

“Religion is one thing, politics another.”<sup>1</sup>

Examining the Religiosities of Cuban Immigrants in Montreal

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<sup>1</sup> Castro. May Day Celebration (1961): Cuba is a Socialist Nation, *Castro Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1961/05/01.htm>.

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**ABSTRACT****“Religion is one thing, politics another:”****Examining the Religiosities of Cuban Immigrants in Montreal****Silvana Morales-Boiardi**

This thesis examines the impact of Fidel Castro’s regime on the religious lives of Cuban immigrants currently residing in Montreal. Outlining a history of the socio-political milieu which allowed Castro to come to power, as well as the subsequent regime he instituted for nearly sixty years, this project focuses on the impact of Castro’s restrictive policies on religious practice throughout the island. By conducting life story interviews with ten Cuban immigrants who now call Montreal home, this paper argues that the Revolutionary government’s oppression of religious practice throughout the island produced religious illiteracy among the population due to a severe lack of religious education coupled with laws forbidding religious practice. To define religious illiteracy among the interlocutors, I move away from discussing a general lack of religious knowledge, as some do have knowledge about religion to a certain degree, especially in regards to their own religion. Instead, I am referring to a lack of comfort and a lack of breadth of knowledge which, in turn, manifests as intolerance against certain religions, continuing the anti-religious stance of the Cuban Revolutionary government, regardless of the interlocutors’ political views towards the State. Engaging with scholars who have focused on the intersection between migration stories and oral histories, as well as scholars whose works problematize or explore the religious diversity of Montreal, I aim to bring the religious plurality of Montreal and Cuba in conversation with the comparative experiences that emerge from the interlocutors’ respective migrations to Canada. Also working with scholars who have focused on the tempestuous relationship between religion (the Catholic Church, Protestant Christianity, and Afro-Cuban religions) and the Revolutionary government, this paper concludes by considering the interlocutors’ perspectives of Montreal as a religiously diverse city as well as the impact of living in such a space on their understandings of religion(s), their personal religious practices, and beliefs.

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“Religion is one thing, politics another.”

## Examining the Religiosities of Cuban Immigrants in Montreal

### Chapter One: Introduction

“We never learned anything about religion. It wasn’t allowed. Why do you ask?” My father sat at the kitchen table, slicing cheddar and guava paste. Placing layers of cheese and fruit on crackers, the snack he had prepared was a staple in a Cuban household. He slid the plate across to me so we could share. “Don’t eat them all!” he scowled. I laughed before continuing my investigation. My father could be chatty when he felt like it, and today was one of those days. Occupied with his culinary task, my father sliced and sliced as he remembered his childhood in Cuba. “Religion being practiced? No.” He shook his head. “People who believed in religion did so in secret. Being religious was practically a crime.” Born with the 1959 triumph of the Cuban Revolution, my father experienced Fidel Castro’s rise to power, as well as the subsequent policies he implemented throughout the different facets of Cuban daily life. What shaped my father most was the education system put into place by the Revolutionary government, which emphasized Marxist-Leninist ideals while simultaneously forbidding any sort of religious education. Finishing the last of his snack, he wiped his hands on a napkin and crumpled it up into a ball before continuing: “We didn’t know anything about religion. I don’t know anything about religion now.” My father’s words addressed an important concern regarding the link between religious education and religious literacy. His experience was the catalyst for this thesis, leading me to question how the prohibition of religious education impacted the religious literacy of the Cuban population.

This thesis examines the impact of Fidel Castro’s government on the religious lives of Cuban immigrants currently residing in Montreal. Outlining a history of the socio-political milieu which allowed Castro to come to power, as well as the subsequent regime he instituted for nearly sixty years, this project focuses on the impact of Castro’s restrictive policies on religious practice throughout the island. By conducting life story interviews with ten Cuban immigrants who now call Montreal home, this paper argues that the Revolutionary government’s oppression of religion throughout the island produced religious illiteracy among the population. This religious illiteracy was due to a severe lack of religious education coupled with laws forbidding religious practice. To define religious illiteracy among the interlocutors, I move away from discussing a general lack of religious knowledge, as some do have knowledge about religion to a certain degree, especially in regards to their own religions. Instead, I am referring to a lack of comfort and a lack of breadth of knowledge which, in turn, manifests as intolerance against certain religions, continuing the anti-religious stance of the Cuban Revolutionary government, regardless of the interlocutors’ political views towards the State. Engaging with scholars who

have focused on the intersection between migration stories and oral histories, I aim to bring the religious plurality of Montreal and Cuba in conversation with the comparative experiences that emerge from the interlocutors' respective migrations to Canada. Also working with scholars who have focused on the tempestuous relationship between religion and the Revolutionary government, this paper concludes by considering the interlocutors' perspectives of Montreal as a religiously diverse city as well as the impact of living in such a space on their understandings of religion(s), their personal religious practices, and beliefs. On a larger scale, this thesis highlights the consequences of a government's harsh regulations on the religious lives of its population. It examines the implications of sanctioning such measures on its people, namely in the way said measures produced religious illiteracy in the population by stripping people of their ability to not only practice their faith, but to also receive proper religious educations and understand religiosity.

My research was driven by questions about two main themes: religious practice and freedom. Primarily, I was curious to examine in what ways a government's censorship of religious practice would impact each interlocutor's religious beliefs and practices. Anticipating different experiences among the interlocutors, I also explore if (and how) this censorship was restrictive for both religious people and atheists. As the interviews focus on the interlocutors' lives in both Cuba and Canada, the subject of family was bound to come up. With this in mind, the impact of the Revolutionary government's restrictions on familial networks and extra-familial relations was also considered. Since the two main themes of my research focus on questions on religious practice and freedom, the lack of freedom to practice religion was the driving question behind the research. I therefore questioned the ways in which Castro's governmental oppression impacted the interlocutors' abilities to not only practice their faith freely, but also to be religiously literate. The question of religious literacy was also considered when discussing interlocutors' respective immigrations to Canada, asking in what ways did their moving to a multicultural city such as Montreal impact their understanding of other religions and cultures. Specifically, did having access to other religious communities as well as the media impact their religious literacy in any way? Lastly, my research questioned if and how the interlocutors' religious beliefs and practices shifted over time and place, as well as if their settlement in Canada played any role in any shift in religious practice and belief.

### I. Brief Summary of Findings

What this project revealed was a group of men whose religious lives had been severely affected under the Castro government. While the interlocutors varied in terms of ethnic heritage, class, political ideology, geographical region, and religion, all agreed that religion was an extremely sensitive and taboo subject during their lives in Cuba. To briefly summarize my findings, interlocutors emphasized that there was a clear prohibition when it came to discussing religion in schools or in places of work in Castro's Cuba. All recalled sentiments of suspicion and distrust from government officials towards religion, however, many recalled religious beliefs and practices still persisting in their communities, albeit behind closed doors. Interlocutors

expressed emotional and material consequences from being forbidden to speak on or engage with religion publicly, such as not being able to learn about their own or others' religious beliefs and practices in an environment that fostered religious literacy. They also felt they had to choose between their faith and their ability to work in certain fields or participate in politics. Some likened Marxism to religion, noting that Castro's near total religion ban had only served to replace religion with his Marxist-Leninist ideologies. The interlocutors also noted that tensions between religion and the government have eased over the last two decades. Those who have returned to Cuba over the years have witnessed religion flourish. Some of the interlocutors cited the first papal visit in 1998 as smoothing the relations between religion (namely, the Catholic faith) and the Castro government.

In terms of their personal religious lives, this project revealed that most of the men came from Catholic backgrounds, however they each differed in terms of religiosity. Some lost ties with their faith due to Castro's crackdown on religion, while others resigned themselves to practicing in the home. Three of the interlocutors of Afro-Cuban heritage discussed their affiliation with diasporic religions such as Santería, Palo Monte (also known as Palo Mayombe), as well as Spiritism. As immigrants currently living in Montreal, most of the interlocutors pointed out a sense of gratefulness to Canada for taking them in, as well as a sense of freedom that they did not have while in Cuba. While those who do not consider themselves religious continue to not practice any religion, those who do continue to do so, albeit mainly in the home. Those who developed a sense of religiosity after their emigration to Canada pointed out that they could not have had the safety and freedom to do so back on the island. For those who practice a religion, the domestic sphere acts a central role in their religious lives, whether it consists of prayer or physical rituals. Some of the interlocutors cited this as being due to religious practice being forced into the confines home while they lived in Cuba.

What is more, the interlocutors all demonstrated a severe lack of religious knowledge towards other religions regardless of their religious background. I argue that this lack of religious knowledge was caused by their inability to cultivate a religious education and develop a religious literacy due to the Revolutionary government's restrictive measures on religion in Cuba. My research indicates that this was not solely the experience of individual men, but points to a greater phenomenon across a group of Cuban men born between 1948 and 1973. Several of the interlocutors cited their inability to openly talk and learn about religion under the Castro government as the reason for their lack of knowledge surrounding other religions. While some were knowledgeable when it came to their own religions, others also admitted uncertainty and ignorance towards the religion they were raised with. On a larger scale, however, the men noted that they had not learned about or encountered information on other faiths aside from whatever they had seen in the media. All of the interlocutors held especially negative sentiments towards Islam, often citing terrorist attacks, as well as the mistreatment of women that has been portrayed in the media, as the reason for dismissing the entirety of Islam as a dangerous religion. As the interlocutors were exposed to Islam upon moving to Canada, I argue that these negative



sentiments towards both the religion and its practitioners have been impacted by Quebec politics and media coverage. Several interlocutors also regarded Jehovah's Witnesses with suspicion. When pressed further, some interlocutors described the group as a "cult" or as "fanaticism," while others recalled Castro's crackdowns on Jehovah's Witnesses in Cuba as instilling this sentiment of antipathy among themselves. I therefore make the argument that the interlocutors' opinions towards Jehovah's Witnesses was directly impacted by their lives under a government who actively oppressed the religion. In the same way that interlocutors have been impacted by the Quebec government's particular depictions of Islam in public discourse, the interlocutors were impacted by the Cuban government's actions towards Jehovah's Witnesses. I therefore argue that living under particular governments impacts religious cognition in general. These interviews demonstrated a group of men whose experiences under the Castro government continue to impact how they think about and interact with other religions. While many of these men have interacted with other communities in Montreal, they have still retained some of the worldviews and habits they were instilled with during their lives in Cuba, whether it is keeping their religious practice in the privacy of their homes to maintaining opinions towards communities who were marginalized by the Cuban government.

## II. Methods and Positionality

Religion has never been a taboo dinner topic in my home. It has often been the source of heated disagreements, pointed questions, and complex discussions. During many of these dinners with my father, the subject of religion has come up time and again when recounting his life in Cuba. As a graduate student in the Department of Religions and Cultures, these discussions both allowed me to reflect on the material I learned in my university courses as well as gain insight on my father's personal experiences. My father's thoughts and questions about different religions not only further provoked my curiosity as a student of religion, but also as a daughter listening to my father remember the most poignant and often difficult moments of his life. My father, a Cuban immigrant of Afro-Indigenous descent, was barely a toddler when Castro's Revolution triumphed on January 1st, 1959. His life has therefore been irreparably marked by the Castro government. He has consistently recalled life under the Revolutionary government as intensely traumatic, marked by extreme poverty and loss of individual freedom brought on by Fidel Castro's often oppressive policies. More recently, my father has reflected on his lack of religious knowledge and non-belief in conjunction with Castro's crackdown on public displays of religion. What began as remarks about his resistance towards religion spiraled into my father describing how religion under Castro was not only looked down upon, but also often the subject of persecution and oppression. My father recalled how religion was not to be talked about in public places, such as in schools or in the workplace. He went as far as to say that those of his generation had "grown up with the trauma of being distrustful of religion, of fearing religion." This fraught relationship between religion and politics on the island of Cuba is what sparked my curiosity about the experiences of other Cuban immigrants who grew up during the height of the Revolutionary government.

This thesis is both an academic as well as a personal endeavor. To ensure that I am keeping my biases in mind while I undertake this project, as well as ensuring that they are made clear to the reader, I am engaging with a reflexive methodology in order to show how my experiences and my beliefs influence my work. Firstly, I want to emphasize that I am against the government instituted by Fidel Castro and maintained by his successors due to the government's consistent systematic human rights abuses against the Cuban population. With this in mind, I also recognize the variety of experiences under this government. When conducting my research, I was prepared to encounter ideologies, worldviews, and opinions that differ greatly from mine. It is therefore imperative that the experiences I have recounted below, while valid, do not overshadow the experiences of those who have had positive experiences under Castro's government. As the child of a Cuban immigrant whose life was drastically impacted by the Cuban Revolution, I have witnessed my father (as well as numerous family friends) wrestle with the trauma brought on by Castro's repressive measures. What is more, religion, and even sometimes, the lack thereof, has been a consistent theme in the lives of Cuban family members and friends. For people like my father, a sixty-three-year-old man who witnessed the height of the Castro regime, religion was a taboo subject, something that clashed with the Marxist ideals of the Revolution. Due to this, many grew up unable to openly practice their faith, whereas others grew up without one altogether. Religion in Cuba has also been significantly marked by the legacy of Spanish colonialism and the subsequent forced conversion of enslaved Africans and Indigenous people on the island. For families like mine, who are of Afro-Indigenous heritage, religion is both a reminder of the traditions and cultures that have been lost to colonialism as well as being a unique blend of traditions born out of a long and painful past.

The most significant part of the paper will focus on the interlocutors' respective experiences and my subsequent analysis of the information gathered during the interviews. My chosen group of interlocutors were ten men aged fifty and over. I was especially interested in speaking with a demographic that remembered the beginnings and height of the Revolutionary government. Due to the issue of access, I have chosen to focus on the experiences of men only. With my father being the Cuban immigrant, my access to the Montreal Cuban community has consisted of the friends and acquaintances he has made over the decades, both in Cuba and Montreal. These all happen to men close in age to my father, albeit from different ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds. Interlocutors were given the choice to speak to me in person, via telephone, or video call. Prior to the interviews, I prepared an interview guide with a series of questions. The guide served more as an aid rather than a checklist. My goal was to use the questions as jumping off points and follow the interlocutors' leads when it came to the discussion. I wanted them to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts with me; I did not want them to feel as though they were answering a questionnaire. The interviews usually took up to two hours, the longest one lasting three hours. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, as this was the language every interlocutor felt the most comfortable speaking. To maintain their private identities, all of the interlocutors will be referred to using pseudonyms. The reason for

this is that the men I spoke to felt more comfortable speaking about their experiences under the Revolutionary government if their identities were not made public.

### III. Overall Experience and Description of Following Chapters

When I first began drafting the outline for this project, I came to the table with the knowledge I had collected over years of learning about the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath, both as a student whose work has focused on religion in Cuba, as well as a person whose life has been shaped by her father's immigration to Canada. What I had anticipated when preparing for the interviews was to hear stories about governmental oppression towards different religions. I had gone into this project imagining that the interlocutors would speak about how the Cuban government's restrictive measures impacted their personal religious beliefs and practices, as well as the practices of those around them. In my research on the Revolutionary government's relationship with religion, scholarly sources all discussed how different religions were impacted by such harsh governmental measures, namely in terms of the ability to practice religion in public settings. When I sat down with each interlocutor and began listening to their stories, what became clear was not only the Revolutionary government's impact on religious practice, but its impact on interreligious relations. As religion in the public sphere became increasingly prohibited, the ability to interact with people of other religions in an environment that fostered religious curiosity diminished. What is more, the experiences recounted in the interviews demonstrated that the Revolutionary government's measures to impede religion contributed to their inability to develop their religious literacy both within their own faiths as well as towards the faiths of others.

What can one expect of the chapters that follow? Chapter two introduces the literature that has played such a vital role in the realization of this project. Critical sources on the history of Cuba, religious literacy, as well as the interview method used to conduct my fieldwork will be discussed in this chapter in order to reflect on how the literature connects to and informs my work. The following chapter focuses on my methodology. Here I discuss how I went about conducting my fieldwork, as well as the previous scholarship on Oral History, Migration Studies, and Ethnography I am relying on as to further develop my work. Chapter four and five dive into the historical context of Cuba. Cuba's history, more specifically, the relationship between religion(s) and politics, must be understood in order to fully grasp the experiences relayed by the interlocutors. These chapters outline Cuba's political and religious histories beginning from its colonial period (1492-1898) to the third papal visit in 2015. Cuba's history has been one of turbulence, punctuated with political unrest and the infamous Cuban Revolution (1953-1959) whose leader, Fidel Castro, led the country for nearly five decades. I further elaborate on different governments' relations with different religions on the island, focusing primarily on the Roman Catholic Church, other Christian denominations such as Jehovah's Witnesses, and Afro-Cuban diasporic religions such as Santería. I emphasize the Castro government's evolving rapport with religion over the decades, ending on the Special Period (1991-2000) and the 2015 papal visit. Chapter six focuses on the conducted interviews and my subsequent findings. It

recounts the experiences of the interlocutors, beginning with their respective childhoods through to their lives as adults in Montreal. My findings focus on how these men's religious beliefs and practices were impacted by the restrictive measures put in place by the Revolutionary government. I especially focus on how the interlocutors were capable of maintaining their religious beliefs and practices (if they harbored any) over the years, as well as whether or not they were able to expand their religious knowledge in their environment. Lastly, in chapter seven, I analyze the results of the fieldwork. My analysis focuses on the concept of religious illiteracy in conjunction with the interlocutors' abilities to think, learn, and talk about religion during their respective upbringings in Cuba. Emphasizing the necessity of religious education and religious literacy, my analysis draws on the interviews with interlocutors to explain how Castro's crackdown on religion not only impacted their ability to practice religion, but also impeded their ability to cultivate their religious knowledge towards their own and other religions, and become religiously literate.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

This chapter examines some of the most relevant sources used in this thesis. The literature discussed below has aided me to contextualize Cuba as experienced by the interlocutors and allowed me to develop my analysis on religious illiteracy as a consequence of the Revolutionary government's harsh restrictions on religion in Cuba. The literature reviewed below has also allowed me to carve out my own space in this field with my own approach to the subject.

### I. Contextualizing Cuba – Scholarship on Religion and Politics in Cuba

Understanding the historical, political, and religious context of Cuba is necessary in order to fully comprehend the extent of Castro's actions on religion's space in Cuban public life. To review all of the sources that aided in the construction of this thesis's historical timeline would be impossible. The works discussed below depict scholars in conversation with one another, whose focus on the relationship between Castro and religion throughout the decades depict a government whose aim was to suppress religion in both the public and private spheres. While these scholars focus on distinct periods in Cuba's Revolutionary history, their emphasis on Castro's complicated relationship with religion was most instrumental to this project.

Both of Margaret Crahan's articles "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization," and "Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba," have provided me with a detailed image of Cuba during the early 1960s through to the 1970s. What is more, both pieces focus on themes of the evolving functions of the Cuban Catholic Church, as well as the Church's unique and fraught relationship with the Revolutionary government. The former article provides a timeline of Castro's relationship with religion on the island. Focusing primarily on Cuba's largest religious institution, the Roman Catholic Church, Crahan also highlights the relations between the government and other religions, ranging from Protestant denominations to Afro-Cuban religions. Crahan provides an outline of the Cuban

Catholic Church's unique place in Latin America, pointing to the "unique historical and social experience of Cuba," as well as to the Church's status as Spain's missionary outpost that remained until the early 1960s.<sup>2</sup> She goes on to describe the role of religion within an institutionalized Revolution, stating that "no encouragement, support or help, would be given to any religion, nor favors requested of churches" by the government.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Crahan indicates that while freedom of belief was permitted by the government, religious groups who were deemed to be "counterrevolutionary" or "obscurantist" would not be tolerated. Ultimately, Crahan's article outlines how the Catholic Church did not feel comfortable in socialist Cuba.<sup>4</sup> She goes on to ask what the role of the Church is when existing in a society in which the government is "committed to the elimination of want and has made considerable progress in doing so," while also espousing an ideology church people reject.<sup>5</sup> This would therefore lead to increasing tensions between the government and the Church. The latter article works as a perfect companion piece to the former, expanding on the theme of the Church's evolving status in Cuba after the Revolution, culminating in a period of stasis experienced by Cuban churches at the end of the 1960s. Crahan cites this period as a result of "institutional and theological conservatism springing largely from the nature of their own, as well as Cuba's, historical development."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Crahan investigates the shifting periods of religious participation in Cuba, noting that the drop in student membership during the late 1960s to 1970s suggested that the "ideological transformation prompted by revolutionary education was having its impact on Cuban youth."<sup>7</sup> The Revolution's Marxist ideals were therefore slowly becoming incompatible with Cuban religiosity. Crahan's articles, among other scholars' works, allowed me to put together a detailed history of Cuba leading up to the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, followed by Castro's rise to power and the institution of his government. Her work serves to contextualize the political, social, and religious environments the interlocutors flourished in, setting the scene for the fruitful discussions had in the interviews.

Works such as Teresita Pedraza's "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba," as well as Jill Goldenziel's "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations", while agreeing with Crahan's work in terms of Castro's oppressive measures on religion in Cuba, focus on the theme of religious resistance and persistence on the island. Differing from Crahan, the authors do not solely focus on the Catholic Church and discuss the relations between religion and the Revolutionary government beyond the 1970s. Beginning with Pedraza, her work contextualizes tensions between religion and politics in Cuba throughout the decades after the Revolution, ending in the 1990s. Pedraza focuses on the Cuban Revolution's

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<sup>2</sup> Crahan, Margaret E. "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, no. 2 (Nov. 1985): p. 319, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/156825>.

