



# Interreligious Dialogue in Cuba

BY ENRIQUE LÓPEZ OLIVA AND  
MARÍA ILEANA FAGUAGA

## CUBA BRIEFING PAPER SERIES

**D**ialogue between church and state in Cuba has increased during the past decade, especially around the time of the January 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II. However, even though much attention has been paid to the church-state dynamic, that relationship is developing within the context of a more complex dialogue among Cuba's various religions themselves.

This paper looks at this interreligious dialogue within Cuba, focusing particularly on the interaction between the Christian denominations and the religions of African origin. It attempts to evaluate current obstacles and opportunities in historical context.

Worldwide, many churches are greeting the new millennium with increased interest both in ecumenical dialogue leading to greater unity among Christian denominations and in what Pope John Paul II described in 1998 as "a dialogue of peace and brotherhood with the followers of all religions."

In the case of Cuba, developing a serious and systematic dialogue among religious communities may be even more complex and difficult than pursuing one between those communities and the government. Each group's different political, economic, social, and cultural experiences have led to distinct interpretations of reality, which are expressed in theological, structural, and practical terms. These differences are ultimately reflected in diverse ways of being that make interreligious dialogue particularly challenging.

Cuba's insularity and historical trajectory have affected the country's religious development in a complex and somewhat contradictory manner. At different times and to varying degrees, Cuba has been influenced by Spanish Catholicism (both official and popular), various African religions, spiritism in syncretic forms, North American Protestantism, Pentecostalism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and even some Far Eastern belief systems. This has led to the predominance of a hybrid faith that cannot strictly be called "popular Catholicism," even though it includes many Catholic elements.

The ethnic and cultural groups that combined to form Cuba's present-day racial and cultural mosaic not only came from different continents but also occupied unequal positions in a highly stratified Cuban society. African-descended blacks and European-descended whites respectively occupied the subordinate and superior roles of slaves and slaveholders. Christianity, arriving on Cuba's shores via the Catholic Church, was used to give theological justification to the conqueror, the colonizer, the oppressor. African reli-



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gions, which would give birth to the Afro-Cuban religious culture, provided spiritual sustenance to the uprooted, subjugated, and marginalized slave population. That divide has influenced the development of Cuban society to this day.

### THE RELEVANCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Interreligious, or macroecumenical, dialogue is distinct from traditional ecumenism in that it reaches beyond the limits of the Christian denominations to engage followers of all religions in all of the diverse forms in which they are practiced. Macroecumenism is not antagonistic to ecumenism, but rather seeks to extend the same principles to a broader range of belief systems.

Interreligious dialogue has become more relevant in a world characterized by growing cultural and religious diversity. As globalization affects all areas of life, cultural and religious interaction, whether positive or negative, has become much more frequent, leaving no country untouched.

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As a multiethnic, multicultural, and religiously diverse society, Cuba has felt this trend as strongly as any country. Its religious panorama is so rich and varied that, as Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz puts it, “it would be impossible to define this people’s religion. . . . There is no general, popular, or official creed. African religious practices are as widely followed as Christianity, and the two are sometimes practiced simultaneously. Spiritism, theosophy, and all manner of superstitions are also widespread. All of these beliefs are combined in a confused mix from which theological concepts such as immanence, transcendence, and pantheism cannot be separated or easily distinguished from each other.”

### OBSTACLES TO INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Despite a generally positive atmosphere, a number of factors have inhibited dialogue in the past and are likely to represent long-term obstacles to frank and respectful communication among Cuba’s religious communities.

### Self-Isolation

Foremost among these impediments is a tendency on the part of most groups toward self-isolation, which has developed for a variety of reasons both deliberate and unintentional. Among the Catholic leadership, this phenomenon stems largely from fear. Because Catholicism is the Christian denomination most closely tied to the Afro-Cuban religions, many in the Catholic Church worry that the influence of syncretic beliefs could distort or contaminate the church’s own message. At the same time, the Catholic Church’s stance toward the Protestant churches is influenced by its fear of losing members to those which evangelize aggressively even among active members of other denominations. (Some Pentecostal churches, for example, carried out aggressive proselytizing campaigns in opposition to the visit of Pope John Paul II, describing him as the Antichrist.)

