in private education for the well-to-do, mainly in Havana and Santiago. Things did not change for the better with the Revolution. As relations between the Castro regime and the Church soured between 1960 and 1961, 70% of the 723 priests active in 1960 had fled by 1963, as did 90% of the 2225 male and female 'religious'.⁴⁸ Castro directly expelled other clergy for counter-revolutionary activities. The more devout were also disproportionately the most likely to flee. For example, a 1969 survey of Havana parishes, found that 50% of their members had left.

In the first years of the Revolution, the Castro regime embarked on a radical strategy of eliminating religious and Catholic Church influence. It closed all religious schools, expelled religious orders and placed strict controls on the numbers of priests, nuns and other devotees who could live and work in the country. Moreover, Castro eliminated religious holidays, actively worked on the young to adopt militant atheism and, in the late 1960s and 1970s, shipped priests to work camps, deliberately placing them with other 'social outcasts' like homosexuals. Alongside these measures are the well-documented efforts to challenge the primacy of the family (extensive volunteer work by the young aimed to keep the population 'mobilised,' while also breaking family controls and providing ample opportunities for unsupervised sexual activity), to make divorce easy and even to encourage the practice of abortion.

In parallel fashion, the regime also tried to weaken the Catholic Church by extending the hand of tolerance to *Santería* as well as to many smaller Protestant organizations (though not the Jehovah's Witnesses). Though *Santería* had an extensive presence in Cuban society, especially among poor blacks and in rural areas, it was also disorganized and lacked any institutional foundation from which it could challenge the regime or its political religion. The Protestant sects, for their part, were patently a minority. By favoring them and *Santería*, the regime could draw on their support or sympathy and disclaim any anti-religious bias in its anti-Catholic measures, even as it sought to build its militantly atheist 'New Man.'

The other aspect of the regime's strategy toward Catholicism was to support and actively collaborate with the advocates of liberation theology. This is not the place for an extended discussion of this phenomenon, but it should be noted that perhaps the central objection the Vatican has had to liberation theology has been less doctrinal (there has been and continues to be, after all, a powerful anti-capitalist strain in Catholic doctrine), than organizational. The touchstone of the dispute was over discipline. Operating as a transnational political religion, in any case, Castroism and its revolutionary allies in Latin America forged close links with this radicalized clergy, and viewed them as important allies in the struggle to weaken the traditional Church and its support for conservative or centrist political parties. This alliance strategy also connected to Castroism as a political religion. The support from, and identification with, 'progressive' clergy and laity helped legitimize both the Revolution and its secular-political religion. Furthermore, the struggle for social justice could serve as the bridge between one religion and the other. The now-famous Frey Betto interview with Castro amply demonstrates

the mutual sympathy between *la iglesia de los pobres*, and Castroism. In this climate, even the high-ranking Latin American figure, Cardinal Archbishop of Sao Paolo, Paulo Evaristo Arens, could send a 1989 note to the '*queridísimo Fidel*,' stating that 'the Christian faith discovered in the conquests of the Revolution the signs of the Kingdom of God.'⁴⁹

Over several decades, the Cuban Catholic Church lost much ground to the competing political religion of Castroism. To the (selective) repression employed by the regime and the hemorrhaging of personnel were joined an intellectual failure to balance the competing demands of social justice and human rights. Few dared to openly oppose a militantly atheistic regime, while others assiduously tried to accommodate the Church and its doctrine to the new and victorious political religion. The Cuban Church began to emerge from its near catatonic state in the late 1970s, with the self-critical review begun under the *Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano*. Over the next decade, the Church embraced nationalism through the appropriation of the nineteenth century Cuban, Father Felix Varela, and began to focus on ways to expand its pastoral presence. Though some of its members embraced liberation theology, others looked to new winds of change in the world (especially the disintegration of the Soviet bloc) to adopt a more assertive position, even coming to call for a national reconciliation and to voice support for dissidents. Reeling from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the regime had loosened some of its reins on Cuban society, and it was eager to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Church. Negotiations for a possible Papal visit began in the early 1990s, around the time the regime eliminated the term 'atheist' from the Constitution, also removing the bar on individuals of religious faith joining the Communist party.