<sup>3</sup> Crahan. "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization." p. 333.

<sup>4</sup> Crahan. "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization." p. 334.

<sup>5</sup> Crahan. "Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization." p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> Crahan, Margaret E. "Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, no. 1 (Feb. 1979): p. 156, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/165694>.

<sup>7</sup> Crahan. "Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba." p.164.

attempt to rebuild society in which a ““new man” was to be created under the guidance of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine,” and where the institution of religion was “singled out for eradication.”<sup>8</sup> Pedraza’s work focuses on the Revolutionary government’s methods to achieve these goals. In doing so, she focuses on the broad spectrum of harsh policies implemented by Cuban authorities that targeted religious groups. Pedraza then discusses the impacts of these measures on different religious groups, explaining that churches “immediately came under attack, as they presented the greatest threat to the new system due to their developed organizational infrastructures and their upper- and middle-class memberships.”<sup>9</sup> Pedraza then notes that authorities “moved against the sects, which were in open defiance of the new order,” primarily referring to the resistance of Jehovah’s Witnesses to the Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Pedraza goes on to describe the persecution of “unorganized religions and cults” under the Revolutionary government.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Pedraza describes the multitude of tactics adopted by religious groups in order to counter the government’s anti-religious efforts. Due to these measures, the author discusses how religion in its various forms continues to thrive in Cuba despite the government’s efforts to suppress it. She notes that Cuban Catholics were able to re-establish a relationship with the government with the first papal visit to the island, whereas pastors from different Protestant churches began to make their voices heard through their opposition to the embargo, or by actively seeking international humanitarian aid. Afro-Cuban “cults,” as Pedraza puts it, also grew in influence by expanding “their influence among the general population,” while members of “sects” continued to “persist in their defiance of government policies.”<sup>12</sup> Pedraza’s work, similar to Crahan’s, serves to contextualize this period in Cuba’s history in order to prepare the reader for the following experiences described by interlocutors whose religious lives were especially touched by the government’s anti-religious measures. While Pedraza’s work is especially useful to the picture I am painting of twentieth century Revolutionary Cuba, my work differs in the terminology used to describe different religious groups. Pedraza’s use of the term “sect” to describe groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well as the term “cult” to describe Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería, do not accurately represent these respective groups. These terms, especially in the context of an environment that has fostered religious persecution, are loaded terms, laced with negative connotations. As such, I do not want to risk using pejorative terms in my work, as my aim has always been to foster an environment of open-mindedness and inclusivity, as well as describe distinct religious groups as accurately and respectfully as possible.

Following the same themes as Pedraza’s work, Jill Goldenziel’s “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations” focuses on Castro’s relationship with different religious groups in Cuba, describing how religion in Cuba has persisted and flourished under the

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<sup>8</sup> Pedraza, Teresita. “This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” *Cuban Studies* (1999): p. 16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24487847>.

<sup>9</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 16.

government's oppressive restrictions. While agreeing with Pedraza on Castro's active suppression of religion, Goldenziel's work differs from Pedraza's as hers is an extension of the relations between religion and the government in Cuba, continuing into the early 2000s, whereas Pedraza's piece ends in the 1990s. Goldenziel notes that in recent years, Cuba has experienced a "dramatic flourishing of religious life."<sup>13</sup> According to Goldenziel, the fall of the Soviet Union saw the Cuban government's increase of religious liberty through the opening of the political space for both religious belief and practice. In 1991, the Cuban Communist Party removed atheism as a prerequisite for membership and one year later, Cuba amended its constitution, naming itself a secular state rather than an atheist state. Goldenziel notes how these changes have allowed religious life in Cuba to grow and flourish exponentially. She focuses on the impact these measures had on all religious denominations, noting that "from the Catholic Church to the Afro-Cuban religious societies to the Jewish and Muslim communities [all saw] increased participation in religious rites."<sup>14</sup> She therefore goes on to explore the Cuban government's sudden accommodation of religion, so antithetical to the previous decades of Cuba as an explicitly atheist and anti-religious state. She draws on original field research in Havana, arguing that "the Cuban government has strategically increased religious liberty for political gain."<sup>15</sup> She expands on this argument by looking at loopholes in U.S. sanctions and policies that have allowed aid to enter Cuba from the United States via different religious groups. This aid, in turn, ties Cuba's "religious marketplace" to its emerging economic markets. Thus, Goldenziel examines how the Cuban government has learned from the experience of other similar religious awakenings in post-Communist states, and has gone on to manage the workings of religious organizations while also permitting individual spiritual revival. The author concludes that by allowing the greater public expression of religious faith, the Cuban government has therefore opened the door to religious pluralism in Cuba, while continuing to closely monitor religious groups in order to prevent any form of political opposition.<sup>16</sup> Goldenziel's work is therefore important as it contextualizes the major shifts in political and religious Cuba following the fall of the Soviet Union. This article allows me to pave the way to examine Cuba in its present day, further contextualizing the experiences of those interlocutors who have returned to Cuba since their emigration. It also allows me to compare and contrast the differences between current religious life in Cuba, to the harsher conditions experienced by interlocutors during the height of Castro's regime.

## II. Migration Studies

While my thesis is on the fraught relationship between religion and politics in Revolutionary Cuba, it was impossible to speak to interlocutors without acknowledging the subject of immigration. All of the men I spoke to left Cuba for Canada, and did so for a plethora

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<sup>13</sup> Goldenziel, Jill I. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations." *Journal of Law and Politics* (2009): p. 179.

<sup>14</sup> Goldenziel. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations." p. 179.

<sup>15</sup> Goldenziel. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations." p. 179.

<sup>16</sup> Goldenziel. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations." pp. 179-80.

of reasons. Their status as immigrants therefore shapes their experiences and their relationships to the island. Their experiences in Canada greatly differed from their lives in Cuba, and I was curious about their reflections on religion and politics in Cuba after having lived in Canada for so long and having been exposed to multiple ethnic and religious communities. Alistair Thomson's article "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies" defines migration "to include both international and intra-national migrations."<sup>17</sup> Thomson specifies in his work that, like most oral history studies, he views the "physical passage of migration from one place to another as only one event within a migratory experience which spans old and new worlds and which continues throughout the life of the migrant and into subsequent generations."<sup>18</sup> Oral history, as mentioned here, is defined by the Oral History Association as "a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events."<sup>19</sup> As my research entailed working with immigrants whose lives have been shaped by their migratory experiences, I was interested to learn how their respective experiences continued throughout their lives as they settled into their daily lives in Canada. Furthermore, Thomson notes that migration history deals with "the processes by which migrants individually and collectively establish themselves in a new region or country," as well as the numerous ways in which "networks and lifestyles from the place of origin are recreated and changed in the new world."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the questions surrounding the interlocutors' respective migrations to Canada aimed to understand how they established themselves in their new country. Understanding the immigration process, how they felt upon their arrival in Canada, how they formed new relationships, how they found employment, and how they established religious routines was crucial in order to gain a fuller perspective on the interlocutors' lives post-Cuba. More importantly, the interviews focused on the networks and lifestyles from Cuba that were recreated and changed upon interlocutors arriving and settling in Montreal. I was especially focused on the interlocutors' religious lives; any beliefs or practices they held prior to leaving Cuba and how they have been recreated or changed due to their transplantation in Montreal. The interview questions therefore focused on these particular subjects, comparing and contrasting if and how interlocutors had to adjust their religious practices to better adapt to their new environment. Lastly, Thomson's article reminds the reader of the dangers of seeing "such communities only in terms of their migrant origins."<sup>21</sup> With this, Thomson emphasizes that in the experience of members of a particular ethnic community, "the history of migration may be less significant than the current issues within that community and concerning its relationship with the dominant culture."<sup>22</sup> While the interlocutors' migration stories were crucial to gaining a proper, fuller image of who they are as people, focusing solely on their identities and experiences as migrants

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<sup>17</sup> Thomson, Alistair. "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies." *Oral History*, no. 1 (Spring 1999): p. 24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40179591>.

<sup>18</sup> Thomson. "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies." p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> "Oral History: Defined." *Oral History Association*, <https://oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>.

<sup>20</sup> Thomson. "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies." p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Thomson. "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies." p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Thomson. "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies." p. 25.



would be an error, as it would minimize other facets of who they are, as well as important issues brought up by interlocutors. Throughout the interviews, interlocutors all brought up significant issues regarding politics and religion, as well as economical and social issues going on in Cuba, such as food and medical supply shortages on the island. Thus, striking a balance between the interlocutors' experiences as well as subjects brought up by them during interviews was crucial in order to fully comprehend both their experiences and who each of them are as people.

Engaging with a specific migrant community also entails examining shared identities among said community. Linda Shopes' "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities" was especially useful during the preparation of the interviews with the interlocutors. Shopes' article looks at "community oral history," defining a project such as this as "defined by locale, to a group of interviews with people who live in some geographically bounded place, whether an urban ethnic neighborhood, a southern mill village, or a region of midwestern farms."<sup>23</sup> Shopes also notes that the term "community" can also refer to a shared social identity. Similar to Thomson's arguments on how migration is not solely about the passage one makes, communities shared by Cuban immigrants are not solely rooted in migration, but also in settlement, as well as what might have existed before. On the one hand, my "community oral history" project focuses on people who previously lived on the island of Cuba and are now living in the city of Montreal. On the other hand, I am also focusing on their shared identities as immigrants, as well as their identities as men above the age of fifty. Moreover, Shopes' piece addresses both the practical and interpretive issues involved in using oral history to study communities, focusing first on the use of extant interviews, followed by the conduct of one's own interviews.<sup>24</sup> Aiding in my fieldwork is the second portion of this article. Shopes addresses two important points here: "ways of structuring community interviews to avoid common problems and oral history as an occasion for public history."<sup>25</sup> First, Shopes' states that one must "conceptualize a community history project around a historical problem or issue rather than a series of life-history interviews."<sup>26</sup> Shopes' reasoning for this is that these types of interviews frequently rely on "naïve assumptions about what properly constitutes history and how to approach it."<sup>27</sup> She goes on to explain that interviews are typically structured around the life histories of individual narrators, rather than around "critical questions about broad themes of social life and the peculiarities of place."<sup>28</sup> Instead, Shopes proposes that one focuses on a community's formation through the intersection of individual lives, asking: "What are the points of connection, tension, or alienation? What historical problem defines the community, and how can this problem be explored through questions to individual narrators?"<sup>29</sup> While this project

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<sup>23</sup> Shopes, Linda. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." *The Journal of American History*, no. 2 (Sept. 2002): p. 588, [https:// www.jstor.org/stable/3092177](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092177).

<sup>24</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 589.

<sup>25</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 596.

<sup>26</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 596.

<sup>27</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 590.

<sup>28</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 590.

<sup>29</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 596.

examines how the individual lives of Cuban immigrants have been impacted by the politics of religion in Cuba and Quebec, it is the politics of religion that must be the subject of study rather than the life history of a single person. Following Shopes, I center my analysis around “problems” shared by community. While the experiences recounted by the interlocutors were both valuable and meaningful, searching for the points of connection, tension, or alienation allowed me to consider the formations of community and experiences as something shared than felt individually. Rather than simply looking at the overall experiences of these men under the Revolutionary government, I built my research around the religious restrictions imposed by Castro.

Examining a migrant community’s shared identities also entails how they construct identity within the diaspora. Thomas A. Tweed’s “Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami” reflects on how displaced peoples construct diasporic identity.<sup>30</sup> Tweed discusses the meaning of the notion of a diaspora, or dispersed people, as originally used to label Jews who had been displaced from their homeland.<sup>31</sup> In recent years, the term has been extended to include other groups of people who have migrated within or across national borders. The author then notes that since the term “diaspora” seems to have interpretative power when applied to a range of experiences, it is therefore difficult to identify exactly what these dispersed peoples share. He therefore suggests that a diaspora points most fundamentally to “a group with some shared culture which lives outside the territory that it considers its native place, and whose continuing bonds with that land are crucial for its collective identity.”<sup>32</sup> He goes on to say that members of the diaspora do not need to assign themselves to the same racial, ethnic, or religious group, and also do not need to feel unaccepted in their host country. What is more, they might even feel ambivalently about, or even reject, a return to the homeland, although in many cases they may continue to be deeply concerned about its current condition and future state. Tweed also notes that the displaced share a language and appeal to common symbols, such as flags, heroes, or parades, even if they disagree or struggle among themselves over their meanings. Lastly and most importantly, Tweed notes that these migrants will symbolically construct a common past and future, using their shared symbols as a bridge between the homeland and the new land. Following Tweed’s description, the notion of diasporic identity had to be considered when conducting my fieldwork. While individual identities are important to illustrate each interlocutor’s unique experiences, engaging with a migrant community of a similar age demographic entailed picking out shared characteristics that constructed their collective diasporic identity. While the interlocutors differed in terms of ethnic, religious, political, and economic backgrounds, as migrants they were all bound by this shared identity of having lived under the Revolutionary government. Living in the diaspora, interlocutors still identified as Cuban and nearly all conveyed being concerned about or keeping

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<sup>30</sup> Tweed, Thomas A. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Tweed. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> Tweed. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*, p. 84.

up with news of Cuba. While sharing pride in being Cuban and embracing Cuban culture (such as food, music, etc.), interlocutors varied in terms of wanting to return to Cuba, ranging from conveying disinterest to ever returning to the island, to visiting the country on a yearly basis. What is more, all of the interlocutors constructed a common past and future, describing similar experiences under the Revolutionary government, while simultaneously hoping for a “free” or “liberated” Cuba. Viewing interlocutors solely as individuals who do not belong to or share an identity with a community would therefore be dismissing a core part of who they are and their experiences, as well as the uniqueness of the shared diasporic identity among Montreal Cubans.

### III. Religious Literacy – Analysis

Scholarship on religious literacy has been instrumental in the construction of my analysis. As the findings from my fieldwork demonstrated a severe lack of religious knowledge due to the inability to expand such knowledge under the Revolutionary government, the importance and necessity of promoting religious literacy plays a large role in my final analysis. The scholarship examined has described religious illiteracy as a growing concern in society. Stephen Prothero’s book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t*, both defines religious literacy and outlines its necessity in society. To define religious literacy, the author refers to it as a metaphor of sorts. Prothero states that in terms of its linguistics, “literacy refers to the ability to use a language – to read and perhaps to write it, to manipulate its vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, religious literacy refers to “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives.”<sup>34</sup> Through interviews with interlocutors, I use Prothero’s definition of religious literacy as a framework to discover the interviewees’ respective literacies in conjunction with the Revolutionary government’s crackdown on religion. My aim was not to quiz interlocutors on their knowledge of all religions, but to gain a sense of their own personal understandings of different religious groups. Examining how religious illiteracy manifested itself among the interlocutors, I move away from looking at the general lack of religious knowledge, as some interlocutors demonstrated knowledge about religion to a certain degree, especially in regards to their own religion. I am instead referring to a lack of comfort and a lack of breadth of religious knowledge which, in turn, manifested as intolerance against specific religions and continued the anti-religious stance of the Revolutionary government, regardless of the interlocutors’ political views towards the State. Furthermore, Prothero specifies that like languages, “religions are particular creatures.”<sup>35</sup> He elaborates, stating that just as it is not possible to speak language in general, one cannot be literate in every religion. Thus, I did not expect interlocutors to be religiously literate in all religions. Rather, I refer to what the author defines as specific “religious literacies,” i.e., Protestant literacy, Buddhist literacy, or Islamic literacy. I therefore examine the specific literacies interlocutors

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<sup>33</sup> Prothero, Stephen. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't* (HarperOne, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Prothero. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, p.15.

<sup>35</sup> Prothero. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, p. 15.

were themselves familiar with. Prothero argues that one needs to know something about the world's religions, that is, to be religiously literate, in order to be truly educated.<sup>36</sup> He also brings up the lack of religious education in public schools, as instead of teaching "about religion," instructors often teach "around religion." Prothero therefore urges the importance of religious education in schools, as according to him, this silence surrounding religion portrays it as being unimportant; that it has "no social, political, or historical force so students can get along just fine without knowing anything about it."<sup>37</sup> I apply Prothero's argument on educational silence to the interlocutors' experiences, focusing on how the Cuban government's silence on religion in the education system impacted their religious literacies. As the interlocutors experienced Castro's secular education system from a young age, I therefore argue that through the government's dismissal and persecution of religion in the classroom the interlocutors were not only unable to develop their religious literacies, but were essentially taught that religion was unimportant to one's knowledge, as well as being antithetical to Revolutionary ideals.

Adding on to Prothero's work is Katherine Marshall's "Education for All: where does religion come in?" acknowledging the importance of including religion in the education system. Marshall's article explores the roles religions play in meeting global education challenges, exploring "five potential avenues for action: advocacy, service delivery, pluralism-focused curricula to further religious literacy, theological training for social justice, and addressing values challenges in education."<sup>38</sup> Marshall's work examines how faith institutions often play "important but complex and often under-appreciated roles in overall global education" yet are often excluded from many influential debates.<sup>39</sup> Marshall notes how public education systems around the world have seen a dramatic shift in curriculum over the past decades, "away from one where even the primers used for the youngest children were imbued with religion, to a situation where religion is almost totally absent from the curriculum."<sup>40</sup> Religious illiteracy is a concern due to the growth of plural societies as the norm, yet according to Marshall, "relations among communities are impaired by lack of understanding across different communities."<sup>41</sup> Marshall also goes on to describe a consequence of religious illiteracy as social tensions being an almost inevitable result, due to a lack of understanding and compassion among communities.<sup>42</sup> Marshall also identifies another key concern; that is, that "many people today lack even basic knowledge of their own cultural heritage, so that they are unable to appreciate literary references and other elements of culture and identity."<sup>43</sup> In conjunction with Prothero's argument on the problem of educational silence surrounding religion, Marshall's work further examines the lack of religious

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<sup>36</sup> Prothero. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Prothero. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, p. 161.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall, Katherine. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" *Comparative Education*, no. 3 (Aug. 2010): p. 273, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27856171>.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 273.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 281.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 283.

<sup>42</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 281.

<sup>43</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 281.

education during a person's most formative years. As many of the interlocutors first experienced the Revolutionary government's anti-religion restrictions as children, Marshall's emphasis on education is relevant here as the interlocutors' government-regulated education is what inhibited their ability learn about, think about, and speak about religion in an open and nuanced manner. Interlocutors described their lack of knowledge on religion as being directly linked to both their education as well as the atmosphere fostered by the government's anti-religion sentiments. Thus, while Prothero argues that the lack of religious education can teach students that religion is not valuable or important, Marshall's work further highlights the consequences of such as negatively impacting relations among different communities. I therefore apply these arguments to my findings, claiming that tensions between the interlocutors and religious groups they view as the Other has been fueled by their inability to obtain a proper religious education.

Working in conjunction with religious literacy is the concept of the religious Other. David Smock's "Teaching about the Religious Other" has been instrumental to my work, especially in analyzing how the interlocutors discussed their views and relationships with other religious communities. Smock's work highlights how prejudice and ignorance about the beliefs and practices of the religious "other" often exacerbate conflicts. Furthermore, Smock discusses how religious stereotypes contribute to misunderstanding and the formation of animosity. Smock goes on to use concrete examples of how both prejudice and ignorance have fueled conflicts among different communities. One conclusion Smock comes to is that one antidote to "hatred between religious communities is to teach communities about the beliefs and practices of the religious other."<sup>44</sup> Smock's work has shaped mine through his emphasis of how ignorance and prejudice contribute to animosity towards the religious Other. In conjunction with the concept of religious illiteracy, I use Smock's work to analyze how the interlocutors engaged with and viewed other religious communities. While the interlocutors did not speak of any physical acts of animosity committed by them towards other religious communities, many of them did display sentiments of animosity that were often driven by prejudice and ignorance. I therefore channel Smock's emphasis on the importance of education as a means of quelling any negative sentiments towards another religious community. What the interlocutors displayed were often deeply rooted prejudices towards two specific religions: Islam and Jehovah's Witnesses. The rhetoric used by the interlocutors indicated a lack of knowledge or understanding pertaining to these two religions. When pressed about these two groups, interlocutors demonstrated minimal, if not non-existent, knowledge on the beliefs and practices of both groups. Instead, they put forward violent stereotypes and made sweeping generalizations about Islam – referring to the media's skewed portrayal of Muslims as religious extremists, violent terrorists, and oppressors of women. Their use of Islamophobic language came from both stereotypes as well as the lack of education stemming from their upbringing in an anti-religious country. What is more, Smock's article emphasizes the particular importance of teaching about the religious Other and introducing this subject in "schools, universities, and seminaries in countries where religious

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<sup>44</sup> Smock, David. "Teaching about the Religious Other." *US Institute of Peace* (2005): p. 1, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep12501>.

conflict is a significant problem.”<sup>45</sup> This is especially relevant in my analysis as the interlocutors were all quick to point out how religion was not ever discussed in schools. Moreover, the interlocutors also often pointed out the Revolutionary government’s open persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses while also agreeing with the government’s actions. Interlocutors often referred to this group as a “cult” or dismissed it as “fanaticism.” Many often evoked the Revolutionary government’s disdain towards Jehovah’s Witnesses as a reason for being distrustful towards the group, highlighting how the government’s perpetuation of popular stereotypes in conjunction with a lack of religious education left room for these attitudes to thrive. Smock’s work therefore allows me to build my own analysis and conclusions based on his existing work.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

Through a series of interviews with ten people, I investigate in which ways Castro’s near-total ban on religion was restrictive on the lives of the interlocutors, as well as how it impacted their ability to be religiously literate. This chapter lays out the methodological procedures employed in the construction of this thesis, beginning with life story interviews, following with oral history, and reflexivity.