The Catholic leadership’s fears about interaction with members of other churches exist largely because of weak doctrinal grounding among Catholics, many of whom lack a solid understanding of even the most fundamental tenets of the Catholic faith. This problem can only be addressed by a more solid teaching of the catechism and greater integration of the laity into the life of the parish—something the Protestant churches have generally done with far greater success.

Practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions would benefit from an equally serious effort to teach their traditions in a more comprehensive manner. Like the African religions from which they developed, the Afro-Cuban religions maintain certain secrets (e.g., the specifics of their initiation ceremonies). Afro-Cuban religious communities tend to convey their message in an oral fashion. Only initiates—a limited number of individuals consecrated in the rites of the religion—have access to supplementary written materials, which they guard jealously.

Among the Afro-Cuban religions, the tendency toward self-isolation has been compounded by a trend of “Yorubization,” as many believers seek to return to their African, and specifically Yoruban, roots. These religions have over centuries appropriated and been enriched by elements of Catholicism, acquiring a distinctly Cuban character in the process. Yorubization, then, is at some level a de-

Cubanization and re-Africanization that diminishes the common ground shared with other Cuban religions and Cuban society in general.

### Intolerance

Self-isolation, particularly over an extended period of time, has served to increase perceived differences and decrease understanding between different religious groups, resulting in varying but significant levels of intolerance toward nonbelievers and members of other religions or denominations. In recent years, there have been signs of a return to rigid denominationalism and a freezing out of ecumenism—in the seminaries, among the leadership, and at the grassroots level.

Concerning dialogue and collaboration among Christian churches, Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner observed in 1976 that “a dialogue, which is not the same as a discussion or a unilateral attempt at immediate conversion, presupposes that each party is disposed to learn something from the other.” He also pointed out that “dialogue is necessary, but it is only possible if conducted openly, in such a way that no participant is prohibited from participating based upon his own presuppositions.”

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Many groups demonstrate a marked refusal to accept, respect, or listen to “the other,” asserting a monopoly on the truth. Newcomers are required to discard every aspect of their previous selves as part of the conversion process before being fully welcomed into the group. One observes an uninformed and dismissive attitude toward other religions, including certain Christians’ characterization of Afro-Cuban religious practitioners as “demonic” and their religions as “fit only for blacks.” Ironically, some black pastors and lay leaders are among those who espouse such views.

Within the Catholic Church, well-intentioned attempts to affirm the value of Cuba’s Catholic heritage have in some cases conveyed an implicit disregard for the traditions of other groups. Immediately prior to and following the visit of John Paul II to Cuba, the Cuban Catholic hierarchy repeatedly asserted that the most

positive values in Cuban society were born of its Catholic heritage, a claim interpreted by many as a denial of other religious traditions’ contributions to the country’s history and values.

### Unfamiliarity with Other Religions

Another product of self-isolation is a lack of familiarity with other religious traditions. Unfamiliarity with the Afro-Cuban religions is particularly common among Cuban Christians. In some cases, the level of ignorance is such that many are unaware, for example, that the Afro-Cuban religions are essentially monotheistic, worshipping one supreme deity, with other divinities mediating between God and humanity in much the same way that Mary and the saints do in Catholicism.

Despite the widespread practice of various Afro-Cuban religions on the island, most Christians have not undertaken any serious study of them. In fact, although there is growing interest in religious research among nonreligious Cubans, within religious circles there is an evident prejudice against such research.

Among the relatively few clergy and laypeople who are beginning to engage in such research, the practitioners of the religion being studied are generally excluded from the process. In fact, it is not unusual for members of Christian communities to organize workshops on Afro-Cuban religions without inviting any Afro-Cuban practitioners to participate. Likewise, Christian religious publications generally do not devote much space to the examination of Afro-Cuban religion or culture. The few works that are published on the topic generally focus on understanding it only as a means of developing a better strategy for evangelism and conversion.

