

Religion & Democracy

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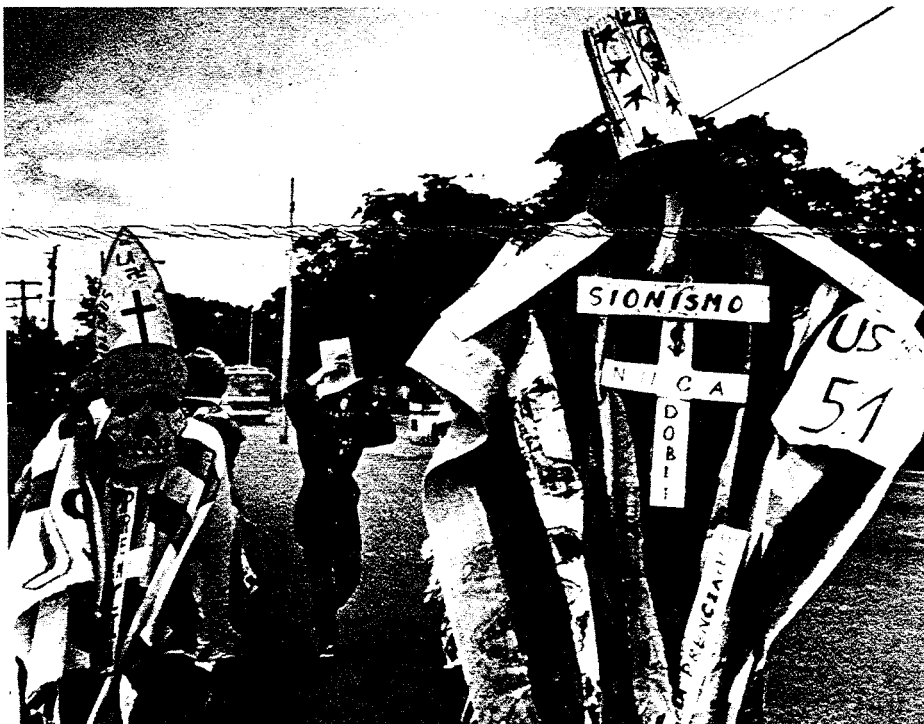
Nicaragua: The Cruel Awakening

In the 1960s a number of Christian intellectuals were captivated by an unlikely dream: that Christians and Communists could overcome a history of the most profound conflict to work together to build a new and genuine form of socialism. In Europe it was thought that such an "historic compromise" would yield Euro-communism -- "socialism with a human face." In Latin America these same ideas gained an even stronger foothold inside the churches, and were elaborated in what came to be called "liberation theology."

In 1979 the moment for the practical testing of liberation theology arrived: the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. There could be no mistaking the significance of the Nicaraguan experiment. Father Alvarado Arguello, a priest who became an important spokesman for the Sandinistas, announced that the Nicaraguan revolution had provided "an historic opportunity for a truly strategic confluence between Christians and non-Christians." The Chilean writer, Pablo Richard, declared that "in all of Latin America eyes are focusing upon Nicaragua and how Christians are going to act in this revolutionary process." Such words found many echoes in the United States.

But today in Nicaragua the dream of Christian-Marxist cooperation is yielding a terrible reality: the transformation of Nicaragua into a totalitarian society. The Sandinista revolution

Continued on page 2



United Press International Photo

Sandinista activists ridicule religion, zionism, and the United States in a Managua parade, July 18, 1982, celebrating the July 1979 victory over dictator Anastacio Somoza.

Catholic Bishops and NCC Differ over Nicaragua

On September 9, Archbishop John R. Roach, speaking as President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a vigorous statement of protest against the persecution of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. His action represents a significant departure from the outlook toward Central America that has prevailed at the U.S. Catholic Conference in recent years.

At the same time, a deputation of leaders from the U.S. National Council of Churches, a predominantly Protestant organization, returned from meetings in Nicaragua to report to the NCC Executive Committee that "there is no systematic repression of religious freedom in Nicaragua."

The statement by Archbishop Roach acknowledges that Nicaragua has some complex problems, but nevertheless declares that "... we cannot fail to protest, in the strongest possible terms, the attempted defamation and acts of physical abuse directed at prominent clerics, the inappropriate exercises of state control over the communications media, including those of the Church, the apparent threats to the Church's role in education, and, most ominous of all, the increasing tendency of public demonstrations to result in bloody conflict."