The January 1998 Papal visit provides us with an extraordinary opportunity to take a snapshot of how the two religions stood in relation to the other at the turn of the century. The visit represented opportunity and risk for both sides. For Castroism, the visit would bring international legitimacy. At the same time, this would be first time in the history of the Revolution that Castro would cede public space, not just to someone else, but to someone who had brought Communism down in Poland and contributed decisively to its demise in the rest of the Soviet bloc. By allowing the visit, Castro was, in effect, saying his brand of 'political religion' was sufficiently strong enough to withstand any public challenge. In fact, he alluded to this in his welcoming remarks, when he declared: '(This is) an educated people to whom you can speak with all the liberty you wish, and with the security that this people possesses talent, a high political culture, deep convictions, absolute

confidence in its ideas and all the awareness and respect in the world to listen to you.⁵⁰

If this constituted bravado, it was backed up by political intuition and tactical shrewdness. Castro was well aware of the weakness of the Church in Cuba, and just in case some spontaneous display of support for the Pope would get out of hand, the regime instructed its militants not to shun, but rather to attend the ceremonies. If Castro understood the weakness of the Church, he may also have intuited the weakness of his own position; the reason why he needed the Pope publicly to recognize him and his religion. Castroism is dominant and hegemonic in Cuba, but it is also, in ideological and 'religious' terms, on its last legs. The regime has survived the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and it may even survive without Fidel. But it will not be the same. Castroism without Castro will not be a 'political religion.' The regime is struggling to convince the population, and even more so the youth of Cuba, that it has a vision of the future. Today, as he has done for much of the past decade, Castro is playing for time. The Papal visit fits within a broader strategic scheme whose objective it is to make some political and economic concessions, while maintaining control. The Pope, for his part, had no desire or intention to challenge the hegemony of Castroism in Cuba, at least in and for the present. Yes, he wanted to lay the foundation for change, to plant the 'seed,' as it were. But John Paul II understood the weakness of the Church in contemporary Cuba. In what was a small but meaningful decision, Vatican aides and Cuban clergy distributed thousands of pamphlets with the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary to those who attended the masses of John Paul II. The Pope was also not interested in encouraging any potential de-stabilization of the situation. If John Paul II is an adversary of 'state socialism,' he was also an opponent of 'neo-liberalism' and consumer culture; or at least his emphases changed after 1989. His constant calls for national reconciliation and peaceful change reflected the desire for a managed transition, one within which the risk of violence would be minimized, the Church could recover lost ground, and 'neo-liberalism' could be kept from gaining too strong a foothold in Cuba.

An examination of the speeches the two men directed both at each other and to the national and international audiences that heard them allows us to gain a good sense of their respective positions. Thus, while Castro was critical of Church history (citing the decimation of indigenous people, the crimes of the Inquisition and pointing to how, as a boy, he had challenged the reactionary views of his Jesuit teachers), he also took great pains to show the affinities between the two 'religions,'

freely employing religious terminology. Here are some direct and deeply revelatory quotes:

Like those Christians atrociously slandered in order to justify the crimes, we, similarly slandered, would prefer death one thousand times before renouncing our convictions. Just like the Church, the Revolution also has many martyrs.

We think like you on many important contemporary world issues and that is a source of great satisfaction to us... Our opinions differ, but we pay respectful homage to the deep conviction with which you defend your ideas.

Respect for believers and non-believers is a basic principle that we Cuban revolutionaries have inculcated in our compatriots. Those principles have been defined and are guaranteed by our Constitution and our laws. If difficulties have arisen at any time this has never been the fault of the Revolution.

There is no country better equipped to understand your felicitous idea, such as we understand it and so similar to what we preach, that the equitable distribution of wealth and solidarity among human beings and peoples must be globalised.

Cuba (is) like a new and one thousand times smaller David.

(When hearing the) calumnies against my country and my people, contrived by those who love no other God than money, I always recall the Christians of Ancient Rome, so atrociously calumniated.

A world without oppression or exploitation; without humiliation or contempt; without injustice or inequalities, where they could live with full moral and material dignity, in genuine liberty. That would be the most just world! Your ideas on evangelisation and ecumenism would not be in contradiction with such a world.⁵¹

Perhaps the most widely quoted phrase uttered by John Paul II during his visit to Cuba was his call for 'Cuba to open itself to the world and the world to open itself to Cuba.'⁵² The Pope developed this idea in two directions. The first was critical of the American embargo of Cuba, while the second attacked the *ensimismamiento* (inward-looking-ness) propounded by the regime. If criticism of the embargo was probably a pre-condition for the visit and undoubtedly pleased the regime, the notion of *apertura* challenged the very cosmology of Castroism as a political religion. As we noted above, this was the first time in nearly 40 years that anyone

other than Castro had occupied public space, and presented a world-view critical of and different from the one espoused by his regime.

