

Christians in Cuba: Dealing with Subtle Forms of Repression

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The restrictions on religious freedom imposed by the Cuban state—a direct consequence of the authoritarian nature of the regime and its atheist and anti-religious ideology—are well-known. Much less understood is the subtle nature of the vulnerability of Christians, especially after the changes that have occurred since the 1990s. This article examines their situation in depth.

Cuba is one of the most sensitive countries in the world with regard to religious freedom. Christian churches appear to exist openly, but their operations are limited, and internal or external efforts to advocate for greater freedom can prove counterproductive.

In this article, drawn from my dissertation,¹ I describe the situation faced by Christians in Cuba, including the various factors that limit their activities. As my dissertation relied mainly on fieldwork conducted in 2016 and 2017, I have added recent information that takes into account the rare protests that have occurred in Cuba during the past year. A careful consideration of the religious freedom context in Cuba can also help to guide our actions with regard to other countries where similar regimes offer some level of tolerance of religion, such as China and Vietnam.

How Cuba regulates religion

According to the World Christian Database, as of 2020 Cuba's population was 61.7 percent Christian, the lowest percentage in all of Latin America.² This relatively low percentage of Christians is generally considered a direct result of the militant atheist policies in the early days following Cuba's communist revolution, which aimed to eradicate religion.³

Evangelistic activity and religious forms of civic participation are quite limited in Cuba, because, to a large extent, they are restricted by law. In view of the

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1 Dennis P. Petri, 'The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities' (PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2020).

2 Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020).

3 Jonathan Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013); Jonathan Fox, *The Unfree Exercise of Religion: A World Survey of Religious Discrimination against Religious Minorities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

restrictions on freedom of expression, simply by joining a religious group Cubans make an implicit political statement against the regime, because it is one of the few opportunities for them to express anything.⁴

Religious identity and the least active forms of religious behaviour are not a direct cause of vulnerability for most Christians. Religious affiliation used to be a problem during the early days of the communist regime, but this is no longer the case, especially since the religious policy changes of 1991 (described below). However, the more active Christians are in terms of visible social behaviour, the greater their vulnerability.

There has also been a noteworthy difference between the Cuban government's approach to Catholics and Protestants. Cuba has engaged in some outright persecution of Catholics, the largest Christian group, whereas the strategy towards the much smaller Protestant community has focused on restrictions, co-optation and divide-and-rule.⁵ Catholic baptisms were forbidden for years, training seminaries were closed and buildings were confiscated. Attendance at mass is quite low.

As for Protestants, denominations registered before 1959 are tolerated, but no new denominations have been allowed to register since then. Moreover, only church buildings that existed before 1959 are permitted. Except for one Russian Orthodox church in 2008 and a 'show' church in the tourist area of Varadero, no new church buildings have been constructed.

To circumvent these restrictions, both registered and independent Protestants experiencing growth in membership began meeting as house churches. According to various Cuban church leaders I interviewed, independent denominations now constitute two-thirds of Cuba's Protestant population.

Registered denominations can function in relative openness but are closely supervised and face some restrictions. Independent denominations are technically illegal and face tighter restrictions and monitoring, although they are not required to submit reports on their activities as the registered denominations do. House churches are technically illegal and always at risk of being shut down, especially if they grow, spread messages perceived as subversive, or get into conflicts with neighbours.⁶ If they manage to avoid attracting attention and stay under the radar, which is very difficult because informants are everywhere, this risk can be mitigated.

The Cuban regime has also implemented a co-optation strategy towards Protestants by inviting them to join the Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba (CIC, Spanish for Cuban Council of Churches), a state-controlled body similar to the Three-Self Church in China. CIC membership brings such benefits as access to foreign donations, use of seminary facilities, and the right to import religious literature and travel abroad, in exchange for tight internal surveillance and unconditional support

4 Jill Goldenziel, 'Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.–Cuban Relations', *Journal of Law & Politics* 25 (2009): 195.

5 Goldenziel, 'Sanctioning Faith', 179–210.

6 Lena López, 'Cuba: Draconian New Restrictions on "Home Religious Meetings"', *Forum* 18 (2005), <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert454dpp1>; Jonathan Fox, *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 147.

for the regime.⁷ Of Cuba's 35 registered denominations, 22 are full CIC members. Despite of its lack of representativeness, the Cuban government treats the CIC as the only voice of Protestant Christianity in Cuba.

