



On Earth as it is In Heaven

The Protestant House Church Phenomenon in Post-Soviet Cuba

Rose T. Caraway, Iowa State University

Abstract

This ethnographic case study examines Protestant social engagement in post-Soviet Cuba through the lens of the growing house church phenomenon. After the fall of the Soviet Bloc, Cuba entered into an acute economic crisis known as the “Special Period,” or *Período Especial*. Socially engaged Protestant groups utilized neighborhood networks of *casas cultos* (house churches) and *casas de oración* (prayer houses) in order to address the concrete spiritual and material needs of fellow Cubans. This article argues that Protestants are combining Christianity with support for the revolutionary values of social solidarity and providing for the common good.

Keywords: Cuban Protestantism, special period, house churches, church and state, religion and social change

Introduction

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Cuba felt its reverberations. Aid from the Soviet Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, which accounted for about 85% of Cuba’s trade, plummeted; commercial relations with the former Soviet Union declined by more than 90%; petroleum imports decreased by an equal amount, and the GDP dropped by 34% (Pérez: 383). This was a crisis in international trade, but on the ground in Cuba consequences proved devastating. In September of 1990 the government of Cuba announced the need for certain austerity and rationing measures and the beginning of a

“Special Period during a time of peace,” or simply “The Special Period” (Hernandez-Reguant: 17). This *Período Especial*, within a Revolutionary environment, involved significant shortages in both food and material goods that long emphasized meeting the basic material needs of its citizens. The shelves of state-run stores (*bodegas*) that once provided set amounts of rationed food to individual families sat empty. Without state-subsidized petroleum, Cubans were forced to rely upon alternative means of transportation, which more often than not meant either walking on foot or riding a bicycle in the already intense heat. Without sufficient electricity or gas supplied to homes and businesses, Cubans suffered from *apagones*, or blackouts for significant portions of the day, which in turn made cooking what little food was available an impossible task. The economic austerity measures put into place by the state intended to prevent a full-blown collapse of the Revolutionary system, but they also made daily life difficult.

As the state’s power to provide social welfare retreated, religious groups stepped in to fill this gap through networks of mutual aid and support. Churches donated goods and services to surrounding communities, and Cubans turned to these churches seeking material resources as well as spiritual support during the acutely difficult years of the Special Period.¹ This period also witnessed the growth of Protestant house churches, or *casas cultos*. These churches, often decentralized and growing in spite of specific state regulations regarding religious permits, provided personal and intimate spaces for worship, prayer, and sharing collective burdens. More than localized spaces for church services, however, *casas cultos* have functioned as networks of mutual aid and material support, and have been directly involved in providing social welfare services for local neighborhoods and surrounding communities.

Scholars studying the influence of the Special Period have argued that the loss of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of stable reference points for the Cuban people, thus rendering more persuasive a religious focus on otherworldly elements and the afterlife. Some scholars argue that *casas cultos* are increasing due to this religious focus and are functioning as a form of escape from difficult circumstances. The academic literature, however, has not yet examined the relationship between *casa culto* organization and practice, and larger social engagement within Cuban society. This ethnographic case study examines the house church phenomenon since the Special Period crisis and its connection to Protestant social engagement. I argue that increased participation in evangelical *casas cultos* is due to an explicit emphasis on social solidarity. *Solidaridad*, or social solidarity, has a long history within revolutionary calls for social justice and working for the common good of society. Cuban Protestants are using this term within their everyday language in order to explain the rising popularity of the house church movement, as well as recent attraction to church groups. In this paper I examine the growth of contemporary Protestantism through the lens of the house church phenomenon to show how Cuban Christians have responded to the Special Period crisis by promoting a concrete and “this-worldly” focused spirituality.

¹ According to ethnographic interviews conducted among Baptists and Pentecostals, the harshest years of the *Período Especial* were from approximately 1993-1996.

