

# RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



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## Methodist Bishops in Nicaragua: Poor Prophets

*On January 23-28, 1989, 31 Methodist bishops from 18 countries met in Managua, Nicaragua, for what was described as an "Episcopal Encounter for Peace." Among those participating were 14 United Methodist bishops from the United States. Michael J. McManus, an independent journalist from Maryland, was there to observe. The following two articles, reprinted from his syndicated column, which appears in 125 newspapers nationally, represent his impressions from that trip. It is interesting to note that Mr. McManus, himself a critic of recent U.S. government policy in Nicaragua, seemed nevertheless to be dismayed by "these self-appointed prophets" who "are not speaking the whole truth."*

Fourteen United Methodist bishops -- a third of America's bishops -- recently spent a week in Nicaragua, where there's not a single Methodist church. I tagged along out of curiosity.

To their credit, the bishops met with both sides of the deeply split country: top Sandinistas including President Daniel Ortega and with the regime's opponents: the Catholic Church, business and the U.S. Embassy. But apparently, they learned nothing from Sandinista opponents.

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**But what's lacking in the bishops' statement is any balance.... These self-appointed prophets are not speaking the whole truth. They know there is no basis for joy, only tears.**

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In a statement thrashed out with 23 Latin American bishops who also participated, they failed to speak truth to Ortega as they did to America:

*We come in the tradition of John Wesley, Methodism's founder whose proclamation -- "The World is My Parish" -- leads us to respond in care and concern for all peoples. We come as shepherds who have heard the cries of the flock -- our brothers and sisters of Central America. We come as prophets to speak against injustice and oppression.*

First, it must be said that there has been "injustice and oppression" and it has a U.S. label. American funding of the

contras led to 10,000 to 40,000 deaths in a land with only three million residents. That would be as if we had lost between 1 and 4 million Americans in a war with Canada.

The World Court found us guilty of mining a Nicaraguan harbor. And in 1985 we imposed a trade embargo taking away Nicaragua's biggest customer. So the bishops were right to go to Managua and say, "We will demand and expect that our government act with compassion and justice.

"We will publicly challenge our governments to be peacemakers and not peacebreakers.... We will work for the sovereign rights of other nations to govern themselves without interference."

These are words the Bush Administration needs to hear at this crucial time as it formulates a new peace initiative

(Poor Prophets, continued on page 2)



Photo by Thomas McAnally / UMMS

Sixteen United Methodist bishops from the United States, the Philippines and East Germany participated in a five day "Episcopal Encounter for Peace" in late January. They are shown here outside the Olof Palme Convention Center in Managua.

## Thirty-Six Hours in Managua -- An In-Depth Report

-- September 1987

There are probably more fact-finding tours of Nicaragua right now than there are facts -- the country has shortages of practically everything. Nonetheless, everyone's going, every senator and representative, the entire pet shop full of '88 presidential candidates, every church-group bake-sale committee and Mush-R-Us liberal coalition. I see that even Mayor Koch is planning to go, probably looking for new kinds of mismanagement to be used in New York City.

I wasn't about to be left out....

-- From *Holidays In Hell*, by P.J. O'Rourke  
(Reprinted by permission of the Atlantic Monthly Press)

(Poor Prophets, continued from page 1)

for Central America. But what's lacking in the bishops' statement is any balance. For example, they say, "We are here to express our joy for what the Nicaraguan people have accomplished in their long struggle for self-determination and justice." Joy? Accomplishments? These self-appointed prophets are not speaking the whole truth. They know there is no basis for joy, only tears.

Inflation last year in Nicaragua was an incredible 23,000 percent! A third of the nation is jobless. Managua's downtown, hit by a terrible earthquake in 1972, is a sea of grassy fields, without one new building. A recent hurricane leveled hundreds of thousands of acres of forests. Sadly, these woes are compounded by an inept Marxist government.