Conversely, there is a lack of familiarity with Christianity among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions. Many are unacquainted with the doctrines, histories, and theological foundations of the Christian churches. This state of affairs can be at least partially explained by the Catholic Church’s historical lack of vigor in pursuing evangelization on the island, due both to a lack of material and human resources and to an attitude of condescension that considered Afro-Cubans insufficiently intelligent to benefit from serious training in Catholic doctrine. As mentioned above, many practitioners of Afro-Cuban

religions have chosen to separate themselves further from the Christian religious tradition by seeking to return to the original African beliefs and practices.

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Such a degree of unfamiliarity among Cubans of both religious traditions is paradoxical, because one can often find elements of both belief systems coexisting in the home, the church, and other areas of daily life. It is common for various members of one family to practice different religions, whether of Spanish, African, or Anglo-Saxon origin, and to change religions without fanfare. A significant number of Cubans practice more than one of the Afro-Cuban religions as well as some form of Christianity, such as Roman Catholicism or Episcopalianism—a phenomenon known as *religiones cruzadas* (“crossed” or “intermingled” religions). In Cuba, *mestizaje* (mixing of races) is even more cultural than racial, and includes religious culture as well.

#### Inadequate Evangelization

Another factor impeding dialogue is a lack of training and experience among those in charge of evangelization for the churches. In many Christian denominations, recently trained evangelizers exhibit such doctrinal, religious, and cultural deficiencies that they inevitably communicate their message in a simplistic, decontextualized, ahistorical, and culturally disconnected manner.

Likewise, within the Afro-Cuban religions there is a proliferation of priests variously known as *babaloshas*, *iyaloshas*, and *babalawos* who assume responsibility for the transmission of the religious culture they profess, yet are themselves insufficiently familiar with that very culture. Phenomenal growth in the number of foreigners traveling to Cuba to become initiated has further aggravated the problem, generating a type of “religious tourism” often lacking in rigor and sophistication.

The result of these deficiencies is often the use of culturally inappropriate methods of communication and evangelization. In many cases, evangelization is not conducted using culturally accessible language. Pastoral methods as well as

theological concepts have been forcibly transplanted into Cuba without regard for cultural and historical context. The hymns sung in many churches are translations taken directly from U.S. hymnbooks and sung to U.S. melodies and rhythms. Most churches have yet to recognize the *mestizaje* that characterizes the national culture and to “Cubanize” their liturgy accordingly. In the absence of any process of assimilation or adaptation to the Cuban reality, the present style of evangelization amounts to a kind of cultural neocolonialism.

Greater familiarity with the Christian experience in Africa as well as Latin American and Caribbean countries with large populations of African origin might help to rectify this situation. There is, however, almost no awareness among Cuba’s religious leadership, much less among the congregations, of the efforts made in the last few years in these other countries to develop a culturally appropriate evangelization strategy that consciously takes into account their societies’ multiethnic and multicultural nature while respecting their indigenous and African heritage.

#### Institutional Weaknesses

Although most of the aforementioned obstacles stem from a lack of desire for interreligious dialogue, Cuba’s religious groups also have some intrinsic characteristics that would make such dialogue difficult even with a solid commitment on the part of the groups involved.

Foremost among these is a lack of institutionalization on the part of the Afro-Cuban religions, which were born under adverse conditions that never permitted the development of sophisticated institutions. Religious communities have thus operated for centuries in a decentralized manner with no authoritative body to promote a uniform doctrine or liturgy. Consequently, over time each religious tradition has developed its own relatively diverse and independent subtraditions. Distinct African ethnic identities are also maintained, almost always unconsciously, resulting in further differentiation among groups.

Without integrative structures, common doctrines, or regional and national leaders, participation in any process of dialogue becomes very difficult. No single individual or even group of individuals can claim to represent

the views, much less command the loyalty, of Cuba's vast number of Afro-Cuban religious practitioners.