Overall, then, Christianity in Cuba can be divided into five categories: Catholics, registered Protestant denominations (subdivided into CIC members and non-members), unregistered denominations and house churches. I consider house churches a separate category because of their unique status, although house churches can be found within both registered and unregistered denominations.

The Cuban regime perceives religious groups as an ideological threat because of their transnational networks, resources and opposition to communism.⁸ In 1961, the new Cuban government declared itself officially atheist and implemented a militantly anti-religious policy.⁹ Article 54 of the 1975 Constitution made it illegal to oppose the revolution on religious grounds. Some opening up occurred around the time when Soviet communism collapsed; in 1992, the Constitution was amended to eliminate discrimination against religion, and various restrictions have been relaxed since then, such as permitting religious groups to provide prison chaplains and conduct some charitable initiatives. In the last 30 years, restriction of religious practice seems to have happened more through 'bureaucratic discouragement' as 'the government continued to try to control local congregations through recourse to legal technicalities.'¹⁰

Collecting information

Obtaining information about religious practice in Cuba is not easy. I did not want to put myself or (especially) my informants at any risk.

I began actively monitoring the situation in Cuba in 2011, and in 2015 an international organization asked me to investigate whether it should resume operations in the country. I was later asked to set up renewed operations, which I managed until the end of 2017.

During two field trips to Cuba in March 2015 and February 2016, I conducted about 40 interviews with Cuban church leaders and members. I introduced myself as a tourist from Holland who was interested in meeting Cuban Christians, a cover I tried to maintain throughout the research, but I was always open about my desire to understand the religious freedom situation.

I also had the opportunity to meet with a number of Cuban church leaders outside Cuba during training conferences I organized in 2016 and 2017. Furthermore, in January 2017 I attended a consultation of representatives of some 20 faith-based organizations working in Cuba. I decided not to return to Cuba after 2016 because the interviews I had granted to various news services and the testimony

7 Goldenziel, 'Sanctioning Faith', 187–91.

8 Goldenziel, 'Sanctioning Faith', 184; Fox, *Political Secularism*, 125; Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

9 John M. Kirk, *Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1989).

10 Geraldine Lievesley, *The Cuban Revolution: Past, Present and Future Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 179.

I delivered at a U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing in September 2015 could have made me identifiable to the regime.

Cuban society is characterized by an advanced degree of suspicion and secrecy, which is the result of decades of communism, under which anyone might be an informant of the regime. Thus, I could never be completely sure that my interviewees were telling the truth or not withholding information. As one interviewee confided, ‘Nobody in Cuba tells you everything.’

Types of threats

My research identified 10 types of threats that Christians face in Cuba. Each of these is discussed below.

Conversion from the Communist Party

If an active member of the Communist Party decides to join a church, the consequences for that individual and family members can be severe, including loss of employment. Since 1991, party members can have a religious affiliation, but conversion is still discouraged and can result in various discriminatory measures.

In various interviews, I was told that a growing number of Communist officials have affiliated with churches, but that Christians often respond to former Communist Party members seeking to join their church with suspicion, because they are accustomed to people portraying themselves as earnest believers who have renounced Marxist and atheist ideology but who are in fact acting as informants for the regime.

A 2015 article in a Protestant magazine for Hispanic residents in the United States told the story of Jorge Luis Pantoja, a Cuban secret agent who was trained to infiltrate a Baptist church and become a youth leader and pastor. Pantoja stated that after years of working as a spy, he experienced a genuine conversion. He explained his plight: ‘I could not tell anyone about [my conversion] because I took a military oath, and this would be considered as treason of the fatherland. My only option was to speak with God daily asking for direction. As a young person I was afraid of what could happen to me because I started to learn how low and dirty this regime really was.’ Pantoja remained silent about his newfound faith for several years until 1995, when he sought political asylum in the United States.¹¹

State surveillance

State surveillance, both physical and digital (the state is the only Internet provider in Cuba), is present in all spheres of life. There is systematic monitoring of church services and sermons, as well as widespread monitoring of other areas of society. By international standards, this surveillance is a human rights violation. Surveillance also encompasses all written and electronic communications by church leaders and other influential persons.

One pastor told me, ‘We know that there are always informants listening to our sermons. That is why we are always very careful and refrain from making any comments that could disturb the communists.’ Another pastor said, ‘As long as we

11 ‘De agente secreto a siervo de Dios’, *Cristianismo Hispano Hoy*, January 2015.

stick to religious themes, we have nothing to fear, but when we discuss social issues, there are always informants.’ And one interviewee offered the comforting assurance, ‘They [the state security] already know you’re here, meeting with me.’