"We have human tragedy in Nicaragua. Our society is disintegrating," said Dr. Jaime Bengoechea, president of the Chamber of Industry and a pharmacist. "When a country is abandoned by 15 percent of its people including 60 percent of its professional and technical people, that's a tragedy. When our average income per capita has gone back from \$100 per month to \$10 per month, that's a human tragedy."

He's not exaggerating. A teacher earns \$12 a month! Yet prices are high. A bottle of milk takes a half day's pay. What went wrong? He said, "A thousand companies have been expropriated. A circus visited here three years ago and had its tent confiscated as a 'public utility'! Can you imagine anyone investing here with that behavior?" The bishops met with Dr. Bengoechea, yet their statement says nothing about the economy.

Cardinal Obando y Bravo was out of the country, but they heard a Catholic bishop talk of the nation's lack of basic freedoms. Bishop Bosco Vivas, who helped the cardinal negotiate a peace treaty between the Sandinistas and the contras, told me, "The democratization has not arrived. Our Catholic radio station is prohibited from giving news. There are 7,000 to 10,000 political prisoners and secret jails. They say there are only 3,000 prisoners, but we can't even get a list of them."

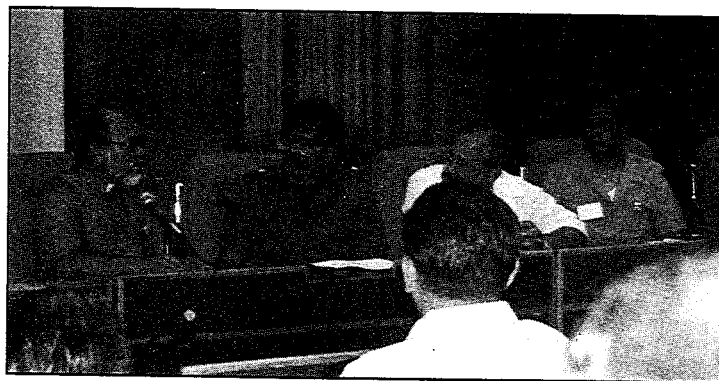
Finally, they heard U.S. officials say the Soviet Union pours \$500 million a year in military equipment

and material to prop up Ortega. What should the bishops have said? They could have been prophetic:

*We call upon President Bush to halt further payments to the contras, and to offer to lift the trade embargo and even provide direct assistance if Russia will stop fueling the conflict by sending arms. We pray that settling this regional conflict will be high on the Bush-Gorbachev agenda. We call upon the Nicaraguans to halt the expropriations. We urge President Ortega to reduce his army's size, the region's biggest, to allow the press and radio to operate freely, and to hold verifiable elections.*

Idealistic? Not at all. On Monday [January 23], Ortega said he is laying off 35,000 workers to cut a budget deficit, and guaranteeing the security of private property to encourage investment! Had the bishops spoken up, they might have prodded Ortega to do more. No one listens to half a prophet.

-- Michael McManus



Sandinista President Daniel Ortega (2nd from left) meets with the bishops as part of the "Episcopal Encounter for Peace."

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# Methodists in Nicaragua: Missionaries or Politicians?

In Nicaragua, I wondered if the United Methodist Church had forgotten Jesus' command, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28).

For of the 11 "missionaries" sent there by the UM's General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), not one is attempting to "make disciples" or even pastor a congregation. The country has no Methodist churches. Why?

"In the 1920's, the American Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists divided up Latin America ... in a comity agreement. The Methodists took Cuba, Brazil, Panama, Costa Rica. The Baptists came to Nicaragua..." said Bishop Lloyd Knox of Birmingham, Alabama, and head of GBGM's World Division. A former Cuban missionary, Knox helped create Nicaragua's Evangelical Committee for Relief and Development after the 1972 earthquake. Methodist missionaries are assigned to work with this group that is in contact with local churches. But the missionary work is more political than spiritual.