The difficulty is compounded by the Afro-Cuban religions' relatively less developed sense of theology as it is understood in the West. Given their origins in nonliterate societies, these religions have developed differently from "religions of the book" such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

These characteristics, along with scant experience and training for the task and a long history of social, economic, and cultural marginalization, hinder these faiths' ability to engage in dialogue with Christian institutions.

These conditions are only just beginning to be addressed. In recent years, there has been a tendency toward the creation of integrative structures. These include the Ifá Iran Lowo Society (Sociedad Ifá Iran Lowo), the Letter of the Year Commission (Comisión de la Letra del Año), the Yoruba Cultural Society of Cuba (Sociedad Cultural Yoruba de Cuba), and the Abakuá Secretariat (Secretaría Abakuá). None of these, however, can yet claim to be a truly representative body.

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Dialogue is also inhibited by institutional weaknesses within the Christian churches. Factionalism and decentralization are almost as problematic among the Protestant denominations as among the Afro-Cuban religions. And although the Catholic Church has maintained a high degree of unity and centralization at the level of the hierarchy, it has also suffered from a lack of maturity on the part of the laity. The lay believers rarely seek a greater voice in church life, preferring to acquiesce to the clergy.

This situation stems from the early years of the Cuban Revolution, when conflict with the government caused many lay organizations to be dissolved and prompted many of their leaders to go into exile. This, together with the strongly pro-atheistic position of the government, spread fear among the laity, who took refuge behind the robes of the clergy and in the process lost their voice within the churches.

Without the active participation of this part of the church, any potential dialogue is limited to a relatively small segment of the clergy.

Some efforts have been made in recent years to renew the lay sector. A case in point is the Inter-Diocesan Meeting of Lay Catholics, held in El Cobre on 27-30 November 1997, whose objective was "the promotion of an integrated, organized, and conscious laity, able to contribute to the renewal and transformation of all aspects of the human condition from an evangelical perspective." The Fourth Catholic Social Symposium, held in Matanzas in June 1999, was another important event of this nature. Nonetheless, within the Catholic Church, the role of the laity remains limited.

### **Lack of Leadership Integrity**

Cuba's potential for interreligious dialogue has also suffered from a lack of integrity among the leaders of its various religious communities. These leaders often lack the credibility and trustworthiness essential to the dialogue process. Most common has been the exploitation of religious sentiment for personal economic gain, as leaders take advantage of their positions to gain access to much-needed hard currency and/or the opportunity to travel abroad. Although also common among the leaders of the Christian denominations, this problem is most often associated with the Afro-Cuban religions, perhaps because the economic aspect of their practice is so visible. (Among the distinctive characteristics of the African and Afro-Cuban religions is the payment of "rights" for almost every religious service rendered and for the offerings that are made to the deities. These payments are made in cash and go partly toward the purchase of the necessary accoutrements.)

Many leaders also have a reputation for political opportunism, entering into the political arena more than their congregations consider appropriate and thereby provoking apathy toward the churches' legitimate social concerns. This apathy has become especially common among the young, who are tired of the excessively ideological atmosphere within which they have been educated.

### **Individualistic Spirituality**

A growing tendency toward individualistic spirituality—a phenomenon certainly not lim-

ited to Cuba—is another obstacle to greater communication among Cuba’s religious communities. Among some groups, faith is viewed in supremely personal terms, often to the exclusion of its communal aspect. This disembodied spirituality tends to separate the individual from his or her social environment, turning the church into a monastery, a refuge from the outside world that allows one to avoid unwanted interaction with the profane. The result is often a lack of interest among believers in their groups’ social and humanitarian programs and, more broadly, a lack of concern for the problems and needs of society as a whole. The result is a bourgeois conception of religion that is decidedly nonparticipatory, making it difficult to create a sense of community.

The implications of this individualism for interreligious dialogue are twofold. Religious groups that are more a collection of individuals than a cohesive community are by nature less capable of participating in a dialogue with other groups. Such groups are also unlikely to have any serious interest in such dialogue.