The Cuban ministers whom I interviewed exhibited a certain acceptance of the surveillance, presumably because they are simply so accustomed to it that they do not question it.

The only people who seem bothered by the permanent surveillance are foreign ministers working in Cuba and Cubans living outside Cuba. However, it has a paralysing effect on the work of Christian ministers, effectively reducing their freedom to speak freely or undertake any initiative the authorities might not appreciate. Crossing the line can lead to interrogations at the police station or the party bureau, occasional physical harassment or fabricated charges as discussed below.

Since 2020, measures adopted by the government to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, under the guise of epidemiological surveillance to guarantee compliance with prevention measures, have been arbitrarily applied to monitor activities inside religious temples and scrutinize the content of sermons.¹²

Discrimination by the authorities

‘You’d be stupid to put your religion on a job application. ... It would go straight in the bin’, said one Cuban schoolteacher.¹³ The existence of such discrimination is so normal for most Christians that they rarely complain about it.

Christians occasionally experience discrimination in the form of exclusion from access to basic social services and food rations, or when they apply for various permits. Some churches seem to have better relationships with the authorities than others, suggesting that it is possible to mitigate some threats through personal advocacy. However, the unpredictable and arbitrary implementation of these restrictions causes considerable stress.

One pastor whose daughter was not accepted into a university told me, ‘I suspect this happened to punish me because my church has been very successful in converting people to the Gospel.’ Discrimination also exists in public employment (private employment does not technically exist in Cuba). A young engineer said he would have faced challenges in his job at a public company due to being the son of a pastor if he had not developed a good relationship with his boss.

Restriction of educational activities

Under the anti-religious interpretation of communist ideology, education is an exclusive prerogative of the state.¹⁴ Therefore, families, private schools and religious institutions are not entitled to engage in any form of educational activities. Non-compliance with the education policy occasionally leads to human rights violations.

12 Teresa Flores and Rossana Muga, ‘Vulnerabilidad de las comunidades religiosas en América Latina en el contexto del COVID-19’, *Religiones Latinoamericanas*, new series 6, no. 2 (2020): 137–72.

13 ‘Religion in Cuba: Chango Unchained’, *The Economist*, 18 April 2015.

14 Ani Sarkissian, *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

One pastor and his wife refused to send their children to a public school, 'arguing that the state system emphasises a Marxist-Leninist atheist ideology that goes against their beliefs. They also [said] their children were bullied at school.'¹⁵ The couple was arrested, and after a quick trial, the pastor was condemned to a one-year prison sentence and his wife to house arrest. In addition, the pastor was required to cease his work as a church leader. After international advocacy efforts, the sentences were reduced and the pastor was allowed to resume his religious work.¹⁶

In the church sphere, there is slightly more room for educational activities. 'The state is particularly jealous about the influence of churches on young people', a pastor explained. 'As churches, we can develop educational programs, but they must be small-scale, so we do not attract attention.' Catechetical teaching must be done cautiously, avoiding large gatherings of youths and the teaching of any topic that could be labelled as subversive. Similarly, various Christian denominations organize summer camps for youths, which are tolerated if conducted quietly.

Various pastors expressed their sense that their denominations have failed to educate their congregations in essential ways. This situation is a direct result of the prevailing communist policy. One interviewee stated, 'We always assumed that we as church leaders needed to stay out of education because this is the role of the state, but we are starting to realize now that this was a mistake.'

In higher education, religious education is possible, but only by government-approved seminaries of registered denominations, which are always under intense scrutiny. Curricula and literature must formally be approved by the CIC (and informally by the Communist Party). Topics related to any form of social or political engagement of Christians are to be avoided at all times.

In the family sphere, Christian parents try to educate their children in the Christian faith, but the educational role of parents is not fully respected. As one pastor declared, 'Schoolteachers pit children against their parents by saying things like "don't believe what your parents tell you, they're wrong."'

Restrictions pertaining to freedom of worship

My fieldwork indicated that the severity of restrictions on freedom of worship in Cuba depends on many factors, including the type of denomination and the extent to which a particular individual or group is viewed as a threat to the regime. As noted, house churches are always at risk. In one extreme case, a house church building was bulldozed and its members detained by the police.¹⁷ In this case, the pastor had repeatedly made statements criticizing the regime, and his church had experienced rapid growth and was part of an unregistered denomination. A total of 20 closed, confiscated or destroyed churches were verified by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (www.violentincidents.com) between 2011 and 2021.