Howard Heiner, his wife, son and daughter-in-law are loaned to the government to work in forestry, planting trees to halt erosion.<sup>1</sup> Paul Jeffery is ordained, but writes a newsletter and articles for U.S. newspapers. Carter Garber and Marty Collier conduct tours for visitors. Others work for "Witness for Peace," documenting contra violations.

All talk glowingly about the Sandinistas, saying little about Jesus.

By contrast, in 1985 when Costa Rican Methodist Bishop Roberto Diaz asked the GBGM for help with an evangelistic program -- to train pastors, to plant churches, to subsidize salaries of Costa Rican pastors to go into areas of great need and tell them about Christ -- he was refused any aid.

Therefore, Diaz called up a new evangelical body, the Mission Society for United Methodists and got help. "We sent \$2000 a month plus evangelists and trainers for pastors, Bibles, literature, a tent, and a projector," said Julia Williams, a vice-president and former missionary.

Rev. H.T. MacLin, who worked for 30 years as a GBGM missionary and executive, says the Society was created because the Board "obscured the original emphasis of the church of winning souls for Christ. In its place emerged a new emphasis to change society by trying to reform it.

"When we attempted to do that, nothing has happened. Out of 38,000 congregations, there were 25,000 in a year who did not report a single person coming to faith." Indeed, Methodists have lost 2 million members.

I asked Bishop Leroy Hodapp of Indianapolis if this hemorrhage was due to church political stands. He replied, "Every survey shows that the so-called political activity is impossible to find as a reason. The problem of our church has not been losing members, but a failure to gain them."<sup>2</sup>

Bishop Kenneth Hicks of Topeka who dined with us in Managua, added, "We do not have the same zeal for

generating outreach in the church and going after people as was the case in the past. We don't have a zeal to reach people who are unchurched with the Gospel -- primarily youth and young adults. We are not even getting children of our own members."

Indeed, Sunday school attendance has plunged from 4.2 million to 2.1.

And Bishop Elias Galvan of Phoenix, the only Hispanic bishop, said, "I have always been concerned that the United Methodists have not been able to reach into the Hispanic community with a ministry creating congrega-

tions. We are close in liturgy and structure to Catholics. But the pentecostal churches understand the subculture much better than we do."

That's true. I interviewed Rev. Saturnino Serrato, superintendent of 380 Assemblies of God in Nicaragua. With 70,000 members, it is the largest Protestant church there. When I asked about the Sandinistas, he refused to answer: "I don't want to say anything that will affect the church."

His church growth comes from Catholics: "They know God exists and say they are Christian. But they don't have an experience with God. We guide them to a personal experience with the Lord Jesus Christ.

"And their lives change. A man named Gavino Rivera was a drunkard. And when he drank rum, he used to fight. Then one Sunday evening, when we were on the radio in Leon, he heard us in his home. He came down to the station and said, 'I want to accept Jesus.' He knelt down there. We prayed for him. He went home, told his wife and she laughed. But from that day, his life changed. He doesn't drink or fight. He has a normal good life."

Fortunately, the Methodists have not totally lost this vision. Prodded by the Mission Society, the GBGM now has a "Mission Evangelism Committee" headed by Rev. Garry Parker. It has drafted a sweeping goal to evangelize where "the Gospel has not been heard or heeded," to hire missionaries with that vision, and even to retrain "current missionary personnel."

But will GBGM accept the vision? In April it will make a decision.

-- Michael McManus

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1. Editor's note: Nora Boots of the GBGM told *Religion & Democracy* that all the Heiners technically work for CEPAD, a pro-Sandinista Protestant relief agency. While Howard and his son Daniel work in forestry as Mr. McManus indicated, Janet Heiner is in health and development programs and Peggy Heiner is in communications, including "receiving groups from the U.S."

2. Editor's note: A recent Gallup survey shows that Methodists and Catholics are more likely to leave their churches than persons raised in other denominations. One in three persons raised a Methodist is no longer identified with that church.

