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A Left „Theocracy“: The Church and the State in Revolutionary Nicaragua

Abstract *This paper analyses the antagonism between the established (Nicaraguan and global) Catholic Church and the Sandinista movement and government, which was one of the focal points for the ascendancy of a continental and global liberation theology movement. The paper provides a critical overview of the Nicaraguan liberation theology movement, as well as Sandinista strategies, primarily in relation to the social functions of religion and religious institutions. The central focus of this essay is to identify how the left-theological and Sandinista understanding of the imperatives of the counter-hegemonic project, the „historical bloc“ (conceived as a system of political and social networks and alliances) and the „national-popular“ strategy contributed to the tentative naissance of a novel state religion and a novel political project: a left-wing „theocratic“ social order. The Nicaraguan experience is useful for focusing the wider discussion about the importance of context-specific normative judgments about Church-state relations.*

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Keywords: *liberation theology, the historical bloc, national-popular, left „theocracy“*

Introduction

Cooperation and conservative symbiosis have been the main historical pattern of church-state relations in Nicaragua. The main orientation shared both by the state and the ruling church hierarchy in this relationship had been the preservation of mutual class interests and privileges of the Church and state hierarchies (Berryman 1984). An innovative new religious divergence within and beyond the church structures allowed an alternative radical and (arguably) politically emancipatory and democratising model of Christianity („liberation theology“) to flourish, in tension with the *ancién regime*, with the Church hierarchy, and (in a more moderate and attenuated way) in tension with the Sandinista state as well.

I shall first contextualise and discuss the emergence of liberation theology (as an ideology and a movement), which eroded the traditional conservative symbiosis between the Nicaraguan church and state. Of course, the party-political arm of the socialist movement, the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*), was a critical intervening variable which, by conquering state power and seeking to instrumentalise liberation theology, disrupted the old patterns of Church-state relations, as well as the

internal coherence and unity of the Church itself. As the Nicaraguan situation clearly illustrates, in different circumstances the official state religion can be both a base for the power of the Church's hierarchy and a challenge to the church hierarchy, compatible with and subversive to the established social order.

The Emergence of Liberation Theology

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The Nicaraguan context was one of drastic inequalities, where half of the country's farmland was owned by less than 200 families, and the poorer half of the farming population owned just 4 per cent of land. There were 200,000 landless peasants while the ruling Somoza dynasty owned 5 million acres. Even more explicitly obscene was the fact that around fifty per cent of all deaths were of children under five years of age. The population suffered extreme exploitation and oppression at the hands of the Somoza family, the rest of the state elite, large capital and the National Guard. National life was characterised by extreme corruption and a brutal economy dominated by agro-exporters (producing cash-crops) and by other business elites (Bradstock 1987).

For decades, since the Somoza family came to power in 1936, the Catholic Church hierarchy in Nicaragua had supported its highly repressive ruling regime and system, which has been described as a „prototypical seigniorial *latifundismo*“ (West 1992: 394). As the popular dissatisfaction and governmental repression escalated, the upper class hierarchy of the official Church was also becoming increasingly remote in the eyes of a significant segment of the population (Berryman 1984; Bradstock 1987). In these trying circumstances, a divide within the Church, both on the level of the clergy and of the broader Church community or *ekklesia*, began to develop.

Class analysis is a key methodological prism for understanding the turbulent events of the Nicaraguan revolution. The clergy, largely originating from the „upper“ and „middle“ classes, was partially fused with the rest of the upper class elite due to its common socialisation experiences and continuing personal and social links. Moreover, for a long time the clergy reflected in its political positions a relatively clear, largely un-ambivalent functional connection to the ruling elite, i.e. its role as the „gatekeeper“ of a conservative capitalist ideology against attempts to reform, transform or crush this hegemonic worldview. However, the differences among the religious elements and the different organisational levels of the Church in their positioning towards radical structural change (and FSLN itself) were complex and multi-causal, irreducible to a reductionist, purely economic,

class-deterministic explanation. After all, the revolutionary priests were themselves often of upper or middle class social background; they possessed substantial social and cultural capital, and occupied a privileged position in the social division of labour. Yet, in the late 1960s this radical clergy started to engage in a strategy of „going to the people“ and popular „*concientizacion*“. This religious activity at the grassroots was mainly conducted by the lower clergy (united in the Association of Nicaraguan Clergy) and the Christian base communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base*) based on cooperative living, working and sharing. The most prominent Nicaraguan examples of these grassroots Christian communities were the one in Solentiname, the San Pablo parish, barrio Riguero, as well as the work of the Capuchins in the countryside (Berryman 1984). Several Christian base communities, like Solentiname, also served as important sanctuaries for revolutionary leaders (*ibid.*). Solentiname's leading figure, the celebrated poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal, later became the Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government. Such progressive religious figures constituted, to a significant extent, the Nicaraguan revolutionary intelligentsia.

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Over-deterministic class perspectives which negate the role of ideological and practical subjectivities in the Latin American liberation theology movement can be challenged even more fundamentally by pointing to the openly reformist, even radicalising, response of some parts of the senior Church hierarchy. As an idea and a movement, it would appear that liberation theology was partly induced and energised by the liberalising effect of the reform-minded Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia (1968), which postulated the „preferential option for the poor“ as the basis of a different, socially responsive theology (partly perhaps as a pragmatic response to the Church's waning popularity), reflecting a conversion to dependency theory (popularised by the concept of „underdevelopment of development“ proposed by neo-Marxist theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank – see Brewer 1990). The Conference produced intense intellectual and spiritual ferment in religious circles (to an extent simply by opening new space for dialogue and non-conformism), with large numbers of the clergy and lay people meeting to discuss the Medellin documents (Bradstock 1987).