The NCC emissaries to Nicaragua -- Paul McCleary, Executive Director of Church World Service and Oscar

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 1

has not only failed to bring the political democracy and respect for human rights it once so confidently promised, but it is now also moving carefully but relentlessly to destroy genuine religious life in Nicaragua. Yet while most Nicaraguans by now have awakened from the illusions of Christian-Marxist collaboration, many North Americans still slumber on.

The Sandinista assault on the churches is no longer a subtle one. On the contrary -- its aim is the dramatic public humiliation of authentic Christian leaders and institutions. For its methods, it has begun to employ deceptions and cruelties which recall anti-clericalism at its most extreme.

On August 11th Father Bismark Carballo, Director of Communications for the Archdiocese of Managua, went to lunch at the home of a woman who had been coming to him for religious counseling for some eight months. The woman had asked him there to meet her family. But soon after he arrived, armed men burst into the apartment through a door which had been suspiciously left open. They beat the priest, forced him to disrobe, and pushed him into the street, where a television crew, photographers, and over a hundred pro-Sandinista demonstrators just happened to be passing by. The government announced that its security forces had rescued

Father Carballo from the woman's husband, who had discovered the two during a lover's tryst.

The government's version of the story was noisily publicized in the pro-government press. Nicaragua's only independent newspaper, *La Prensa*, attempted to publish Father Carballo's refutation, but was censored by the government. Archbishop Obando y Bravo of Managua promptly denounced the incident as "an atrocious calumny," and *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, declared categorically from Rome that:

The Church and its institutions have become the targets of offensiveness and violence by groups of Sandinistas, a situation that has never before come about in a nation where Catholic faith and tradition have been so firmly rooted.

To this date, however, very few U.S. church voices have been heard to speak in protest against the Sandinistas -- or even to offer some explanation to the Christian family about what meaning this bizarre incident may hold. Church publications still speak reverentially about Nicaragua's "religious" revolution. Tens of thousands of dollars are still flowing from American churchgoers to pro-Sandinista organizations in Nicaragua and in this country (see page

Where the Money Goes: Church Aid to Nicaragua

* **The Evangelical Committee for Development (CEPAD)**, an organization which is sometimes effusive in its apologies for the Sandinista government (see page 3), receives hundreds of thousands of dollars annually from American Protestants. In 1981, Church World Service of the National Council of Churches gave \$365,329 to CEPAD; the United Methodist Committee on Relief gave \$100,000; and the United Presbyterian Hunger Program gave at least \$10,000.

* **The Institute of Economic and Social Research (INIES)** in Managua, an organization which encourages others in Central America to copy the Sandinista mode of socialism, received \$25,000 this year from the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

* **The Ecumenical Program for Inter-American Communication and Action (EPICA)** received \$19,260 from the National Council of Churches in 1981. EPICA describes the

Sandinista oligarchy as the "vanguard" of the Nicaraguan people in its film "Nicaragua: A People's Revolution" -- a film produced with church funds.

* **The North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA)**, a long time recipient of church money, obtained \$11,000 of Presbyterian hunger funds in 1980 and \$300 from the National Council of Churches in 1981. NACLA's analysis of religious repression in Nicaragua is that "the Church hierarchy has become less cooperative in the face of the Sandinista government's clear commitment to true social revolution."

* **The Institute for Food and Development Policy (IFDP)** co-founder Joseph Collins serves as an advisor to the Nicaraguan Ministry of Planning. His salary has been paid in part by the \$7,500 contribution to the IFDP made by the Presbyterian Hunger Program in 1981. According to the IFDP's Action Alert, "In Nicaragua today, religious freedom is guaranteed."



Jose Esteban Gonzales (left), organizer of the Nicaraguan Permanent Commission for Human Rights in 1977, and Humberto Belli, until recently an editor of La Prensa, address members of the Washington press corps at an August 6 meeting arranged by IRD. Mr. Belli, a Catholic lay leader, documented attacks on the free press and on the church. He displayed literacy materials in which Marxist ideology is the central message, materials which have been particularly offensive to Christian groups.

2), and there are no signs that consideration is being given to slowing or stopping it. So far, Archbishop John R. Roach, President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is the only major U.S. church figure to have protested this incident forthrightly.