# Your Church Dollars At Work?

## Christianity and Crisis

It is a magazine with a distinguished pedigree. American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr founded *Christianity and Crisis* (C&C) in 1941 as a sentinel of "Christian realism." In its pages he advocated the defense of democratic values against the totalitarian threat of that day -- fascism. His arguments were not always welcome in mainline church circles then.

Eventually, C&C won mainline acceptance, which it still enjoys today, nearly two decades after Niebuhr's death. Several church bodies now subsidize the magazine -- a

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favor not usually bestowed on non-official publications. In 1986 C&C received \$11,500 from national agencies of the United Methodist Church and \$8,000 from those of the United Church of Christ. The American Baptist Churches are also listed as a supporter, and other denominations -- less open about their finances -- probably give as well. Almost half of C&C's board of directors comes from the upper echelon of church officialdom.

Ironically, though, C&C no longer stands for the same principles. In the face of the totalitarian threat of our day -- communism -- it seems more inclined to sympathy than to resistance. Consider the following examples, culled from just a few issues of the magazine during 1988:

\* **October 24.** A special issue on Cuba declares the communist dictatorship there a rousing popular success. "The country's socialist principles," it says, have clear support from "the great majority of Cubans on the island." C&C's coverage even emits a whiff of the Castro cult:

*One source of dynamism that helps make change possible is clearly Fidel's own charisma and moral leadership. "Cubans are very fidelista" remarked a Baptist pastor. A worker [asked about the relationship between the Cuban people and their leaders] replied with intensity: "We respect them, we love them, and we will go to the ends of the earth with them." Fidel's prestige lends legitimacy to any process of innovation he endorses.*

Yet even when Fidel blocks innovation, the magazine praises him. His current "rectification" campaign -- an old-fashioned Stalinist drive for greater "discipline" -- is hailed as "a renewal of the revolutionary spirit." Commenting on Castro's exaltation of his late guerrilla comrade, Che Guevara, as "the personification of the new man," one article

asserts, "The ideal of a person in Christ's image, it seems, is not so different from that of Che Guevara's 'new man.'"

C&C also seeks to cover up the Cuban regime's abuses. It assures readers that "allegations of systematic torture, disappearances, and arbitrary executions are unsubstantiated." Likewise, there is said to be no religious persecution, because "Cuban church-state relations are characterized by a new climate of mutual trust."

\* **September 26.** A pair of articles on Afghanistan casts the United States and Pakistan as the main obstacles to peace, with scarcely a harsh word for the Soviets' long occupation of that country. C&C charges that U.S. aid to the Afghan rebels has "prolonged the civil strife." Looking toward the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the magazine urges immediate U.S. cooperation with the Afghan communist regime.

\* **September 12.** An article laments the "compromised witness" of South African churches. It criticizes the many South African Christians who seek reconciliation rather than revolution: "The cautious liberal character of traditional church leadership is not well equipped to promote what must be asked for if the present government is to be removed from power."

\* **May 2.** An article on the Philippines asserts that the restored democracy there "is not a system that will permit peaceful social change." Therefore, it concludes, "violent revolution becomes the only option for groups seeking fundamental change." This amounts to an endorsement of the communist insurgency in the Philippines.

\* **April 4.** C&C publishes the testimony of a U.S. "internationalist" working for the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. She speaks of fleeing "the ideological forces that operate in the United States" to deceive progressives with "the myth that the U.S. is governed by and for the people." In Nicaragua she finds the inspiration she has been missing:

*It is a tremendous privilege to be able to observe and participate in this unique historical process upon which the Nicaraguan people have embarked under the leadership of the Sandinista party. Though the Sandinistas are far from perfect, close-hand observation of their creativity and commitment to building a society that gives priority to the poor is a political education, one that will serve us wherever we choose to enter the struggle.*

How sad to see the principles of Reinhold Niebuhr so totally abandoned. Nowhere in today's C&C do we find expressed the genuine liberalism which would forthrightly condemn Castro, the Sandinistas, and their would-be imitators. It is indeed a disgrace that our church offerings subsidize the extremist political views that now rule C&C's pages.