15 'Cuba: Pastor Returns to Work after Arrest for Home-Schooling', *World Watch Monitor*, 18 August 2017.

16 'Pastor Barred from Working as Church Leader', *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, 4 August 2017.

17 'Church Destroyed and 200 Members Detained in Cuba', *Christian Today*, 9 February 2016.

More common practices include intimidation, bureaucratic discouragement and discrimination. For example, Cuban ministers who travel abroad to international conferences are systematically questioned before and after their trips. Importing of Christian materials must be channelled through the CIC and is subject to censorship, as I confirmed on my visits to the printing presses and libraries of various Cuban denominations. Sometimes the state intervenes in the designation of denominational leaders, and it ensures that the president of the CIC is always favourable to the regime. Registered denominations can have a bank account, but the number of transactions per month is limited.

Generally, many aspects of freedom of worship are officially tolerated but typically hindered through bureaucratic processes, leading to frustration and a permanent feeling of obstruction. 'The permanent obstruction is a strategy of the government. Only the most determined people actually manage to get things done', one interviewee stated.

Christians are rarely directly accused of violating religious policy. Rather, when the authorities want to hinder a particular individual or church, they tend to fabricate charges unrelated to religion. One such strategy is to accuse someone of buying on the black market. This is a very convenient tool, because virtually everyone in Cuba buys on the black market as many supplies are simply unavailable in the formal economy. Or a church may be charged with violating zoning regulations, which is very common in the case of house churches, whose formal designation is residential and not religious. The COVID-19 context has fuelled these incidents under the pretext of crimes such as 'transmission of the epidemic' or not complying with the required sanitary precautions during religious services.

Christians have learned to find ways to work within these restrictions. Developing personal relationships with the authorities has been a good strategy to mitigate risks, but when authorities change, the situation can turn unpredictable. 'If we are smart, we can enjoy some degree of freedom, but you need to know how the system works', said one pastor. There is no real legal security for churches in Cuba.

Restrictions on church growth

When churches grow in membership, integrating many new converts, they frequently experience more opposition. Their sheer growth is viewed as a threat by the state. On a few occasions, authorities have broken up the church. More often, other pretexts are found to intimidate the pastor or priest, cause the church to split up, or even fabricate scandals to discredit the minister. An older pastor explained, 'The communists don't like large gatherings of people. They simply cannot stand it that we [religious ministers] have such an influence in the community while the Communist Party is losing members.' Another interviewee reinforced this point: 'Vital religion and the communist ideology are incompatible. The sight of successful and growing churches is a sign to the world that communism failed.'

Prosecution of conscientious objectors

Conscientious objection is classically associated with both freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Under the Cuban Constitution, refusal of military service is a punishable offence, regardless of the reason cited. However, in actual practice, the

authorities allow conscientious objectors to perform alternative service.¹⁸ The Cuban government, through its Permanent Mission to the UN office in Geneva, confirmed this in a letter to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Conscientious objection can become an issue in the field of education. Several ministers whom I interviewed complained about being pressured to publicly express their support of gay rights, which the Cuban government decided to embrace in 1986, after decades of persecution of sexual minorities.¹⁹ Refusal to support gay rights did not get them into trouble, but they did receive warnings that the situation could change in the future.

Restrictions on missionary activity

Legal restrictions on missionary activity have been applied to both Cuban nationals and foreign clergy or missionaries, who may be granted visas only under the condition that they refrain from proselytizing.²⁰

Cuba's policy regarding missionary activity is not unequivocal. Like other restrictions, these seemed to be tightest on the eastern side of the island and generally target fast-growing denominations not affiliated with the CIC.

During my visits to Cuba, I observed groups engaging in street evangelism, but one should not make too much of this observation. On one hand, I saw a very marginal group of social outcasts with little education, who gathered for religious services next to a garbage dump and were not restricted from doing street evangelism. I suspect that the authorities did not bother to intervene in the activities of such a marginal group. On the other hand, I received reports that better-organized groups belonging to larger denominations were denied permission for street evangelism.