#### I. Method: Interviews

The most important method employed in this thesis is my use of interviews in order to gather multiple personal experiences of Cuban immigrants who lived under the Castro government. As a member of the Cuban community in Montreal, as well as the daughter of a Cuban immigrant, I quickly learned that memory plays a crucial part in the community. My father and his friends have often begun their sentences with “I remember...” or “Do you remember...” when discussing their previous lives in Cuba. These memories have often been followed up with sentiments of nostalgia, and sometimes even critique of the Cuban government for being the source of destruction of the “good” things. It therefore made sense to me to interview members of the community to obtain their firsthand experiences under the Revolutionary government. With this said, heavily relying on memory comes with its share of implications. By interviewing people on their past experiences, I am accessing a place that no longer exists. Relying on memory means recognizing that a person’s recollections are not always reliable. Sometimes there are gaps in a person’s remembrances, conflicting narratives of the same event, or a change in opinion that occurs decades later. As I am not relying on my own experiences, but on the experiences of others regarding a space I cannot and will never be able to access, I must therefore work with the memories put forward by the interlocutors, no matter how disjointed or incomplete they might be. While I recognize that I cannot extract every detail of a person’s life, the memories offered by the different interlocutors functioned as pieces of a mosaic that created a complete work of art. In conjunction with migration studies, these memories also formed the social and diasporic identity shared by the interlocutors as members of the diasporic

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<sup>45</sup> Smock. “Teaching about the Religious Other.” p. 1.

Cuban community in Montreal. What is more, as discussed in the subsequent section on oral history, this mosaic of memories also contributed to the preservation and interpretation of the interlocutors' voices. My aim when conducting these interviews was to carve out a space in which the interviewees could speak about their experiences as openly as possible. I went on to reach out to ten members of the community, ranging from close family friends to strangers. My aim was to have as specific a group as possible, so I chose to speak to men above the age of fifty. In this way, the men would still have diverse backgrounds and experiences, but they could also be capable of recalling the height of Castro's government and its effects on the population. It is important to note that the interviews were conducted in Spanish, as this is the language all of the interlocutors felt the most comfortable conversing in. In this way, they could properly convey their thoughts and opinions without worrying about any potential language barrier.

In planning my interviews, I wanted to strike a balance between guiding the interview and giving interlocutors the time and space needed to discuss whatever came to mind. I therefore draw on Bauman and Greenberg Adair's "The Use of Ethnographic Interviewing to Inform Questionnaire Construction" to structure my interviews. While I did not construct a questionnaire for the interviews, I did prepare an interview guide. The guide was very much loosely followed, with a series of twenty questions that covered different periods of the interlocutors' lives as well as certain themes relating to their religious beliefs and practices, the Castro government's attitude towards religion, and the interlocutors' religious literacies. Bauman and Greenberg's paper describes different qualitative interviewing styles and identify specific ways each can contribute to constructing surveys. I especially focused on their discussion of the structured in-depth interview, as I aimed to model my approach after this when conducting the life story interviews. The authors describe this type of interview as capitalizing on the richness of qualitative open-ended responses, while also structuring the content of the interview through the use of an interview guide.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, they note that this type of interview is not "free-flowing or determined by the respondent's interests; it is focused on a specific issue or set of issues, and the guide specifies the topics that must be covered during the interview."<sup>47</sup> Thus, I structured my interviews around the lives of the interlocutors. I would begin each interview by asking them about their childhoods – i.e. "When and where were you born?" to more open-ended questions such as "Tell me about a typical day for you as a child." From there, the interlocutors would typically begin narrating their lives, usually in great detail. I would occasionally interject, asking them to expand on a certain point, or clarify another. This is described by the authors in their paper as well, noting that while this type of interview requires specific data from all respondents, it is flexible in the order of interview topics, as well as in the wording of questions and probes. During interviews, I would refer to my interview guide when exploring certain themes, such as asking the interlocutors to recall the political environment during that specific

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<sup>46</sup> Bauman, Laurie J., and Elissa Greenberg Adair. "The Use of Ethnographic Interviewing to Inform Questionnaire Construction." *Health Education Quarterly*, no. 1 (Spring 1992): p. 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45049404>.

<sup>47</sup> Bauman and Greenberg Adair. "The Use of Ethnographic Interviewing to Inform Questionnaire Construction." p. 11.

time period, the government's relationship with religion, as well as their own religious (or non-religious) upbringings.

Considering the identities of the interviewees is necessary to ensure that I am not excluding different members of the same community. Shopes proposes two important points: to define the universe of narrators broadly, as well as to approach interviews in a spirit of critical inquiry.<sup>48</sup> In terms of the former, Shopes explains that historians are usually sensitive to racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, and one would therefore expect a group of interviewees to reflect such sensitivity. She pushes this further and asks who else may have a meaningful connection to the problem at hand. Rather than solely interviewing insiders and people with a long-term relationship with a community, Shopes asks about the role of outsiders and newcomers, asking, "Who am I missing?" These questions shifted the makeup of my interviewees. While the purpose of my thesis did require the voices of insiders rather than outsiders, Shopes' work led me to think about the potential problem of homogeneity. I therefore asked myself, "Who was I missing?" As the child of a Cuban immigrant whose life under Castro was negatively impacted, my position had led me to mistakenly assume that the interlocutors would all have the same experience as my father. Upon reaching out to multiple members of the Montreal Cuban community and realizing that immigration to Canada did not necessarily equate to disagreement with the regime, I recognized a need to interview those who maintained their support for both Castro and the Cuban government while planting roots in the diaspora. Shopes' work allowed me to rethink my group of interviewees.

While I had been specific about interviewing men above the age of fifty, I had also been sensitive to include men from different socioeconomic backgrounds, different geographic locations, different ethnic heritage, and different religious backgrounds. While I had definitely considered their identities as immigrants, I had failed to consider the diversity of political stances present in the community. In terms of Shopes' point on approaching interviews with critical inquiry, she goes on to explain that this means "asking the hard questions that may cause discomfort, that address difficult or controversial topics, that may reveal ruptures in the community."<sup>49</sup> Shopes adds that the conversation may not be easy, however the result will foster a more nuanced and humane understanding of the way people live in history. Addressing difficult or controversial topics has been an obstacle for me in previous research. I have always been hesitant to push further and potentially offend an interlocutor. While I am still honing my craft as an interviewer and researcher, Shopes' points reinforced the necessity for these difficult discussions. I realized that these difficult discussions could be fruitful as long as I struck a proper balance between initiating (or following along with) a difficult discussion, and demonstrating kindness, empathy, and respect. During the interviews, I had to actively push myself out of my comfort zone. Channeling my own discomfort allowed me to take these sentiments as a sign to continue the discussion instead of sweeping a subject under the rug.

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<sup>48</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 596.

<sup>49</sup> Shopes. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." p. 597.



Other than gathering information, what was important to me was ensuring that I was both properly engaging with the interlocutors and their stories. I brought a notebook with me to jot down notes while conducting the interviews. I also chose to record the interviews in case I missed anything important. The recordings were especially useful, as I was able to play them back and discover points I had not previously taken into consideration. That being said, I did not want to use the notebook and the recording device as a crutch. I wanted to ensure that I was properly listening to the interlocutors. In “Ethnography as participant listening,” Forsey describes listening as “at least as significant as observation to ethnographers.”<sup>50</sup> Prior to engaging with interlocutors, I was hesitant to consider my fieldwork as ‘participant observation’ as I felt it did not properly encapsulate the way I wanted to conduct my interviews. Thus, simply making observations on paper was not enough. I wanted to both be immersed in the discussions while also retaining the sensitivity and reflexivity needed when approaching the conversations. As Forsey notes, an “ethnographic self consciousness” can “stimulate a sensitivity to the self-consciousness of those we study.”<sup>51</sup> This ethnographic self consciousness is what I aimed to channel when conducting my fieldwork, as sensitivity towards the interlocutors and their stories was especially crucial. I was no longer thinking of myself as a participant observer, but rather as a participant *listener*, actively involved in the discussion. This is argued by Forsey, who urges the reader to consider the importance of “listening to the ethnographic project,” as well as to “open up the possibility of placing *engaged listening* on a similar footing to participant observation in our conceptualization of ethnographic practices.”<sup>52</sup> Listening to the ethnographic project, as Forsey puts it, allowed the project to bloom on its own. Rather than forcing the project to fit into my idea of what it should be, taking a step back and listening, both to the interlocutors and to the project as it developed, allowed for it to flourish in ways I had not anticipated. Engaged listening therefore allowed me to discover hidden themes in my project, themes that would then make its way to becoming crucial to the subject of my thesis.

## II. Method: Oral History

Often working hand in hand with interviews, oral history as a method was crucial in the way I approached my fieldwork. Steven High evokes Alessandro Portelli’s definition of oral history in his “Embodied Ways of Listening: Oral History, Genocide, and the Audio Tour,” describing it as “a “dialogic discourse” that searches for connection between “biography and history; between individual experience and societal transformation.””<sup>53</sup> What is more, High notes that we find significance not only in the words spoken, but in the form and structure of oral narratives as well. My aim when conducting these interviews was to reach this connection between biography and history, as well as geography. While I researched in depth the time

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<sup>50</sup> Forsey, Martin Gerard. “Ethnography as participant listening.” *Ethnography*, no. 4 (Dec. 2010): p. 560, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24048026>.

<sup>51</sup> Forsey. “Ethnography as participant listening.” p. 560.

<sup>52</sup> Forsey. “Ethnography as participant listening.” p. 560.

<sup>53</sup> High, Steven. “Embodied Ways of Listening: Oral History, Genocide and the Audio Tour.” *Anthropologica*, no. 1 (2013): p. 74.

period leading up to, during, and following the Cuban Revolution, my goal was to highlight history from the perspective of those who lived it. Moreover, as I was not traveling to Cuba to conduct these interviews, geography played a key role in that I was relying on the interlocutors' recollections of Cuba, as well as their migration experiences from Cuba to Canada. I wanted the interlocutors to guide me through their lived experiences as well as what they were thinking throughout different points of their lives. This did not mean simply recording the interlocutors' words and taking them at face value, but rather, as High puts it, as a "catalyst for personal reflection, intercultural dialogue, and political action."<sup>54</sup> Focusing primarily on personal reflection, my aim with these interviews was to give interlocutors the space to examine their religiosities (or lack thereof), as well as any opinions or biases towards religion they may have. As described by Ivan Jaksic in "Oral History in the Americas," the most "helpful interviews are precisely those that reveal how the individual comes to terms with the experience, and what conclusions he or she derives from it."<sup>55</sup> The foci of these interviews are both the interlocutors' experiences as well as the conclusions and reflections pulled from them. While I was interested in recording what the men had done and experienced, I was especially curious about how they responded to various situations and experiences in their lives. To do so, I drew from Jaksic's work, where he discusses that scholars "must hone their interviewing skills to allow their subjects to develop their own stories."<sup>56</sup> As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, I did not want to rigorously structure my interviews. The interviews were meant to feel as natural as possible, thus, I did not want my interview guide to act as a checklist or questionnaire. While I had topics and themes in mind to discuss – the Castro regime and its relation to religion, the interlocutors' personal religious views, their immigration experiences – the interviews were set up so that the interlocutors could lead the conversation and further develop their stories. I aimed for open-ended questions, and would then follow interlocutors as they led me through their responses, memories, and opinions. Moreover, Jaksic notes that scholars must also "identify topics and areas that stand to benefit from an oral history approach."<sup>57</sup> The aforementioned subjects, such as the Castro regime and its relation to religion, the interlocutors' personal religious views, and their immigration experiences, were all identified and chosen to be studied from an oral history approach. These topics were chosen as I wanted to record the reflections of those who encountered or experienced these subjects or situations, putting the insiders' stories at the forefront of this project. Thus, I prepared the interviews with these themes in mind, while also remaining open to the myriad of possible subjects that could be uncovered through topics brought up by interlocutors.

Another especially useful source has been Stéphanie Panichelli-Batalla and Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca's "Dealing with sensitive topics in communist societies: oral history

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<sup>54</sup> High. "Embodied Ways of Listening: Oral History, Genocide and the Audio Tour." p. 74.

<sup>55</sup> Jaksic, Ivan. "Oral History in the Americas." *The Journal of American History*, no. 2 (Sep. 1992): p. 599, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2080049>.

<sup>56</sup> Jaksic. "Oral History in the Americas." p. 599.

<sup>57</sup> Jaksic. "Oral History in the Americas." p. 599.

research in and on Cuba.” Their work focuses on how researchers and participants deal with sensitive topics during the interview process. The article highlights “that any topic can be a sensitive topic when interviewing participants who have lived and still live in a communist society.”<sup>58</sup> Panichelli-Batalla and Saavedra Montes de Oca offer various reflexive perspectives on the interview process, especially focusing on how both the researcher and participant address such topics. Furthermore, the authors discuss how these approaches are later analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. As my work consists of interviews conducted with Cuban immigrants, I recognize that sensitive topics are inevitable. Many of the interlocutors interviewed discussed painful memories that came with living under the Castro government, as well as the pain and hardship that come with leaving one’s homeland behind. The reflexivity demonstrated by both Panichelli-Batalla and Saavedra Montes de Oca in their work is one I aimed to emulate in mine. The questions put forward by the authors are points I considered when conducting my fieldwork: “How are such [sensitive] topics dealt with during the interview by the researcher as well as by the interviewee? What is the impact of different approaches taken by the interviewer and the interviewee on the interview process itself? How does the dynamic construction of this relationship affect the analysis of the data at a later stage?”<sup>59</sup> More importantly, this piece highlights an important aspect of working with participants and forming relationships with them. The authors note that oral history narratives are “influenced by the relationship of trust established between researcher and participant,” and it is also “widely accepted that the researcher’s own experiences and cultural habitus will affect the way in which narratives are told and interpreted.”<sup>60</sup> My own experiences as the daughter of a Cuban immigrant living in Montreal shapes this piece of work. It is my reflexivity and ability to be aware of my biases and experiences that will ensure that I am presenting the experiences recounted by the interlocutors as authentically as possible. Panichelli-Batalla and Saavedra Montes de Oca’s emphasis on reflexivity and sensitivity when working with fraught subjects has shaped my work. In doing so, I have not only taken further care to be aware of how my own experiences and cultural habitus have affected my work, but I have also carved my own space in the field of oral history on Cuba.

### III. Method: Self-Reflexivity and Positionality

Being able to examine my own feelings and opinions, as well as being aware of my position as a researcher has played a large role in this project. As a woman of Cuban heritage, I am well aware of how fraught of a subject the Cuban Revolution is. The Revolution, as well as Fidel Castro as an individual, evoke many intense emotions in Cubans both living on the island and in the diaspora. These emotions and opinions can also be quite polarizing, occupying both

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<sup>58</sup> Panichelli-Batalla, Stéphanie, and Olga Lidia Saavedra Montes de Oca. “Dealing with sensitive topics in communist societies: oral history research in and on Cuba.” *Oral History*, no. 2 (Autumn 2017): p. 31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26382598>.

<sup>59</sup> Panichelli-Batalla and Saavedra Montes de Oca. “Dealing with sensitive topics in communist societies: oral history research in and on Cuba.” p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> Panichelli-Batalla and Saavedra Montes de Oca. “Dealing with sensitive topics in communist societies: oral history research in and on Cuba.” p. 31.

ends of one spectrum. From a personal perspective, I have witnessed these opinions tear families in two: one side choosing the Revolution and its core values, the other demonizing the same thing their loved ones adhere themselves to. With that being said, I recognized that my father, who fled the island in 1993, fell on the latter end of that spectrum. Thus, my upbringing was very much shaped by his experiences in Cuba, as he often recounted the human rights violations he witnessed growing up on the western end of the island. My father's experiences made me view the Revolution, and subsequently Castro, through a critical lens. Furthermore, my own experiences during the numerous periods of time I spent visiting Cuba only reinforced my critiques of the government. While my family members have never openly discussed their political views due to the fear of anyone potentially listening in, I watched (and even shared) their frustrations at food shortages, never-ending power outages, and the lack of basic healthcare resources. The older I got, the more curious I was about the history of Cuba and its infamous Revolution. While I valued my father's opinions and experiences, I also wanted to conduct my own research and receive a more nuanced version of Cuba's history. I wanted to understand the Revolution from the perspective of its supporters, even if I did not necessarily share their views. When I developed the idea to research the Cuban immigrant community in Montreal for this thesis, both my positionality and reflexivity were pulled to the forefront. My experiences, opinions, and position as a member of the community needed to be taken into consideration and dissected in order to examine if and how they would be shaping this project. What is more, my position as both an insider in the community as well as researcher needed to be taken into account as well. I therefore had to ask myself: What knowledge would my position as a member of the Montreal Cuban community produce? Would my position as a researcher produce different knowledge? Did my being a woman affect the way the men interacted with me? I also had to consider my religious and ethnic backgrounds. As I was raised in an interfaith household where both Roman Catholicism and Cuban Santería were present, I questioned how these religions would impact my work. Would me being of a certain religious background affect the way interlocutors interacted with me? Would my Indigenous and Afro-Cuban heritage also have an impact? In a similar vein, would my white-presenting appearance contribute to interactions with interlocutors in any way? These questions were all examined prior, during, and after the research was conducted.

Both reflexivity and positionality were essential to the construction of this thesis. Described by Ping-Chun Hsiung in "Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing," reflexivity is "central to debates on subjectivity, objectivity, and, ultimately, the scientific foundation of social science knowledge and research."<sup>61</sup> She defines reflexivity as a "process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how his or her research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter into their research."<sup>62</sup> Reflexivity is imperative to qualitative research because it "conceptualizes the researcher as an active

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<sup>61</sup> Hsiung, Ping-Chun. "Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing." *Teaching Sociology*, no. 3 (Jul. 2008): p. 211, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20491240>.

<sup>62</sup> Hsiung, Ping-Chun. "Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing." p. 212.

participant in knowledge reproduction rather than as a neutral bystander.”<sup>63</sup> The main objective when being reflexive in qualitative research is to “acknowledge and interrogate the constitutive role of the researcher in research design, data collection, analysis, and knowledge production.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, my position as a researcher cannot be minimized. While the focal point of my work is, of course, the data drawn from interviews with the ten interlocutors, my role as the researcher must also be examined as it contributes to the construction of the thesis as a whole. Reflexivity, as described by Hsiung, calls for the examination of one’s experiences and “conceptual baggage,” meaning the interconnections between a researcher’s “intellectual assumptions; subject location(s) in relation to class, race, sexuality, gender, and so on; and beliefs or emotions.”<sup>65</sup> All of these aspects of a researcher’s beliefs or identity ultimately combine to impact both the nature and the outcome of a qualitative interview. While preparing for and conducting my research, I examined both my experiences and “conceptual baggage.” Doing so meant critically analyzing different facets of my identity, as well as my experiences, to determine how they would or could impact my research. Philip Carl Salzman further expands on reflexivity and positionality in his piece, “On Reflexivity,” noting that reflexivity provides the reader of an ethnographic study with information that is necessary to assess the report.<sup>66</sup> Thus, informing the reader on the “position” of the researcher allows them to view both the angle and view from which the researcher’s findings emerged from. This was especially relevant to my work, as I wanted readers to not only be aware of my position, but to also be aware of my views in order to gain a deeper understanding of how this project was developed.

Other than understanding how my positionality can impact my interactions with interlocutors while conducting research, I also had to consider how my position as a member of the community and as a researcher would affect my access to them. Sezer İdil Göğüş writes in “‘Puzzling’ Moments in the Field: Dilemmas of Positionality and Self-Reflexivity,” that factors that form a researcher’s identity, such as gender, age, education, or ethnicity, can influence accessing the field. With this in mind, this does not necessarily mean that such factors are a “universal key to open all doors for the researcher,” as they can sometimes open doors, or at other times, close them.<sup>67</sup> I therefore had to evaluate how multiple factors – my insider status in the community, the fact that I was born and raised outside of Cuba, my gender, ethnic heritage, age, and religious background – were either instrumental or detrimental in accessing the field. While my status as an insider, as well as my ability to speak Spanish fluently, gave me an advantage when contacting potential interlocutors, my position as a researcher sometimes made people hesitant to speak to me. While I explained that they would remain anonymous upon publishing my results, several of the men I contacted, including family friends, were still

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<sup>63</sup> Hsiung, Ping-Chun. “Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing.” p. 212.

<sup>64</sup> Hsiung, Ping-Chun. “Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing.” p. 212.

<sup>65</sup> Hsiung, Ping-Chun. “Teaching Reflexivity in Qualitative Interviewing.” p. 212.

<sup>66</sup> Salzman, Philip Carl. “On Reflexivity.” *American Anthropologist*, no. 3 (Sept. 2002): p. 808, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3567258>.

<sup>67</sup> İdil Göğüş, Sezer. “‘Puzzling’ Moments in the Field: Dilemmas of Positionality and Self-Reflexivity.” *Peace Research Institute Frankfurt* (2019): p.1, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep19889>.

uncomfortable with speaking on the record about their experiences under the Revolutionary government. Many were forthcoming about their experiences off the record, but declined to participate in the study as they feared repercussions on behalf of the Cuban government. Thus, my position was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, my fluency in Spanish, my knowledge of Cuban culture, including local religion, allowed the interlocutors to feel more comfortable discussing aspects of Cuban culture with someone who was more than familiar with it.