Though the Pope was unfailingly polite, he was also very direct in his comments and challenged on a variety of grounds. One was methodological:

The ideological and economic systems that followed one after the other over the past two centuries have frequently encouraged confrontation as a method... This profoundly conditioned their conception of man and their relations with others. Some of those systems have tried to reduce religion to the merely individual sphere, removing it from any influence or social relevance. In this sense, it is worth recalling that a modern State cannot make of atheism or of religion one of its political *ordenamientos*. The State (should be) far from any fanaticism or extreme secularism; it should promote a serene social climate and an adequate legislation that permits each person and each religion to live freely its faith, to express it in the spheres of public life, and to count with the sufficient space and means to bring their spiritual, moral, and civic riches to national life.⁵³

Another related to the compatibility of social justice with freedom:

For many political and economic systems prevailing today, the greatest challenge continues to be to be able to combine freedom with social justice, freedom with solidarity, so as not to relegate any one of these to an inferior plane. In this connection, the social doctrine of the Church aspires to illuminate and conciliate relations between the inalienable rights of every man and social needs, so that the person will attain his most profound aspirations and integral fulfillment.⁵⁴

The Pope also spoke about fear, directing his message not only to individual Cubans but also to those who ran the state:

Do not be afraid, open your families and schools to the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which are never a danger for any social project.⁵⁵

And he, then, took the occasion to distinguish between Catholicism and other religions, especially *Santería*:

There are some reductionist conceptions that try to place the Catholic Church at the same level as certain cultural manifestations

of religiosity... (such as) the syncretic cults... (T)hough worthy of respect, these cannot be considered a religion proper but rather as a combination of traditions and beliefs.⁵⁶

But it was with respect to the historic roots of Cuban nationalism, and the future of Cuban youth that John Paul II most clearly threw down the gauntlet. The Revolution, as conceived, articulated and defended by Fidel Castro, has been about the teaching of a certain Cuban history, with the ordering of events and martyrs and the claim that Fidel Castro was the possible heir and interpreter of the aspirations of the Cuban people. Speech after speech of Castro's is filled with references to Jose Marti and Antonio Maceo, all designed to demonstrate that the skin of history in which they played a role unfolded naturally into the leading role of Fidel. The Revolution has also been about youth and the future, about the claim that Castro and his colleagues were embarked on the noble task to create the 'New Man.' Excesses, it might be inferred, could be forgiven, given the greatness of the task.

John Paul II firmly and directly, if politely, challenged Castro on both issues. He sketched an alternative history of Cuba, one that placed a priest, not a man of war or someone who had died in battle, as the father of the both the nation and democracy. Felix Varela, John Paul II, noted:

... was the first one who spoke about independence in these lands. He also spoke of democracy, considering it the political project that was most harmonious with human nature and he also emphasised the demands that derive from it. Among these demands he underlined two... (The first was) that there be persons educated for liberty and for responsibility, with an ethical project forged within them... (The second) was... to *dinamizar* the Rule of Law, essential guarantee of any human *convivencia* that can be considered democratic.⁵⁷

The Pope then went on to link the ideas and values of Varela and Marti, thereby providing another reading of Cuban history:

The torch that was lit by Father Varela was to illuminate the history of the Cuban people, and it was picked up shortly after his death by that relevant personality who is Jose Marti, writer, teacher in the broadest sense of the word, profoundly in favor of democracy and independence, patriot, loyal friend even with those who did not share his program. He was, above all, a man of light, coherent with his ethical values and animated by spirituality with eminently Chris-

tian roots. He is considered a continuator of the thought of Father Varela, whom he called 'the Cuban saint'.⁵⁸

The Pope also quoted amply from Martí. Rather than the belligerent and anti-imperialist Martí of the Castro speeches, this Martí spoke about religion and love, and Pope used him to touch on the moral crisis in Cuba:

Jose Martí's doctrine of love among all men has profoundly evangelical roots, thereby overcoming the false conflict between faith in God and love and service to the Motherland. Thus wrote this *procer*: 'Pure, disinterested, persecuted, martyred, poetic, and simple, the religion of the Nazarene seduced all honest men... Every people needs to be religious. This is so not only essentially, but it needs be so for its utility. An irreligious people will die, because nothing feeds virtue within.'⁵⁹

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The other important salvo that came from the Pope was directed at the theme of youth and the future. John Paul II again challenged the revolutionary cosmology, and pointed to the crisis of values in Cuba, and even took the closed-door policy of the regime to task for having undermined the values of youth:

Many young people... (are) victims of cultural schemes devoid of (any) sense or of ideological schemes that do not offer high and precise moral values. This moral relativism generates egotism, division, marginalization, discrimination, fear and lack of confidence in others... (T)he shadow of the frightening present-day crisis of values that shakes the world also threatens the youth of this luminous Isle. A pernicious crisis of identity extends itself that leads youth to live without sentiments, with neither direction nor project for the future, asphyxiated by the immediate. Relativism, religious indifference and the absence of a moral dimension emerge, and there exists the temptation to surrender to the idols of consumer society, fascinated by their *brillo fugaz*. It goes so far that anything that comes from outside the country appears to *deslumbrar*.⁶⁰

And as for the future, John Paul II declared:

I am confident that in the future the Cubans will attain a civilization of justice and solidarity, of liberty and truth, a civilization of love and

peace that, as Padre Varela said, 'would be the foundation of the great edifice of our happiness.'⁶¹

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have reviewed Castroism in terms of how well its ideas conform to the concept of a political religion. In a general sense, the term fits Castroism well. Cuba was experiencing the kind of extraordinary crisis and a failure of its national mission that creates fertile soil for charismatic leaders like Castro. Castro has maintained his iron grip by virtue of a repressive political regime, and has explicitly tried to create a political religion. Many, if not most of the elements are there: the *Führerprinzip*, a pantheon of revolutionary icons, intense nationalism, efforts to rejuvenate and 'cleanse' the country, clearly defined enemies and so on. Castro has also explicitly competed with other legitimizing doctrines, most dramatically with the Catholic Church.

But as for Castro, his regime and Castroism as a political religion, what does the future hold for Cuba? Though the regime has gone through different phases, it has always remained totalitarian in its ambition, if not, especially after the demise of the Soviet Union and because of the deep economic crisis this provoked, in terms of its capacity. There was at least one identifiable juncture (in the mid-1980s) when Fidel Castro directly, and personally, truncated what appeared to be a transition to a Soviet-style post-totalitarianism. The 1990s may be seen as another moment of transition, though exactly toward what we do not know. What is clear, on the one hand, is that important changes have begun to take place within Cuban society. The regime may still be capable of effective mobilization (see the Elian Gonzalez phenomenon and even the recent 2004 May Day meeting attended by over a million people) and repression (witness the lengthy sentences meted out to 75 human rights activists and dissidents arrested in March 2003), but it is also evident that many of the 'emergency' measures the regime has implemented over the past 15 years in order to ensure its survival have diminished its quotient of power.

The dollarization of the economy and the toleration of a certain space for private enterprise have visibly weakened the state's grip on society and led to significant social stratification. Today in Cuba there are two kinds of citizens, those with access to dollars and those without. The purchasing capacity of the former is dramatically greater than that of the latter. Along with stratification has come the resurgence of the 'old'

social evils, not least of prostitution, which the regime had once upon a time claimed to have eliminated and erased. Today 15-year-old *jineteras* represent what is the 'pull' side of a phenomenon whose 'push' side is the 'sexual tourism' packages sold in Europe and elsewhere. There is also the matter of Castro's mortality. He remains quite vigorous for an 80-year-old man, but as the recent fainting spells demonstrate (in Havana in June 2002 and in Argentina in May 2003, to cite only two well-known examples) he is mortal. It is not an exaggeration to say that the post-Castro transition has begun, though the irony is that Fidel himself is presiding over the end of one regime and the beginning of another. Regardless of the shape and content of the next regime, it will be different, not least because there is little, if any, prospect that Castro will be able to transfer his charismatic authority to any successor. As the case of Franco in Spain well reminds us, it does not much matter that *lo bien atado que estan las cosas* (everything is taken care of), once the regime founder has left the scene. Paradoxically, in this last phase of his regime, Castro's authority is even more sharply put into relief, and his interventions acquire a particularly important value.

In political terms, this has meant that Castro is more central to his regime today than at probably any point since the first years of the Revolution. The last 15 years have seen a wholesale reshuffle of the regime's leadership, as Castro has systematically replaced most of the veterans who were with him at the outset of the Revolution, with a generation of men in their late 1930s and 1940s. The Revolution has always been youth-oriented, the only difference now is that the youth will soon enough replace Fidel. Symbolically, too, this is the last fight of Castro's political life, the fight for the future and for his place in the history of Cuba.