But the attack on Father Carballo was only the most flamboyant of many recent Sandinista abuses against Christians -- both Catholics and Protestants. The Archbishop of Managua has been prohibited from saying Mass on television, and a pastoral letter to the Nicaraguan bishops from the pope could not be published for weeks. The Catholic Church's authority over priests has been denied and, in some instances, forcibly resisted. (Sandinista mobs have attacked a bishop sent to remove a pro-government priest from a church he occupied, and mobs have twice tried to attack the archbishop himself.) Catholic schools are being taken over by Sandinista bands. The church buildings of many Protestant denominations have been seized for varying periods of time, and a number of Protestant and Catholic clergy have been forced to leave the country.

Until the Carballo incident, the Sandinista strategy against the churches was one of death by a thousand cuts. No single incident seemed dramatic or grave enough to warrant a repudiation of the revolution by those who once had such hopes for it. (The Nicaraguan churches discovered again that it is sometimes easier to survive being swallowed whole by the Leviathan than to survive being eaten piecemeal by piranhas.)

This Sandinista strategy was helped by the inclination of many North American church

leaders to excuse the abuses of the revolution as in one way or another the fault of the United States. Church groups here sometimes speak as though not a sparrow can fall to the ground in Nicaragua without the CIA having had a hand in it.

For example, several months ago the Sandinistas began the forced relocation of the Miskito Indians, a predominantly Protestant sub-culture on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. The Miskitos had objected to government efforts to liquidate their culture -- including the imposition of Spanish-language instruction in the Miskitos' own school system, using Soviet-style, atheistic tracts. The conflict eventually turned bloody, and tens of thousands of Miskitos fled to Honduras.

But the response of the Task Force on Central America of the United Presbyterian Church to the Miskitos' plight was to circulate a statement from some Nicaraguan Protestant relief workers (an organization called CEPAD, see page 2) which praised the forced resettlement as a plan "to guarantee the right to life of the Miskito people." The statement urged North Americans to pray for the Nicaraguan government "... and the programs it has prepared to raise the lowly, to strengthen the weak, to improve their level of life and to include them in the decision-making process of our nation." And, of course, the statement denounced "the warlike, intolerant and arrogant attitudes of the government of the United States towards Nicaragua."

The Presbyterians have not been alone in apologizing for such oppression. The Moravian Church in America, which has many missionaries among the Miskitos, was accused by the Sandinistas of being a CIA front, and many of its churches were seized or burned. But the principal response of the Moravian Board of World Mission has been to assail the U.S. government for its policies in Central America, which the Moravians describe as "mischievous and probably self-defeating," and to call for stricter Congressional curbs on the CIA. Toward the Sandinistas, however, the U.S. Moravians have shown the greatest diplomatic reserve.

But the Carballo incident has provoked U.S. Catholic leadership, after long hesitation, to acknowledge the scope and seriousness of the Sandinista challenge. Perhaps this is because the Sandinista campaign against the Nicaraguan Catholic Church involves an even grosser sacrilege than its attacks on the Protestants. It aims to subjugate the Catholic Church, not merely to evict it.

The Sandinista strategy actually draws upon concepts developed by "liberation" theologians: they seek to transform the church from a church of all humankind into a church of the class struggle. To accomplish this, Sandinistas seek to politicize local "base communities" -- lay organizations within the Church -- to undermine the church hierarchy. Conflicts engendered by such

efforts have led to mob violence against several Nicaraguan bishops, the detention of priests and bishops, and several pitched battles between loyal Catholics and Sandinista mobs. (In such a battle in Masaya last month, at least three persons were killed.)

Last June, as this conflict was building, Pope John Paul wrote to the Nicaraguan bishops affirming his support for them and his opposition to those who promote class warfare within the church. "The concept of the 'People's Church'," he warned, "readily takes on strongly ideological connotations, which follow the line of a certain political radicalism: the class struggle, the acceptance of violence in the pursuit of certain goals, etc."

The Pope's comment goes incisively to the flaw of liberation theology. While it claims to represent "the option for the poor" or "the church of the poor" -- and while its ideas have attracted many who sincerely mean to serve the poor -- in practice it has become hopelessly entangled with the Marxist-Leninist ideology of revolutionary class struggle. This peculiar ideology is surely not the only possible outlook for those who wish to affirm their solidarity with the poor. Nor is there reason to believe that it is what the poor want -- if it were, why not give them elections? Nor is it, as mounting evidence attests, even likely to bring the poor any material benefits.