On the other hand, while many of the men I spoke to felt comfortable speaking to me as an insider, they often pointed out the difference between someone who was born in Cuba versus someone who had been born in the diaspora. Ultimately, I, according to some of the men I spoke to, could not grasp the full extent of what they had experienced because I had grown up in Canada and had not experienced the Castro government. My gender, ethnic heritage, and religious background did not seem to impact the way interlocutors interacted with me because of my position as an insider. Overall, interlocutors spoke to me as another member of the community, regardless of where they sat on the political spectrum. While most of the men I spoke with were opposed to the Revolutionary government and held feelings of animosity and resentment towards it, those who sat on the opposite side were equally forthcoming about their support of the government. Hearing positive stories challenged me most, as I had made the error of anticipating only negative experiences. Instead, hearing positive comments about the Revolutionary government caused me to check my biases and misconceptions. These experiences further highlighted the diversity of the Cuban community, as well as the numerous reasons why people choose to leave their homelands behind.

The methods described in this chapter have all been indispensable to the construction of this thesis. The interview method has functioned as the primary method in conducting my research. With this method I have been able to hone my skills as an interviewer and organize an interview process that is both guided by myself as an interviewer, while also giving interlocutors the space and comfort to lead the conversation as they see fit. Oral history functioned in conjunction with the interview method, allowing me to structure my interviews with certain specific themes in mind. Moreover, oral history has taught me to be more mindful and receptive to the needs and stories of the interlocutors. This went hand in hand with self-reflexivity and positionality as methods, which taught me to be critical of my own experiences and biases in order to be aware of how they impacted my research, as well as my relationship with interlocutors.

#### Chapter Four: Political Context

Prior to engaging with the interlocutors and their stories, it is crucial to understand the island of Cuba's political and religious contexts. More importantly, it is important to know how the two have intersected, clashed, and coexisted over the decades. This chapter outlines a brief history of the island's religions and politics. While it is by no means a complete and definitive

history of Cuba, it sets the scene for the context in which the interlocutors lived in for most of their lives.

### I. Indigenous Cuba and Columbus

Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean Sea, with a total area of almost 111 thousand square kilometers. With a current population of over eleven million inhabitants, Cuba's capital city, Havana, holds over two million of the island's overall population. When Christopher Columbus reached the northeastern coast of Cuba on October 28, 1492, he described the island as "the most beautiful that eyes have seen."<sup>68</sup> Though the Indigenous Taíno Columbus encountered referred to the island as Cuba or Cubanacán, Columbus first believed that he had landed in Cipangu, the name Marco Polo had given to Japan, and then Cathay, mainland China. The island did not provide him with bountiful sources of silver and gold, and thirty-eight days after his arrival on the island, Columbus sailed off in search of more land and gold. He wrote to his royal Spanish patrons and emphasized other forms of wealth found on the island, such as the land's natural beauty, as well as the "Indians" whose souls were in need of salvation. From Cuba, Columbus then traveled to Hispaniola, establishing Europe's first permanent settlement there and naming it Navidad. He then returned to Spain, bringing with him gold samples and six Indigenous people.

During his second expedition, Columbus returned to Hispaniola and then traveled to Cuba, exploring the island's Southern coast.<sup>69</sup> Returning to Hispaniola once again, Ferrer notes that it was here that the first phase of "European conquest and colonization of the Americas unfolded in earnest."<sup>70</sup> Internal rivalries developed among Spanish settlers over gold, whereas the relations between the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples soured due to the forced labor of Indigenous people in mines. The results of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean were devastating to the Indigenous peoples. By 1540, the Taíno population had been decimated.<sup>71</sup> The active participation in the destruction of the Taínos by the Europeans by both direct killing as well as "in that more enduring subjugation characterized as "conversion" to "civilization," sped up the process that ensured cultural, political, and economic destruction of the population.<sup>72</sup> By destroying the culture, colonizers destroyed the lives of the Taínos by denying them access to food, traditional medicines, and cultural/religious ceremonies, weakening them from the inside out. Diseases from the Old World such as smallpox, measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague, typhus, and malaria, severely impacted the Indigenous population as they were

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<sup>68</sup> Ferrer, Ada. *Cuba: An American History*, (Scribner, 2022), p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> Freeland, Mark, and Tink Tinker. "Thief, Slave Trader, Murderer: Christopher Columbus and Caribbean Population Decline." *Wicazo Sa Review*, no. 1 (2008): p. 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30131245>.

<sup>72</sup> Freeland and Tinker. "Thief, Slave Trader, Murderer: Christopher Columbus and Caribbean Population Decline." p. 37.

not immunologically prepared for such illnesses.<sup>73</sup> Reduced physical and emotional resistance to disease due to the conditions of slavery imposed on the Taínos further contributed to the decline in population.<sup>74</sup> According to Tinker and Freeland, the cycle of violence that had been intentionally created to maximize the extraction of wealth from islands such as Cuba, in conjunction with diseases that were introduced to the Taínos by colonizers, would together promote the genocide of the Indigenous group.<sup>75</sup> The significant decrease in the Indigenous population meant that the labor supply was dwindling rapidly. With this, colonizers began traveling to nearby islands such as Cuba and the Bahamas, stealing people in order to increase the workforce in the mines.<sup>76</sup> When the gold and enslaved workers were not enough for the settlers, colonizers then set their sights on islands such as Cuba. According to Ferrer, it was then that the conquest and colonization of Cuba began.<sup>77</sup> In 1511, Diego Velázquez, founded the first settlement on the island and named it Nuestra Señora de la Asunción (named Baracoa by the Taíno). In four years, he had established seven towns which initially prospered under the Spanish crown: Baracoa, Bayamo, Santiago, Trinidad, Camagüey, Sancti Spíritus, and Havana.<sup>78</sup> Velázquez ordered the planting of crops, as well as the building of churches, gold mines, and a smelting plant to process ore. These were all planted and built by the Taíno. As the Indigenous population continued to dwindle, colonizers would then turn to the transatlantic slave trade.

## II. Cuba and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

The forced migration of Africans to Caribbean islands such as Cuba contributed to the Spanish Crown's wealth. Cuba was one of the first colonial societies to establish slavery in the early sixteenth century.<sup>79</sup> While the Indigenous population on the island was the first to be enslaved by Spanish colonizers during the period after Columbus's travels, by the 1550s only those of African descent could be enslaved according to law.<sup>80</sup> The first large-scale introduction of enslaved Africans to the island occurred in 1524, when, according to Corwin, "permission was granted to import three hundred Africans to work the Jagua gold mines."<sup>81</sup> Later in 1550, "because of the laziness of Cubans," who resisted all kinds of work, an exclusive privilege was given by the crown to import African slaves" to aid in the cultivation of both tobacco and sugar

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<sup>73</sup> Nunn, Nathan, and Nancy Qian. "The Columbian Exchange: A History of Disease, Food, and Ideas." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, no. 2 (2010): pp.165, [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/nunn/files/nunn\\_qian\\_jep\\_2010.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/nunn/files/nunn_qian_jep_2010.pdf).

<sup>74</sup> Freeland and Tinker. "Thief, Slave Trader, Murderer: Christopher Columbus and Caribbean Population Decline." p. 36.

<sup>75</sup> Freeland and Tinker. "Thief, Slave Trader, Murderer: Christopher Columbus and Caribbean Population Decline." p. 37.

<sup>76</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 19.

<sup>79</sup> Bergad, Laird W. *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United States* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. xii.

<sup>80</sup> Bergad. *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United State*, p. xi.

<sup>80</sup> Corwin, Arthur F. *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817–1886*, p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> Corwin, Arthur F. *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817–1886*, p. 9.



cane.<sup>82</sup> 1790 was the first year of the ‘open’ Spanish slave trade functioning under the “cédula”<sup>83</sup> of 1789.<sup>84</sup> In Cuba, slavery spread to nearly every region, becoming in many areas the principal labor system employed by both rural and urban elites.<sup>85</sup> With the rapidly growing number of enslaved Africans, sugar mills grew exponentially across the island, and by 1830, Cuba was producing more sugar than anywhere else on earth.<sup>86</sup> As the demand for labour increased significantly, more Africans were brought in to meet the demands. With the slave trade open to all, as well as the barbaric working conditions, plantation owners worked enslaved people to death, knowing that they could easily be replaced. Long after slavery had been abolished elsewhere in the Americas, it continued to thrive in Cuba until the 1880s.<sup>87</sup> A series of internal and external factors, such as revolts erupting on plantations throughout the island and growing anti-colonial movements, caused political elites to end the institution of slavery officially in 1886.

### III. Cuban Independence and Republican Cuba

On October 10, 1868, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a slaveholder and sugar planter, committed an act that announced the end of Spain’s colonial rule on Cuba.<sup>88</sup> Freeing all of the enslaved people on his plantation, he urged them to join him in helping “conquer the liberty and independence” of the island.<sup>89</sup> The success of this first rebellion would be the start of the first Cuban War of Independence, also known as the Ten Years’ War. During the first few years of the war, Cuban rebels fought a guerrilla war against the Spanish colonial forces. Fighting continued, however the rebels were unable to expand throughout the greater territory of the island or keep up with the intense pressure of the war.<sup>90</sup> On February 10, 1878, the Pact of Zanjón was signed, the armistice leading to the end of the Ten Years’ War. One by one, the Cuban rebel forces throughout the island surrendered. Despite the end of the first Cuban War of Independence, turmoil continued to grow on the island. With the end of the conflict, there were two branches of leadership: those who had accepted peace under Spain over Cuban independence and abolition, and those who continued to support war until both full independence and emancipation occurred.<sup>91</sup> Tensions continued to persist until August of 1879, eighteen months after the end of the Ten Years’ War, when a second war of independence erupted.<sup>92</sup> Known as the Little War, this War of Independence was a continuation of its predecessor, with

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<sup>82</sup> Corwin. *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817–1886*, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Royal Cédula de Gracias de 1789 (The Royal Decree of Graces of 1789) were new slave-holding laws issued to Caribbean territories.

<sup>84</sup> Murray, D. R. “Statistics of the Slave Trade to Cuba, 1790-1867.” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, no. 2, (Nov. 1971), p. 131, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/156557>.

<sup>85</sup> Bergad. *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United State*, p. xii.

<sup>86</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 70.

<sup>87</sup> Bergad. *The Comparative Histories of Slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the United State*, p. xiii.

<sup>88</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 129.

<sup>89</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 129.

<sup>90</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 134.

<sup>91</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 135.

<sup>92</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 136.

its goals once again being independence and emancipation. In June 1880, the rebel leaders entered into negotiations with the Spanish governor. The war ended not with independence from Spain, but with the abolition of slavery across the island. The struggle for independence continued, culminating in the United States declaring war on Spain in 1898.<sup>93</sup> With American intervention in Cuba, by December 1898 representatives of both Spain and the United States had met in Paris to sign the treaty that would result in the end of Spanish colonial rule in Cuba.<sup>94</sup> The Treaty of Paris would therefore be the beginning of the United States' occupation of Cuba that would last until 1902.

Under the signing of the Platt Amendment, May 20, 1902 saw the arrival of the first Cuba president, Tomás Estrada Palma.<sup>95</sup> The Platt Amendment had cemented relations between Cuba and the United States, and with time, American companies entered the island, purchasing land and selling it to American buyers.<sup>96</sup> What is more, the United States began taking control of the sugar industry in Cuba, with most of the American investment in sugar focusing on the eastern regions of the island.<sup>97</sup> By 1925, nineteen of the twenty most active sugar mills on the island were U.S. owned.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the reduced tariffs on American products entering the island meant that cheap manufactured American goods filled the Cuban market, making it practically impossible for Cuban business to flourish.<sup>99</sup> This led to the shutting down of hundreds of Cuban-owned companies throughout the island, making it difficult for the Cuban Republican government to diversify and industrialize the national economy.<sup>100</sup> Under President Mario Menocal, World War I caused Cuba's sugar economy to be in extremely high demand, leading to extremely high profits.<sup>101</sup> What is more, Postwar Cuba continued to increase American influence on the island. After the war, Americans began traveling to Cuba more and more, growing tourism in Cuba.<sup>102</sup> According to Ferrer, "gambling, drinking, everything seemed to be legal in Cuba," as the island was transformed into "a playground for American tourists."<sup>103</sup> Fast-forwarding through the Republican Period, under President Gerardo Machado the island experienced a darker period. Machado "expanded the government's repressive capacity," setting up both torture specialists and a government death squad.<sup>104</sup> The government-sanctioned violence culminated in several attempts on Machado's life, as well as rumors surrounding the explosion of a full-blown revolution.<sup>105</sup> By August 13, 1933, Machado had fled the island. As the Republican Period progressed, Fulgencio Batista, a stenographer turned general in chief, gained

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<sup>93</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 153.

<sup>94</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 165.

<sup>95</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 185.

<sup>96</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 187.

<sup>97</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 188.

<sup>98</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 189.

<sup>99</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 191.

<sup>100</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 192.

<sup>101</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 217.

<sup>102</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 219.

<sup>103</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 221.

<sup>104</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 229.

<sup>105</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 230.

political power.<sup>106</sup> On the first day of his presidency on October 10, 1940, the republic's new constitution went into full effect.<sup>107</sup> For the first time in Cuban history, Cuba would have a constitution that had been drafted and signed without the presence of an outside governor. Corruption followed Batista during his term, as well as during the following presidencies, as each president skimmed money from government budgets and collaborated with the American mafia.<sup>108</sup> In 1952, Batista organized a coup d'état, taking control of the island and beginning a U.S.-backed military dictatorship that would last until 1959, when he would be overthrown by the Cuban Revolution.

#### IV. The Cuban Revolution

Among those condemning Batista's coup was Fidel Castro. In 1952, Castro brought a lawsuit against Batista.<sup>109</sup> The case brought up every single one of Batista's violations of the 1940 Constitution, seeking the maximum sentence for each one, or a total of more than one hundred years in prison. The case ultimately went nowhere, and Castro then went on to plan the Moncada barracks attack on July 26, 1953. This military barracks in Santiago de Cuba became the site of an armed attack by Castro's small group of guerrilla fighters.<sup>110</sup> The government's response to the Moncada attack was especially violent, retaliating by torturing and executing the rebels who had participated in it.<sup>111</sup> This attack, while a failure, would become "the initial defeat that in hindsight proceeded inexorably to triumph."<sup>112</sup> In 1955, Castro used the date of the Moncada attack to name his revolutionary movement – the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement. In the time following the attack, Castro continued to thrive in the court of public opinion, with the public growing increasingly anti-Batista as the revolution persisted. After Castro's arrest, he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for his crimes, and he served out his sentence at the Presidio Modelo jail in the Isle of Pines.<sup>113</sup> During his time in prison, Castro read. Reading about Cuba and about contemporary politics, he used this time to think about and plan what he would do once liberated.<sup>114</sup> Released from prison early in 1955, Castro, along with others imprisoned for the Moncada barracks attack, were pardoned by Batista.<sup>115</sup> In the meantime, supporters of Castro and opposers to Batista protested in the streets, further intensifying state-sanctioned violence by Batista. As this went on, Castro was in eastern Cuba, organizing an insurrection against the government. In 1957, in La Plata, Castro's rebels in the mountains won their first victory, and a second followed five days later, beginning a full-on war against Batista's army. Castro and the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement continuously gained on Batista's army, with more and more people

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<sup>106</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 249.

<sup>107</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 258.

<sup>108</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 261.

<sup>109</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 271.

<sup>110</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 279.

<sup>111</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 280.

<sup>112</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 279.

<sup>113</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 282.

<sup>114</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 284.

<sup>115</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 289.

joining the rebel forces by the day.<sup>116</sup> Batista, on the other hand, could not maintain peace on the island regardless of what he did. As the situation grew more volatile and the violence escalated further, the president of Cuba was at a loss. By New Years' Eve in 1958, Batista had fled the island of Cuba. Castro then took position as the new leader of Cuba, ruling the island until 2008.

This chapter has provided a brief timeline of Cuba's political history. In doing so, this chapter contextualizes the following chapter on Cuba's religious history, as it has explained the plurality of identities and cultures present on the island, as well as the turbulent nature of Cuba's political past. By laying out a history of Cuba's political milieu, it allows one to comprehend Cuba's successive colonialisms and the impact they have had both on religion and politics, as well as Castro's ascent to power and his subsequent legislative measures towards religion on the island.

## Chapter Five: Religious Context

### I. Religion in the Colonial Period

The general religious context of Cuba largely consists of the Roman Catholic Church, other Christian denominations, and Afro-Cuban religions. Beginning with the Catholic Church, it is important to note that while the Church in Cuba has been understood as one of the weakest in all of Latin America, it has played the largest role in Cuban politics.<sup>117</sup> Catholicism itself was introduced into the island with the arrival of Christopher Columbus.<sup>118</sup> According to Crahan, the transformation of the island into "a way-station or staging area for expeditions to the more heavily populated mainland colonies meant that it became of secondary, or even tertiary, importance to colonial authorities both civil and ecclesiastical."<sup>119</sup> During the colonial period, the Church suffered due to Spain's treatment of the island as a "colonial backwater dumping ground for miscreant clerics."<sup>120</sup> The colonial period also saw the forced immigration of millions of enslaved Africans to the island.<sup>121</sup> This led to multiple forms of evangelisation of enslaved people on the island.<sup>122</sup> These forms ultimately depended on the economic needs and beliefs of the Spanish. According to Patricia González Gómez-Cásseres Spanish chronicles demonstrated that indoctrination in Cuba was not always taken seriously.<sup>123</sup> Thus, ethnic groups originating from Nigeria, Angola, and the Congo brought along religious practices and beliefs that would lead to the birth of various religious groups such as Santería, Palo Monte, and the Abakuá.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ferrer. *Cuba: An American History*, p. 309.

<sup>117</sup> Crahan, Margaret E. "Catholicism in Cuba." *Cuban Studies* (1989): p. 4, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24487075>.

<sup>118</sup> Crahan. "Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba." p.159.

<sup>119</sup> Crahan. "Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba." p.159.

<sup>120</sup> Crahan. "Catholicism in Cuba." p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 18.

<sup>122</sup> González Gómez-Cásseres, Patricia. "Afro-Cuban Religions: Spiritual Marronage and Resistance." *Social and Economic Studies*, no. 1 (Mar. 2018): p. 122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45174653>.

<sup>123</sup> González Gómez-Cásseres. "Afro-Cuban Religions: Spiritual Marronage and Resistance." p. 122.

<sup>124</sup> Goldenziel. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations." pp. 183.

These groups flourished under plantation owners with lax religious rules; while many plantation owners paid the Catholic Church for each visit from a priest, others did the same to prevent religious visits.<sup>125</sup> In doing so, indoctrination was completely avoided while also allowing plantation owners to accumulate bigger profits.

As “slave religions,” practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions were excluded from societal discourse, and the practice of such religions remained illegal even after the abolishment of slavery in 1886.<sup>126</sup> Lax religious guidance, however, as well as the late participation in the slave trade, the formation of “cabildos,”<sup>127</sup> and the sole focus of large plantations on production all fueled the survival of African religious beliefs on the island.<sup>128</sup> Afro-Cuban religions also thrived due to secrecy, as resigning religious rituals to the safety of the domestic sphere allowed practitioners to preserve forbidden practices. Furthermore, the masquerading of traditional African religious practices as Catholic rituals allowed believers to publicly share and celebrate their religions. Added to that, the organization of enslaved people into original “nations” allowed them to continue sharing spiritual traditions, maintaining the practices and beliefs from their respective homelands. Lastly, drumming, which was permitted in festivities and gatherings, was used to promote commonality, as well as communication and spiritual knowledge. Africans used drums and other instruments such as whistles and conch shells to speak to others about sacred stories and traditions. Drums were especially instrumental, as they had the ability to unite different linguistic groups to one common cause. Thus, African traditions were able to thrive under harsh circumstances and develop into the traditions practiced on the island today.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the Catholic Church had been left in severe decay. Spain’s use of Cuba as a punishment for exiled miscreant clerics, coupled with the fleeing of conservative priests and religious from the newly independent mainland Spanish colonies only fueled reactionary attitudes within the Church and contributed to the lax observance of clerical duties.<sup>129</sup> The laxity and lack of involvement in religious duties on behalf of the remaining clerics on the island further contributed to the growth of anticlericalism in Cuba.<sup>130</sup> What is more, the pronounced anti-Catholic sentiments on the island facilitated the growth of Protestantism, as missionaries from the Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Quaker denominations began building schools and churches throughout the land.<sup>131</sup> Religion would further get wrapped up in politics as the newfound independence from Spain would result in a nation that was under significant distress.

## II. Religion During the Struggles for Independence

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<sup>125</sup> González Gómez-Cásseres. “Afro-Cuban Religions: Spiritual Marronage and Resistance.” p. 122.

<sup>126</sup> Goldenziel. “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations.” pp. 183.

<sup>127</sup> African ethnic associations.

<sup>128</sup> González Gómez-Cásseres. “Afro-Cuban Religions: Spiritual Marronage and Resistance.” p. 122.

<sup>129</sup> Crahan. “Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba.” p.159.

<sup>130</sup> Crahan. “Catholicism in Cuba.” p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> Crahan. “Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization.” p. 320.