I would theorize that the authorities prefer not to give the impression that religion is oppressed in Cuba, and therefore they restrict only the missionary work of groups they view as a threat, just as freedom of worship is not restricted but church growth is. By comparison, Afro-Cuban religion is now very visible on the streets of Havana and faces less restriction than Christianity. The Cuban government has become less hostile to Afro-Cuban religion in recent years, mainly because it is increasingly viewed as part of the Cuban national culture—whereas Christianity is viewed as imposed by Spanish colonizers and American imperialism—and because it has increasingly become an export product.²¹

Hindrance of charitable work

Beginning in 1991, religious groups were authorized to engage in some forms of charitable work. Many religious organizations took advantage of this opportunity.

18 US Department of State, *2017 Report on International Religious Freedom*, <https://worlddeas.org/yourls/ert454dpp2>.

19 'From Persecution to Acceptance? The History of LGBT Rights in Cuba', *Cutting Edge*, 24 October 2012.

20 Fox, *Political Secularism*, 193–94.

21 Ivor L. Miller, 'Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance', *Drama Review* 44, no. 2 (2000): 30–55; Adrian H. Hearn, *Cuba: Religion, Social Capital, and Development* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

The largest charitable initiative in this field is the Cuban chapter of Caritas, which has operated legally in Cuba since 1991 under the umbrella of the Catholic Church.²² World Vision International entered Cuba in 2011.²³

However, religious groups must stay within the service boundaries defined by the government. Given its own limited capacity, the government is happy to have religious groups providing meals for elderly people and children with disabilities or conducting emergency relief programs. However, they cannot engage in any activities related to education, youth work or business development. Humanitarian work is always subject to strict monitoring. The state must always be given the credit, initiatives must not attract too much attention, and missionary activity must be avoided.

After Hurricanes Matthew and Nicole in September and October 2016 and Hurricane Irma in September 2017, in a display of inter-church solidarity, a coalition of churches loaded some trucks with food and supplies for those in need, but the authorities stopped these trucks, alleging that they lacked the proper permits. One interviewee involved in the humanitarian operation after Hurricane Irma said, 'The authorities told us there was no need for us to take humanitarian aid to the victims and that this is the responsibility of the state. They confiscated all the supplies to distribute it themselves.' To bring humanitarian aid to the victims, the group had to come up with alternative strategies, such as travelling by night and in smaller, less conspicuous vehicles.²⁴ Religious leaders who decided to provide and distribute aid to the neediest populations during the COVID-19 pandemic have been charged with contempt.

Restrictions also exist in the realm of business development initiatives, in which some churches engage to generate revenue for poor members, church operations, missionary work or their printing presses. Businesses that grow too visibly risk being closed. One interviewee recalled, 'My cousin started a small business, a restaurant, just around the corner. After three months it was shut down by the government. Why? Because it was too successful.' Microloan programs, for which foreign ministries often provide capital, are also threatened: 'The government says that churches should not give loans for businesses. They say that if someone needs credit, they can reach out to the public banks. But this is not true; they never give loans to small businesses.'

Intimidation of people engaging in human rights activism

Finally, anyone engaging in human rights activism or any public criticism of the Cuban regime risks severe consequences. This is by far the most intense threat Christians can face, although only a small minority of them take the risk.

Denominational leaders deliberately choose to avoid making political statements, mainly to avoid trouble. 'We just don't do this. It would make things worse for us', one denominational leader said. Another commented, 'In Cuba, if we

22 Goldenziel, 'Sanctioning Faith', 199.

23 'Trabajando por la niñez en Cuba', World Vision International, 3 September 2015.

24 'Cuban Government Is Blocking Religious Charities from Aiding Hurricane Irma Victims, Pastor Warns', *Christian Times*, 1 November 2017.

really want to promote social change, we should not do it through open criticism of the government. We need to be cautious, patient and strategic.’

Some individual Christians have actively engaged in political speech, resulting in grave repercussions. For example, pastor Mario Félix Leonart was strongly committed to ‘integral mission’, which emphasizes that Christianity should address the social, political, educational and political fields and should not be reduced to religious worship. His views led him to actively engage in social action—collaborating with human rights activists, publicly denouncing the regime on a blog, writing for various underground newspapers, organizing conferences and concerts, and participating in radio and television programmes outside Cuba. Barroso suffered severe human security threats, including intense surveillance, confiscation of personal belongings, numerous threats, beatings and imprisonments²⁵ before finally leaving Cuba. In another case, a university student who performed religious freedom advocacy work in the United States was harassed and eventually expelled from his university, based on the fabricated justification that he had accumulated too many absences.²⁶

Conclusions regarding threats to Christians in Cuba

One clear characteristic of the regulation of religion in present-day Cuba is that it rarely involves physical violence. Rather, it is mainly expressed through legal restrictions on religious practice, in combination with intentional bureaucratic discouragement and intimidation tactics, although arrests, demolitions of religious property and various forms of harassment do still occur.