Methods and Methodology

I collected the data for this ethnography in a town in Havana province during yearly fieldwork trips to Cuba from 2005-2010. Through participant-observation, I worked primarily with one local Baptist church and its network of neighborhood house churches (*casas cultos*) and prayer houses (*casas de oración*), as well as a local Pentecostal church that sponsored several cell or small group meetings. In the field I conducted participant-observation in two main churches, four affiliated *casas cultos*, three *casas de oración*, one Pentecostal cell group, and a Pentecostal spiritual retreat with one hundred and fifty Cuban women attending. In addition to participant-observation, I utilized qualitative methods through a combination of life history narratives and structured and semi-structured interviews. I conducted qualitative interviews with nine men and five women, with four additional follow-up interviews with two male house church leaders. The age of participants ranged from mid-twenties to mid-eighties, with an average age of early to mid-forties. Qualitative interviews and participant-observation of religious change were analyzed within Cuba's larger socio-economic context and the effects of the Special Period crisis. I grounded the understanding of this context upon my previous research on Cuban political economy in the fall of 2002.

This article uses excerpts from interviews with the following informants:² 1) Lucas, who leads a local *casa culto* service in a neighbor's home once a week; 2) Doris, who volunteers her home for prayer meetings for predominantly elderly Cubans; 3) Moisés, a leader of a neighborhood *casa de oración*; 4) Ernesto, a pastor of a local Pentecostal church; and 5) Diego, who is currently a leader within a local neighborhood's network of house churches. Diego's life history narrative helped place local religious change in the larger context of the Special Period; he converted to Christianity in 1995, during the particularly harsh years of the *Período Especial*.

Historical Background

After the fall of the Soviet Bloc, the Cuban government gradually softened its Marxist-Leninist stance toward religion. In 1992 Cuba reformed the 1976 version of its Constitution in Chapter 7, Article 55 to state that the government "recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of conscience and of religion," as well as "every citizen's freedom to change religious beliefs or to not have any, and to profess, within the framework of respect for the law, the religious belief of his preference" (Republic of Cuba). However, it maintained the previous 1976 clause allowing for state regulation of religious institutions, which has since taken a myriad of forms ranging from house church regulations to specific permit requirements on the construction of new church buildings.

Constitutional changes by the Cuban state reflected a perceived need to adjust ideological and economic structures to fit the realities of a collapsed Soviet Bloc. Scientific materialism had previously formed the basis of Cuban Marxist philosophies, which drew their roots from positivism and went even further than their Soviet counterparts in "demystifying reality and history, with scientific critiques of ideologies" (Parsons and

² First-name pseudonyms are used in order to ensure anonymity of informants.

Somerville: 15-16). Upon the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union, however, Cuba's ideological metanarrative did not line up with contemporary realities. The Special Period threw everything upon its head: local *bodegas* with empty shelves sat next to supermarkets flashing name-brand items (Hernández-Reguant: 12). The result of this clash “was ripping at the seams involving the Cuban people, who found the schizophrenia of living with the *doble moral* too complicated and unsatisfying” (Blum: 109). María López-Vigil, a Cuban-born journalist and author now working in Nicaragua, has analyzed the nature of the Special Period and its connection to religious revivals:

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

While López-Vigil argues that Cubans turned to the hereafter, a closer examination of Protestant house churches reveals that they turned their focus to the here and now in order to address concrete issues and problems faced since the Special Period crisis.

The Cuban House Church Phenomenon

The Cuban government requires each church to register as a religious association, and religious groups must seek the proper government permit for the construction of new religious buildings. The process for obtaining a building permit can be lengthy, and construction materials are expensive and difficult to obtain. Without access to new building space, Cubans have been holding religious services within private homes, or house churches. The United States Department of State's 2013 Report on Religious Freedom estimates the number of house churches to be between 2,000 and 10,000. The number of Protestant house churches has increased from more than a hundred (Ramírez Calzadilla: 152) in the late 1990s to at least 2,000.