-- Alan Wisdom

From time to time, *Religion & Democracy* will publish this feature on "Your Church Dollars" which reports on questionable religious/political groups receiving church funds.

# Religious Liberty Alert

## Northern Ireland: Irish Eyes Aren't Smiling

When one thinks of Ireland -- with images of leprechauns and lush green hills -- religious liberty abuses do not spring to mind. Should we not focus our efforts on the situations in Cuba, China, Albania, Iraq, or the Soviet Union? The harsh reality of Northern Ireland, however, has often been glossed over by the American media because of idyllic views of Irish history and culture. Northern Ireland, which boasts the highest rate of church attendance in the world, is a country where the church is in a crisis -- a crisis centering on the failure of religious leadership.

There is no persecution or harassment of believers by a hostile government; but Northern Ireland is an environment where Catholics are discriminated against by Protestants, indiscriminate violence is promoted in the name of justice, and religion is manipulated to justify hatred. This is an attack on the witness and purity of the Christian Church.

Though rooted in a centuries-old conflict between the English Protestant majority and the Irish Catholic minority, the modern struggle in Northern Ireland began twenty years ago. British troops came to occupy the country in 1969 because of violent division over Catholic civil rights demonstrations. When, in 1972, British soldiers shot and killed 13 protesters, the Marxist-inspired Irish Republican Army (IRA) used it as a means to incite the Catholic community to action against the British and Protestant rule. Protestant para-military groups sprang up to retaliate, believing the police were not firm enough. Two months later, the British government imposed direct rule from Westminster.

Since the "troubles" (as they are called) began, more than 3,000 killings and 30,000 injuries have occurred. One out of every 20 households in Northern Ireland has experienced a death or injury from shootings and bombings.

Fear in Northern Ireland, however, comes not just from the violence. Catholics and Protestants seem to be more fearful of the possibility that the other will usurp its traditions. Most Catholics want

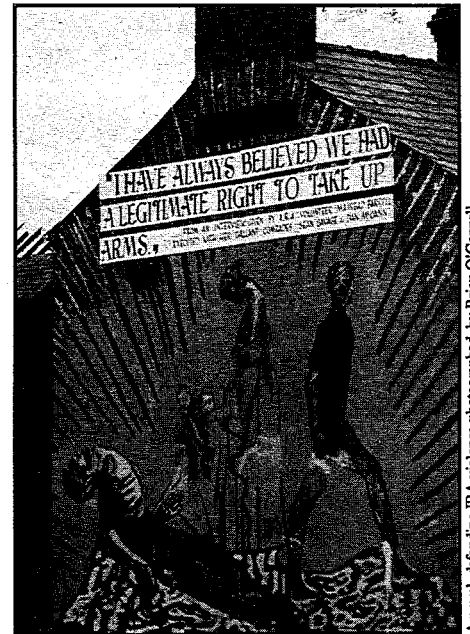
Northern Ireland to be united with the Republic of Ireland to the south, though they do not embrace the violent means of the IRA. Most Protestants want to remain part of the United Kingdom. The impasse is an all-or-nothing game. Compromise is not part of their vocabulary.

Sadly, the value of religious and political pluralism, so honored in most Western cultures, seems to have little place in Northern Ireland. Both Protestants and Catholics take very seriously the cultural identity that is attached to their faith -- perhaps even more seriously than the spiritual identity. Whether one is a Catholic or Protestant is by far the most important factor determining attitudes.

The religious community -- and its leadership -- is an integral part of the problem in Northern Ireland. Evangelical churches often foster anti-Catholic attitudes and fail to support reconciliation efforts which minister to Protestants and Catholics alike. The more dominant mainline Protestant churches have inappropriately called for a watered-down "reconciliation of differences" instead of true reconciliation centered on personal repentance and forgiveness. Catholic leaders, while denouncing IRA violence, refuse to excommunicate IRA members or even those in more radical offshoots. The message this would send to the Protestant community (let alone the IRA itself) has been rejected on the grounds that it might not work.

