

Changes in the Cuban Religious Field since the Last Decade of the 20th Century¹

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The Cuban religious field, that is to say, the specific religions and religious expressions practiced in Cuba as whole, is characterized by its diversity, and by the different historical periods in which religions and religious expressions took roots in the country.

Unlike many Latin American countries, the indigenous population was almost totally eradicated in Cuba by the Spanish colonization. However, some remnants of the religious beliefs and of the culture of our early inhabitants have survived in the culture and religiousness of the Cuban people.

The first contribution to our religiousness and culture came from Spain, which established Catholicism as an exclusive religion in our early history. Another contribution to Cuban popular religiousness came from the various forms of African culture, from which came about the Regla de Ocha or Santería, basically of Yoruba origin; the Regla Conga, popularly known as Palo Monte, of Bantu origin; and the Abakuá Secret Societies from the Calabar region in Nigeria.

¹ Ponencia presentada en American Canadian Conference for Academic Disciplines. Universidad Ryerson, Toronto. Mayo de 2012. Publicada en: Humanities and Social Sciences Review, Vol. 1. No. 3, Dic. 2012.

Protestantism and Spiritualism came from the United States in the late nineteenth century. Spiritualism has been structured into three main modalities: scientific or Kardecian and two more Cubanized modalities, called “espiritismo cruzado, and “espiritismo de cordón” that incorporate elements of Catholicism and of the religious expressions of African origin (Hodge: 1997).”

In Cuban society, as well as in the contemporary world, there are many different forms of religious beliefs. The religious manifestations, called religious expressions, by us have different levels of systematization, theoretical development and organization. Other religious beliefs, like **religiosidad popular** (people’s religiousness) are spontaneous, unsystematic, with such an elementary organization that no groups are set up, although there is an organized popular religiousness in some social sectors. (Ramírez Calzadilla: 2000)

In Cuba a spontaneous religiousness, free from all orthodoxy and prone to syncretism is significantly prevalent; thus, it cannot be said that the Cuban people predominantly practices Catholicism, Santería, Spiritualism or any other religion or religious expression.

Socio-economic Crisis and Religious Revival

In a diverse and complex world, in constant ideological and philosophical mobility and contradiction, in quest for utopias or trying to revive old paradigms, religious institutions have undergone changes, transformations and divisions, as a consequence of the dialectical interaction of religion and society.

After a long period of “scientific” atheism and of a distorted and biased view of religion, there was a gradual process of understanding and awareness

of the high level of religiousness of the Cuban people, which was scientifically demonstrated by the Department for Socio-religious Studies Department of the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Environment of Cuba and by other research groups and institutions.

Thus, a religious revival that led to the emergence of the most varied religious expressions occurred in our country during the late 1980s and especially in 1990

It must be remembered that a religious revival did not take place only in Cuba. During the 1970s, in Latin America and the United States, the Pentecostal charismatic explosion emerged, and in the non-Christian field, the countercultural movement in the United States of the late 1950s and 1960s revived spirituality and religious beliefs with the strengthening of Theosophy, Esotericism, the expansion of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern philosophies.

As shown by the findings of research studies conducted by the Department of Socio-religious Studies of the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment of Cuba, the religious “revival” in Cuba was not the sole result of the economic crisis that was faced in those years. Previously, institutional action had been taken, such as the adoption of the amendment to the Constitution of the Republic which established the lay character of the Cuban State, and the granting of access to membership in the Communist Party to religious believers. These actions, among others, encouraged the outer manifestation of individual religiousness. At the same time, religious institutions and groups obtained new social spaces, while increasing their ranks.

The reasons for the occurrence of the religious revival are manifold. Being a multi-determined event, interacting with several aspects, and impacting on many spheres of social and individual life, its changes can not be explained by a single factor or by a few factors; but rather they can be explained by a set or system of factors that operate in a causal relationship.

Undoubtedly, dissatisfaction, disorientation and feelings of vulnerability, which are characteristic of social crises, encouraged resorting to religion as a means for explanation, support, and hope, and to seek protection by the supernatural, that is to say, the meta-social.

Therefore, religious institutions and groups were strengthened, in a social context undergoing deep and rapid changes in all spheres, marked by the disruption of daily life, the search of new meanings, the re-construction of social representations, the questioning of conventionalities; and efforts to find new ways to understand, explain and cope with daily life. New theological trends and religious groups emerged; and Eastern philosophies and religions, healing techniques and a variety of spiritual practices also began to occupy spaces in the Cuban religious and spiritual field.

Moreover, the measures taken to face the socio-economic crisis of the nineties, for example: redesign of the property system; change in the system of ownership and in role of the State in the economy; entrepreneurial reform; and the empowerment of economic sectors, such as tourism and biotechnology, among others, involved changes in the ways of meeting needs, and of interpreting reality; in the values; in the dynamic of legitimating-non legitimating ways of life and of social mobility; in the establishment of social consensus; and in the production of meaning.

In the process of religious revival, which is not a homogeneous process, several stages interrelated with social complexities at national and global level can be identified.

The first stage, from the late nineteen eighties up to the first three years of the 1990s, is characterized broadly by the legitimating religion in the search for alternatives to cope with the turbulent environment, the rapid rise of religiousness indicators, the social expansion of religion and the establishment of new religious manifestations and institutions.

The second stage from 1993 to 1996 covers the most difficult years of the crisis or of the “Special Period”, as it is called in Cuba. During this period, a religious boom took place as shown by the highest quantitative indices of religiousness and a clearer and closer connection between religion and the socioeconomic and political problems afflicting the population.

Later, coinciding with the process of socio-economic recovery taking place in the country, there is a redefinition of religious institutions; and the revival adopts other forms. Processes from previous years continue, such as the social expansion of various religions and the trend towards greater institutionalization, even of the religious practices of African origin. New emergent religious actors are strengthened, religious pluralism is reinforced and religious mobility is increased in the search for options closer to the interests of the faithful, thus, reflecting the diversity of thought in Cuban society. (Perera Pintado: 2009)

A significant characteristic, since the last decade, is the increased action of the new religious modalities, which include new groups and practices, as trends proposing new ways to represent reality, not new ways to understand

the faith.

The changes that have taken place, in the religious field of Cuba, since two decades ago, in a very close dialectic relationship with the social changes occurring in the nation, involve the following: membership increase; manifest expression of religious affiliation; conversion and reconversion to many different religions and religious manifestations; trends towards Africanization of Santeria and towards the institutionalization of some religious groups; rise of Zen, Soka Gakkai and Tibetan Buddhism; emergence of a new range of spiritualities and healing techniques that in many cases coexist with the religion of their practitioners; transversalization of trends in the Prosperity Theology and the Apostolic Movement and, mainly, in the new evangelical religious groups, which in many cases, are severances from established churches.

The changes in the Cuban religious field have brought about: more marked heterogeneity and plurality; an increased presence of religious institutions in civil society; the strengthening of the structure of religious institutions and of their channels for spreading their doctrines and socio-political projections; and the gradual obtaining of social spaces for evangelical and community functions.

I firmly agree, with François Houtart, in the importance of insisting on the humanist role of religions, which will be successfully performed, if religions “starting from meaning, symbols, mysticism, and practice, create references and motivations that will contribute to find transcendence in the struggle for life”.

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