Notes

1. These terms constantly appear in Castro's speeches. See 'Speech on the Second Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution,' 3 January 1961. Castro Speech Database: <http://www1.lanl.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html>.
2. Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 58–9.
3. He never directly commanded more than 3000 men, and this was only toward the end of the guerrilla campaign.
4. Eusebio Mujal-León and Joshua Busby, 'Much Ado about Something? Regime Change in Cuba,' *Problems of Post-Communism* (2001).
5. Emilio Gentile, 'The Sacralisation of Politics: Definitions, Interpretations and Reflections on the Question of Secular Religion and Totalitarianism,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Summer 2000); Michael Burleigh, 'National Socialism as a Political Religion,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2000); George

- Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: toward a General Theory of Fascism*. (New York: H. Fertig, 1999).
6. 'Ideology: Political Aspects,' *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2001).
 7. 'Religion: Definition and Explanation,' *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2001.
 8. Dwight B. Billings and Shaunna L. Scott, 'Religion and Political Legitimation,' *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 20 (1994), p. 174.
 9. Gentile (2000), p. 22.
 10. Eric Voegelin, *Die politische Religionen*. Stockholm: (Bermann-Fischer Verlag, 1939).
 11. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*. (New York: Routledge, 1993).
 12. Gentile (2000), p. 24.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
 14. Burleigh, p. 5.
 15. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 17. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
 18. One large problem with the political religion literature is that it was developed from and for certain unequivocal cases such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.
 19. Note that movement from the left to right on the ideology axis denotes greater world-changing ambition, revolutionary fervor or radicalism. Movement away from the traditional religious pole represents more differentiation and competition on the part of the purveyors of the political religion.
 20. See Quirk (1993).
 21. K. S. Karol, *Guerrillas in Power; the Course of the Cuban Revolution*, translated from the French by Arnold Pomerans (New York: Hill & Wang, 1970), p. 459.
 22. Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Country Profile 2003: Cuba' (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2003), pp. 9–10.
 23. This quote was in conjunction with Stone's 2003 film *Comandante*. See http://www.kamera.co.uk/reviews_extra/commandante.php.
 24. See Quirk (1993).
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
 26. *Ibid.*, pp. 58–9.
 27. Rolando Bonachea and Nelson Valdés, *Cuba in Revolution*. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 157.
 28. Note again the parallel dynamics to the Nazis, especially as exemplified in Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* – where Hitler never mentions himself, yet is literally worshipped by his cronies. Hitler also always conveyed an impression that he only reluctantly took on the leadership of Germany – because there was no one else – always self-identifying as a simple artist. Note that before the fall of Batista, Castro never expressed a desire to lead the nation – rather stating that he wanted to return to the 'simple' life.
 29. 'The Ochoa Affair' in *The New York Review of Books*, p. 10.

30. Rolando Bonachea and Nelson Valdes, eds, *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), p. 204.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
32. Speech on 13 March 1968 in Fagen, Richard R. *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 13.
33. Speech on 28 September 1964 in *ibid.*
34. Bonachea and Valdes (1969), p. 195.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
38. His seductive appeal to leftists in many countries is perhaps not that much of a surprise. This is also one of the fundamental empirical differences between totalitarian political religions of the left versus of the right, and why Nazism will always be considered worse than Communism.
39. Bonachea and Valdes (1969), p. 197.
40. Karol (1970), p. 47.
41. 'Castro Addresses State Council on Drug Trial,' 12 July 1989. Castro Speech Database, <http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html>.
42. Fidel Castro, *Che en la memoria de Fidel Castro* ed. David Deutschmann. Melbourne and New York: Ocean Press, 1998, p. 85.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
44. 'Castro Honors Internationalists, Views Socialism,' 7 December 1989. Castro Speech Database, <http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html>.
45. <http://www.cubagob.cu/ingles>.
46. Bonachea and Valdes (1972), p. 179.
47. Margaret Crahan, 'Religion and Revolution: Cuba and Nicaragua.' Working Paper. (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, Latin American Program, 1987), p. 4.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 258–9.
49. *Granma*, 6 January 1989.
50. Jorge Maria Bergoglio, ed. *Dialogos entre Juan Pablo II y Fidel Castro*. (Buenos Aires: Funacion Centro de Estudios politicos y Administrativos, 1998), p. 139.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 135–41.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
53. Homily in the Plaza de la Revolucion, 25 January 1998 in *Ibid.*, pp. 110–11.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
55. Santa Clara, 22 January 1998 in *ibid.*, p. 70.
56. Meeting with Cuban Bishops, 25 January 1998 in *ibid.*, p. 118.
57. University of Havana, 23 January 1998 in *ibid.*, pp. 89–90.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
61. Speech at the University of Havana, 23 January, 1998 in *ibid.*, p. 92.

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Chapter 04

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