

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CUBA

The arrival of Spanish colonialism in October 1492 to what is nowadays Cuban archipelago, found an aboriginal people with a well-defined religious culture manifested on their understanding of good and evil represented by their two gods: "Mabuya" for evil and "Atabex" for good. This population was almost extinguished during the first century of colonization what made voracious colonizers import labor force from Africa who came in with their rooted religious practices. Needless to say they were deprived from practicing their faith; such a prohibition did not get any further because the African slaves smartly disguised their saints behind the Catholic ones starting a syncretizing process that brought about a new religion expression widely spread up to our days and known as "afrocuban" religion.

During colonial stage (1492-1898) the religious domain of Roman and Apostolic Catholic faith did not allow the practice of any other religious cult that was not the official one, such prohibition was encouraged and supported by the political power. The Taken of Havana by English forces in 1762 introduced for the first time a non-Catholic cult of which no traces were left after signing Paris Treatise putting an end to English occupancy.

Fighters for independence who fled to United States after first independence war got to know there about other interpretations of Christian faith which soon became to be like their own. They came back to Cuba in a period of time when war ceased known as "Tregua Fecunda" (1878-1895) to continue, thanks to some public freedoms of Spain, the struggle for independence while proclaiming Christian faith under the new vision learned in the churches they had been part of in the United States, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterians and Episcopalians. By the end of the second period of wars for independence (1898) there were in Cuba evangelical and/or protestant churches in many communities, well regarded by people who joined them as a necessary freedom space. The first intervention of United States in the country (1898-1902) introduced in the religious realm the "domestic board missionaries" who took over the national churches.

The first National Constitution (1901), free from Spanish colonialism and North American intervention, established the right of religious freedom but despite of this Catholicism occupied a predominant place in the new emerging public relation of the emerging state. Those non-Catholic expressions of faith were considered second class religions while afrocuban cults were relegated to an even inferior level and treated deceptively by Catholics and Protestants. Neocolonial Republic witnessed a Catholic church recuperating former privileges as well as a more diverse religious realm with the many evangelical denominations and other practices that were strong in the social stratus regardless their minority status.

A new constitution, 1942, more clearly labeled the country as ley state with freedom of cult and a well-defined separation between political power and religious institutions. Regardless the strong movement advocating for all believers' freedom and equality, the State favored Catholicism. In an effort to make postulates of the constitution being respected and to defend freedom and equality of religion The Council of Evangelical Churches of Cuba is founded in 1941, what it is today Cuban Council of Churches, (CIC), the oldest and most representative

ecumenical organization in the country, which has been distinguished by its vocation of social projection and service.

By the time the revolutionary movement triumphed in January 1959, the dominant social classes were the ones practicing Catholicism, Protestantism was mainly practiced by middle class with Pentecostal missionaries specially settled in poor neighborhoods and rural areas carrying out revivals of faith as vital experience of their practice, there was also a weak orthodox presence mainly formed by foreigners living in the island. Judaism was also present, and their main range of action was among European and North American immigrants the majority of which came after World War II. On the other hand Islamic presence was almost unknown.

A period of tensions aroused from the sixties on, particularly, with those Christians institutions that by any means either did not want or could not accompany the social changes taking place. The direct confrontations of some churches and the exodus, mostly towards US, of several pastors and religious leaders created a negative vision about religious matters. Just to point out one example, there was one denomination that lost in this "exile" 72 of its pastors and missionaries, leaving in the country 5 of them. And as if this was not enough, an intentionally evil manipulation of the facts by anti-Cuban exterior political forces helped to establish and support hostile policies against Cuba.

On its side the revolution adopted rules that limited the traditional function of the church: church colleges and school were closed and nationalized. Hospital and prison chaplains were denied to do their jobs, the Churches' health institutions were expropriated and started to be government run and as a response to a policy of intolerance a forced "Military service" was set in place for those citizens consider as a "load" to society, pimps, drug addicts, religious, and gay people were within this selection. Seminarian students, young pastors and Christian leaders from the whole country ended up in this Military Units for Production Support(UMAP) , as they were named.

It did not take long for political changes in Cuba to occur. The years of misunderstanding and marginalization were left behind thanks to the reconciling attitude of believers and communists. The attempts in a search for spaces of full religious freedom can be grouped in three main moments:

-Dr. Jesse Jackson, nominee for candidate in the United States presidential campaign visited Cuba in 1984 invited by a Baptist organization, to have the final speech in an event to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At that occasion Dr. Jackson attended his speaking engagement with President Fidel Castro turning this fact in a historical event since it was the first time a president of Cuba ever attended to a non-Catholic liturgical celebration.

-Dominican Priest Frei Betto from Brazil interview Cuban president and as a result of this he published a book, Fidel and Religion, which publically expressed this political leader's point of views regarding religion. His statements favored the humble, humanist and altruist spirit of religion.

- A meeting held by more than 70 evangelical and protestant church leaders with Dr. Fidel Castro, (April 1990) what was completely national televised was the turning point of a

misunderstanding and marginalization era. Christian leaders without “going around the bush” inquired President Castro about putting an end to government discriminatory spirit towards religious people as well as an opening of new possibilities of actions for believers and churches of all kinds.