Also, the most severe vulnerability of religious minorities in Cuba is primarily, although not exclusively, the consequence of social activism inspired by religious convictions. A high degree of social activism can also lead to restrictions of other, less active forms of religious behaviour, as a kind of repercussion measure.

Believers are no longer significantly discriminated against in terms of access to university education, public-sector jobs or membership in the Communist Party. Attendance at church services, even those of house churches or unregistered denominations, also rarely poses a threat. But the unpredictability of the state and the permanent surveillance nevertheless remain intimidating. Religious ministers, especially those not affiliated with the CIC, live in a constant state of fear and discouragement, as they are subject to permanent surveillance, the threat of fabricated charges whenever something they do displeases the authorities, ongoing discrimination, total absence of legal security, and frustrating restrictions in the conduct of their work.

Most Cuban religious leaders did not seem to view the remaining restrictions as a problem. I see two reasons for this attitude. First, they are content with their current freedoms, which go considerably beyond what they were formerly permitted to do. Second, many religious groups have, perhaps unconsciously, internalized a narrow interpretation of religious freedom, to the point that they believe they *have* freedom of religion and would not even consider doing anything outside the established parameters. The Cuban regime has been extremely successful, not in

25 ‘Cuban Pastor Was Arrested Hours before Obama Visit’, *CBN News*, 31 March 2016.

26 ‘Cuban Activist Expelled from University’, *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, 10 May 2017.

eliminating Christianity or slowing down its growth, but in unconsciously defining the options for Cuban Christians and the nature of the freedom they aspire to, which is a form of 'symbolic violence'.²⁷

I found younger interviewees more aware that their situation is still not ideal. When asked whether they faced operating restrictions, many would say there were none, but when I asked specifically about aspects related to church repairs or expansions, active missionary activity or criticism of the government, all immediately declared that these things were not possible or subject to restrictions. This discrepancy could be explained by the optimistic nature of the Cuban people or their reluctance to express criticisms to strangers, but they may also have become so accustomed to the pressure that they consider it normal.

The internalization of this narrow definition of religious freedom is also present among international faith-based organizations active in Cuba, all of which accept the rules imposed by the Cuban government: to be allowed to work there, they must avoid any form of intervention related to human rights or somehow do it undercover.

The common denominator amongst the most prominent threats to Christians is that any form of religious behaviour viewed by the regime as subversive creates vulnerability. Visible church growth or human rights activism provokes the most intense threats. In these cases, the distinction between CIC-affiliated and non-affiliated groups fades, although CIC members rarely overstep the authorized boundaries.

In summary, Cuba's opening up since 1991 has really created only the illusion of religious freedom. The Cuban state defines the parameters of what religious freedom includes, effectively restricting it to purely 'ministerial' activities—i.e. activities taking place within the church sphere, but not the social dimensions of Christianity. Any political content in church services, theological training or religious literature is out of the question. Surveillance of church services may even have increased since 1991.²⁸

Resilience tools exhibited by Cuban Christians

Avoidance

Avoidance is a common coping mechanism for all Christians, although documenting it is challenging, because people who adopt this coping mechanism avoid making their views known. Moreover, most of my interviewees were relatively outspoken about their faith. But many of them referred to 'staying under the radar' or trying not to be noticed by the authorities. I observed avoidance in many different areas, such as the organization of evangelistic activities, the creation of small businesses, the conduct of social work or the operation of a printing press. These activities are generally conducted in such a way as to attract as little attention as possible, with frequent tactical postponements.

27 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La reproduction: Éléments d'une théorie du système d'enseignement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970).

28 Goldenziel, 'Sanctioning Faith', 208.

Individual Christians also practice avoidance. For example, a young engineer working for a state company remained silent about his Christian convictions to avoid any trouble in his professional career.

Christians adopt ways of speaking covertly through Bible stories, parables, biographies of saints or well-known Christians and seemingly apolitical religious acts. For example, in one church service I attended, the pastor made references to John Bunyan, the seventeenth-century English writer and preacher who had been imprisoned for his missionary work, but left his audience to establish any parallel with the persecution in modern-day Cuba. Similarly, in Afro-Cuban religion, the annual procession in honour of Saint Lázaro evolved in the 1990s into a forum for the expression of political protest.²⁹ In these and other cases, seemingly religious acts constitute covert expressions of protest, which really is the only way for religious organizations to express disagreement with the regime.