In terms of interest representation, however, it was clear that liberation theology's main „constituency“ were the poor (as the „preferential option for the poor“ concept openly explicated). The vast majority of these Christian base communities were based in poverty-stricken communities,

although people from elite and middle-class layers of society participated as well (Sabia 1997). These religious activist and discussion groups were often based on the method of Socratic dialogue, enabling the people involved to develop an empowering self-awareness, which supported the wider processes of the democratisation of the public sphere. A truly revolutionary aspect of these discussions was the fact people started interpreting the Scriptures independently, without uncritically adhering to the traditionalist understanding that those „above“ have a monopoly on „truth“ (Berryman 1984). The people are entitled to become the protagonists of their culture and history. However, it is important to note that the emphasis only gradually shifted from personal spiritualism („internal renovation“) to social activism (collective liberation) in many of these grassroots Christian communities (*ibid.*). This grassroots and participatory approach of the base communities threatened both the Church hierarchy and the state's authoritarian *modus operandi*.

The „Delegates of the Word“ (groups of lay preachers working among the rural poor not only to lead worship but also to bring about improvements in health, agriculture and literacy) were another important Christian progressive and pro-participatory sector. They were to a significant extent trained by the Center for Rural Education and Development. By late 1970^s a number of Delegates became active collaborators of FSLN, and some „had been pressured, jailed, tortured and killed“ (*ibid.*: 73). Small groups of evangelicals (particularly Baptist) became increasingly radicalised and involved in the Nicaraguan liberation struggle – some of them even became important Sandinista leaders. The arrival of a number of new priests in mid-60s from their studies abroad further contributed to this radicalisation. „Given the tremendous prestige local priests held in the very religious Nicaraguan society, they were key elements in the coalition's efforts in the countryside. [...] The Sandinistas used the priests and philosophy of liberation theology to provide unassailable moral high ground for the insurgency“ (Hammes 2006: 85–87). Indubitably, many Sandinistas had their worldviews shaped by the egalitarian and humanistic aspects of the Christian teaching. Besides, the use of biblically phrased language often must have helped in expressing politically dangerous, counter-hegemonic and subversive ideas. Additionally, the adoption of the parish structure as an organisational base for anti-regime activities made sense considering the material and cultural resources that this offered.

Castañeda characterised the Christian base communities as „the most important [grassroots] movement, because it is so firmly anchored in the

region's history and psyche" (Castañeda 1994: 205). The proponents of liberation theology gave priority to „orthopraxis“ (right practice) over the traditional Church emphasis on „orthodoxy“ (dogma, doctrinal concerns) (McHugh 2003: 314). Liberation theology is about serving the poor and the oppressed, about „feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and healing the sick“. It is a message of solicitude for the underdogs, the poor and the oppressed. The leading Nicaraguan liberation theologian and Sandinista Minister of Culture, Ernesto Cardenal, expressed a readiness to reconcile his differences with non-believers, allowing a respectful, relaxed fellowship of believers and non-believers (a position other progressive priest-politicians like the foreign minister Miguel D'Escoto have also embraced): „prefer to be with those who, without putting God's name on their lips, and perhaps without even formally knowing God, are doing all God asks to be done for a suffering people“ (Ernesto Cardenal in Cabestrero 1983: 76-77).¹ Liberation theology counter-posed the „horizontalist“, grassroots level of pastoral work to the traditional Church hierarchy. The Christian base community members laid stress in their criticism of the official Church on its authoritarianism and unwillingness to participate in democratic dialogue.

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Another radical ideological aspect of liberation theology is its rejection of the crude division between the body and the soul, the physical and the spiritual². The „Church of the Poor“/„Popular Church“ was committed concretely to the creation of the „Kingdom of God on Earth“, a new society based on gospel principles, „universal brotherhood“, a beloved community of justice and equality, freedom from oppression, etc. Revolution was a form of „effective charity“, and democratic socialism was to be that „society of love“ the oppressed longed for, a society of „human dignity, basic human equality [...], unity, struggle, hope“ (Berryman 1984: 22). The liberation theologians emphasise that Christ himself was a social

1 In fact, the liberation theologians also found support for this stance in the Scriptures: „Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and the needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Says the Lord“. (The Book of Jeremiah, in Bradstock 1987: 20)

2 The potential progressive implications of this, from the rejection of economic servitude to the rejection of sexual repression, should be apparent. A particularly mobilising aspect of this grassroots left-theological movement was its development of women's political consciousness and role in society. Even the image of the Virgin Mary, an orthodox symbol of female submissiveness, passivity and inferiority, was transformed into a Louise Michel-like figure of revolutionary sacrifice and social initiative, providing a diametrically opposite role model to Nicaraguan women and girls (Linkogle 1998). The traditional ahistorical, fatalistic (seemingly) apolitical institutional approach (no big changes are possible due to human nature, destiny etc., no socialist structural reforms, capitalism as the natural form of human relations...) loses its appeal as people acquire a measure of self-initiative and self-control over their lives.

revolutionary who preached a kingdom of unity and love, serving the poor and the oppressed, who declared that „it is easier for a camel to go through the eyes of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the gates of heaven“ (The Gospel According to St. Mark, 10: 25), and was therefore executed by the authorities who were in fear for their privileges. They believe that „identifying with those who are hungry and thirst for justice, with the exploited and oppressed, brings reprisals. These reprisals for having taken the side of poor who suffer, this is the Cross“ (D’Escoto, 1992, 65).

