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## The Pope defeats the Dictator: Religion and Communism in Cuba

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Title: The Pope defeats the Dictator: Religion and Communism in Cuba

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**Abstract.** This article was written by Ismael Sambra Haber. Sambra has published poetry, short stories, literary criticism, and essays in both Cuban and international magazines and journals. He also has worked as a stage actor and as a consultant, screenwriter, actor, and director of Tele Turquino. Sambra has published *Para Ti Mujer (For You, Woman)*, Coleccion Plegables, 1978; *Las Cinco Plumas y la Luz del Sol (The Five Feathers and the Sun Light)*, Editorial Oriente, 1987; *Para No Ser Leido en Recital (Not to be Read at a Poetry Reading or Recital)*, Editorial Oriente, 1991; and *Remolino de Luz (Whirl of Light)*, Editorial Oriente, 1992. He founded the literary magazines Museo and El Grupo. Sambra's book of essays, *El Unico Marti: Principal Opositor a la Tirania de Castro (The Unique Marti: Principal Opponent to Castro's Tyranny)*, has recently been published by La Otra Cuba, Mexico City.

Sambra is currently Writer-in-Exile at York University, Toronto, Canada. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison and imprisoned on February 14, 1993 for writing and distributing pamphlets against Fidel Castro during the 1992 Cuban elections. He obtained his freedom thanks to the Government of Canada and--as Sambra writes--the diligent and patient work of PEN Canada. *The Pope Defeats the Dictator: Religion and Communism in Cuba* has been translated from the Spanish by Miguel Martin and has undergone minor editing by IBPP.

Communists, in their doctrines and postulates, have always affirmed their opposition to religion and have presented a vicious and violent attack against any religious manifestation or practice. This is a declaration of Communistic atheism. Cuba has not been an exception. Since Castro declared the socialist character of the Cuban revolution in 1961, vilely tricking his followers in the process, he has persecuted all religions in all spheres and institutions of national life.

Castro specifically concentrated his disintegrative energy on the Catholic Church, although he also persecuted Jehovah's Witnesses as they worshipped only God and refused to pay homage to any symbol of the State, the party or the revolution. The tyrant could not accept this. Many went to prison for their refusal to worship the leader, the Commander-in-Chief Castro, who declared that these religious types were authentic counterrevolutionaries worthy of public repudiation.

I lived these experiences. I was baptized by the Catholic Church. I had my first communion and went to mass frequently, but later I began to collide against the new political realities that had implanted atheistic Communism in my country. I wanted to continue my university studies, but I was faced with the dilemma that my faith would prevent me from enrolling. In an interview about ideology before several militant communists, I tried to be convincing about the question of my faith in God.

I responded by writing, as it was not enough just to say that when I was a child I believed in God, that I now believe in Marx and Lenin. It appears I convinced them in this way, because I was allowed into the university and was able to finish my education. I also participated in everything--even giving up vacation time so as to cut sugar cane and to engage in military training. If I didn't do all this, I could be accused of being an enemy and expelled. Yet, even at that time, I was convinced of the erroneous path of the Cuban Revolution that most of us had put a little faith.

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"God forgive me," I later said in my heart. "I had to do it so I could study in [the] University." At that time I knew very little about Marx or Lenin. I had to fake a moral code to survive. Many youth had the same experience. This is what happened to the Cuban people. That is how national morality became contaminated with embarrassment.

Over many years the Catholic Church in particular was persecuted and intimidated, as it had demonstrated a fierce resistance to the abuses of authoritarian communism. Churches were closed and all those who insisted on their religious practices were marginalized and discriminated against. Many priests were deported and nuns who helped the poverty-stricken areas disappeared. Castro closed all Catholic schools, recognizing only those public schools that disseminated Marxist-Leninist doctrine. He refused to acknowledge the requests of Pope John Paul II to visit Cuba and to offer his voice of peace and reconciliation. The attacks against the Church by Castro were constant and highly offensive.

The disintegration of international Communism and the Cuban economy, as well as the accumulation of evidence of the need for change, all had to present themselves before Castro, against his will, could accept certain transformations. (Others and I classified these transformations as opportunistic and demagogical, as they are not from the dictator's conscience, but necessary to give Castro's power more oxygen). Castro has always been, and continues to be, a perennial contradiction. At the end of any discourse he continues to say the redundant phrase "Socialism or Death"-- two things which are the same. He continues to threaten the population, while permitting circulation of the dollar, some specific business operations, and investments from ambitious foreign capitalists. Everything is a perennial contradiction in Cuba.

Castro accepted the entry of the Pope when there was no other alternative. Cuba was the only country in the Western Hemisphere that the Pope had never visited. It's the country that saw the obligation to opportunistically change the atheistic character of the Constitution to a lay one. Castro wanted to give the impression that things were changing. False. He is only a tyrant who wanted to win some time and space for his power. He is the tyrant who thinks himself indispensable, with the right to fix the bridges that he himself destroyed.

But Castro wanted to prepare the land, and in an announcement to the nation announcing the visit of the Pope, said that this should be seen as a triumph of the revolution. But he is fooling no one with this cynicism. The visit of the Pope is a devastation of the Communist revolution and a devastation of the dictator who is stubborn about changing the name of everything and who makes idiots still believe in a reality that exists only in his perverse imagination.

The Pope took to Cuba a message of peace and reconciliation. He asked for the celebration of Easter. He asked for the freedom of political prisoners. One can still hear the chants of "liberty" by the people in a Plaza de la Revolución (Plaza of the Revolution) converted into a gigantic church that gave shelter to half a million Cubans--believers and non-believers alike. The acclamations of "the free Pope wants to see us all free" circulated throughout the people when the Pope talked about democracy, liberty, and respect for human rights. These acclamations still make their rounds. And the Pope said, "Cuba needs to open itself to the world, and the world to Cuba."

The Pope talked about the union of the family. He said the Cuban family is divided in a forced exile that grows daily and proclaimed "Cuba cuide a tu familia para que conserve tu corazón" (Cuba, watch your family to conserve your heart). The Pope cited the words of Jose Marti, our independence hero, our

apostle of liberty, tolerance, political liberty and democracy. In the process of constructing a future with everyone for the well-being of everyone, Marti stated that the family, school, and the Church must form an educative community wherein the sons (and daughters) of Cuba can grow in humanity. The Pope could not be clearer in his protocol. I imagine the tyrant trembling of impotence against these truths, against the realities provoked by his erratic politics and mistakes.

On balance, the positive consequences of the Papal visit to Cuba far outweigh the negative. Without a doubt, the Pope has devastated the moribund dictator with simple and profound words, with prayers of peace and truth, and with his charismatic figure. The Pope has penetrated deeply into the popular conscience and has marked significant changes in Cuban morality. The people will begin to react without fear like the Pope asked. Despite the repressive machine that was there before and after the visit, in the plazas of the historical masses the people collectively breathed the first breath of liberty in almost 40 years of totalitarian Communism imposed on the nation. This can never be forgotten. (See De Haan, L.G., & Schulenberg, J. (1997). Social and political attitudes among religious groups: Convergence and divergence over time. *Journal of Adolescence*, 20, 537-552; De la Torre, C. (1997). La identidad nacional del cubano: Logros y encrucijadas de un proyecto (Cuban national identity: Results and difficulties of a research project. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 29, 223-241; Hoffman, J.P., & Miller, A.S. (1997). *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36, 52-70; Williams, R.H. (1996). Religion as political resource: Culture or ideology? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35, 368-378.) (Keywords: Castro, Communism, Cuba, Religion.)