As another form of avoiding attention, missionary activity occurs primarily through personal, casual-looking conversations rather than large gatherings. Businesses are careful not to grow beyond one employee. Churches avoid integrating new converts but instead direct them towards house churches within the same denomination. Humanitarian work is performed by small groups and from multiple locations.

At times, staying under the radar is impossible, and the only alternatives are to abandon one's social activity or leave the country. Many interviewees pointed out that numerous church leaders have ended up migrating to the United States, either because they grew tired of the oppression or because the authorities asked them to depart, leaving their Cuban churches without leadership.

Spiritual endurance

Almost all the Cuban Christians I interviewed stated that their Christian faith is a source of comfort, relief and hope that helps them to undergo the challenges inherent in living in a communist system. They cited the biblical teaching that believers are promised a better world in the future as a source of consolation. In addition, Cuban Christians expressed comfort in the realization that Christians have suffered tribulations throughout history and presently suffer in many parts of the world.

Many interviewees expressed a calling to remain and serve the church in Cuba. Some of them described living in the United States as not necessarily ideal, particularly in view of the temptations and challenges of materialism they would face there. One even viewed living under communism as 'a blessing because it helps [us] to stay true to the faith'.

Finally, the house church model can be an important source of spiritual endurance. As Koesel suggests, house churches are particularly appropriate for developing deep personal relationships. In China, they have enabled Christianity to

29 Katherine J. Hagedorn, 'Long Day's Journey to Rincón: From Suffering to Resistance in the Procession of San Lázaro/Babalú Ayé', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11, no. 1 (2002): 43–69.

grow in ways that may not have been possible without the restrictions imposed by the communist regime.³⁰ This also seems to be the case in Cuba.

Compliance

For Cuban Christians, compliance can take two general forms: actual acceptance of and obedience to regulations, or formal compliance while disrespecting the government's intent. For example, expanding a church building is not technically permissible, but if one does it very gradually, without attracting attention, and formal requirements such as maintaining the historical façade of the building are respected, restrictions can be circumvented. One pastor showed me a 1959 photograph of his church, which could hold perhaps 50 people at that time. The façade was maintained, but three stories were built on top of it, and now the church can accommodate 500 people.

Another pastor operates an illegal printing press in east Cuba, with the complicity of the authorities. He stated, 'The only reason why my printing press is not shut down is because I maintain such good relations with the authorities. We have an unspoken agreement that I will never print anything that could jeopardize the authorities. I also printed some materials for them when their own printing press was broken.' A youth pastor from Havana encouraged one of his church members to write a thesis on the persecution of Protestants during the first decades after the Cuban revolution. The student cleverly took advantage of a legal loophole and wrote the thesis not for a seminary but in a journalism program. It was later published in the United States and distributed via flash drives in Cuba, circumventing the restrictions on printing.

More often, Christians simply obey when ordered to shut down a particular project or operation. 'Sometimes it's best to just comply. You need to pick your battles', one pastor said. For many, compliance is a protective mechanism: 'If we are ever questioned, we can always say we have always obeyed previous orders.'

Social wisdom

Christian leaders consider very carefully when to circumvent regulations, when to comply, and when to engage in potentially risky behaviours such as social work, evangelism or advocacy. They approach their interactions strategically, complying in most cases so as not to be viewed as troublemakers and disobeying only when the matter is sufficiently important. The importance of social wisdom can also be observed when it is lacking, as in the case of a few Christian leaders who became targets for repression because of behaviour that their peers considered unnecessarily provocative.

Moral standing

Moral standing can be both a coping mechanism and a source of vulnerability. High moral standing in society increases vulnerability, because the communist authorities

30 Karrie J. Koesel, 'The Rise of a Chinese House Church: The Organizational Weapon', *China Quarterly* 215 (2013): 572–89; Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism*.

are wary of religious leaders' moral authority. In contrast, earning the respect of communist officials, such as through personal friendships or because the spouses of party leaders attend their church, can become a coping mechanism. However, if a church's humanitarian work generates a certain level of goodwill within a community, the church can be seen as competing with the state—something the communist leaders never appreciate.

Solidarity

Some examples of inter-Christian solidarity can be observed in Cuba, in spite of the limited material resources available to churches. After the destructive hurricanes, churches in the less hard-hit western part of the island collected donations and supplies to help those in more heavily affected areas.