The „historical bloc“, „national-popular“, and the Nicaraguan interregnum

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It is quite understandable that the Nicaraguan Church did not rush to place itself at the helm of the movement against the Somoza dictatorship in the context of state terror, a vicious Guardia Nacional and death squads (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 1978). They must have been conscious of the threat that courageous opposition entails, even for the Church leadership. Oscar Romero, the progressive Archbishop of El Salvador, proved this point with his own life in 1980. However, many other very senior members of the clergy had the moral courage to align themselves quite closely to liberation theology (e.g. the Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, Bishop Gerardi in Guatemala, Bishop Rubén López Ardón of Estelí in Nicaragua, etc. – Berryman 1984).

Although increasingly critical of the regime in the context of its continued repressiveness and, probably more importantly, in the context of increasingly powerful grassroots rebellion, the Nicaraguan Catholic Church bishops still made it clear they weren’t endorsing the radical Sandinistas (FSLN) either. Perhaps opportunistically, they sent public messages of concern for Somoza’s health after his heart attack in 1977, and at least 233 masses were organised by his supporters for his recovery. As already mentioned, it would be wrong to overgeneralise with regards to the conservativeness of the hierarchy, as significant variations could be found even among bishops. Bishop Calderon y Padilla refused to attend the funeral of Somoza Garcia, while Bishop Donaldo Chavez Nunez even publicly condoned the bloody repression of an opposition demonstration in January 1967. (Berryman 1984).

The split in the Nicaraguan Church, and the success of the Sandinista insurrection itself, would have been far less likely had the FSLN’s strategy not evolved in a creatively counter-hegemonic way. At first, the Sandinistas rather uncritically subscribed to the guerrilla „foco“ theory of insurgency,

which they abandoned after the strategy's debacle in 1963, as well as the failure of this approach in other countries (especially in Bolivia in 1967). The second (more orthodox Marxist) tendency oriented its activities to the city and the urban proletariat. The *terceristas* (or the Third Way advocates) led by Humberto Ortega devised the most creative strategy based on the minimisation of antagonising leftist rhetoric, the creation of a broad anti-Somoza front which included a broad, extensive network of social forces (including the alienated, fragmented „business classes“), mass organisations supporting FSLN, and a joint unified leadership of all the three Sandinista tendencies. (Hammes 2006)³

This innovative wing of the Sandinista movement understood better than others the importance of constructing a progressive „historical bloc“, a system of political and social alliances able to counteract the centrifugal tendencies which usually undermine movements for deep social change (Gramsci, 2000). In the Nicaraguan context, this pragmatic perspective entailed the construction of a compact revolutionary bloc of forces allying atheistic Marxist and Christian socialist intellectuals and activists with the often more traditionally religious broad masses.

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Gramsci's concept of the „national-popular“ (Gramsci 1982), which denotes the national character of the movement for change, is of critical importance in the construction of progressive strategies based on the analysis of concrete social conditions. In relation to the Sandinista stance towards religion, the adherence to a „national-popular“ strategy was, obviously, not a question of essentialist identification, of intrinsically Catholic national identity, but of a relatively dynamic, historically constructed one. However, existing deep-seated beliefs are not easily malleable, nor is it necessarily productive to attempt to radically unseat them, as the more politically mature Sandinistas understood. The social context (i.e. the balance and organisation of social forces) strongly precluded the creation of a laicised new social order.

After the initial failure to develop a sufficiently broad political base, largely due to committing violence towards popular beliefs and norms, by failing to establish an organic connection with the masses and popular consciousness – the rebels increasingly attempted to root themselves in

3 This pluralism was, nonetheless, tempered by the FSLN leadership's highly pragmatic (and lucidly strategic) judgment: „Despite the appearance of a broad front, Ortega ensured that the key elements of power, namely all of the coalition's military and security elements, remained firmly in the hands of the Communist leaders.“ (Hammes 2006: 83)

the Nicaraguan tradition, for instance through the lionisation of Augusto Sandino, the unifying symbol of trans-class anti-colonial patriotism.

Like Gramsci, the Sandinistas realised that „the internal relations of any nation are the result of a combination which is 'original' and (in a certain sense) unique: these relations must be conceived and understood in their originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate and direct them. To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is 'national' – and it is from this point of departure that one must begin“ (Gramsci 1982: 140). A crucial political task for the Sandinista revolutionaries was to frame their strategy for gaining power and for constructing a new state within the shared cultural and public discourse, the shared experiences of the Nicaraguan people. The Sandinista approach entailed the adaptation and integration of religion and of popular religious beliefs into their revolutionary practice, ideology and mode of public communication.

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The Church leadership initially responded by attempting to place itself in the role of „neutral mediation“, as well as, since the 1970s, the advocacy of limited, non-structural reforms from above („somocismo sin Somoza“) which were presumably intended to prevent deeper, structural and anti-systemic change (Berryman 1984). Just prior to the overthrow of the Somoza regime, the bishops took part in a US-organised attempt to install the capitalist opposition and sidestep the socialists – the broad, relatively radical coalition that was the Sandinista National Liberation Front, including its Christian elements (such as the Association of Nicaraguan Clergy). However, through its creative and flexible popular counter-hegemonic work and a strategic cross-class alliance (including the establishment of a legitimising „Group of Twelve“⁴), FSLN was capable of immediately taking power following the overthrow of the Somoza family in 1979.