My participant observation of Baptist house churches in a town outside of Havana revealed growth in the number of house churches from eight in 2006 to more than thirty in 2009. These house churches were affiliated with one of the five official larger Baptist churches in the town. The presence of unregistered or unofficial religious meetings within houses poses challenges to researching religious revivals in Cuba and obtaining independently-verifiable statistics. Hunter and Chan note a similar problem in their work on contemporary Protestant revivals in China. Lucas, leader of a house church, explained in a July 2006 interview that “because there are already five Baptist churches in town, it's not easy for us. If we call this a *casa culto*, we will have to look for a permit.”

In 2005, the state issued regulations stipulating that if Cubans live within two kilometers of an officially registered church, they cannot receive a permit for a house church. Participants are to attend the officially registered larger church, rather than attend the *casa culto*. In response to these regulations, some Protestant Cubans hold prayer meetings within

private homes, known as prayer houses (*casas de oración*). These meetings have several different names; some refer to them as *casas de oración*, while others use the term *grupo celular*, or cell group. Doris explained in a July 2006 interview the difference between a *casa culto* and a *casa de oración*: the former requires an official state permit, while the latter does not.³ In addition, participants within a *casa culto* are “believers who generally know each other already.” In a *casa de oración*, however, participants gather together specifically to listen to each other’s concrete problems; those attending “may have never heard of talking about God before.” Moisés explained, in a July 2006 interview, why he felt that *casas de oración* were increasing in Cuba: “because we are a family. There is more community, much more love; whatever concern I might have, I can address it there.”

A typical *casa culto* or *casa de oración* meeting will usually hold no more than twelve persons (adults or children) because any meeting with more than twelve people present can potentially be monitored or questioned by the state regarding the status of legal permits. If there is not enough space within the house itself, Cubans will meet outside on patios, with make-shift furniture for seating if necessary. Although there is no formal structure to the meeting, it will often begin with a prayer of thanksgiving by the leader, who may be a lay individual with no formal seminary training. Following the opening prayer, the leader will open the floor to prayer requests for any specific problems people are having; these prayers are often tied to requests for healing for physical ailments, mental anxieties, and depression.

Following twenty to thirty minutes of prayer, the leader will often give what in a larger church might be considered a sermon, but are locally referred to as Bible readings. Participants will often have to share Bibles, as printed Bibles are not numerous within these settings. Bible readings are focused upon the application and understanding of verses as they apply to everyday life circumstances. During one observed *casa de oración* meeting, for example, the discussion focused on the theme of common fears that Cubans face: Will the economy improve? Will there be food in the *bodegas* the next month? How will I get the needed insulin for my diabetes? Will there be more power outages?

Some Protestant leaders claimed that *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* serve the concrete needs of Cubans in a better way than the traditional larger churches. Daniel González García of the Western Baptist Convention has used the vernacular language of the Cuban public health care system in order to analyze the appeal of *casas cultos*. The network of house churches and prayer meetings is similar in structure to personal family consultations (*consultários*), while the larger official churches are like the hospitals and specialty clinics⁴ within a specific locality and neighborhood. This is known as *el modelo cubano* (the Cuban model) of church structure and organization, where *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* are viewed

³ These differences in terminology contribute to the difficulty in obtaining independently verifiable statistics of the growing phenomenon of religious meetings within private homes. Official statistics issued by both the Cuban state and the U.S. Department of State measure the number of officially registered *casas cultos*; they do not technically count the number of prayer meetings, however, as these do not require a permit by the state in order to meet.

⁴ In Cuba, these specialized, local community clinics are known as *policlínicos*. Beyond primary care within hospitals, *policlínicos* offer a wide array of care in specialized areas such as pediatrics, dentistry, gastro-intestinal medicine, and other areas.

as more effective in meeting the material and spiritual needs of local Cubans than the larger official churches.