The struggles for independence (the Ten Years' War, 1868-1878, and the Cuban War of Independence, 1895-1898) impacted Protestant denominations, Afro-Cuban groups such as the Abakuá, and the Catholic Church. Protestant denominations had been established on the island by Cubans receiving support from US churches prior to the wars.<sup>132</sup> The Presbyterian Church in Cuba, on the other hand, had not been formed by American missionaries, but rather by a Cuban layman named Evaristo Collazo.<sup>133</sup> Collazo had requested for Presbyterian missionaries to come to the island from the United States, and then had asked to be ordained by them in order to be able to lead the church he had established. Both a fierce Cuban nationalist and a devout Christian, Collazo's "Cuban-ness – evangelical and nationalist – was something Presbyterians in Cuba shared with other Protestant denominations in adapting Protestant theology to the needs of Cuban society as nationalists who advocated for reform and social justice."<sup>134</sup> According to Baer, prior to the 1870s, "the only Protestants in Cuba were foreign nationals who worked or served their government in Cuba," however, they were not allowed to evangelize or hold meetings in public.<sup>135</sup> After the Pact of Zanjón, Protestant Cubans who returned from the US were able to worship, although with restrictions. The years during the Cuban War of Independence were especially difficult for Protestant pastors and their congregations as Protestant churches were closed by Spanish authorities and many pastors went off to war or were exiled.<sup>136</sup> Those who returned to Cuba after having converted to Protestantism in the United States were few, yet notable. Among them were Enrique Someillán, one of the founders of the Methodist Church in Cuba, as well as Alberto J. Díaz, founder of the first Southern Baptist Church.<sup>137</sup> Another notable figure who returned to the island was Pedro Duarte, who established one of the first Episcopalian congregations, known as Fieles a Jesús. While these three men all functioned under the authority of American denominations, their churches were organized and directed by Cubans, maintaining the nationalistic fervor that had arisen from Cuba's domination over Spanish colonial rule.

In the years leading up to another war of independence, Cuban rebels found increasing support among US Protestant denominations.<sup>138</sup> When the United States would ultimately take over the conflict and occupy the island, the number of American Protestant missionaries increased significantly. Among the Afro-Cuban community, those who were involved in the Abakuá secret societies were especially feared by colonial powers.<sup>139</sup> Due to their "fierce nationalism," the Abakuá often participated in political plots against the Spanish authorities and were therefore viewed as violent criminals. Furthermore, upon Spain's defeat in 1898, the Catholic Church occupied an unwelcome space in Cuban society. After independence, the clergy

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<sup>132</sup> Baer, James A. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, no. 1 (Spring 2016): p. 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/intejcubastud.8.1.0074>.

<sup>133</sup> Baer. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." p. 75.

<sup>134</sup> Baer. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." p. 75.

<sup>135</sup> Baer. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." p. 79.

<sup>136</sup> Baer. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." p. 84.

<sup>137</sup> Baer. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." p. 79.

<sup>138</sup> Baer. "God and the Nation: Protestants, Patriotism and Pride in Cuba, 1890–1906." p. 75.

<sup>139</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 20.

that remained were largely Spanish, and by the early twentieth century, an estimated eighty percent of the clergy were citizens of the former colonial Spain.<sup>140</sup> The Church, in the eyes of the Cuban people, was therefore an awful reminder of the island's formal colonial oppressor. This was especially the case in the countryside where, among rural peasants, the Church largely encountered indifference. As these sentiments of indifference and resentment grew in the countryside, the Church withdrew until it had effectively abandoned the rural poor. The Church's position in public life, as well as the positions of various Christian denominations and Afro-Cuban religions, would shift as the Republic Period progressed and religious restrictions were changed.

### III. Religion in the Republican Period

Cuba's Republican Period (1902-1959) allowed for Christians (both Catholic, Protestant, and other denominations) to function openly in public life. These privileges, however, were not afforded to those who practiced Afro-Cuban religions. Those associated with Afro-Cuban religions (such as the Abakuá), were continuously stigmatized as violent delinquents, making them targets for the criminal justice system.<sup>141</sup> Despite the stigma surrounding Afro-Cuban religious practices, a variety of esoteric and syncretic religious beliefs of European and African origins continued to be practiced.<sup>142</sup> Espiritismo (Spiritism), as well as Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería and Palo Monte, acted as the "foundation of what has been identified as the country's "popular religiosity" or "unorganized popular religion."<sup>143</sup> In the mainstream sphere, Christian denominations proselytized "through a broad media network that included publications, radio, and television programs."<sup>144</sup> Catholics and Protestants, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses and Gideon's Band, all spread their respective theologies through such mediums. This would continue through Fulgencio Batista's reign (1952-1958) until Castro's arrival in 1959. When Batista rose to power in 1952, the Catholic Church's response to the coup was ambiguous, with most of the hierarchy accepting it while many of the younger priests and lay persons were opposed to it.<sup>145</sup> As anti-Batista sentiments grew, so did the Church's support for Fidel Castro.<sup>146</sup> On January 1, 1959, President Batista fled the island, unable to prevent the young Castro and his band of rebels from seizing power.

When Castro entered Havana on January 8, 1959, he was met with the unrestrained excitement of a hopeful Cuban people. According to Super, Castro "personified Cuba's potential to become a progressive and democratic republic."<sup>147</sup> His popularity allowed him to overcome

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<sup>140</sup> Janz, Denis R. "Castro and the Rebirth of the Church in Cuba." *CrossCurrents*, no. 4 (Winter 1988-89): p. 437, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24458966>.

<sup>141</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 20.

<sup>142</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 19.

<sup>143</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 19.

<sup>144</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 19.

<sup>145</sup> Crahan. "Catholicism in Cuba." p. 4.

<sup>146</sup> Crahan. "Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba." p.171.

<sup>147</sup> Super, John C. "Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961." *The Catholic Historical Review*, no. 3 (Jul. 2003): p. 511, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25026423>.

“for a brief period the divisions over political philosophies and programs that soon fractured Cuban life.”<sup>148</sup> Following his rise to power, Castro acknowledged the supportive role played by some Christians in the Revolution.<sup>149</sup> In 1959, for example, despite the “nominal Catholicism of the masses,” the Catholic Church as an institution was still a force to be reckoned with due to its socializing influence as the major provider of education for middle- and upper-class youth.<sup>150</sup> What is more, during this period, Protestant denominations were in the process of building an accomplished private education system comparable to that of the Catholic Church’s. Thus, many of those who participated in the Revolution had been influenced by Christian education. According to Janz, Castro initially seemed open to the possibility of a constructive relationship between the Catholic Church and the Revolution.<sup>151</sup> This was not to be the case. The Church quickly became opposed to the Revolution, and the National Catholic Congress encouraged the opposition. By 1960, with the threat of U.S. invasion looming, the Church openly supported the intervention. Furthermore, as Castro’s Marxist views<sup>152</sup> became increasingly clear, the Cuban bishops openly promoted their anti-communist sentiments and were viewed as allying themselves with U.S. policy. As Castro’s stance on religion became clearer, the relationship that had been cultivated between him and various churches would disintegrate.

#### IV. Fidel Castro and Religion

Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz was born in 1926 in the village of Birán, located in the eastern province of Holguín, Cuba. The son of a Spanish farmer, Castro would recall his upbringing in a place with no church and no opportunity for religious instruction.<sup>153</sup> Despite this, Castro also recalled his mother’s devout religiosity, describing her as a “woman of simple yet genuine piety who filled the house with images of Mary, Christ and the saints, and who prayed the rosary and the Lord’s Prayer every day.”<sup>154</sup> Castro would be sent to an elementary school run by the Christian Brothers, followed by a Jesuit junior high school in Santiago de Cuba, and then to an elite Jesuit high school in Havana. While Castro complimented the virtues instilled in him by the Jesuits, such as the spirit of sacrifice, adventure, and effort, he was critical of the “elitist composition of the student body and the reward-and-punishment view of morality he was taught,” ultimately wishing he had been given a more reason-oriented approach to faith instead of the emphasis on willpower he associated with the Jesuits.<sup>155</sup> He described his experiences with the Jesuits as not very positive, described everything as being very dogmatic, stating: “You had to believe it, even if you didn’t understand it. If you didn’t, it was a fault, a sin, something

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<sup>148</sup> Super. “Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961.” p. 511.

<sup>149</sup> Janz. “Castro and the Rebirth of the Church in Cuba.” p. 438.

<sup>150</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 19.

<sup>151</sup> Janz. “Castro and the Rebirth of the Church in Cuba.” p. 438.

<sup>152</sup> As a Marxist-Leninist, Castro agreed with Lenin’s views on the separation of Church and State. While Castro’s stance on religion softened with time, in 1980 the government denounced religion as antithetical to Marxist principles (Goldenziel 2009, 186).

<sup>153</sup> Betto, Frei. *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto* (Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>154</sup> Betto. *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*, p. 12.

<sup>155</sup> Betto. *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*, p. 13.



worthy of punishment.”<sup>156</sup> He further went on to say that reasoning and feeling were not developed. Castro criticized other aspects of his religious upbringing among the Jesuits, such as the requirement that students attend mass every day, noting: “Every day, we had the same ritual. I think it was mechanical. Having to go to Mass every day was overdoing it, and I don’t think it helps a child...Now, as I see it, repeating the same prayers over and over 100 times, saying the Hail Mary and the Lord’s Prayer mechanically, had no positive effect...”<sup>157</sup> In his later life, it is difficult to properly gauge how Castro felt about religion. While he sometimes made more positive comments about religion, such as saying that he believed that Karl Marx could have subscribed to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, the Revolutionary government’s punitive actions towards various religious groups sends a different message.<sup>158</sup>

Both the Catholic Church and Protestant groups would become some of Castro’s greatest opponents. Afro-Cuban religious groups would also be persecuted. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, the Catholic Church of Cuba was “small, ineffective, conservative, dominated by foreigners, confined to the major cities, and out of touch with the serious social and economic problems of the nation.”<sup>159</sup> The Church was therefore ill-prepared to respond to the Cuban Revolution, as they lacked the “organizational, ideological, flexibility and commitment to substantial socioeconomic change the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was soon to provide.”<sup>160</sup> The Church was regarded by the new Castro government as a “counterrevolutionary institution dominated by foreign clerics.”<sup>161</sup> The small but growing group of Protestants also posed a threat for the atheist Revolutionary government. Cuban Protestants held close ties with their counterparts in the U.S., relying heavily upon them for financial support.<sup>162</sup> This dependence on the U.S. led the Revolutionary government to view Protestantism as a potential source of opposition that needed to be dismantled. In 1962, Catholic churches were depopulated and stripped of their schools, ending the Church’s ability to expand its influence in education.<sup>163</sup> The same occurred for Protestants – the closure of religious schools diminished the growing influence of expanding Protestant religions.<sup>164</sup> Some Catholics were imprisoned for counterrevolutionary activities, and others remained suspect by the government.<sup>165</sup> While Castro claimed that only those who were overtly involved in counterrevolutionary activities were jailed, even those who had worked for the Revolution ran the risk of incarceration if they critiqued it.<sup>166</sup> The same occurred to those who practiced Afro-Cuban religions. The Abakuá continued to be charged by the authorities for a disproportionate percentage of all violent crimes taking place in

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<sup>156</sup> Betto. *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*, p. 123.

<sup>157</sup> Betto. *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*, p. 123.

<sup>158</sup> Betto. *Fidel and Religion: Castro Talks on Revolution and Religion with Frei Betto*, p. 271.

<sup>159</sup> Super. “Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961.” p. 513.

<sup>160</sup> Crahan. “Catholicism in Cuba.” p. 6.

<sup>161</sup> Crahan. “Catholicism in Cuba.” p. 6.

<sup>162</sup> Goldenziel. “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations.” p. 184.

<sup>163</sup> Super. “Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961.” p. 523.

<sup>164</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 22.

<sup>165</sup> Crahan. “Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization.” p. 328.

<sup>166</sup> Janz. “Castro and the Rebirth of the Church in Cuba.” p. 439.

Havana.<sup>167</sup> Many who practiced these religions were also persecuted for political reasons by the regime, leading them to be incarcerated or even sent to the firing squad. Those who practiced Santería and Palo were also forbidden from conducting initiations or ritual animal sacrifices, and often had their religious paraphernalia confiscated by the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution<sup>168</sup> (CDRs).<sup>169</sup>

While Castro did not use the strong-arm tactics of other antireligious regimes, he encouraged the oppression through a series of laws and propaganda campaigns.<sup>170</sup> Rather than shooting priests and burning churches, the government severely limited the activities of the Church in public life and also created a climate of fear and insecurity. Many priests were imprisoned or forced into exile, and the government limited the activities of the Catholic Church in public life. By 1963, the Catholic Church was left with “virtually no role in Cuban society save to minister to those who were widely regarded as outcasts.”<sup>171</sup> The same could be said for Protestants, as many pastors were exiled and estranged from the island during the 1960s.<sup>172</sup> According to Janz, Christians were denied access to good jobs because of their faith and “even more lived in acute fear.”<sup>173</sup> Those who openly professed their faith were often victims of harassment, physical and verbal abuse, as well as discrimination at work and school.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, openly religious individuals were also barred from participating in the Communist Party (PCC), as well as the Union of Communist Youth, ultimately barring them from most positions of influence in government and the army.<sup>175</sup> In certain instances, parishes lost the majority of their organizational leaders as they fled the country.<sup>176</sup> In 1962, the government imposed a ban on “casas cultos,” or house-churches, impacting the ability of Protestant groups to proselytize and practice their faiths.<sup>177</sup>

Jehovah’s Witnesses were especially targeted by the Revolutionary government. 1962 saw a “never before experienced climate of systematic governmental oppression,” as Cuba’s Department of Communication stopped the entry of their religious literature into the island, as well as the use of mail services for its distribution.<sup>178</sup> Destructions of their religious material occurred during a period of increasing verbal opposition to the Jehovah’s Witnesses by the

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<sup>167</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 20.

<sup>168</sup> A CDR is a neighborhood committee whose role is to report on “counterrevolutionary” activity in one’s respective neighborhood.

<sup>169</sup> Pedraza. ““This Too Shall Pass”: The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba.” p. 24.

<sup>170</sup> Super. “Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961.” p. 528.

<sup>171</sup> Crahan. “Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization.” p. 328.

<sup>172</sup> Goldenziel. “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations.” p. 200.

<sup>173</sup> Janz. “Castro and the Rebirth of the Church in Cuba.” p. 439.

<sup>174</sup> Super. “Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961.” p. 528.

<sup>175</sup> Crahan. “Catholicism in Cuba.” p. 19.

<sup>176</sup> Janz. “Castro and the Rebirth of the Church in Cuba.” p. 439.

<sup>177</sup> Goldenziel. “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations.” p. 200.

<sup>178</sup> Aguirre, B. E., and Jon P. Alston. “Organizational Change and Religious Commitment: Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists in Cuba, 1938-1965.” *The Pacific Sociological Review*, no. 2 (Apr. 1980): p. 190, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1388816>.

government.<sup>179</sup> One year later, all foreign missionaries were expelled from the island, and hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and charged for organizing gatherings without permission from local authorities. In the province of Pinar del Río, almost all of the Kingdom Halls were shut down and properties confiscated. In 1965, over forty Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and given sentences ranging from one to six years in forced-labor camps due to their refusal to serve in the military. These forced-labor camps, known as the Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP), were forced-work agricultural labor camps located in the east-central province of Camagüey.<sup>180</sup> Among those interred in the UMAP, the majority were 'religiosos'<sup>181</sup> and homosexual men. Those who were victims of the worst brutality while imprisoned in these camps were the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses were also charged with "counterrevolutionary" activities, largely for offering Bible study classes and for providing people with religious literature.<sup>182</sup> In 1966, government agents carried out the torture of several Jehovah's Witnesses due to their perceived threat to the Revolutionary government. On the other hand, after years of the government's efforts to intimidate followers of unorganized Afro-Cuban religions, authorities began to relax their stance towards them.<sup>183</sup> This relaxation towards Afro-Cuban religions coincided with the Cuban government's growing interest in the island's African heritage both as a foreign policy and a tourist attraction. The Cuban government therefore made it very clear that full participation in Cuban life would not be extended to those who openly practiced their faith, unless it was deemed valuable to the State.

### V. Religion After the Revolution

The decades following the 1960s saw the steady smoothing over of relations between religions and the State. While the 1960s were marked by significant tensions, the 1970s was a period of restoring credibility to the Catholic Church.<sup>184</sup> The following years accelerated this, largely due to the efforts on the part of both the Church and the government. In 1975, the First Party Congress granted a legal space for Afro-Cuban religions under the folklore category.<sup>185</sup> In 1990, the government lifted the 1962 ban on house-churches, thus aiding younger Protestant denominations and Afro-Cuban religions to flourish on the island.<sup>186</sup> For Afro-Cuban religions, whose ceremonies traditionally revolved around the home, house-churches effectively allowed

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<sup>179</sup> Aguirre and Alston. "Organizational Change and Religious Commitment: Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists in Cuba, 1938-1965." p. 191.

<sup>180</sup> Tahbaz, Joseph. "Demystifying las UMAP: The Politics of Sugar, Gender, and Religion in 1960s Cuba." *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, no. 2 (Dec. 2013): p.1, <https://udspace.udel.edu/items/67eb987d-d6cb-43be-b6ef-4579136d8213>.

<sup>181</sup> Religious people.

<sup>182</sup> Aguirre and Alston. "Organizational Change and Religious Commitment: Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists in Cuba, 1938-1965." p. 191.

<sup>183</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 31.

<sup>184</sup> Kirk, John M. "Between God and the Party: The Church in Revolutionary Cuba, 1969-1985." *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, no. 21 (1986): p. 103, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41799591>.

<sup>185</sup> Pedraza. "'This Too Shall Pass': The Resistance and Endurance of Religion in Cuba." p. 31.

<sup>186</sup> Goldenziel. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations." p. 200.

their faith to grow rapidly.<sup>187</sup> Drastic changes occurred within the Cuban economy following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Castro then declared the start of the “Special Period,” an extended period of economic crisis that lasted until 2000. To both revitalize the institution after “the decade of marginalised silence and introspection of the 1970s” as well as fill the ideological lacunae created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Church reorganized itself in order “to provide for internal revival in the 1980s and re-emerge in the Cuban society in the 1990s.”<sup>188</sup> This allowed the Church to fill the void of ideological and existential searching among Cubans, caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Special Period, and the removal of the atheist ideals from the Cuban constitution, all occurring simultaneously in the first half of the 1990s. These events all had effects on religious beliefs and practices in Cuba. According to Miller, in 1992, in an attempt to gain “needed support amongst disaffected Cubans, the PCC ended the prohibition on religious believers in its ranks.”<sup>189</sup> For many people, this new policy was a relief as they could now openly practice their beliefs without the fear of ostracization. The Catholic Church was able to regain its presence in the public sphere, engaging in society as “an active subject and agent.”<sup>190</sup> The easing of tensions between the Church and State paved the way for three papal visits: Pope John Paul II in 1998, Pope Benedict XVI in 2012, and Pope Francis in 2015 – visibly conveying the reinvigorated presence of the Church on the island. For Protestants and other Christian denominations, this easing of tensions allowed for religious growth to skyrocket in terms of formal membership, numbers of worshippers, and places of worship.<sup>191</sup> As the strained relationship between religions and the government relaxed, religion now enjoys a more comfortable position in Cuba’s public life.

This chapter has briefly examined the relationship between different Cuban governments and various religious groups on the island. While this chapter by no means captures the full extent of Cuba’s religious history, it has established a timeline of Cuba’s religions and their respective relationships with the government over different periods of time. The emphasis of this thesis is on Castro’s regime and its rigid measures placed on religious practices on the island. As the interlocutors interviewed experienced the height of Castro’s regime and the subsequent restrictions placed on religion on the island, this thesis therefore intends to explore the effects of Castro’s informal religion ban on those who grew up with the regime.

### Chapter Six: The Interviews

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<sup>187</sup> Goldenziel. “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations.” p. 202.

<sup>188</sup> Kuivala, Petra. “Policy of Empowerment: Pope Francis in Cuba.” *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, no. 1 (Spring 2017): p. 20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/intejcubastud.9.1.0019>.

<sup>189</sup> Miller, Ivor L. “Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance.” *TDR*, no.2 (Summer 2000): p. 49, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146846>.

<sup>190</sup> Kuivala, Petra. “Is there Church History in Revolutionary Cuba? Accessing and Analysing Cuban Catholic Sources.” *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, no. 2 (Winter 2016): p. 325, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/intejcubastud.8.2.0309>.

<sup>191</sup> Goldenziel. “Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations.” p. 200.

To fully grasp the extent of Castro's religious restrictions on Cuban society, learning about the experiences of those who lived through the height of the Revolutionary government's religious crackdown is imperative. This chapter examines interviews conducted with ten Cuban men who now call Montreal home. Ranging from the ages of 52 to 77, the interlocutors' stories are presented here as accurately as possible in order to demonstrate the diversity of experiences under the Castro government. Most left Cuba in the early 1990s, and on average have been living in Quebec for 30 years. Translated from Spanish, I have worked to capture both their words as well as the syntax and tone of each interlocutor. Divided into four sections, this chapter begins by describing introducing the ten interlocutors, establishing who each of them are and providing vignettes that offer glimpses into their respective memories. The following section examines the interlocutors' families' religious beliefs and practices, as well as their recollections of public religious life and politics in Cuba. This section also examines any religious education interlocutors received outside of the home. The following sections examine the interlocutors' religious lives as adults prior to and post-immigration to Canada. More importantly, these sections examine if and how the interlocutors modified their religious practices to adapt to their new environment, as well as if and how their religious views have shifted over time and after having been exposed to other religions and cultures in Montreal. These subjects emerged in various ways throughout the interviews, and it is therefore imperative to examine these themes in relation to both if and how these themes intersected with their respective religiosities, as well as the interlocutors' experiences under the Castro government as a whole.