Church-State conflict under the Sandinista administration

FSLN's (publicly revealed and practically manifested) programme in power was not particularly radical, let alone „communist“ in the usual established sense of the word. It included a commitment to a mixed economy, a non-aligned foreign policy and a degree of political pluralism. However,

4 „The linkage by the FSLN with a group of persons active in public life, priests, business men, professionals, intellectuals, who thereby appeared to give support to the armed struggle, was decisive in changing the panorama“. It enabled FSLN „to widen its legitimacy with the masses“ (Velasquez 1986: 114 in Morray 1992: 18).

FSLN nationalised the property of the Somozas and some of their collaborators, expropriated bank, insurance and mining companies, initiated land reform which started to redistribute land to the peasantry, established agricultural and industrial cooperatives, improved public services, conducted a vaccination program and strengthened the health care system through socialised medicine (Murray 1992; Wehr and Nepstad 1994). They abolished torture and the death penalty (in fact, the Sandinistas also managed to secure discipline and greatly reduce the number of „spontaneous“ executions immediately after the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty – Berryman 1983), made certain tentative moves towards greater equality for women, etc. (Murray 1992). In real-life terms, „Archimedean“ strides were made by the new government: „Infant mortality rates were drastically reduced and health levels increased not in decades or years but in a matter of months. In education, the illiteracy rate was reduced from 52 percent to 12 percent in one year“ (Bendaña 2004: 150). Forty thousand landless peasant families were given land in the first two years of Sandinista rule. Free health care and schooling were also introduced, as well as workers' participation in decision-making in some workplaces, etc. (Targ 1989).

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Christians were leading an important role in this rapidly evolving social endeavour. Pastoral agents and members of Christian communities actively participated in the Sandinista Defense Committees (neighbourhood participation schemes). Four priests became government ministers, and Father Ernesto Cardenal (Minister for Education) initiated a „Literacy Crusade“ during which illiteracy was reduced from 52 per cent to 13 per cent (Berryman 1984), enabling a greater political and cultural participation of the impoverished masses, the improvement in job skills, better health campaigns and greater social development in general. Nonetheless, although the Nicaraguan bishops offered some initial support for the campaign, it ended being heavily criticised as „Marxist indoctrination“, partly also due to a small number of Cuban teachers who participated (Bradstock 1987). Furthermore, the Sandinistas managed to reduce infant mortality, their health campaigns helped eradicate or control many diseases, and substantial amounts of land were redistributed to co-operatives and peasant farmers (*ibid.*).

It took decades for the official Church hierarchy to start criticising the brutal, oppressive and elitist Somoza regime. A week and a half was all that was necessary when it came to distancing themselves from the popular Sandinistas (Berryman 1984). Grim tones of caution and scepticism

were discordant with the general atmosphere of popular enthusiasm and renewed hope in a better future. Of course, rather than being interpreted as the Church's „Damascene moment“, a sudden shift from its traditional role as the member and „transmission belt“ of the ruling elite in favour of an authentic and independent critical stance, the Church's rapid positioning against the Sandinistas should probably be understood as the hierarchy's continued commitment to elitist values and interests (both in terms of the social order as a whole and, as I shall later show, in relation to the Church's particularistic ideological and material interests).

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However, the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference of November 17, 1979 (admittedly still during the „honeymoon period“ of relations between the Church and the new administration) was an indication of the complexity of the intra-Church power struggles and of a degree of political flexibility and openness (and even authentic conceptual differences). At that conference, the bishops' statement made a positive assessment of the base Christian communities and Delegates of the Word, as well as of the revolutionary process in general, was produced. The tone, although instructive, was atypically positive:

„We think the conscious and active participation of the Nicaraguan majorities [...] should take place through bodies of direct popular democracy. [...] We are confident that the revolutionary process will be something original, creative, deeply national, and in no way imitative, because along with the majority of Nicaraguans, what we want is a process that strides firmly toward a society that is fully and authentically Nicaraguan, neither capitalistic, nor dependent, nor totalitarian“ (Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference letter in Berryman 1984: 234–235).

It is difficult to ascertain, especially considering the exceptionally dynamic nature of post-insurrectionary politics, the extent and degree to which some segments of the senior clergy were or might have been open to an accommodation with the Sandinista regime. It should be clear, however, that in order to avoid its own crisis of legitimation, the Church had to modify its previous conservative intransigence, if only to „purchase time“ to regroup and resume its advocacy of the pre-revolutionary *status quo*, or perhaps the advocacy of a somewhat more socially sensitive and moderate form of mainstream capitalist rule. In any case, the bishops, along with other elite conservative protagonists, rapidly assumed a hostile stance, and Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo became perhaps the central figure of the entire opposition movement. Just as the Church's position towards the Sandinistas and rebellion against the Somoza followed the

mood of the bourgeois opposition, it began its attacks on the Sandinista government simultaneously with the broad capitalist and conservative opposition movement. Conveniently, the central pro-capitalist (and United States-funded – West 1992) newspaper *La Prensa* insisted on the necessity of „the strictest respect for church authorities“ (Berryman 1984). The conservative Church authorities remained a material and ideological force, akin to a parallel ideological government around which the defeated economic and state elite could regroup, plan and mobilise its counter-offensive. The central concern of the propertied classes and the other segments of the anti-Sandinista opposition appeared to be the perceived threat of a turn towards a more stabilised and, gradually, a more radicalised socialist system.

As the political crisis of the new regime deepened, frequent public pastoral letters criticising the government began to be made. Long a stabiliser of the *status quo*, the church leadership now fully committed itself to the destabilisation of the Sandinista regime. Although some efforts at defending neoliberal „free markets“ had been made, instead of stressing the alternative to the Sandinista project (which would have exposed its defence of upper-class privileges), the capitalist opposition and the Church focused on criticising the „errors“ of the Sandinistas, warning of the dangers of Marxism and utilising the rhetoric of „human rights“ and „freedom“ (*ibid.*)⁵.