### Racial Issues

Dialogue between the Christian denominations and the Afro-Cuban religions also suffers from remnants of racism and racial inequality in Cuban society. Despite the absence of reliable statistics, one can easily observe that members of Christian congregations are disproportionately European in origin while members of Afro-Cuban religious groups are disproportionately of African ancestry. Within the Cuban Catholic Church, for example, there are currently only six black and seven *mestizo* (mixed-race) priests. In Cuban society as a whole, blacks and *mestizos* remain socioeconomically disadvantaged. Interreligious dialogue is thus further complicated by racial and socioeconomic factors.

### Political Considerations

In addition to the above difficulties are factors not directly religious in nature but which affect the religious scenario on the island. Among these factors is the relative international isolation of Cuba’s religious communities, largely the result of hostility between the governments of Cuba and the United States and the latter’s long-standing policy of isolation.

Another such factor is the Cuban system’s past

lack of understanding of the religious phenomenon and its uncritical acceptance of the Eastern European socialist ideological models, including “scientific atheism.” Today it is acknowledged that this led, as Jorge Ramírez Calzadilla has put it, to “prejudice, mistakes, and discrimination.”

### ELEMENTS FAVORING INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Despite the above obstacles and continuing reluctance among some Christian and Afro-Cuban religious leaders, Cuba’s religious communities have taken some steps toward a genuine process of interreligious dialogue on the island. The following factors have facilitated the progress that has been made thus far.

#### More Acceptance of Cultural Diversity

At the Cuban National Church Meeting (Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano) held in February 1986, the Catholic Church first explicitly acknowledged Cuba’s cultural diversity, noting that “our national culture, born through a complex process of Spanish and African exchange, mixing, and sharing, is characterized by *mestizaje*, not only in our way of life and modes of expression, but also in a continuing religious syncretism.”

Since then, the Catholic Church has taken other steps in the same direction. In a July 1997 speech inaugurating the program on Afro-Cuban culture at the Seminary of San Basilio Magno in Santiago de Cuba, Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, Vicar-General of the Archdiocese of Havana, argued that “it is syncretism that challenges Catholic thought and evangelization in Cuba” and found it “surprising that documents on general church teachings in Latin America do not give the phenomenon of syncretism the broad theological-pastoral attention that its widespread practice demands of the church.”

Pope John Paul II, noted for his condemnation of racism and his recognition of the positive values found in African cultures, has also made several statements relevant to the Cuban case. On 15 September 1987, the pope spoke to a meeting of black Catholics in New Orleans. He was introduced by Bishop Joseph Lawson Howze of Mississippi, at that time the only black diocesan bishop in the United States, who

remarked, “Even within the church there is a racism which prevents the full development of internal black authority.” He also said that blacks are reluctant to become Catholic because the church is perceived as “a white and European-American church” and because they fear that by entering it “they will abandon their own people and their racial heritage.”

The pope made an impassioned response, using words that were interpreted by those present as a statement of self-criticism and repentance for past and present racism in the church. “The church,” he said, “is neither black nor white, nor is it an American church. There is not, and there must not be, more than one church of Jesus Christ, one house only, for blacks, whites, Americans, one house for all races and cultures.”

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Later, in the 1995 Apostolic appeal *Ecclesia in Africa*, the pope acknowledged that “Africa. . . offers a great variety of cultural values and invaluable human qualities to the churches and to all humankind.” He observed that “Africans have a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, a sense of the existence of God the Creator and of a spiritual world” and added that “the church certainly respects and values the non-Christian religions practiced by so very many people on the African continent, because they are a living expression of the spirit of large parts of the population.” At the same time, he said, “neither our respect nor our appreciation for these religions, nor the complexity of the questions they pose, imply any inclination on the part of the church to refrain from sharing the message of Jesus Christ with non-Christians.”

Having noted “seeds of truth” and “positive cultural values” in non-Christian religions, the Roman Catholic Church declared the run-up to the year 2000 a propitious moment to “promote interreligious dialogue,” characterizing that dialogue as “one part of the evangelizing mission.”