### I. Introduction to the Interlocutors

To fully comprehend the political and religious contexts in which the interlocutors found themselves in, it is paramount to hear their stories in their own words. Childhood was a formative period for the ten interlocutors. For the most part, the interlocutors described simple upbringings; however, their childhoods were heavily impacted by the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath. The memories recalled by the interlocutors were heavily imbued with Revolutionary politics, depicting the government as present in each aspect of their lives. This section provides a brief profile of each interlocutor, supplying vignettes of their early lives in order to gain a sense of their upbringing prior to further examining their religious lives both in and outside of Cuba.

#### *JOSE*

Like many of the men interviewed, sixty-three-year-old Jose was born with the Revolution. When the interview began, my father sat in our kitchen, his interlaced hands on the table. While he agreed to the interview, he was still uncertain as to why I would want to speak with him about his life in Cuba. Sitting with his back against the sunshine yellow wall, Jose stared at a spot somewhere off in the distance. As he began to tell his story, his voice dropped to almost a whisper, as though he were speaking to himself: "What do you want to know about my life for? Don't you know enough already?"

Jose began by describing a poor childhood, recalling a loving family consisting of two parents and seven siblings. Living in a two-bedroom home in Cardenas, a town in the western province of Matanzas, he recalled that one bed was meant for the eight children to share. Jose's overall memories of his childhood are positive, describing a typical day in his life as such: "My childhood was...my childhood was going to school, that was mandatory. Then, you'd come back from school and do homework, if you had homework. And after dinner, you'd go out and play. If you had nothing else left to do, you'd meet up with your friends. Normally, we'd meet up at the street corner by the house, eight or ten boys who were growing up together, and we'd play up until nine or ten o'clock at night. Then we'd go to bed and we'd get up again the next day and do it all over again." He especially enjoyed watching television programs during a time where television was not easily accessible for many: "During that time period, very little people had televisions. We'd go over to a family's house in the neighborhood who we knew owned a television, so we could watch a show. We'd go there, the boys and I, almost every night to watch a show, it was like an adventure show. It lasted thirty minutes, every day from seven-thirty to eight o'clock, we'd watch that show. Almost all the neighborhood boys went there. The house would fill up with children."

The memories, however, quickly turned political when Jose was asked about the shows he and his friends liked to watch. He described two shows, one named *Hatuey*, based on the Taíno chief known for being Cuba's first national hero, the other named *Los mambises*, a series about the guerrilla Cuban independence soldiers who fought against Spain during Cuba's two wars of independence. Jose noted, "Normally, everything revolved around politics. Ultimately, everything would end up being about the War of Independence, or something like that. Every TV program would end with some sort of political message. Movies too. Everything that happened in Cuba went through a sort of filter. There were people that would watch them before and then decide whether or not they would be allowed on television, whether it was a movie or a TV show." Jose further emphasized the degree to which the government regulated the media: "In Cuba, it was totally prohibited to let any American channel or radio station into country. If somehow, they got through, it was totally prohibited to even watch or listen to them. For example, in the seventies it was totally prohibited. It was almost a crime to listen to them."

### *MARIO*

Sixty-nine-year-old Mario agreed to a telephone interview. He called early in the afternoon, and I apologized to him as I fumbled to get the old landline to work. Mario was more than understanding as I clumsily began recording the interview after numerous technical issues with the telephone, and began recounting his childhood enthusiastically. Growing up in the westernmost province of Pinar del Río, Mario practically beamed through the phone as he remembered his early childhood:

"My childhood in Cuba was very nice. I was the last child. My older brother was already married. My other brother had already moved out. I was the spoiled child of the family. My

parents gave me everything they could. We had a really nice house because my father was an accountant. We were in a good financial situation. My mom had studied to be a teacher but she had also taken classes to be a seamstress, so that's what she did at home." The nostalgia emitting from the receiver suddenly shifted when Mario's memories took on a different tone. Similar to Jose, his childhood recollections quickly turned political with the Revolution occurring within the first few years of his life: "My childhood went really well, until the economic situation changed in the country. Starting from 1964, I was about nine or ten years old, the economic situation in the country started changing. I had just done my first communion, and going to church was then prohibited, and a series of horrible things came after that... We started having a lot of shortages. A lot of food shortages... The ration process<sup>192</sup> started for the population... That was really hard." Mario recalled store shelves sitting empty, as well as how difficult it became to access basic clothing such as shoes and pants. He recalled having to wear clothes that were several sizes too small due to the massive growth spurt he was going through during his teenage years: "The hardest period was in 1970 to 1976 or 77. Cuba went through a really difficult period. And I lived through that in full adolescence."

Mario's tone once again changed when he recalled his parents' hope that the Revolution would aid the nation's poor. Staunchly against the Revolutionary government, Mario's voice picked up a hint of frustration at the recollection of his parents strongly supporting something that to him, ultimately failed: "My parents came from a humble background because my grandparents were Spanish, and after a hurricane, they lost everything in Cuba and had to start from zero. So, my parents lived through hard times. So, when Fidel came to power and he promised so much prosperity for the country, they got excited and were hopeful that he'd make changes. But as the economy kept failing, they kept on believing in it, because of all the political propaganda. There was so much political control over the television, the radio, including over the neighborhoods. Everything was political."

### *FERNANDO*

"What a nice garden! Look at all that lettuce!" Fernando strained to see over the balcony railing. It was a cloudy summer day, and the sky kept teasing us with rain. He sat across from me; cup full of coffee in his hand. At sixty-four-years old, Fernando was born and raised in the capital city of Havana, the son of a schoolteacher and a chauffeur. Music was a crucial aspect of Fernando's life since he was a child, as his mother had also studied piano alongside pedagogy. A musician and singer all his life, Fernando depicted a wonderful childhood in Havana, whose selection for the state-run sports schools known as EIDE<sup>193</sup> allowed him to thrive in his youth: "I was a child with wonderful parents. I was a very happy child... In the fifth grade I was selected to be an athlete. A diver, to be exact. For the EIDE, for swimming, water polo, and synchronized

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<sup>192</sup> The libreta de abastecimiento, or family ration book, was a rations system implemented in 1962. It was introduced in response to production shortages caused by the postrevolutionary agrarian reforms as well as increased food import costs caused by the U.S. embargo (Carter 2013, 1).

<sup>193</sup> Acronym for "Escuela de Iniciación Deportiva Escolar" or "School of School Sports Initiation"

swimming... You'd spend the week getting your academic education, as well as your training as an athlete. I was lucky enough to be a high-performance athlete for the national juvenile team. I was lucky enough to be a national medalist for my country, too." Despite his happy childhood and success in sports in his youth, Fernando also felt the impact of the Revolution on his life, recalling a better environment prior to the Revolution: "Look, I don't have much to say about the subject, because I'm one of the firsts. I'm from when you could actually live in Cuba. I'm one of the children that was turned into a Fidelista. We were indoctrinated."

### *ANTONIO*

Antonio lit a cigarette and took a long drag. He exhaled the smoke and then sipped his coffee, peering down at the sun-filled garden below the balcony. Dogs barked somewhere in the distance. "We were like real Cuban families back in the day... We'd get together for New Year's and on December 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>194</sup> Everyone would go to my grandmother's house; all the cousins were together. It was such a beautiful thing. We were a humble family, but we were happy," he said. At sixty-four, Antonio, continued holding on to the values his family inculcated in him from a young age: "Socially, my parents educated me like people were educated back then. Countrypeople, with lots of honesty, lots of modesty." The son of a barber and a housewife from Cardenas, Cuba, Antonio's childhood was heavily influenced by the Revolution and its teachings, as his father was a massive supporter of Castro: "My dad always inculcated in me the principles of the Revolution. Despite everything, I have always had deep feelings for the Revolution, and Fidel Castro, to me, isn't to blame as he was wronged for many years." A wide smile broke on Antonio's face when discussing his continued support for the Revolution, describing himself as loving both Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. He stopped smoking for a moment, flicking the ash into a makeshift ashtray as he thought about the overall political climate during his upbringing on the island: "A lot of faith in the Revolution. The poor became people. Children of poor famers became doctors. Free education. Free healthcare. A lot of familiarity between people."

### *GONZALO*

The sound of a lawn mower blared from the laptop. Gonzalo fiddled with his bedroom window, trying drown out the noise. After slamming the window shut, Gonzalo sat back down at his desk, turning his attention back to the interview. Sixty-four-year-old Gonzalo, born and raised in Havana, agreed to a video call. Having lived in Canada for three decades, the Revolution was still vividly present in all of his recollections. "My childhood in Cuba was like any other Cuban child's. I was born with the triumph of the Revolution and with time, they indoctrinated the children: 'We'll be like Che!'<sup>195</sup> or this about Raúl [Castro], or this about

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<sup>194</sup> Nochebuena (Christmas Eve) is celebrated on December 24<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>195</sup> The maxim "Pioneers for communism, we will be like Che!" was adopted by the José Martí Pioneer Organization in 1968, a youth organization that groups primary and secondary school children. Every October 8<sup>th</sup>, to commemorate the death of Che Guevara, first graders in all of the country's elementary schools, receive from the hands of their parents the blue neckerchief that identifies them as 'pioneros' (pioneers) (Silva Correa).



Fidel,” he said almost immediately upon beginning the interview. To him, the Revolution had an extremely negative impact on Cuban society, with one of his core memories describing the traumatic arrest of his teenaged brother: “They [government authorities] took my brother away. He’d been watching a movie at a movie theater. He was 17. He was watching a movie in the cinema. When he walked out, there was a bus that fit 46 people, and they were filling it up with boys, ages 16 and 17, and they were sending them to Camaguey.” Gonzalo raised his voice when speaking about his brother’s time at a forced labor camp, further illustrating how the pain his family had endured then was still felt today. Gonzalo further specified his and his family’s stance on the Revolution and its politics after describing experiences such as this one: “My family was never involved in politics. We were always against it...We were always a family of opposers.”

### *RONALDO*

When Ronaldo answered the phone, he immediately began recounting his life story before I could begin asking him questions. Taken aback by how forthcoming he was, I quickly began recording his words and jotting down notes. One hour would elapse before I could begin asking him questions, as he had spent the entire time recounting all of his experiences in great detail. A former intelligence officer for the Revolutionary government’s state security, the seventy-year-old man was born in Cardenas, Cuba, and was the son of a single mother who was a militant Revolutionary. Especially marked by his mother’s heavy involvement in the Revolution, all of his childhood memories were heavily imbued with the Revolution and its politics: “My family, as I explained to you, the woman who gave me life – because I can’t say she was a mother, but that’s a personal problem of mine – the woman who gave me life was a clandestine combatant, a founder of the [Communist] Party. She passed with, if I’m not mistaken, eighteen medals from the minister’s council of state because of her actions.” Ronaldo’s tone is bitter when he speaks about his mother, especially when remembering how she involved him in politics as a child without his knowledge: “She used me, being a child, to transport Communist propaganda called bonds of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July. They were like tickets, a little bit bigger than money, but tickets that said ‘26<sup>th</sup> of July,’ and she’d put them in my boots. She risked my life. I was a child. I had no idea...She put me on a bus, and I was wearing cowboy boots. In my boots she had placed those bonds. She had put them beneath false soles. So, I got on the bus. And there were two police officers from the rural guard, they were Batista’s men. And I started to cry because my feet were hurting. And the policemen told my mother, ‘Ma’am take your son’s boots off.’ And my mother said that I was just spoiled, and she smacked me a few times, and we got off the bus.” This memory in particular shifted Ronaldo’s opinion of the Revolution, further gathering negative associations for him due to how he was implicated in it without his consent during childhood.

### *ABRAHAM*

He settled into the chair with difficulty, using his wooden cane for support. As he did so, seventy-seven-year-old Abraham talked about the health complications he experienced since

contracting COVID-19. After a lengthy hospital stay, Abraham continued to feel the long-term effects of the virus, struggling to breathe and developing mobility issues. Sitting at the table, Abraham was content to start discussing his life in Cuba. Now retired, he had worked as an airplane mechanic until his departure from the island in 1995.

A musician from Santiago de Cuba, Abraham described his early life in the eastern end of the island as difficult, as his mother, who was separated from his father, struggled to make ends meet as a servant for Santiago's upper class. His father, who owned a bar, was not entirely present in his life, however, when he was, would bring him to the plaza on Sundays so he could ride his bicycle or roller skates. He recalled, "In Santiago we were very, very poor. We didn't have anything to eat sometimes." His life changed at the age of ten, once he and his mother moved to Havana, where she worked as a nanny for a wealthy American family. He and his mother lived in her employer's home, and the family sent Abraham to private school and enrolled him in the Boy Scouts. Abraham gave a wide smile when recalling how much he loved being a Boy Scout. This all had occurred prior to the Revolution: "Before the Revolution, I lived with that family. I went to a private school paid by the family. I was there until third grade. Then I went to a school where I lived at that school from Monday to Friday. They fed me and everything there. I was there until 1960. When Christmas would roll around the family would give me toys. Back then we celebrated Christmas in Cuba. Rich people celebrated Christmas. All the Christmas things came from Spain... They treated us like we were family." When the Revolution triumphed, Abraham recalled the way things changed for the worse: "The family left in '60. My mom was sent to work with another family, a Basque family, who then left in '62. They were the owners of a restaurant in Havana." Once they left, he and his mother struggled once again, as she moved around from job to job as a housekeeper in Havana.

### *LUIS*

Luis's hands were caked in grime from a long day's work. Now working in construction, the former dancer suggested we sit outside on the balcony for the interview. A light drizzle began to fall upon us as the fifty-two-year-old man began to speak, and I offered to move us back inside. Luis chuckled and waved me off. "It's only a little rain. I like the rain," he said. Smiling, Luis turned his attention away from the rain and back to me. "Well?" He asked. "Shall we begin?"

Growing up in Isla de la Juventud, the second-largest Cuban island after Cuba's mainland, Luis recalled his childhood as being extremely poor. Being raised by a single mother, his mother often struggled to make ends meet for him and his sister. Despite the extreme poverty he and his family endured, Luis recounted his childhood warmly, demonstrating a deep respect for his mother's sacrifices: "I had a very wholesome, but poor childhood. Wholesome because my mom always worked. My mom was always a person that was very integrated in life. She always fought for us; she was always sacrificing for us. She was a chef. She had also been a kayaking champion, but she got older and left the profession. We had other needs. It's always

been hard, I won't lie. Life in Cuba has always been very hard, but my childhood was wholesome. We were a very tightknit, humble family. We were poor, of course, but we always got on. As a child, I'd go out and veneer courtyards to bring a little money home. My mom was always happy."

Luis's softer tone hardened when he moved on from speaking about his mother. While he noted that life in Cuba had been hard for many prior to the Revolution, he emphasized that the living conditions worsened after its triumph. His emphasis was especially on the restrictive and authoritarian nature of the new government: "As a child, everything was restricted. Everything was limited, but everything had a Communist ideology to it. Truthfully, it was totalitarian and authoritarian, a regime that's the same as now...Everything was restricted. Throughout my entire childhood, everything was "Homeland or death! We shall overcome!" and "Pioneers for Communism! We'll be like Che!" Those were the mottos. It was religious." Luis's comparison to describing Communism as a religion related to his understanding of religion a fervent belief or adherence to a worldview or set of ideals. To him, the government's vehement support and promotion of Communist doctrine was comparable to an organized religion.

#### *RAFAEL*

Sixty-one-year-old Rafael, from the rural town of Pedro Betancourt in western Cuba, agreed to share his experiences in Cuba over the phone. Having worked in tourism his entire adult life in Cuba, he now works in a rubber factory outside of Montreal. Rafael described his childhood very briefly and bluntly, referring to it as both humble yet wholesome: "Well, my childhood was very tranquil. I was born in the countryside. We didn't have electricity. I had 4 siblings. It was a lovely childhood. We didn't have many clothes, but we had food. We didn't have any toys, but we played like any other child of the countryside: barefoot, with mosquitoes. But it was nice." The son of an agricultural worker and a housewife, Rafael recalled celebrating Christmas and New Year's Eve fondly: "Every New Year, we'd slaughter a pig. We celebrated Christmas. We were a very tightknit family. Very lovely."

Born with the Revolution, Rafael did not waste time mentioning its impact on his childhood, recalling: "All the youth, we were all believers in Fidel...And on top of that you couldn't speak about anything else because you'd get arrested. There was a lot fear." Rafael's words briefly hint at the dominant presence the Revolution had on the youth who were growing up with it. He emphasized the fact that both the youth, as well as the adults, did not necessarily have a choice but to support the new Revolutionary government: "My parents weren't opposed and they weren't Communists. But during that time, you'd get arrested and shot. Going out and talking about the government in the 80s didn't exist...They talked about it at home: 'The government is destroying this,' or 'This is an injustice,' but that was it. It was all said in whispers, under the table. You couldn't even tell your neighbor about your thoughts or else you'd risk getting arrested." Rafael's memories further illustrated the aura of fear and paranoia felt by many, as freedom of expression when it came to politics was severely suppressed.

*FELIPE*

Felipe knocked on my neighbor's door, several houses down. I had spotted him from my window, recognizing his white fedora as he made his way down the street. While I have known Felipe for over two decades, we had not visited in quite a long time, and he could not remember which house was mine. Walking along the street to my home, Felipe chatted with me about school and my studies in religion. Settling in the kitchen, he laughed loudly at my two little dogs, who were both curious and excited about the new visitor. At seventy-five years old, Felipe's energy was contagious. Speaking quickly and laughing between each sentence, he recounted the extreme poverty he and his family endured in the western village of Agramonte in a pleasant tone.

Growing up on a farm, rural life with his parents and six siblings was exceptionally difficult: "My childhood in Cuba was very poor. I got my first pair of shoes when I was eleven years old. We walked around the countryside barefoot, and school was really far away and we had to go on foot, like ten kilometers. Our primary food was flour and milk, because we'd plant corn, and the cows gave us milk. It wasn't easy, that life. There was a lot of poverty." Felipe nodded at this, before continuing. Life was especially hard for his family, as his mother was a housewife who stayed home to take care of seven children, while his father was the sole breadwinner: "The only person who worked was my father. He would cut sugar cane and he was illiterate. Tell me what kind of job an illiterate man can do? He'd work and his boss would tell him, 'You've made this amount of money,' and since he didn't know anything his boss would give him whatever he wanted..." With this, Felipe laughed once again as he recalled his father's inability to read or count, explaining how his father would "sign" documents with his fingerprint. He also recalled how he had to work as a child in order to help support his family: "My childhood was hard. I had to go and hand out breakfasts and lunches to people who were working in the sugar cane fields by the age of eight. I had to go on horseback to hand out food to the sugar cane workers...I don't like remembering that childhood. What a childhood I had. I'd wake up every day at four o'clock in the morning."

This section not only served to introduce the interlocutors and offer glimpses into their lived experiences, but also demonstrated commonalities that would be present throughout the interviews. Differing in age, political ideology, geographical location on the island, as well as the urban and rural landscapes they lived in, these experiences recounted by the interlocutors primarily highlighted the poverty present during most of their childhoods. The interlocutors cited these conditions as existing prior to the Revolution, with many emphasizing the worsening of such conditions as occurring after its triumph. What is more, this section also highlighted a pattern among most of the interlocutors: the government's control on all aspects of Cuban life. The government's constant presence in their daily lives extended into the religious lives of the population, impacting both their abilities to practice religion and cultivate their religious literacies.

## II. Childhood: Religion and Politics Inside and Outside the Home

This section introduces the interlocutors' memories of religion and politics throughout their respective childhoods, specifically investigating the Revolutionary government's ban on religion in the education system and its impact on religious literacy, as well as the persecution of openly religious students in schools. What is more, this section also examines the impact of forcing religion out of the public sphere and into the domestic sphere as a result of the government's legislations. The memories and experiences described by the interlocutors often shared similar themes: all recalled religion not being talked about or taught in schools, and many recalled religions being exceptionally badly viewed and restricted by the Cuban government. With these memories of not being allowed to practice or learn about religion, I argue that the government's restrictions on religion and, in conjunction, religious education, impeded the interlocutors' religious literacies. While the stories vary in terms of religious belief, religious practice, and even political affiliation, their stories are but one page in the long book of Cuban history.

School, according to the interlocutors, was heavily regulated by the State. Revolutionary politics trumped religion in the educational sphere. The role of the Revolution and its ideologies was best described by Jose, who recalled the education he and his peers received in the 1960s and 70s in great detail: "Honestly, everything at school revolved around the existing system in Cuba, which was the communist system. We talked a lot about Marxism-Leninism, which was a mandatory subject in school. Marxism. You couldn't talk about anything that went against the Revolutionary system. You couldn't talk about the United States, or any other country that was aligned with them. During my time, it was only Russia and Cuba that was really talked about, or other socialist countries." What is more, interlocutors noted that students had to be involved in politics while attending school. Jose explained it as such: "It was obligatory to be involved in politics. Because, as you're growing up, you start your life in school by getting involved in organizations, political organizations. And it's practically obligatory. When you're a child, you become a Pioneer.<sup>196</sup> That's in elementary school. When you start high school, you start getting involved in another organization, called the UJC.<sup>197</sup> At that point, you have to start denouncing everything you see that's against the system, you practically become a new member of the system. Once you start working, when you're an adult, you can be in the Communist Party." Jose's words indicate an educational system that was heavily regulated by the government. The government therefore had the power to pick and choose what was considered acceptable within their chosen curriculum. Heavily focused on the Revolution and its politics, students were molded to the government's ideals through their education as well as their participation in

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<sup>196</sup> The José Martí Pioneer Organization, a youth organization that groups primary and secondary school children (Silva Correa).