Other Cubans argue that the intimate and familiar space of the *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* provide otherwise timid individuals with a safe space to express their concerns about daily life and struggles. When asked to explain the increasing popularity of these prayer meetings, Diego explained in a July 2006 interview:

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

Diego is a Cuban Baptist who, according to his life narrative, was an ardent Marxist-Leninist prior to his conversion experience during the Special Period crisis.⁵ Diego is now a leader in the local *casa culto* and *casa de oración* movement, and during the course of several interviews he explained the nature of the new hope he discovered after turning to religion in 1995:

[Before] I was a person who, before coming to the Lord . . . I liked to associate myself with protection because of the diabolic lie, that says that anyone can be your enemy – that your neighbor next to you wishes you harm, that someone else is going to do something to create problems for you . . . And I came with that fear and that rancor in my heart. And God changed me completely. I was always fearful of walking in public openly, talking with people. And nowadays I surprise myself with how I am capable of even performing in the theatre . . . In spite of everything, God has given me . . . His peace. His happiness, His love, his blessing. He gave me a new hope (June 2005 interview).

Some scholars have argued that within evangelical house churches, Cubans are "circulating literature that promotes the preaching of an evasive religiosity, with messages directed towards people to elevate individuality" (Berges Curbelo: 208-10). An examination of responses by *casas cultos* participants reveals, however, that Cubans are not abandoning revolutionary values for a spirituality that focuses primarily on the individual or hope in the afterlife. The new hope that some Cubans have found since the Special Period crisis represents a concrete and this worldly spirituality tied to networks of social welfare programs. The house church movement has grown not only due to the more intimate and familiar spaces of private homes, but because religious leaders and lay participants are using social welfare programs to provide for the basic needs of local citizens.

Diego, who now leads *casa de oración* meetings within the local neighborhoods near his home, described what happened during the Special Period: "there wasn't fuel to cook with,

⁵ During a period of forced bed-rest after a back surgery gone awry, Diego reportedly asked his mother to place a portrait of Lenin at his bedside.

there wasn't food, there wasn't medicine, there wasn't clothing to put on, there wasn't soap to bathe with, or detergent . . . everything was very difficult. Everything was very difficult." Diego explained in June 2005 that during the harshest years of the crisis,

Some brothers asked us for a donation of oil, of something to eat. And the church distributed these things to the people that were attending. And many people would go to church wanting these things. But when those things ran out, some of the people who had gone because of those things didn't go anymore. But others that went looking for food ended up finding Jesus. And they remained in Church.

Ernesto, in June 2005, tied the increase in *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* since the 1990s to a hunger:

They take this strategy of [using] a house from a person who [has] agreed to it, so essentially they begin worship in that house. But there is like a hunger – that's what's promoting the house churches that they are making. And for example: it begins with a small house with 12 people – practically the size of the family. And we begin there . . . there's a hunger, a hunger for the Word of God, for God . . . perhaps because of the tribulations that happen to people, perhaps because of the same poverty, the same necessity . . . all of these series of things cause people to hope for something. I came to that, perhaps I accepted because of a certain hunger.

Through networks of social welfare programs, Protestant *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* are meeting both the material and spiritual needs of Cubans since the Special Period crisis. Some *casas de oración* are geared specifically towards meeting the material needs of particular demographics. One Baptist church, for example, was built next to a *lugar de ancianos*, or home for the elderly. Several Baptists who attend another church in town happen to work at this *lugar de ancianos* for a living, providing medical, material, and spiritual care to those living there. The church next to the *lugar de ancianos* has been participating in a unification process with the other four official Protestant churches in town, utilizing networks of neighborhood prayer meetings and house churches. A number of these *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* networks are meeting the material needs of the elderly. In March 2009, Diego referred to this as an effort to "bring the church to the people, instead of bringing people to church." Doris explained the appeal of these networks: they are "specifically for people within this neighborhood to pray and carry the burdens of one another, come together in love, and help one another in everything."