### **Contrition**

The Catholic hierarchy in Cuba has also expressed contrition for the church’s role in con-

tributing to negative attitudes and actions in the past. One of the last pastoral letters of 1999, written by Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino and delivered on the eve of the Jubilee Year 2000, was titled “One God, Father of All.” In it, the cardinal asked for forgiveness from “our black brothers,” in the name of the church, “for slavery, which tore your ancestors from their native land in order to subject them to an inhuman life,” and stressed that slavery “was a wretched business conducted by Christians.”

Cardinal Ortega spoke clearly and emphatically:

The church and the entire Catholic community will always owe a debt to these brothers of ours who also subsequently experienced discrimination in some of our schools, where they were not able to study. We ask their forgiveness, in the name of our church. I also want to counsel all Catholics in Havana to steer clear of discriminatory feelings, which have never fully disappeared, and which have increased recently, at least in Havana. Discrimination against other human beings based on their race, their culture, their origin, their religion, is a very grave sin. Christians should not allow these kinds of feelings to dwell in their hearts. They offend God as they violate the precept of brotherly love.

This public expression of contrition is unprecedented in the history of the Christian churches in Cuba, and follows the example set by Pope John Paul II of public repentance for the sins against humanity committed in the name of Christianity. At the same time, much of the Cuban Catholic community has not internalized the repentance professed by Cardinal Ortega. In fact, many Catholics are not even familiar with the cardinal’s statement or the church’s overall position.

### **Awareness of Different Traditions**

Throughout the Cuban population, there is a growing interest in religious and cultural traditions of African origin. One sign of this is the increasing number of conferences, workshops, courses, and publications on the topic.

Various factors have contributed to this growth. Cuban society has seen increased inter-

nal migration in recent decades, both from the countryside to the cities and from the east to the west, and migrants have carried their beliefs and traditions to the areas where they have settled. Migration has thus helped to spread Afro-Cuban religions across geographical lines. Regla de Osha (Santería), previously practiced principally in western Cuba, and Vodun, once found primarily in isolated eastern communities, are now practiced in so many parts of the island that they can no longer be geographically categorized.

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Cuba's involvement in Africa in the late twentieth century also contributed to greater interest in Afro-Cuban culture and religion. Many Cubans going to Africa had little or no experience with any of the Afro-Cuban religions. The youngest among them had been educated during the years of strongly pro-atheistic policies and had received no religious training. Some rejected religion as a "remnant of the past" that needed to be buried.

In Africa, these individuals were exposed to the environment that generated the myths and legends narrated in the *patakie*s, or sacred tales, that form the essential points of reference in Afro-Cuban religious practice. Many returned to Cuba having adopted their ancestral religions as integral to their identities. Most if not all gained a greater familiarity with and understanding of these religions.

Prospects for interreligious dialogue have also been aided by a growing commitment among Afro-Cuban religious practitioners to "know themselves," studying their own religious history and traditions, and to "know the other," seeking to find commonalities between their own practices and those of Christianity and other religions. This trend is related to the greater social mobility of the last few decades in Cuba, which has given black Cubans access to more advanced education and thereby helped to discredit the idea that Afro-Cuban religions are suitable only for "crude, ignorant blacks." Indeed, many practitioners today are university educated, and a significant number are not black or *mestizo*.

#### More Interaction Among Groups

The First Symposium on Interreligious Dialogue was held in Havana on 6 July 1996. Orga-

nized with the assistance of Catholic theologian Giulio Girardi and held in the Episcopal Cathedral of Havana, the symposium was attended by some fifty people—members of various Christian churches and Afro-Cuban religions, as well as religious scholars. Almost all were participating as individuals, because no religious or secular institution officially supported the event.

One of their explicit goals was to create an environment conducive to all parties becoming better acquainted with one another and exchanging ideas, beliefs, and worldviews. The Christians present approached the conference with a recognition of the positive values of the Afro-Cuban religions and their importance to the overall national culture. They also recognized the importance of dialogue in the validation and renewal of those religions.