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The institutional Church against Liberation theology

The Catholic Church is not a democratic institution, and could not tolerate more explicit forms of religious „parallelism“ – the challenge to its ideological authority, hierarchical character and organisational unity. The official Church, both domestically and in the Vatican, did not appreciate the efforts of the „popular church“ (*iglesia popular*), i.e. the grassroots Christian community, to subject the oligarchic Church structures to a democratic class analysis (Berryman 1984).

The Sandinistas moderately and cautiously encouraged these challenges to the Church hierarchy through their Christian „populism“, the appointment of priests in positions of governmental authority, close links with

5 An example of these inauthentic Church tactics was its hostile reaction to the FSLN's literacy campaign: „The Catholic hierarchy perceived the entire campaign as a threat to their own historic monopolisation of the educational process. Thus, a certain rivalry for moral leadership developed between the Sandinistas and the church“ (Sabia 1997: 88).

the Christian base communities and the like (while also attempting to reach an accommodation with the official Church). It is possible that the Sandinistas overplayed their Christian credentials by attempting to install an essentially new state religion: a socialist activist Christianity, whose *ekklesia* were the politicised Christian base communities, and whose bishops were increasingly the charismatic priest-politicians with ministerial portfolios in the FSLN government, rather than the somewhat marginalised official Church oligarchy. The new ideological supremacy of the Sandinistas, and of their revolutionary priests in government (a powerful alternative source of moral authority), threatened the continued influence of the Church leadership through a novel phenomenon: a historically progressive socialist „theocracy“.

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One of the crucial points of contention had to do with the relationship of the religious movement towards the Sandinista government. The hierarchy accused the base communities and the left-wing clergy of politicising religion. The Church authorities had real cause to fear they might be displaced by new politicised structures of religious „dual power“. The Sandinistas' revolutionary project appeared to require (or, at least, the FSLN believed it required) a highly totalising strategy for the accumulation of power. An entire new apparatus of power was being constructed, assuming the recognisable contours of a revolutionary party-state. The external US pressures, the militarised culture and the „natural“ oligarchy of the guerrilla movement limited the potentials for cohabitation with the Church leadership. The emergence of the right-wing insurgency and the ensuing civil war led FSLN to commit half of the Nicaraguan national budget to the military (Gharakhanian, 2006), drastically reducing the scope for progressive social programmes and reforms. Under these troubled circumstances, the struggle for ideological hegemony favoured the conservative forces, and the Church leadership (including the Vatican planners to which the Nicaraguan Church ultimately had to answer to) found itself naturally drawn to its old allies.

It would appear that, at times, uncritical support given by certain tendencies within the grassroots religious movement to the Sandinistas made the entire liberation theology movement more vulnerable to political attack, since the conservative elements could claim (and fear) it was entirely subservient to the emerging FSLN power structure, i.e. simply a politicised „religious wing“ of the Sandinistas. The contestation of the left-wing clergy's legitimacy by the Church authorities limited the public support for it (Sabia 1997), just as the perceived „partisanship“ of the

politically engaged Christian base communities is likely to have limited the breadth and the reach of their message. A more politically open and independent grassroots movement, less fragmented communal leadership (capable of stimulating more effective action, self-reflection, charisma and cohesion) and greater constructive grassroots pressure on the FSLN government perhaps could have increased the feasibility and likelihood of more participatory democratic patterns in the economy and the society, as well as increasing the credibility and inclusiveness of the progressive Christian movement itself. Radical Christian socialists were clearly too weak to decisively transform the Church on their own. While progressive Christian elements were relatively deep-rooted in the fabric of the broad population due to their grassroots approach and work closer to the poor, revolutionary Christian clergy and religious activists were estimated to have constituted only about 25 per cent of the overall clergy in Nicaragua in the first half of the 1980-s (Berryman 1984).

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The response of the Church authorities and of the ambivalent sector of the clergy was crucial, as the traditional Church and traditional religious ideology proved to be more stable than many may have expected. The basic dilemma experienced by the Church leadership in Nicaragua was whether to attempt a cohabitation, or even to align itself with the new regime, or to defend the *status quo ante*, the safe and the known position it had held in the past, protecting the interests of other privileged minorities (with which it was partially fused) in the process. That the Nicaraguan Catholic Church hierarchy chose the latter is probably to a significant extent the result of the Sandinista failure to build a mutually reassuring and beneficial alliance with the Church leadership (in the context of strong domestic and United States capitalist opposition). It is here that the centralised power of the Vatican might have been decisive. Somewhat paradoxically, the Vatican may have been less overtly hostile to the Sandinista government had the new regime been able to establish a more decisive social hegemony.⁶

The complex, highly contingent situation in which the Church hierarchy found itself presented various dilemmas with regards to the Church's optimal political positioning. The independent organisational logic of

6 The case of Yugoslavia, where the national Catholic Church leadership was partly allowed by the Vatican to maintain relatively cordial relationships (although this entente did not extend to liberation theologians such as the Slovenian „red bishop“ of Maribor, Vekoslav Grmič, who was demoted on account of his clear left-wing positioning – Delo 2005), demonstrates the potential validity of this point.

the Nicaraguan Catholic Church complicated the „bourgeois“ class position of the hierarchy, since the objective material interests of the Church as an organisation and of its leading individuals were not always easily discernible. A pact with the Sandinistas may have even solidified and deepened the Church's power. The explosion of base communities and of liberation theology, if it had been kept under control by the Church hierarchy, had the potential of organisationally reinvigorating the Church, giving it a power and reach which an ossified bureaucratic strategy would not have been able to achieve, especially in the context of a relative crisis of legitimation which the Church faced in the emerging Sandinista social order. Additionally, it may have been seen as potentially in the interest of the Church to attain and retain a „foothold“ in Nicaragua's liberation politics, lest the anti-clerical, assertively secularist (or even atheist) Marxist elements were to gain a greater role in the political process. The goal of constraining the independent initiative of the progressive clergy and the „Popular Church“ may have also initially required the Church hierarchy's positioning to be more akin to a balancing act than a monolithic denunciation of liberation theology.