The notion of carrying one another's burdens is a theme within both Christianity and revolutionary calls for social solidarity, or the "identification and mutual support of all members of society viewed and treated as equals" (Veltmeyer and Rushton: 242). Doris emphasized the close communication between the religious meetings in her home, the larger central Baptist church through which it operates, and the local elderly members of the community. When discussing the intimate nature of house meetings in July 2006, she explained that because the house meetings are of the community, neighbors unite together more (*se solidariza más*), and this solidarity helps them to grow. The word *solidariza* roughly translates into the verbal form (*se solidariza*) of the term solidarity (*solidaridad*). Protestant

Cubans are demonstrating *solidaridad* through their commitment to social engagement and an emphasis on providing for the needs of the larger collective.

Conclusion: Towards a Progressive Cuban Protestantism

Since the Special Period crisis, even Cubans who may not have fully embraced the Marxism-Leninism from political elites have “reworked revolutionary values into their personal networks of family and friends to resolve the material lack (*lo material*) and also to reap spiritual benefits, *lo spiritual*” (Blum: 212). The revolutionary values of mutual reciprocity and solidarity have been reworked into the vernacular vocabulary of house church leaders and participants. Lucas, in July 2006, for example, insisted that the house church meeting represents more than people simply coming together. Rather, the *casa culto* functions as a model of the family. This corroborates Denise Blum’s findings, that given the growing gap between the state and its people, Cubans are creating alternative networks “between friends and family to compensate for the lack of fulfillment on the part of the state. In turn, this rerouting has been responsible for the emergence of new understandings and meanings of socialism” (Blum: 212).

By embracing the Cuban concept of *solidaridad* within networks of social welfare programs, *casa culto* and *casa de oración* participants are also creating new understandings of socialism in the post-Soviet era. Although some of the Cuban academic literature critiques Protestant house churches for promoting individualism, the explicit emphasis on social solidarity indicates that Protestants are combining Christianity with some support for revolutionary values. The house church phenomenon can be understood as a socially engaged religious response to the economic crisis of the *Período Especial*, as *casas cultos* and *casas de oración* began providing Cubans with a concrete and this-worldly spirituality through networks of mutual aid and support. Increased social engagement by Cuban Protestant churches in the mid-1990s indicates that churches were responding to “powerful psychological needs in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse” (Hearn: 144).

The organizational structure and social engagement of Cuban house church meetings has some parallels with the growth of Catholic base communities (CEBs) in Latin America in the 1980s. After a period of institutional decline and concern regarding the Church’s shortage of priests and weak connections to the popular masses, progressive priests encouraged greater lay participation within local church meetings (Mainwaring: 125). This focus on more decentralized practices was further encouraged at the Puebla gathering of Latin American bishops in 1979, where they recognized that the CEBs “created better interpersonal relationships, acceptance of God’s word, reflection about life and reality in light of the Bible; in the communities, the commitment to family, work, the neighborhood, and the local community are strengthened” (Mainwaring: 126). In the face of violent repression by the military regimes in the 1970s, CEBs throughout the Latin American region also “provided some of the most important attempts to forge a practical synthesis between Christian faith and socialist political and economic commitments” (Smith: 158).

Like Catholic CEBs, Cuban Protestant house churches and *casas de oración* focus on lay leadership, the creation of tight-knit interpersonal networks, and the reading of biblical passages in light of everyday life circumstances and issues. Although the precise nature of the political orientation of house church leaders and participants will require further study, two

observations can be made. First, within ethnographic interviews, Protestants echoed some of the same concerns of the state regarding the intervention of the United States in Cuba's cultural, political, and religious affairs. One graduate from the Baptist theological seminary in Havana, for example, recognized the problems and issues with Cuban Baptists' historical connection to U.S. mission boards. Wary of unilaterally accepting material aid from foreign sources, the seminary graduate observed that although help was welcome, "we want to run our own show." The Cuban Revolution has long emphasized autonomy and self-sufficiency, and some Cuban Baptists are embracing this theme within the organization of their local networks of churches. Second, Cuban Protestantism has a history of supporting the Revolution and its values; in fact, a number of the Revolution's leaders had roots within Cuba's Protestant denominations, thus preparing a foundation for linkages between revolutionary and Protestant social engagement (Farber: 53). The current social engagement of the house church phenomenon reflects this past history, particularly with the emphasis on the importance of *solidaridad*.