The ideas of liberation theology will no doubt linger among us. But the fruits of this prophesy are now being tasted in Nicaragua and they are bitter fruits indeed.

The Sandinista Spirit

Recent speeches by Sandinista leaders give telling evidence about the way Latin America's "historic compromise" between Christians and Marxists is turning out. The following are verbatim transcripts made by the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service of two recent speeches by Interior Minister Thomas Borge:

...there are a large number of religious sects that are being financed by the CIA. According to data we have on hand, but which are incomplete, there are 99 religious sects or denominations in Nicaragua. Only half of them, 51, together have more than 1,500 churches. (shouts of "Let them go!") Some of them have mother churches in the United States. The most famous sects -- and it is best for our people to know their enemies -- are: Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, and the Adventists. (shouts of "Boo!")

There are other sects whose origins are unknown and which can hardly be called churches. These sects have names that are very strange, such as the Divine Flames and the Live Waters, (laughter) whose activities are mainly carried out in Chinandega Department. Other sects are the Voice of Acclamation and the Wesleyan Church, whatever the hell that means, (laughter) in Leon Department....

...We have no problems with Christians who are true revolutionaries. On the other hand, we have not been able to achieve an understanding with the leaders of the Catholic Church. I don't think we will ever be able to. I once asked them if they wanted to start a war.

We don't expect them to become Sandinists; all we ask of them is that they teach the Gospel and spread God's word, and that they not plot against the revolution or accept the CIA's money. Instead, in the class struggle that is going on in this country, they have decided to side with the exploiters, the wealthy and the imperialists.

BRIEFS

□ On August 20 two representatives of the Eloff Commission of the Republic of South Africa visited the offices of the Institute on Religion and Democracy seeking information for their inquiry into the South African Council of Churches. The IRD staff offered them this written statement:

"The Institute on Religion and Democracy is committed to strengthening the link between Christianity and democracy. As a consequence, the IRD has criticized the agencies of several American churches as well as the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the World Council of Churches for supporting some organizations of the totalitarian Left. For example, the IRD has opposed church aid to the South West Africa People's Organization and the African National Congress, two organizations with strong terrorist and totalitarian influences.

"We have no reasonable evidence that the South African Council of Churches is significantly dominated or influenced by Marxism-Leninism. While we do not necessarily endorse all the policies and programs of the South African Council of Churches, we find nothing improper in grants which assist that organization in seeking to change apartheid, a system which denies democratic rights to a majority of South Africans."

□ Christian Century's Jean Caffey Lyles commends the standards for financial procedures and disclosures promoted by the three-year-old Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, in the magazine's Sept. 1 issue. She concludes, "We'd like to see liberal religious groups be equally up-front about their finances."

□ There's a frantic scramble by some U.S. church officials to soften the blow of the August Reader's Digest blast at the

Continued on page 5

World Council of Churches, an article entitled "Karl Marx or Jesus Christ."

In an official 2700-word response to the 1600-word article, as well as in magazine articles and mailings to regional church leaders, denominational officers attack a "biased and unfairly negative view of the World Council, unsubstantiated by facts." Everyone seems to bemoan these "media attacks" that "sap energies." It makes you wonder if the media are really the only people raising questions.

There's another round coming, warn church officials: a "60 Minutes" report on the World and National Councils is apparently planned for this fall. Stay tuned

Msgr. George Higgins, a leader in Catholic social justice and labor action, has criticized People for the American Way for employing the single-minded emotional scare tactics similar to those employed by the religious new right, and has publicly resigned from the group's advisory board. PAW was founded by TV producer Norman Lear to counter the influence of the religious New Right. Msgr. Higgins identified "a deep-seated and almost fanatical abhorrence of any and all forms of religious

fundamentalism" on the part of some associated with PAW.

While massive demonstrations were taking place in New York during the June United Nations special session on disarmament, Soviet officials cracked down on their own fledgling independent peace movement, arresting two members of a committee formed by about a dozen Soviet intellectuals.

The little group, led by 25-year-old Sergei Batovrin, had issued an appeal to the governments and peoples of the Soviet Union and the United States, calling for the banning of nuclear weapons and for a "free exchange of opinions."

Christianity Today reports a religious angle to the controversial Siberia-Europe natural gas pipeline. About one-tenth of the 100,000 people working on the construction of the pipeline are forced laborers, including those imprisoned for religious activities--believers such as Baptist preachers Vladimir Marmus and Alexander Ussatjuk.