However, this solidarity is the exception, not the rule. There is great mistrust amongst Cuban churches and even within Christian denominations, partly due to the regime's divide-and-rule strategy. Collaboration across denominations remains uncommon. Christian leaders understand that this situation reduces their overall resilience but find it difficult to trust one another.

The international ties of Cuban churches, although not appreciated by the Cuban regime, provide partners who frequently speak on their behalf in international advocacy forums and to the media. Unfortunately, international advocacy can often be counterproductive. Frequently, Cuban leaders complain that the misdirected advocacy efforts of international faith-based organizations, in which Cuban emigrants to the United States are often involved, do more harm than good. 'They only yell at the Cuban authorities, but their reports are often not accurate, and they create problems for us', said one Cuban pastor.

Collective action

Collective action (e.g. organized resistance or protests) as a coping mechanism is relatively underdeveloped among most Christians in Cuba. The Communist Party's divide-and-rule strategy has sought to prevent any form of coordinated effort among Christians that could destabilize the regime. In addition, Christians generally avoid any form of political advocacy that could disturb the precarious status quo that allows them to operate their churches with relative freedom.

However, a few Christians have learned about nonviolent resistance through their relations with other (non-religious) dissidents. Works such as *From Dictatorship to Democracy* by Gene Sharp³¹ have become available on flash drives, and some Christian activists have timidly started to adopt similar techniques.

Mario Félix Lleonart, the aforementioned human rights activist, is a follower of Sharp's teachings. He told me in an interview that he once received notice that he would be arrested because a particular blog post annoyed the authorities. He immediately asked the members of his congregation to come to his church for a service. Overcoming their fear, many people gathered in front of the rectory where he lived, in a display of solidarity. When the police arrived, the crowd made it

31 Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (Boston: Albert Einstein Institution, 1993).

practically impossible to arrest him. Other church leaders have applied the same tactic.

There appears to be a growing awareness that concerted efforts, if executed ‘wisely’ (their word choice), can sometimes be beneficial. For example, an organized lobbying effort helped to secure permission to rebuild churches destroyed by a hurricane. But nearly all Cuban Christians steer clear of advocacy work. Many interviewees did not believe that international pressure could have a positive effect on religious freedom.

The last four years

When Miguel Díaz-Canel took over as Cuba’s president in 2018, after 59 years of leadership by Fidel Castro and then his brother Raúl, most analysts expected continuity of the communist system.³² They also warned that the growing social discontent in Cuba, mainly related to the dire economic situation and the food and electricity shortages, would lead to an increase of social protests.³³ Indeed, in July 2021 a series of unprecedented protests erupted against the ruling Communist Party.³⁴ As expected, these protests were violently repressed and did not alter the political status quo—at least not immediately.

Under Díaz-Canel, the repression of Christians seems to have increased somewhat, especially for unregistered churches on the island. Norms such as Decree Law 370, ‘On the Computerization of Society in Cuba’, are used to interrogate, threaten and confiscate resources from anyone who disseminates unapproved information on social networks. Under this decree, exorbitant fines are imposed, often leading to non-payment and subsequent imprisonment. This regulation, in addition to limiting freedom of expression, also prohibits all religious manifestations containing content in opposition to the regime.³⁵ Between January 2020 and August 2021, the database of violent incidents of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America reported 33 arrests, three sentencing, 15 cases of physical or mental abuse and three attacks on houses of religious ministers. Worship services continue to be monitored, a situation that has worsened in the context of COVID-19.

After decades of disagreements with the CIC, seven Protestant denominations have formed the Alliance of Cuban Evangelical Churches, seeking to establish a united front against government intimidation of Christians. Their members are constantly monitored and intimidated by the regime.³⁶

32 Dennis P. Petri and Teresa Flores, ‘Country Overviews and Case Studies of Mexico, Colombia, and Cuba’, 2019, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert454dpp3>.

33 José Antonio Pastor and Dennis P. Petri, ‘Cuba: New Names, but the Same Approach’, Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, 2 April 2018, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert454dpp4>.

34 ‘Cuba Protests: Frustration at Government Runs Deep’, *BBC News*, 14 July 2021.

35 ‘Cuba and Its Decree Law 370: Annihilating Freedom of Expression on the Internet’, Reporters Without Borders, 5 July 2021.

36 ‘Evangelical Churches of Cuba Establish Their Own Alliance’, *Evangelical Focus*, 14 June 2019.