<sup>197</sup> The Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Young Communist League) is the youth organization of the Communist Party of Cuba. Part of its mission statement reads: "Contribute to the communist education of the new generations, based on patriotism, loyalty to the Communist Party of Cuba, the defense of the highest human values, the economic and social development of the country and the anti-imperialist and internationalist spirit..." (UJC).

communist youth movements. This also meant that subjects that were considered counterrevolutionary, such as religion, were prohibited within the state-run education system. The government therefore had the ultimate say in a student's education, impeding their learning of subjects such as world religions, as well as teaching children that religion was not only unrelated to, but functioned in opposition to politics.

Since religion was off limits in schools, all of the interlocutors emphasized that religion was not taught or talked about by any of the educational staff and recalled the mistreatment of their openly religious peers by staff. Only one of the interlocutors noted that religion was discussed in schools, but the discussions were kept among classmates. Jose recalled religion being actively forbidden in school: "No. During my time, we never talked about religion in school. Religion was completely out of...there were no classes on religion, nothing. You couldn't hold any religious beliefs either. If you went to school with a crucifix around your neck or something like that, you risked having it confiscated from you. The teachers would take them away." Jose's description of how teachers would not tolerate any sort of religiosity in schools demonstrated how far the government would go to prohibit religion in the classroom. As the teachers were expected to follow the state curriculum, this included ensuring that religion was not entering the classroom in any manner. This would not only impede religious education and the development of religious literacy, but also the ability to be openly religious in public.

Practicing religion openly led to the persecution of students in schools. As religion was integral to the identities and self-expression of religious students, their religiosities, which functioned in opposition with the Revolutionary government's atheist ideals, persisted despite the mistreatment they faced by the educational staff. Antonio recalled the persecution some students faced by school staff during the 1960s: "Religion was never talked about. To the point where there was this one religion, I don't remember the name of it...Seventh Day? Jehovah's Witnesses? They didn't salute the flag the way we were supposed to every morning in school. They were persecuted." Antonio's words not only echoed the persecution certain religious groups faced, but also demonstrated his own lack of knowledge regarding certain religions. When pressed about the groups he mentioned, he was unsure about the differences between such religions and their respective beliefs and practices. Antonio's lack of religious understanding was further fueled by his lack of religious education, as the little exposure he had to religion around him was swiftly quashed by his educators.

Similar experiences were also shared by Gonzalo, who attended school at the same time as Jose and Antonio and recalled the mistreatment towards students who were Jehovah's Witnesses: "There's a religion called the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses were the only ones that I remember seeing. There was a boy in my class...his religion didn't let him wear the neckerchief. They'd kick him out of line and put him there, like an attack, because he wouldn't wear the neckerchief...They couldn't salute the flag and they couldn't wear the neckerchief. They were persecuted. They were the most persecuted in my time." While Gonzalo recalled the religious persecution towards religious classmates, when asked about the religious

group mentioned, he also demonstrated a lack of knowledge towards the beliefs and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses other than knowing that they could not salute their nation's flag or wear the mandatory neckerchiefs that came with being a Pioneer. He did not really know why Jehovah's Witnesses were prohibited from involving themselves in the nation's politics. As a millenarian restorationist Christian denomination, the Jehovah's Witnesses choose not to participate in acts such as pledges of allegiance, saluting flags, or singing national anthems because they believe that these conflict with two specific Bible teachings – that God alone deserves their worship and all humans are equal before God.<sup>198</sup> Once again, this lack of religious education caused by the government's restrictions, left him, as well as other interlocutors, unaware of religious practices and beliefs around them, and suppressed the ability for others to cultivate their religious literacies by eliminating spaces for open and honest religious dialogue.

What is more, interlocutors also recalled the singling out of certain religions over others by the government outside of school. Jose remembered people treating religion with an air of secrecy: "There were people who might have had their own religious beliefs but it was almost like a secret. Being a Jehovah's Witness was practically a crime. Everything that revolved around religion was practically a crime." He further detailed the persecution Jehovah's Witnesses faced during the height of the Castro government's reign: "Because of their beliefs, and, aside from that, they'd congregate, and in Cuba, everything that was considered a "gathering" was completely prohibited. They [the government] were really afraid that people would discuss other [political] things during those gatherings, or that they would use religion to do other [political] things. There was a lot of political insecurity." This notion of the government being preoccupied with the risk of religious gatherings functioning as a front for political gatherings demonstrates the fear of political upheaval in an already turbulent climate. Gonzalo also recalled the ban on religious gatherings, stating, "Before, all religious systems were persecuted. Everything was persecuted by the Revolution. Any gathering of three, four, five, ten people were banned, because they were afraid of any gatherings... They were worried that people were conspiring against them." This further indicated that the government was perhaps operating under fear, viewing any reunion or gathering as a potential threat to their established system. While the interlocutors did not mention people gathering in secret to discuss counterrevolutionary politics, their memories did indicate that to the Revolutionary government, this fear of rebellion was, in fact, very real to them.

While the interlocutors all agreed that religious persecution did occur in schools, only two noted that it did not occur when they were attending theirs. Growing up in Isla de la Juventud in the 1970s and Pedro Betancourt in the 1960s, respectively, Luis and Rafael's experiences are similar due to the rural settings in which they lived. The lack of involvement on behalf of government authorities in the areas, combined with teachers who did not enforce the government's atheist ideals, led religion to be discussed among students. Luis noted that, "We

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<sup>198</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses. "Why Do Jehovah's Witnesses Respectfully Abstain From Participating in Nationalistic Ceremonies?" <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/why-abstain-nationalistic-ceremonies-flag/>.

did talk about religion in school. ‘Oh, in my house there was a ritual.’ ‘Or this, or that.’ ‘At my house there was a party, so and so killed a goat.’ Afro-Cuban things, because that’s what we were all growing up with. For that part, I didn’t specifically see any restrictions against religion, you see? But, from other people I’ve heard – I remember when I was a child, I don’t know if it was hidden, but we did it in the house for ourselves.” Luis specified, however, that teachers never talked about religion, but any discussion that occurred was among students. He did, however, acknowledge that he had heard about religious persecution occurring in other schools in other parts of the island. In his experience, Luis was able to have religious conversations with his peers about Afro-Cuban religions, however, the conversations did not extend to other religions, nor was discussion on religion actively condoned or shared aloud in class. Rafael echoed Luis’s words, emphasizing that his teachers actively avoided punishing children for their religious beliefs: “Look, maybe in other schools in other places, more populated places. But we were such few children, you understand, and practically all the families and neighbors were like family. So, you couldn’t say anything to a child. And another thing, all the teachers were old and they all had their own religious things. So, they couldn’t talk about religion, but they wouldn’t mistreat children either.” Similar to Luis, Rafael acknowledged that religious persecution did occur in other places. What is more, Rafael’s words indicated that while religion was not actively suppressed in his school, his educators did not break from the government’s curriculum and display any sort of religiosity or engage in religious education. Instead, they chose to adopt a neutral stance, neither encouraging nor discouraging religion among students. With that said, this lack of encouragement in stimulating religious dialogue did nothing to promote religious literacy as students were not given the room to engage with religion. Due to this, the little interlocutors knew about different religions came from what minimal displays of religiosity they witnessed or heard in their immediate surroundings.

While religion was prohibited in schools, religion, as well as the degrees of religious practice, varied in the homes of the interlocutors and their families. Most of the interlocutors grew up with some form of religion in the home, regardless of their social status, geographical location, or ethnic heritage. For some, religion was not talked about or discussed, whereas others were especially involved in religious practice. For Jose, religion was not discussed in the home. He remembered it as such: “My mother was the more religious one. My mother had lived through the other government, the Batista government. So, people who’d experienced the old government already had their own beliefs and ideas. But she didn’t practice anything. No one went to church or anything like that. She was Catholic, but she also read tarot cards and things like that. My dad didn’t believe in anything, I don’t think.” Jose’s uncertainty towards his father’s religion demonstrated how little religion was discussed or displayed in his home. What is more, his mention of the previous government prior to Castro demonstrated the impact of Castro’s new restrictions on religion and religious practice. While his mother had cultivated religious beliefs and practices prior to the Revolution, the Revolution’s triumph forced her (and others) to reduce or completely stop their religious practice. While Jose’s mother was Catholic, religion was essentially nonexistent in the home. Jose had not been baptized, nor did his parents



take him to church out of fear of being judged as, according to him, “people developed a personal panic about being judged for going to church or having any religious belief, or for even belonging to a religion. Anything that was negative for the system had repercussions on peoples’ personal lives, whether it was at work or in their social life.” This indicated that people therefore had to choose between religion and access to daily life due to the government’s presence in various public spheres, including the workplace. By cutting off employment and social opportunities for people, the government was effectively forcing people to make a choice between continuing to publicly practice their religion or engaging in Cuban public life without the fear of persecution and ostracization.

Whereas religion in the public sphere may have decreased or was completely eradicated for some, religion in the private sphere continued to thrive. According to the descriptions of multiple interlocutors, religion was relegated to the safety of the domestic sphere. Mario, who remembered the years leading up to the Revolution, noted, “My parents were Catholic, and my mother was very religious. Before the triumph of the Revolution, they practiced it in church. After the government prohibited going to church, my mother would pray at home, she’d light candles for the Virgin in the home, and everything would go on at home... You couldn’t talk about religion in public. My mother had an altar for the Virgin that she kept in my room. She was obliged to remove all of the Virgins that she kept in the living room and put them in my room, so that we weren’t badly viewed.” Mario clearly identified a stark “before” and “after” when discussing religious practice prior to and after the triumph of the Revolution. Once again, those who had been religious prior to the Revolution did not necessarily want to give up their religious beliefs and practices. Instead, they reached a compromise by not outwardly portraying their religiosity in public. While many practiced their religion in the home, those who did would often go the extra mile to relocate religious items to more discrete locations in the home in order to avoid potentially damaging their social standing in the community. However, this did not diminish religious private practice. Fernando noted, “No one would do that [religion] in public. No one would do that in public because openly doing so in the street would be telling police, “I’m a delinquent!” Nobody would do it in public, but they did go into people’s houses and of course, communists would have them hidden in rooms, but normal people had, maybe, a Virgencita.<sup>199</sup> Nothing scandalous. Nothing exaggerated.”

Ronaldo, who had some recollections of the years leading up to the Revolution, also corroborated this: “It was prohibited. But to a certain point it wasn’t prohibited, because some people were still going to church. Older people. The youth weren’t going.” Ronaldo’s words highlight the stark contrast between the “older” generation (those who had experienced life before the Revolution), and the “youth,” (those who had grown up with the generation). The older generation, while many perhaps embraced the Revolution, were more resistant to completely ceasing their religious practices, whereas the youth, who had grown up with the Revolution’s atheistic discourse, as well as the Revolutionary government’s harsh measures on

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<sup>199</sup> Nickname for the Virgin.

religion, were less inclined, or able, to cultivate a sense of religiosity. Ronaldo's explanation for this was: "Because their [the youth's] parents had been manipulated, influenced by Communism. Communism is a religion... Communism is a religion in the same way that Jehovah's Witnesses are." Ronaldo equated the two as both Communism and Jehovah's Witnesses were 'fanatical' to him. A Catholic, he classed anything that did not pertain to his religion under the fanaticism umbrella, citing the 'excessive' beliefs of groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and those who adhered to the Revolution as such. Ronaldo's interpretation of religion heavily relied on the notion of fervent belief in a deity or concept. To him, the Revolution's goal was to replace religion with Communism, effectively pushing people to reject one belief system for another. While religion had been suppressed by the government, Ronaldo saw it as a means to introduce a different "religion," i.e., Communism, to a nation while eliminating any other belief system that would conflict or compete with it. The prejudice held by Ronaldo and others like him towards the Jehovah's Witnesses was due to the Cuban state's discrimination of the religion. This influence illustrated that even the most "religious" religion was impacted by Cuban policies against religion and expected to adhere to the Revolution. While religion was viewed negatively in public life and was often confined to the home, the government dictated what was considered acceptable to be seen in everyday life.

If religion was thriving in the home, then why did the younger generation not grow up with it? While religion was confined to the home, this did not necessarily mean that people the generations who were raised with the triumph of the Revolution were developing their religiosity within it. Rafael described the domestic religion practiced by his mother, who referred to her religious practices as being a result of the Revolution's crackdown on churches: "Well, my mom...my mom, yes, she was religious. You might not know this, but after the triumph of the Revolution, in Cuba, they shut down all the churches, you understand? You couldn't go to church. There was conflict between the Revolution and the churches, and so my mother was a believer in her own way. She wasn't the kind of believer that would go to church every Sunday and stuff like that because we lived in the countryside, we didn't live in the city. She did believe, but she couldn't go to church...She had a saint with flowers [as offerings] in the house. She believed in God, you understand?" Rafael recalled religious life in the countryside as being especially isolated. He noted that the closest church was about nineteen kilometers away, which made certain religious practices, such as regularly attending mass or engaging in any of the sacraments, especially difficult.

This geographical isolation, coupled with the Revolution's restrictions, made it exceptionally difficult for Rafael to cultivate any sort of religious belief or routine: "We were baptized by the church...A priest would show up in the countryside on horseback, and he'd gather up all the children and he'd baptize them. Is that what it's called? They put something in our mouths." Rafael then went on to describe the sacrament of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, noting that the priest would give the children sacramental bread: "I don't remember what it was. They gave us that communion. Is that what it is?" Rafael's uncertainty towards the

religious rites he participated in as a child further pointed to his inability to cultivate any sort of religious literacy. While his mother practiced her Roman Catholic faith in the home, his lack of involvement due to the taboo nature of religion in Cuban daily life led to him being unaware of the different religious practices present within the religion. Some parents continued to practice religion in the home, however, many felt uncomfortable or fearful about passing their religious beliefs down to their children due to the ostracism that occurred towards religious students. What is more, a child's public religiosity would reflect back to the parents', singling the entire household out as potentially engaging in counterrevolutionary activities. Similar to the other interlocutors, religion occurred around them, and sometimes even included them, however, they did not have the means to fully immerse themselves in it due to the predominance of the Revolution in daily life.

While several of the interlocutors with Catholic roots noted that religion was often diminished or suppressed within the home, Afro-Cuban religions seemed to continue thriving in the domestic sphere during the 1960s and 70s, with many of the interlocutors and their families involved with it themselves. For Luis, religion in his home was a mixed bag. He described himself as Catholic, and cited his grandmother's devout Catholic faith as the reason for his adherence to the religion. Luis described how his grandmother would take him to Catholic mass, regardless of religious restrictions, as she had been a devout Catholic her entire life prior to the Revolution and aimed to instill that same religiosity in him. At the same time, he also recalled his family's deep affiliation to Santería: "On my mother's end, however, that's where it starts to be about the dead. Look, my mom had a doll named Francisca Siete Sayas.<sup>200</sup> Her name was Francisca, you see? And that doll, my mother would speak to her. She had her as a sort of medium for the family's protection. She had shrines and offerings in the house, with the colored necklaces, and things like that." Luis also described other shrines present in his family's home, shrines dedicated to Afro-Cuban orishas: "We had other shrines and offerings in the house. I'll mention their names. We had one to Ogún Guerrero, Oyá the goddess of the cemeteries, San Lázaro the saint of health and sickness. Elegguá, the one who not only opens paths, but also closes them in the same way he opens them. Yemayá, the queen of the sea, and of rivers. Oshún, the one of the rivers. Both are of the rivers. They're mother and daughter. We can say Oshún is the owner of rivers. Did I mention Obatalá?"<sup>201</sup> Luis's family often communed with the dead, as

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<sup>200</sup> Francisca Siete Sayas is described as a spirit guide who had previously been an enslaved African woman (Espirito Santo and Tassi).

<sup>201</sup> Ogún is the orisha of metals and minerals, especially iron. He is depicted as a blacksmith or ironworker, as well as a warrior. He is also syncretized with the Catholic Saint Peter (Duncan). Oyá is the guardian of cemeteries. She is the orisha of winds and storms, and is known to bring change into the lives of humans. Oyá is syncretized the Virgin of Candelaria. San Lázaro, or Saint Lazarus, has been syncretized with the orisha Babalú Ayé. Babalú Ayé is the orisha of smallpox, leprosy, and the plague (Hagedorn, 44). Elegguá is both a trickster orisha and a warrior. He is syncretized with the Child Jesus of Atocha, as well as Saint Anthony of Padua (Duncan). Yemayá is the orisha known as the mother who lives and rules over the seas. She is syncretized with the Virgin of Regla. Obatalá is the creator of the earth, as well as the creator of humankind. As an orisha, he is syncretized with the Virgin of Mercy. Oshún is the orisha of love and sensuality. She also rules over the rivers. Oshún is syncretized with the patroness of Cuba, the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre.

well as providing offerings to the orishas in exchange for protection, health, and other blessings. This domestic religiosity among practitioners of Afro-Cuban religions was not a new development caused by the Revolution's religious restrictions. Instead, these religions have typically always been practiced in the home, due to their secretive nature as a result of governmental persecution and stigmatization throughout Cuban history. Practiced in the home, interlocutors such as Luis were exposed to and involved with the religion as the Revolutionary government's restrictions, while impacting all religions, did little to stop a religion that had been historically stigmatized.

The prevalence of Afro-Cuban religions within the home was also recalled by Fernando, who grew up in the 1960s and described a mixture of Santería and syncretic traditions in his family's home: "My family always worshipped – not worshipped – always respected the roots we all have. The Afro-Cuban and Pan-Catholics ones. They had respect for the Virgencita,<sup>202</sup> for that part of the Afro-Cuban culture. My elders [his grandparents] weren't practitioners of anything, despite my mother having the ability, or facility – I don't know how to say it, to pass a spirit...My mother had the ability to be possessed by a spirit. To be mounted. My mother would be mounted by a spirit, something which she hated...She didn't want it to happen, but it happened. It was wonderful. Wonderful. Because that spirit, I remember her name was Luisa Barroso. The other one was named Jiquí. Another spirit she'd pass, that I remember, was named Dionisio. Another one I remember was Francisco Batallá. What would happen was very beautiful. It was beautiful in the sense that it never caused me any fear. The stupidities that ignorant people talk about; I never saw." The "stupidities" that Fernando referred to are the negative stereotypes that are often associated with Afro-Cuban culture. Communication with the dead, along with animal sacrifice, and other practices, have often been looked upon with suspicion and fear.

The misinformation that stems from such fear has led to rumors of devil worship and human sacrifice, further stigmatizing Afro-Cuban religions. Fernando's referral to people who believe harmful stereotypes towards Afro-Cuban religions as "ignorant" highlights the misinformation present about the group's practices. This religious ignorance, or illiteracy, could have disproportionate effects on communities who became linked to harmful stereotypes. African religions in Cuba have a long history of marginalization, stigmatization, and exploitation.<sup>203</sup> During the Republican Period (1902-1959), Afro-Cuban religious practices were criminalized. Castro's Socialist government then cracked down on any religious expression until the 1990s. Afro-Cuban religions were therefore historically targeted by the system's intolerance of religion and Fernando's words also implied individual intolerance, as people around him often held negative opinions towards them, absorbing the lessons of the state. What Fernando instead recounted about his family's practices was positive: "What I did see was a spirit that in its

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<sup>202</sup> Nickname for the Virgin.

<sup>203</sup> Marouan, Maha. "Santería in Cuba: contested issues at a time of transition." *Transition* (2018): p. 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.125.1.09>.

limited ability to speak in the Spanish language would communicate, and would send – or would advise – would give news. And with herbs, was able to cure illnesses. It would cure illnesses, would send people for cleansings. Which I know sounds crazy to people. It would send people to have ceremonies done. And many times, these were people who'd been given up on by doctors, and these people would recover.” Fernando’s experiences also highlighted the semi-public nature of his family’s practices. While religion was confined to the home, this did not necessarily mean that members of a community were unaware of each other’s practices. Seeking out religious assistance or attending religious gatherings was made possible through word of mouth. While the government put measures in place to limit religion, those still willing to practice religion regardless of government restrictions still found a means to do so.

While the restrictions and stigmatizations of religion in school led older Cubans to continue their religious practices in domestic spaces, this too was fraught with difficulties because of the society-wide persecution of religion which impacted their everyday lives. Most of the interlocutors recalled instances of government sanctioned religious persecution in daily life. Like Rafael, Abraham, too, remembered watching churches be closed down by the State: “That’s the first thing Fidel banned. He closed [almost] all the churches. Threw out all the priests. Many people no longer go to church because of that. The youth don’t go to church either.” Abraham’s words highlighted the aftermath of the government’s harsh measures on the Catholic church; the closure of religious institutions in order to prevent people from attending practicing religion effectively led to the decrease of religious practice among the population. Religion in the workplace was also heavily regulated, with interlocutors recalling people having their employment terminated due to their religious affiliation. Gonzalo remembered Santería practitioners hiding their practices from the public out of fear of repercussions: “Many people who were Santeros started throwing out their saints. People stopped going to church. Because people could lose their jobs.” Antonio, despite his feelings of approval towards Fidel Castro and the Revolution, critiqued this aspect of the Revolution in particular: “That was one of the biggest mistakes that the Revolution made...There was a lot of tyranny. A lot of tyranny, including the biggest mistake the government made which was denigrating certain religions... These were mistakes that were made, the way mistakes are made in any government in the world.” Antonio also brought up the repercussions people could face at work if their religious affiliations were discovered: “People who worked in social spheres, like teachers, people who worked within the community, if they believed in God or were religious then, no, no, no, [Antonio made a whistling sound], fly away! They’d get thrown out of work.” He gave a concrete example about his godmother, who worked as a schoolteacher in his town: “My godmother. My godmother! My Catholic godmother, who was a teacher, would go to a church in the middle of nowhere, in some countryside far away, because she was scared people would see her if she went to a church in Cardenas. Like I said, those were mistakes that were made.” Regulating religion in the public sphere, as well as castigating those who brought religion to public spaces such as the workplace, was another way of suppressing religion and reducing smaller, private spaces. This was one more

tactic by the Revolutionary government to diminish the presence of religion on the island altogether.