However, reconciliation efforts, though rarely endorsed by Northern Ireland's religious leadership, are making some progress precisely because they are beginning to draw both Catholics and Protestants together spiritually at the popular level. David Hamilton, a former member of a Protestant paramilitary group and now associate director of Prison Fellowship in Belfast, says, "We do not need reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics as [our] church leaders insist, instead, we need reconciliation between anti-Catholics and anti-Protestants.

"Reconciliation efforts at the grassroots and inner-city levels are beginning to have some effect. Believers are often risk-



A mural depicting IRA violence photographed by Brian O'Connell

Many reconciliation groups working in Northern Ireland are worth supporting. A few of the best include:

Crossfire Trust  
95 Darkly Road  
Keady BT 60 3 AY  
NORTHERN IRELAND

Prison Fellowship  
39 University Street  
Belfast BT 7 1 FY  
NORTHERN IRELAND

Columba House  
11 Queen Street  
Derry  
NORTHERN IRELAND

ing their lives so that the message of Christ's reconciling power can be heard. "Since so many people use the Gospel in a perverted way," says one reconciliation worker, "efforts in evangelism have to be doubled, even tripled, to reach people." When these efforts come to fruition, perhaps Irish eyes will be smiling once again.

-- Brian F. O'Connell

Mr. O'Connell coordinates the Peace, Freedom and Security Studies program of the National Association of Evangelicals. He recently returned from an assignment in Northern Ireland for News Network International.

# The Book Shelf

## *Christian Ethics and U.S. Foreign Policy*

*Christian Ethics and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing, \$12.95) lands on our shelf at a time when recent studies by various public opinion research groups reveal that the majority of the American public is confused or misinformed regarding United States foreign policy. For example, one poll, released last June, found that 61 percent of the public believes that the Soviet Union is currently supporting a communist revolution *against* Nicaragua's government. The fact is that the Nicaraguan government receives economic and military support from the Soviet Union and that U.S. government policy has supported the Nicaraguan resistance forces. Ironically, the same survey reports that 59 percent of those polled support U.S. military aid for indigenous movements fighting communist-backed governments. This typical example of the general public's lack of knowledge about foreign affairs is unfortunate, to say the least. For Christians too, it is important that participation in the political process be carried out both responsibly and intelligently.

In *Christian Ethics and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Dr. Mark Amstutz, Chairman of the Department of Political Science at Wheaton College, writes that "if Christians are to discharge their civic and religious responsibilities competently, they need to be informed -- theologically, ethically, and politically." And, with increasing political participation by evangelicals and oldline Protestants in the American foreign policy debate, Amstutz cautions Christians to "carry out their political obligations with greater care and thoughtfulness" than has been the case thus far.

Christian activists, writes Amstutz, have tended to neglect the opportunities to establish the "moral context"

for public policy debate. Instead, he finds the churches' political activity focused on advocating specific policy proposals. This, he says, is a misappropriation of the authority of the church and its witness. "The church has a responsibility to assume in foreign affairs," writes Amstutz. "Its role, however, is not to make foreign policy, but to help structure the context in which public policy is debated...."

*Christian Ethics and U.S. Foreign Policy* was written to be a "framework for discussion" among Christians. It was written not for specialists in ethics and international affairs but rather for the Christian citizen who desires an understanding of the moral and ethical principles which "can and should influence the development and implementation of American foreign policy."

-- Richard Sperbeck

## *Christianity and Marxism Worldwide*

Edited by Dr. Mark Elliott, Director of the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Marxism, this new reference guide includes contributions by eight scholars and is designed for the general public, students, journalists, and others. It includes sections on theory, the U.S.S.R., Eastern Europe, China, Asia, Africa, Latin America and liberation theology.

*Christianity and Marxism Worldwide: An Annotated Bibliography* is available for \$15 from the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Marxism, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL 60187.

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