On 7-8 August 1999, after the Cuban Evangelical Celebrations, there was an important meeting on interreligious dialogue in the city of Cárdenas, at the ecumenical Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue. Scholars and religious workers discussed such topics in Cuban religion as Islam, the Yoruban culture, the island's Vodun tradition, and the foundations of Cuban spiritism, as well as macroecumenism and its implications from the Christian perspective. Most important, several macroecumenical working groups were set up as a result of the meeting.

The evangelism campaign mounted by the Catholic Church in the period leading up to the pope's visit also led to greater interaction between Catholics and members of other religions and denominations and thus carried significant promise for interreligious dialogue. The campaign was subsequently extended in preparation for the arrival of the third millennium, but then lost momentum. Nonetheless, the campaign created an important precedent in seeking to present the Gospel message to Cuban society in a culturally effective way, taking into account its African and *mestizo* religious and cultural characteristics.

The two most publicized religious events in Cuba in recent years, the pope's January 1998 visit and the Evangelical Celebrations of May and June 1999, stimulated the ecumenical and macroecumenical movement in Cuba as well, despite the regrettable exclusion of some groups, the self-exclusion of others, and dogmatism and sectarianism in some quarters.

Representatives of the Afro-Cuban religions were not invited to the meeting between John Paul II and the leaders of other religions. However, many of them attended the public masses in which he officiated, displaying religious symbols (necklaces, bracelets, etc.) as a sign of respect. Several days before the pope's arrival, a group of *babalawos* performed a drumming ceremony "as an expression of solidarity and respect for His Holiness."

Cuban participation in international religious events has also led to greater interaction among groups on the island. Interaction between Cuban religious institutions and their counterparts in other countries, including the United States, has increased in recent years. Several international cooperative and exchange agreements have been put into practice. At present, there is no longer any important religious event that does not include the participation of Cuban religious representatives—a fact that facilitates communication and sustains ongoing interaction.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, Cuba has entered into a process of significant transformation, leading to greater opportunities for action by civil-society organizations. Although political limitations have constrained the space available to religious groups, internal conflicts have also been a serious obstacle to their development as an effective segment of civil society.

Cuba's religious groups are unlikely to influence broader societal and political structures until they overcome their differences and cooperate in areas of common interest. To do so, each would have to acknowledge that all of Cuba's religions have contributed to the *mestizaje* that characterizes the island's identity and culture. They would need to focus on broad social concerns rather than narrow parochial ones, and

work to make their messages relevant and accessible to the rest of the population.

Without these steps, Cuba's religious groups run the risk of ghettoization, becoming irrelevant to the trajectory of the rest of society. One can almost imagine them reduced to mere curiosities, museum pieces from a bygone era, unintentionally mimicking the "museums of religion" maintained under the former atheistic regimes of Eastern Europe.

If the dialogue between churches and state is to progress, and if the church laity is to mature, then interreligious dialogue too would have to be promoted, sustained, and developed. In its absence, an understanding between secular and religious Cuba is unlikely.

**Enrique López Oliva** taught at the University of Havana for twenty-seven years as a professor of history of the Americas and of history of religion in the Americas. With previous training in journalism, Professor López Oliva worked as a correspondent throughout much of Latin America as well as the former Soviet Union. Some of his works, available in Spanish, include *Revolution in Theology? and Catholics and Latin American Revolution*. He received his degree in journalism in 1979 from the University of Havana.

**María Ileana Faguaga** is a researcher for the Cuban Commission for the Study of the Church's History in Latin America (CEHILA-Cuba). As a historian and ethnologist, she specializes in Afro-Cuban religions. Ms. Faguaga is also an active member of the coordinating committee of CEHILA-Cuba's program on interreligious dialogue in Cuba. She contributes as an independent journalist to various Cuban and foreign newspapers.

## For Further Information

Fernando Ortiz, *Estudios Etnosociológicos* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1991).

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## GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY CARIBBEAN PROJECT

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**Gillian Gunn Clissold** Executive Director, Cuba Briefing Paper Series  
Director, Caribbean Project

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