However the achievement of a policy of equal opportunities, religious freedom and realizations in every area by religious institutions in the country was even more noticeable with agreements taken in IV Communist Party Congress (1991) where the possibility for believers of any faith to be members of the party was opened.

1996 constitution, a revision of that of 1975 stated very clearly everything regarding cult freedom when expresses:

Article 8- State recognizes, respect and guarantee religious freedom

In The Republic of Cuba, religious institutions are separated from State

Every faith belief and religion enjoys equal consideration before government and State Instances.

Article 55- State recognize, respect and guarantee conscious and religion freedom and at the same time recognize, respect and guarantee the freedom of every citizen of

changing religious belief or just do not have any, as well as to practice any religious cult of preference as long as it is within a social and civic respect and without breaking the law.

For bad or good human mind sets are not changed like laws and decrees from “dust to dawn”, it takes time to an educative process to overcome this. Legally, and not merely legal but also in the minds of the political leaders of the country , religious freedom is a reality, though there are people who still do not get it, yet there are others, even when they are not many, who tend to self-marginalize, and, thanks God, in just very few cases, discriminatory feelings persist.

Freedoms gained in early 90's last century made possible an increscent in number of places of worship in a way that by mid 90's features of 1989 had been doubled. The worship places did not satisfy the needs of believers, then liturgical celebrations were authorized to be carried out in many other new places. Facilities were either built or rebuilt for religious purposes, the possibility of prison and hospital ministry was given. New training institutions for priests, ministers and religious workers were opened. Small spaces in national public media were granted, among other things.

Shamefully religious explosion that took place in Cuba had brought about new ways of religious discrimination: a growth of extreme fundamentalist tendencies that not only deny people the possibility of accessing God through other vias, but also fighting them with their own beliefs which they claimed to be “the only truth”. On the other hand the arrival to our country of pretended foreign “missionaries” with enough economic power to “buy” believers and divide established churches who at times become instruments of political oppositional forces headquartered abroad endanger not only national stability but also all victories in this field already secured.

Historical evangelical and/or protestant churches, Catholicism and Orthodox existing churches (Greek and Russian) together with other religious expressions found themselves threat of being able to maintain their freedom.

In opposition to the equality of duties and rights that the country constitution states for all citizens and freedom of religion, supporters of fundamentalist thoughts and ideology with extremist actions try by all means to limit other groups' freedoms.

The recognition to cults of Afro-Cuban origin in current Cuban religious midst is remarkable. These expressions, very limited, in times prior to the revolution, and marginalized in the first years of this process had achieved an access to public places where they were not known before as well as the use of mass media through programs that had helped them to popularize their beliefs and rituals even more.

On the other side, Catholicism which coped with serious difficulties in the past due to its position of opposition to advances of Cuban socialism had started to develop an outstanding role in citizenship life. The recent visit announcement of Pope Benedict XVI to Cuba, in spring of the coming year and all national activities celebrated for the 400 year of Virgin of Charity's apparition for which they have been allowed to use all public spaces they have requested set clearly the sense of respect and freedom for religious diversity that Cubans can enjoy now.

The World Council of Churches, through the opinion of its General Secretary, Samuel Kobia during his visit to Cuba in 2007 pointed out the validity of ecumenical movement in this country and the deep and Bible rooted theology in a frame of harmony and social tranquility. On the other hand CCIA develop one of its meetings in the Evangelical Seminary of Matanzas (2009). Participants were able to experienced firsthand the increment of religious presence in several areas and the freedom atmosphere of the nation.

-Cuba is not the Kingdom of God, but those of us who had remained in the country against all odds had worked heads over heels, and continue to do so, to achieve a full religious freedom feel happy for what we had been able to achieved so far, even when we are sure that there is more to be done in order to get rid of prejudices, stigmatism, misunderstandings, violations and marginalization that still persists. First conference of Communist Party, governing political force of the island to be celebrated on January 2012 announced the elimination of several rules that still exists and in some way limit religious liberty.

The fact that members of the army cannot yet practice any expression of faith and that believers of any faith cannot join the army, are remaining traces of a past era of marginalization and scarce religious liberties, that according to the signs is about to end.

Cuba, as part of Latin American Region, is experiencing an increase in the number of evangelical and protestant believers. Latin America, an area eminently Roman Catholic has been leaving ground to a proliferation of other religious groups, if it is true that still last century we faced cases of religious discrimination by Catholic sectors with support, sometimes visible and other times not as visible of the government, an opening to a religious plurality is taking place in a way that could serve as model for other regions of the planets.

A policy of respect to aboriginal people and their religious expressions is gaining followers as well as the permissibility to cults of African origin, mainly in countries that border the Caribbean sea. However we cannot cease in our efforts because there are places in our region where religious repression still exists; speaking of which, the same day in which this article was written we received through Latin America News Agency (ALC) an information about how evangelical and/or protestant believers were being repressed in several Mexican States. Catholics who have not yet understood reforms that have been carried out by Vatican II, with local and even state government allies had attacked those who have a different interpretation of faith. Fortunately these are just exceptions of the rule.

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