If officials continue to view Cuban Protestantism through the critical lens of connections to the United States, then the potential for dialogue between the state and house church groups remains minimal. The set of new regulations that the state put in place in September of 2005 allows government officials to monitor house church activities. From the perspective of the state, house church participants' "identity as practicing Christians is regarded as potentially antithetical to the revolutionary project" (Garrard-Burnett: 168). Cuban Protestant demonstration of the concept of *solidaridad*, however, indicates that the house church movement may have more in common with revolutionary ideals than previously thought. If this is the case, then it would be fruitful to reexamine Cuban Protestantism and the growing house church phenomenon within the larger context of studies on world Christianity. This literature recognizes the demographic shifts in Christianity towards the Global South, as well as the dynamic and fluid nature of Christian thought and practice in today's increasingly globalized world. This Cuban case study can contribute to larger discussions of world Christianity through an analysis of how local context creatively shapes belief and practice.

Bibliography

Berges Curbelo, Juana.

2006 *Los Llamados Nuevos Movimientos Religiosos en el Gran Caribe: Reflexiones Sobre un Problema Contemporáneo*. La Habana: Ediciones CEA.

Blum, Denise

2010 *Cuban Youth and Revolutionary Values: Educating the New Socialist Citizen*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Garrard-Burnett, Virginia.

2012 "Central America and the Caribbean: Christianity on the Periphery." Pp. 154-70 in *Introducing World Christianity*. Edited by C. Farhadian. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Farber, Samuel.

- 2006 *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*. Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press.

Gonzalez Garcia, Daniel

- 2008 *Modelo Cubano de Reinocrecimiento: Una Iglesia Sistemica*. La Habana: Western Baptist Convention Mission Board.

Hearn, Adrian

- 2008 *Cuba: Religion, Social Capital, and Development*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hernández-Reguant, Ariana

- 2009 "Writing in the Special Period: An Introduction." Pp. 1-18 in *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*. Edited by A. Hernández-Reguant. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hunter, Alan, and Kim-Kwong Chan

- 1993 *Protestantism in Contemporary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

López-Vigil, María

- 1997 "A Religious Agenda for the Time of Crisis." *Revista Envío*. Available online at <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2058>.

Mainwaring, Scott

- 1986 "Brazil: The Catholic Church and the Popular Movement in Nova Iguaçu, 1974-1985." Pp. 124-55 in *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America*. Edited by D Levine. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Parsons, Howard L., and John Somerville

- 1977 *Marxism, Revolution and Peace*. Amsterdam: Grüner.

Pérez, Luis A

- 1995 *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ramírez Calzadilla, Jorge

- 1997 *Religión, Cultura, y Sociedad en Cuba*. Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas (CIPS). Departamento de Estudios Socioreligiosos (DESR). Havana: CIPS.

Republic of Cuba

- 1992 "Constitution of the Republic of Cuba." Available online at http://www.cubanet.org/htdocs/ref/dis/const_92_e.htm.

Smith, Brian H

- 1986 "Chile: Deepening the Allegiance of Working-Class Sectors to the Church in the 1970s." Pp. 156-86 in *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America*. Edited by D. Levine. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

United States Department of State

- 2014 "2013 Report on International Religious Freedom – Cuba." Available online at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9078c14.html>.

Veltmeyer, Henry, and Mark Rushton

- 2011 *The Cuban Revolution as Socialist Human Development*. Leiden: Brill.