What appears to be clear is that the Nicaraguan Church's rather monopolistic conception of religious life entailed a pronounced intolerance for democratic standards. This may have been a decisive strategic consideration of the Catholic hierarchy, although a close investigation of internal debates within the hierarchy would probably detect the existence of a relatively sophisticated set of intertwined strategic arguments. In any case, the Archbishop (later Cardinal) Obando and the rest of the Church authorities demanded that the priests withdraw from their governmental posts, which they refused, and a compromise under which the authorities would allow the priests to remain in the government if they abandoned their priestly functions was later reached. Furthermore, the pro-Sandinista Nicaraguan Association of Clergy was ultimately forced to disband. The deployment of pro-Sandinista priests to insignificant posts became a common practice, while the government expelled foreign „counter-revolutionary“ priests (Sabia 1997). A rift between the base communities opened up as well: while some base communities accepted the bishops' criticisms, others chose to defy their authority. A base community member stated: „The bishops come with great authority, with great publicity, to denounce us. It is tiring and exhausting for members of our community“ (*ibid.*: 107). The „righteousness“ of Christian base communities, their „missionary“ character, sometimes gave them the popular appearance of a sect (*ibid.*). The comforting traditionalism of the mainstream Church, at least after

years of counter-insurgency, the introduction of general conscription and a soaring inflation rate (Bendaña 2004) is likely to have been to the Church's advantage in the religious confrontation over mass legitimacy.

Although the global reach of Vatican has impacted the national politics of many countries, the confrontation between the global leadership of the Catholic Church and the Nicaraguan state was particularly sharp. Various attacks against the Sandinistas were persistently made by the religious hierarchy, and as late as May 1983, after *Newsweek* had already ran a cover story on the US „covert war“ in Nicaragua, Archbishop Obando still cynically expressed disbelief that the US was fomenting aggression „since all the information comes from only one side“ (Berryman 1984: 275). Obando was even promoted into a Cardinal by the Vatican, which appears likely to have been an eminently political decision.

The sharply anti-Sandinista political position of the official Church came at a time when the US, particularly after Jimmy Carter lost the presidency to Ronald Reagan in 1981 (Blum 2004), began to pursue an aggressive strategy of prolonged destabilisation of the Sandinista regime through a war of attrition. During that time, CIA was giving various forms of support and aid to the capitalist and right-wing opposition, including the Contras (counterrevolutionary death squads), which the International Court of Justice found to be illegal in 1984.⁷

Far from advancing some kind of „high-minded aloofness“ from the „greasy pole“ of politics, Cardinal Obando's outspoken hostility to the Sandinistas in this context amounted to (subjectively as well as objectively) counter-revolutionary political initiative:

„Cardinal Miguel Obando and the Catholic Church in Nicaragua received hundreds of thousands of dollars in covert aid. [...] Nicaragua's ports were under siege: mortar shelling from high-speed motor launches, aerial bombing and rocket and machine-gun attacks were designed to blockade Nicaragua's exports as well as to starve the country of imports

7 Both a direct and indirect military intervention by the US was initiated, including the following methods:

„The CIA, in addition to training, arming, and directing the Contras, conducted military actions on its own, including aerial raids against military bases and oil storage tanks, and the mining of Nicaraguan harbours in early 1984. The Reagan administration also blocked international loans to Nicaragua, imposed an economic embargo against Nicaragua in May 1985, subsidized internal opposition groups besides the Contras, sidestepped peace initiatives promoted by Latin American leaders, ignored a World Court decision in 1986 that ruled U.S. actions against Nicaragua illegal“, etc. (Peace 2008: 64).

by frightening away foreign shipping. [...] It was disclosed in October 1984 that the CIA had prepared a manual of instructions for its clients which, amongst other things, encouraged the use of violence against civilians. [...] Congressional intelligence committees were informed by the CIA, by present and former contra leaders, and by other witnesses that the contras indeed „raped, tortured and killed unarmed civilians, including children“ and [...] „groups of civilians, including women and children, were burned, dismembered, blinded and beheaded“ (The Guardian, 3 June 1983, in Blum 2004: 292–293).

This is the context in which the Catholic Church hierarchy chose to confront the „Popular Church“ and the Sandinista government.