If four months ago IRD had suggested that the assassination attempt on the Pope's life might have involved the Soviet KGB, would you have thought us a bit excessive?

Bolioli -- met with Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. Dr. McCleary reported that they "found the Commandante receptive to our suggestions that government and religious leaders meet to iron out their difficulties and misunderstanding."

The NCC leaders did not meet with the bishops of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, but with Ortega, leaders of the Protestant Evangelical Development Committee (CEPAD), and other Catholics. CEPAD receives substantial funding from Church World Service and the WCC, and supports the Sandinista government. The NCC delegation, which found "no systematic repression" in Nicaragua therefore met only with those accused of complicity in repression, and not at all with its purported victims: an apparent tilt toward the so-called "People's Church," a dissident Catholic faction. In a recent letter to the Nicaraguan Catholic bishops Pope John Paul warned, according to Catholic teaching, this "People's Church," opposed to the bishops, represents "a serious distortion of Jesus Christ's will and of His plan of salvation."

RESPOND

Become a member of the Institute on Religion and Democracy by making a tax-deductible contribution of \$25 each year. When you become a member, you are joining a growing number of Christians working to support democratic values within our churches. If you are not yet a member of the Institute, join TODAY!

Please enroll me as a member of IRD, a project of the Foundation for Democratic Education, Inc. My \$25 tax-deductible donation is enclosed. (Please make checks payable to FDE-IRD.)

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Help us by sending the names and addresses of others whom you believe would be interested in the Institute on Religion and Democracy. We will send them a packet of introductory materials.

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Share your reactions to Religion and Democracy articles or other IRD projects. Brief letters may be published in forthcoming issues of the newsletter.

The following publications are available from the IRD office. Please enclose a check with your order. IRD members are entitled to a 10 percent discount on all items.

Nicaragua: A Revolution Against the Church? (\$1.50) This 1981 pamphlet offers important background information on the current assault on liberty by Nicaragua's Sandinistas and highlights the courageous role of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church.

Christianity Democracy and the Churches Today (\$2.00) An attractive booklet containing a critique and debate regarding democratic values and current church policies. Richard Neuhaus and Ed Robb speak for IRD -- and James Armstrong and Arie Brouwer speak for the National Council of Churches.

The Nuclear Freeze: A Study Guide (\$2.50) A timely collection of the original freeze resolutions, informative articles, and commentary. Many church members are finding this an important resource for understanding a significant issue before the churches today.

Some First-Hand Impressions on

The Church in the Soviet Union

IRD Chairman Edmund Robb traveled through the Soviet Union and Poland during August. He visited Leningrad, Moscow, and Warsaw, and he preached several times in Estonia. He makes these observations on religious life behind the Iron Curtain:

There is some good news to report regarding interest in religion in the Soviet Union. A Western authority on Soviet religious affairs with whom I visited spoke of a growing concern for religion, especially among young people. The Russian Orthodox priesthood is attracting more capable men. Evangelicals are reaching larger numbers of the laboring class. The growth of unregistered house churches is strong.

When I preached in Baptist and Methodist churches in Estonia the people were very responsive, with overflow crowds standing in the aisles. But I was also told that there were numerous KGB informers in those services -- and it was obvious to me that I was under surveillance much of the time.

The encouraging news on religious growth is clouded by predictions of increased religious persecution in the near future. Already there is evidence of

intensified atheistic propaganda and pressure on the church.

Restrictions on Soviet religious life include the following: Sunday schools and Christian youth organizations are not allowed; no Protestant seminaries may be established; organized women's work in churches is forbidden; there may be no importation of religious literature, Bibles, or sacred sheet music; the church is not permitted to criticize the government or speak prophetically concerning social or political issues; atheism is officially taught in the schools at all levels; and one must be at

least 18 before joining the church.

There is only one Protestant church allowed in Leningrad, a city of five million. There are only two in Moscow, a city of eight million. The Russian Orthodox congregations once numbered more than 500 in Moscow; now there are less than 50. The government has closed 61 Orthodox seminaries since the revolution, leaving only nine.

~~The Church is surviving~~ even growing -- under these harsh conditions. There must be more that we can do here to help.



Ed Robb (left) talks with Methodist women in Estonia, a lay leader acting as translator. Robb also visited Poland, where he observed the influence of the Catholic Church on the dissent movement.

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