The revolutionary impasse

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The rise of the „Popular Church“ vs. the official Church was both one of the key initial strategic advantages, and subsequently one of the crucial sources of antagonism in the entire Sandinista political project. While the Church hierarchy focused on its own power, the preservation of its ruling traditional position in society as a paternalistic institution, the Christian base movement and the politicised clergy took as their *raison d'être* the commitment to the poor, to the elevation of the oppressed masses from poverty and to an end of their passive subservience to the ruling elites. Traditional charitable work and paternalism could no longer serve as an acceptable substitute for structural and transformative social change. Speaking in a post-Sandinista situation, a base community member vividly identified the contrast between the two conflicting concepts of Christianity and of the Church's relation to democratic, public and dialogic life: „Today there is no place for biblical analysis and discussion. The priest tells us that only he can do reflections and he silences us if we try to speak“ (Uri Schmidt in Sabia 1997: 129). Moreover, the educational courses for new priests were centralised (Sabia 1997). Mark Lester, a former Catholic priest who was involved with the base community movement, said this of the traditional Church's relation to the realm of public life: „It is a ministering divorced from the people's immediate reality. The element of reflection on the reality in Nicaragua has simply been taken out“ (Lester in Sabia 1997: 131–132). Priests were also drawn towards the upper classes due to not being paid a salary, which made them dependent on the contributions from the wealthy (Sabia 1997).

However, by turning inward to their base communities, and often away from the official religious institutions (especially as the authorities became

increasingly critical of their activities), the progressive Christians might have actually limited their reach to the still traditionalist majority and to the shared discourse of the general population: „The campesino people are very traditional. They love the church but at the same time they can be very radical. [...] Internally, the campesino people are very traditional, but politically they can be very radical“ (Uri Schmidt in Sabia 1997: 153).

The Sandinistas were faced with a daunting task of avoiding both the danger of self-isolation by „out-of-place“, inorganic „radicalism“ and the prospect of accommodation with the oppressive capitalist elites.

A consistent commitment to the protection of human rights and human dignity is both most conducive to the creation of a more advanced society, as well as an important response to the „anti-communist“ demagoguery.⁸ The real human rights improvements under the FSLN government were hypocritically ignored by the Right in Nicaragua and in the United States (West 1992). Yet it is clear that the Sandinistas could have projected a significantly more civil libertarian and humanistic image. The early alienation of the Native American and Creole population on the Atlantic Coast, the pursuit of a unitary state (though it was not devoid of various safety-valve mechanisms and grievance channels), as well as a perhaps overly swift and far reaching programme of property confiscations (Wehr and Nepstad 1994), reduced FSLN's political capital. While much ideologically and morally transformative work had been done in relation to the Nicaraguan Revolution's enemies (*ibid.*), the FSLN's strategy could have been significantly more creative. A firmer commitment to the strategic concept of a pluralistic „historical bloc“, combining a more authentic commitment to decentralisation and popular grassroots empowerment with greater economic and status concessions to segments of the middle and upper class (at least in the transitional period) – along with more effective communication of the broader

8 An important point in this regard is that a more pluralist and non-corporatist stance of the Sandinistas might have been able to more successfully mobilise US churches and other religious actors, who might have found it easier to transcend Cold War posturing and official propaganda if the Nicaraguan revolutionaries had taken more care not to alienate the US public and the US government (to the extent that this was possible without losing basic political authenticity). The progressive religious community in other countries, especially in the US, led an important campaign against the US governments' destabilisation programme in Nicaragua, but this peace movement, despite the Iran-Contra affair (which led to highly publicised hearings in Congress), never truly succeeded in breaking out of the progressive US activist and religious ghetto (Peace 2012).

horizons for human emancipation regardless of one's class background – might have been able to substantially reduce the breadth and the virulence of the opposition in and beyond the Catholic Church. No fair critique could deny the existence of formidable challenges posed by the destabilisation efforts of the domestic and foreign opposition. Nonetheless, this lack of sufficiently structurally empowering reforms along with more consistently and creatively non-corporatist peace-building efforts by the Sandinistas appears to have had a strong role in the diminution of their political legitimacy. A less alienating political strategy, including the advancement of a more universalistic notion of human emancipation and empowerment, might have been more successful in moderating opposition against and building support for progressive change than a more stereotypical discourse reminiscent of „class warfare“ and the seemingly exclusive „option for the poor“. The Church and the rest of the opposition were able to seize upon this supposed „corporatism“, asserting that God loves everyone, not just the poor. In the process of its political crystallisation, FSLN failed to effectively advance the strategy of the „historical bloc“ to a new stage which would be both sufficiently pluralistic and non-corporatist, yet still deeply progressive. The stability of the Sandinista project to a large extent relied on the FSLN's ability to advance the decentralising structural empowerment of the broad masses while minimising, and in some other ways compensating, the challenge that communal self-organisation posed to the established structures of the mighty Catholic Church. Still, it should be acknowledged that tension, conflict and contradiction are (to some extent) the *sine qua non* of revolutionary dialectics. The grassroots Christian movement was both a major source of conflict with the Church and a critical Sandinista asset. Nonetheless, more consideration should probably have been given to the supposition that the left-wing religious parallelism (through Christian base communities and the organisations of the radical left-wing clergy) went too far in conflating the spheres of public and Church politics. Even in the Nicaraguan context, Christian base communities were not an adequate replacement for secularised formal structures of communal self-government.

Perhaps, if the Catholic Church and the rest of the established elite had experienced a more conciliatory treatment by the Sandinista government, the Catholic hierarchy would have been willing to perform a more progressive or conciliatory function in the civil war. The Protestant Churches paved the way in this respect, especially the historically pacifist and peace-making Mennonite and Moravian Churches. The Moravian Church, as

the leading religious organisation in the East of the country, assumed the role of the intermediary in the conflict between the FSLN government and the Native American and Creole population on the Atlantic Coast (Wehr and Nepstad, 1994). The Catholic Church later also began to support the peace negotiations, primarily through its role as an intermediary between the government and the opposition. The Nicaraguan National Reconciliation Commission in 1988 and 1989 was chaired by Cardinal Obando y Bravo (*ibid.*). Perhaps the Church's involvement in the peace process reflected the changing international context (the strengthening of the international solidarity campaign in support of the Sandinistas in conjunction with US-Soviet détente and the heightened scrutiny of the US destabilisation programme in the US Congress). Considering the Catholic hierarchy's hostility to the Sandinistas, it is also possible that the Church authorities were seeking to ease the transition to a post-Sandinista regime.

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This peace-building role of various religious organisations and networks within and outside of Nicaragua, as well as the contribution of Christian base communities (as structures of participatory democracy) to civil society, clearly demonstrate the potentially constructive role organised religion can play in public life. Besides, even on the level of public ideology, the supposedly „exclusivist“ discourse of Christian politics is, paradoxically, sometimes actually better at speaking to the Rawlsian „public reason“ intelligible to the broad public due to its potential to communicate deeper social truths which a less spiritual or „poetical“ (i.e. more banal) discourse and normative framework perhaps could not. One of the founders of liberation theology, Leonardo Boff, summated the theological resources for a peaceable and pluralistic political stance: „In this struggle, theologians of liberation give clear preference to peaceful means because these are the means that generate life. We find in the gospel the renunciation of all vengeance, of all domination of one over another. We learn solidarity and love of enemy. But traditionally this gospel has only been preached at the personal level. We must reclaim it for our politics as well“ (Boff 1991: x). I have already outlined the role that some progressive religious actors in Nicaragua had in advancing the role of love as the creative and integrative form of power (Boulding 1989; Wehr and Nepstad 1994). This kind of tolerant discourse of Christian nonviolence is supportive of civil liberties and the public good, yet it has been challenged in many contexts both by rigid laicist impositions (which are, effectively, restrictions on the freedom of conscience) and by conservative religious actors committed to the defence of existing oligarchic class relationships.

Concluding remarks

Depending on the specific national contexts, the imperatives of pragmatic political activity based on the „national-popular“ approach and the wide historical bloc of progressive forces sometimes preclude the adherence to secularist and laicist normative suppositions. Liberation theology in particular, as a political religion in its very essence, challenges the easy secularist political formulas postulated by the French Revolution. Attempting to uncritically copy the historically specific (and decidedly atypical) political trajectory of countries like France would, in certain national contexts, be to test the very limits of a society's „elasticity“. Any attempt to progressively redefine the relationship between the Church and the state must, as its fundamental guiding principle, give due respect to the exigencies of organic social development.

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Many past and contemporary examples have demonstrated the (historically contingent) potential for some religious beliefs and religious institutions to contribute to progressive and democratic social change. The reformist Second Vatican Council, as well as the current Pope Francis I (already noted for his socially conscious and strongly critical positioning *vis-à-vis* the prevailing militarism and what he has termed the murderous global economy – Pope Francis, 2013) have demonstrated that even the global Catholic Church, a highly traditionalist and historically highly conservative institution, nonetheless holds potential for progressive political positioning in certain contexts.

The relationship of the religious institutions with the state and the public sphere will, understandably, need to be more pluralistic in countries with more heterogeneous religious affiliations of the population than in the context of Nicaragua, which has been very predominantly Christian and Catholic. Religious actors are objectively required to show greater tolerance of differing perspectives, sometimes even discretion, in other political contexts, such as in laicised Western states.

This essay is a *plaidoyer* for a greater understanding of the varieties of Church-state arrangements and of the importance of not basing political expectations of the relationship between the Church and the state on static and de-contextualised conceptual presuppositions. Instead, they should be organically rooted in the (dynamic) processes and institutions of actual social life. As I have attempted to demonstrate, the concept of a historical bloc of progressive forces, rooted in (though not slavish to) the specific social and cultural realities of the national context (the

„national-popular“), is the most fruitful theoretical and strategic approach. It is nonetheless possible to generalise the progressive normative position on a certain level of abstraction: a progressive republic should strongly protect all forms of non-monopolistic and non-exclusionary public speech. The more coherently and constructively pluralistic the dispersion of power and influence becomes, the richer the political sphere is likely to be. In such a truly democratic public life, humane religious and political visionaries such as Martin Luther King and Ernesto Cardenal, as well as the movements and organisations inspired by their noble ideals, would always have their place under the republican sun.

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Daniel Jakopovich

Leva „teokratija“: država i Crkva u revolucionarnoj Nikaragvi

Sažetak

Ovaj esej analizira antagonizme između Katoličke crkve (u Nikaragvi i svetu) i sandinističkog pokreta i sandinističke vlade, koji su predstavljali jednu od žarišnih tačaka za uspon kontinentalnog i globalnog pokreta teologije oslobođenja. Esej daje kritički pregled pokreta teologije oslobođenja u Nikaragvi, prvenstveno u vezi sa socijalnom funkcijom religije i religijskih institucija. Centralni fokus ovog eseja jeste identifikacija načina na koji je levoteološko i sandinističko razumevanje imperativa kontrahegemonskog projekta, „istorijskog bloka“ (shvaćenog kao sistema političkih i socijalnih veza i savezništava) i „nacionalno-popularne“ strategije doprinelo opreznom stvaranju nove državne religije i novog političkog projekta: levog „teokratskog“ društvenog poretka. Iskustvo Nikaragve korisno je radi fokusiranja šire diskusije o značaju kontekst-specifičnog normativnog prosuđivanja o vezama između države i crkve.

Cljučne riječi: teologija oslobođenja, istorijski blok, nacionalno-popularno, leva „teokratija“