The persistence of Afro-Cuban religious practices under the Revolutionary government, as well as the involvement of practitioners and believers in each other's rituals was also described by Felipe, whose family was heavily involved in their African heritage, practicing both Santería and Espiritismo. Felipe and his family were somewhat of an exception, as his family were also staunch Revolutionaries. To Felipe's family, their religion and their political views functioned alongside each other. Living on an isolated farm in Agramonte, Felipe's family did not have to consistently deal with government authorities regulating their religious practices, nor did they feel the need to reject their faith in order to support the Revolutionary cause. His mother was particularly talented when it came to communing with the dead: "My mother was an Espiritista<sup>204</sup>. She would say that religion would stick to her through the air. For example, you'd come and see her and you'd tell her, 'I have this problem,' and she'd say, 'Look, the spirit says that what you have is this and that, because of this.' And that's how she'd work with religion. That's the religion I liked the most, Espiritismo, because there were no lies. The Espiritista would work with the dead. The dead would come to them and they would speak what the dead had said. That's why there aren't any lies. Everything else is lies, where they throw shells and coconut shells and tell you this or that...I know this stuff. I was born into these religions." Felipe's referral to certain Afro-Cuban divination practices and the use of divination tools such as cowrie shells and coconut shells as "lies," displays Felipe's understanding of what "authentic" religion looks like. To him, the authenticity of Espiritismo came from the fact that no aids were used to communicate with the other side, other than the human body. In this way, people had to be truthful in their words and could not rely on outside tools. While Felipe did not necessarily believe that all people who used divination tools were liars, the reliance on tools over the human body seemed to open up a space for liars and charlatans.

Other than Espiritismo, Felipe's grandmother was involved in Santería. A priestess of the religion, Felipe recalled her home offerings to the orishas or saints: "My grandmother had a massive altar full of saints. San Lázaro, Santa Bárbara, all the saints she had there. And she worked with herbs. You'd go to her while sick and she'd go out to the fields to pick herbs. She'd come back and start hitting you with them. She'd chant in a loud voice and whatever you had would go away." Felipe also recalled other practices that were conducted by his family: "Saints don't eat food. They eat blood. They'd set up a gourd and then slaughter a ram or a goat. They'd skin it and then you'd have to hold it by its feet and ask the saints whatever it is you wanted to ask them, 'San Lázaro I want you to help me with this or that' and the blood would pour into the gourd. Then, the head was taken and placed on the gourd with your name on it. The saint asks for the animal to eat and to guide you." Another practice Felipe recalled were his family's

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<sup>204</sup> Spiritist.

bembés:<sup>205</sup> “They’d have bembés that would last all night. For example, if it was San Lázaro’s day, they’d have a bembé, all night long, calling the saints, eating meat... Three to four days of bembés, all night long. The saints on their altars, with candles lit. San Lázaro, Santa Bárbara, the Virgin of Regla, the Virgin of Charity. All the saints were there.” Similar to Luis, Felipe noted that his family’s religious practices were well known in the rural area in which he lived, with people attending their bembés or traveling from afar to be cured by spirits. These practices were not necessarily frowned upon the way they were in more urban areas. What is more, aside from his family’s practices as being known in the area, Felipe’s family were staunch supporters of the Revolution. He recalled: “It was public. They cured people too. I don’t how they did it. But they’d call the saints, and use herbs, and slaughter animals... My entire family were revolutionaries. They saw that Revolution was going to help the poor. They did their witchcraft but they also believed in the Revolution. Both things.” To Felipe’s family, their faith and the Revolution were not irreconcilable. While they were firm practitioners of their faith, they did not feel the need to trade their religion in to support the Revolution. Living in such an isolated place surrounded by others who held similar religious beliefs further allowed for two distinct belief systems to coexist.

### III. Adulthood: Religion Prior to Migration to Canada

Religion played a role in the adult lives of the interlocutors, whether in their surroundings or in their personal lives. This section examines the religiosities of the interlocutors throughout their adult lives. It investigates the lack of religiosity among those who worked in government jobs, while also examining the practices of those who followed a religion regardless of the government’s harsh measures on religion on the island. What is more, this section examines the lifting of religious restrictions during the 1990s in conjunction with Pope John Paul II’s visit to the island in 1998. Beginning with their adult lives in Cuba, this section ultimately focuses on the interlocutors’ reflections on their practices and beliefs as adults, as well as their overall thoughts on religion in Cuba prior to their migrations to Canada.

During their adult lives in Cuba, religion manifested itself in different ways for the interlocutors. For some, religion in their personal lives was practically nonexistent. For Jose, religion did not exist in his life as he had simply never practiced it as a child. The same could be said about Abraham, who had not grown up in a religious household, and was also obliged to put religion aside for his job as an airplane mechanic: “I worked as a mechanic for [redacted Airline]. To start working there, they investigated me first. I had to fill out an application. There were questions asking if you were religious, what religion you practiced, if you had family on the outside, if you had contact with said family, all sorts of things.” Abraham went on to give a concrete example of what could happen if one was religious in that profession: “You couldn’t go to church or anything like that. Since I worked at [redacted Airline], I couldn’t go to church, I couldn’t do anything like that. If you were religious, they’d fire you. They’d throw you out of the

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<sup>205</sup> A bembé is a ritual complex made up of drumming, dancing, and singing, organized for the veneration of African divinities known as orishas (Murphy 2012, 70).

airport. I had a friend whose wife would go to church, and because of that, they fired him. She didn't even work at the airport. But since she was a Christian, and she was going to church, they threw him out of the airport." Abraham's words further highlighted the risks being openly religious posed for people's livelihoods. Many were therefore forced to choose between their faith and their careers in order to survive. Others noted that their lack of religious views went hand in hand with their participation in the Revolutionary movement.

For Ronaldo, his employment as an intelligence officer within the government's state security meant that his main focus was Communism: "Look, I was a Revolutionary. I was a Communist. Because I was manipulated like everyone else. I was influenced by my parents. There are many people living here who were also influenced but are too scared to say it." To Ronaldo, the Revolution's teachings were a form of manipulation on the youth, coaxing them to choose the Revolution over "counterrevolutionary" worldviews, such as religion. In doing so, the Revolution attempted to ensure that the youth would not develop any religious belief or practice from an early age. Felipe, on the other hand, rejected his religious upbringing in favor for the Revolution's atheist ideals. Since he had joined Che Guevara's guerrilla militia at the age of thirteen, Felipe's life had consistently revolved around the Revolution and the military for many years. He recalled his first introduction to Che Guevara as such: "I started working with Che when I was thirteen years old. At thirteen, I entered the guerrilla...He had a farm that was used for military practice. How to fight in combat, how to fire guns. I arrived and he looked at me and asked, 'How old are you?' And I said, 'I'm thirteen years old.' He said, 'You're not ready for the guerrilla.' I said, 'Those people over there, just because they're older than me, that means they can do it?' He looked at me and started laughing. He said, 'This kid is thirteen and he wants to be in the military with us. Practice here is tough.' And I said, 'Aren't others able to handle it?' I remember that our leader was the captain [name redacted], and he said 'Put him in the guerrilla and see if he does well.'" With this intensive military training shaping his teenage years, Felipe noted that he carried on the ideals of the Revolution throughout a portion of his adult life: "I was atheist for a while...I'd tell people, 'I believe in what I can see.'...I spent five years not practicing or believing in anything. The only thing I thought about was military stuff. I would say that religion didn't exist." Felipe's experiences not only illustrated the impact of the government's measures on a person's employment, but went one step further to portray how those involved directly with the Revolutionary government were not only expected, but obliged, to reject religion. Thus, religion was made unfavorable to members of Cuban society. By eliminating employment opportunities both in and outside of government jobs for religious people, the government was pushing people to avoid religion for the sake of maintaining their positions in their careers.

With this said, people did continue to practice religion on the island even with the real possibility of governmental persecution. For interlocutors such as Fernando and Mario, religion was something they continued to practice well into their adult lives. Having grown up surrounded by Afro-Cuban religions, Fernando recalled the initiation ceremony, known as



‘making saint,’ that he underwent to be Santero, a priest of Santería: “I made saint in 1987, sorry, 1986... The process to be made saint consists of various ceremonies. To be honest with you, I wasn’t an expert in the religion. I don’t know in great detail the things that are done when they are making you saint... When you’re made saint you’re born again. The thing is that you’re being made saint. And elders are the ones making you saint. So, I don’t have the knowledge of what they did. I know they made me saint.” While Fernando was uncertain about the details of his initiation, he continued to be a dedicated Santero and practice his faith until his departure from the island. For others, religion functioned as a source of comfort or stability in their lives, regardless of the government’s attitude towards religion.

For Mario, a homosexual man who was raised Catholic, religion allowed him to find some semblance of peace as he struggled to accept his sexuality. Growing up in Pinar del Río in the 1960s and 70s, the few churches that had remained open after the government’s mass closure of Catholic churches functioned as his safe space: “Going to church to pray would free me a little, would free me from the tension I was living with, that double life... I couldn’t tell my family that I was gay. I couldn’t tell my friends that I was gay. Whenever I had a sporadic relationship, I would go to church and pray for forgiveness. I would say that I would never do it again. I was repressing myself. I was repressing everything about myself.” Mario left Cuba in 1988, after marrying a Canadian woman. He cited both the country’s repressive measures against the population, as well as his belief that moving to Canada would allow him to change his sexuality, as motivations for immigration: “There were various factors that caused me to leave Cuba. Truthfully, I wasn’t in agreement with the political system, and socially, I was repressed. Because, I was fighting against something within me, which was my homosexuality. So, I had girlfriends and whatnot, but I was living a life that wasn’t really my life... At the time, I thought I could change my sexual orientation. Because Cuba was putting out books about sexual orientation and homosexuality, and it was viewed as an illness.” When Mario attended church, he found comfort in his prayers, while also asking God to cure him of his sexuality. In his experience, what was most damaging was not the government’s restrictions on religion, but the government-sanctioned homophobia that was spread through the use of pamphlets describing homosexuality as a disease. Going to church was therefore a safe space for him as he worked to come to terms with his identity. When asked about how he reconciled his sexuality and the Catholic church’s negative stance on homosexuality, Mario explained that his faith was a personal affair between himself and God, and he did not pay attention to what the Church as an institution put forward. His argument was that the Church had been built by humankind, whereas God was divine and therefore superseded anything created by humanity. This allowed Mario to feel more at ease within the Catholic religion than with the Revolutionary government’s rhetoric. Religion continued to exist in the lives of Cubans even with the government’s attempts to eliminate it. Fernando and Mario were but two examples of people who chose religion over Revolutionary ideals. To them, their faith was more important and fulfilling to give up altogether.

Some interlocutors noted that relations between religion and the government began to take a turn for the better in the 1990s. Jose recalled that the visit of Pope John Paul II on the island shifted the course of the relationship between religions and the State: “After the first papal visit, there was an opening. After the pope came to Cuba, that’s when things opened up a little around religion. Different churches opened and different religions, almost all the world religions, even the Muslim religion, started to be practiced by Cubans.” The Pope’s visit was not only significant for the Catholic Church, but for religions as a whole. His visit was not an insignificant trip to the island, but was rather an event that signalled change. Coupled with the Revolutionary government’s decision to allow religious people into the Communist Party in 1991 and the following year’s reformation of the constitution declaring Cuba as a secular state instead of an atheist one, Pope John Paul’s visit symbolized a greater religious acceptance on behalf of the Revolutionary government. What is more, Jose noted that this papal visit also led to the inclusion of religious people in the Communist Party: “Before the 90s you didn’t have the option but to choose Communism, the Communist Party. The option was Communism or Communism. You couldn’t say, “I’m a Communist during the day and at night I go to church.” If you were seen in a Church, it would 100% get back to the Party.” Once again, this indicated the government’s role to make religion as undesirable as possible by having people choose only one path in life. In ensuring that people chose Communism, religion in public was effectively being suppressed until the 1990s. The impact of the 1998 papal visit on religion in Cuba was also described by Antonio, who noted: “After the Pope came to Cuba, December 24<sup>th</sup> was celebrated again. It opened up the ability to practice all kinds of religion in Cuba. I even read that there’s a mosque in Havana now. Like I said, one of the biggest mistakes of the Revolution was the persecution of religion.” While Antonio supported the Revolution, his critique of this aspect of the government’s policies further indicated the controversial nature of the government’s policies. Rafael, who, while raised by a Catholic mother, did not practice any religion during his adult life, also corroborated Antonio’s words: “When the Pope came, Christmas started to be celebrated again. Before that, people had to work every day, even on Christmas. The only days off were on July 26<sup>th</sup> and days like that.” Thus, religion was given the chance to flourish once again on the island.

Rafael also reflected on why the Pope’s visit to the island made such a difference for the State: “It wasn’t convenient for Fidel Castro to fight with religious people. So, the Pope came to Cuba. He [Castro] wanted to project an image that there wasn’t a dictatorship. He was very intelligent. He opened the doors. He let religious people join the Communist Party. He opened up the churches. He wasn’t fighting with churches as much. So, there was more freedom. He was very intelligent.” Rafael’s analysis indicated that to him, the government perhaps felt that prohibiting religion would make them lose support or sympathy throughout the nation. Thus, opening up opportunities to different religious groups, as well as orchestrating the first papal visit to the island, would begin mending relations between religion and the State. Another interlocutor, Gonzalo, who grew up in Havana in a Catholic family during the 1960s, described himself as a non-practicing Catholic and summarized the result of the Pope’s visit in one phrase: “When the Pope came, things opened up...Because you can’t have a nation without faith.” To

Gonzalo, having a “nation without faith,” was a grave mistake, as it discriminated against religious people and eliminated the right to choose one’s own path. While Gonzalo himself was not a religious person, he recalled the impact of the Revolution’s religious restrictions on his family’s religious practices and how this lack of religious freedom and the lack of availability of the choice to practice a religion controlled a person’s ability to live as authentically as possible. Controlling such a personal and important aspect of one’s life would, to Gonzalo, sow mistrust towards the government. Faith (or the lack thereof) would continue to play differing roles in the interlocutors lives once they left Cuba and settled down in Montreal.

#### IV. Adulthood: Religion After Migration to Canada

Religiosity varied among the interlocutors as they settled in Montreal. For some, religion continued to not be a presence in their lives. Jose left Cuba in 1993, citing his actions as a human rights activist on the island as the reason for him fleeing the country: “I had already protested against the system. I belonged to a movement of human rights activists. In Cuba, when someone signals themselves as opposing the system, they find themselves in a lot of danger. It caused me a lot of problems at work. That’s why they [the sector chief of his neighborhood CDR] gave me a choice: to go to prison for thirty years for crimes against the Revolution or to leave the country.” Jose described never feeling the urge or desire to practice any religion. As an adult in Canada, he does not currently practice or believe in any religion: “I’ve never been motivated to practice any religion. From a young age...I was already predisposed to it...I grew up in that...I never had an interest in any religion or in practicing one. Personally, I don’t think you need to go to church in order to have good values. I don’t think worshipping any figure gives you any values. There are people who go to church and don’t have any respect for others.” For Rafael, who left Cuba in 2013, religion stopped existing in his life altogether. While he had practiced some Catholicism as a child, his faith had diminished over time until it had been extinguished completely: “I don’t believe in anything now...As time went on, I started losing faith. And when something would happen to me, I’d remember God. But, let me tell you something. Now I don’t even think about God...For me, he doesn’t exist. I completely lost my faith. I’m a total atheist.” His reasoning for this was very straightforward and clear: “If God existed...You see all these religious people dying, and all these wars. So, for me, he doesn’t exist.” Gonzalo, who left Cuba in 1992, described himself as a Catholic but also specified that he was no longer much of a practitioner. He cited his lack of faith as a result of the Cuban government’s crackdown on religion: “They discouraged the youth from going to church...The Communist mindset was atheist. They didn’t believe in any religion. So, they went on taking faith away from my generation. My generation, your father’s generation, we didn’t believe in anything...In Cuba, they stole our faith.” Gonzalo directly correlates his lack of religiosity to the government’s harsh measures on religion, describing religion as something that had been completely removed from his generation. Religion was therefore eliminated as an option for those growing up with the Revolution.

For other interlocutors, religion was something they developed or explored further upon arriving in Canada. Abraham was able to practice Catholicism openly once he left the island in 1995. He described his domestic religious practices now that he no longer is able to attend mass due to his health: “No, I don’t go to church anymore. I used to go La Guadalupe, but now I can’t really walk anymore. But I used to go to La Guadalupe and Notre Dame. I’d go every Sunday...At home, I have my saints. Santa Bárbara, San Lázaro, the Virgin of Charity. When I was hospitalized with the coronavirus, one day, when it was like ten o’clock in the morning, I unlocked my cellphone and the first thing that showed up was a photo of Saint Jude. And I said, ‘Please Saint Jude, get me out of here. I want to leave the hospital now, I’m going crazy.’ It was like ten in the morning, and at around ten-fifteen, the doctor came and told me I could leave the hospital that day. So now, every Monday I light a candle for Saint Jude. Every Monday I light a candle to Santa Bárbara, to the Virgin, to San Lazaro, and to Elegguá.” Abraham’s life in Canada gave him enough comfort and safety to branch out and develop his faith. While his age and health do not allow him to practice religion publicly anymore, he maintains his connection to the divine within the home.

Similar to Abraham, Ronaldo also began developing his religious beliefs after leaving Cuba in 1994. Ronaldo cited the country’s political, economic, and social instability as his reason for immigration. When asked about his change of heart towards religion, he simply replied with: “You get to a point where you realize that there is something supernatural that is protecting you.” Ronaldo described himself as a Catholic, but mentioned that he does not attend church here in Canada: “When I first arrived here, I didn’t go to church. I didn’t want to go because to me, it was offensive.” Ronaldo was resistant to religion when he arrived in Canada, as he still held a lot of negative sentiments towards it due to his time working within the Revolutionary government. What is more, he did not feel comfortable attending church in Canada, preferring to attend the one in his hometown whenever he visited Cuba: “If I were to have gone, it would’ve been in Cuba...I chose the Catholic religion because it’s the healthiest religion I’ve seen. It’s the least influential. There’s no pressure on you. It has the least influence.” He further specified that he only goes to church during his visits to Cuba, at a specific church in his hometown of Cardenas: “I go to the church in Parque Colón. It’s my favorite church. I go during the week when there’s no one. I find such peace and tranquility. I arrive there, I sit down. And sometimes, I spend one to two hours in there. My wife accompanies me, and we don’t speak. And when I leave, I feel new.” Ronaldo also specified that he does not think going to Church is mandatory in order to have a relationship with the divine: “To believe in God, one doesn’t have to go to church...I’m not a fanatic. I’m not a fanatic. I don’t go to church every Sunday. When I want to converse with God, I’ll converse with God. Because why not? Isn’t he everywhere?” For Ronaldo, his faith transcends location, communicating with the divine whenever he feels the urge to do so. While some people were able to explore religion once they settled in Canada, others continued to maintain pre-existing religious practices.

For other interlocutors, their religion was transplanted from one country to another. Antonio left Cuba in 2010 to better provide for his disabled son still living on the island. Living in the diaspora has not diminished or changed his support for the Revolution: “I’m a Fidelista, and I love Fidel and I love Che Guevara. And I’m nothing, a nobody. But that’s what my dad inculcated in me, and I’m not ashamed of saying it.” While he continues to support the Revolution and its ideals, Antonio has not compromised his religious views. He has not modified his religious practices, and has continued to practice his blend of Catholic and Afro-Cuban beliefs: “I adore Santa Bárbara. I have her in my house. I never forget her wine and her apple. It’s like what you said, about mixing religions. In Christianity, her name is Santa Bárbara. In the African religion, his name is Changó. Blessed Santa Bárbara and Changó are the same thing.” When describing his practices, he also added: “I still believe in Santa Bárbara and in Jesus Christ. It’s never changed. My Santa Bárbara never goes without her red rose, her apple, her wine. There’s the dead spirit that accompanies me, too. One that my godmother gave me. From the African religion. I have San Lázaro and Elegguá on the floor with a few balls so that he can open up my paths. I speak to them daily, before leaving the house.” When asked to elaborate further about the spirit, Antonio simply replied with, “Francisco. He’s there to protect me...I just know he’s a black African slave who died in Cuba. He brought his African roots with him to Cuba. That’s all I can tell you about him. I don’t know anything else. He likes coffee, rum, and tobacco.” Antonio’s religious practices are relegated to his home, ranging between prayers, candle lightings, and offerings of food and tobacco. With this, he also carries his beliefs with him wherever he goes, being especially devoted to Saint Barbara. Similar to Antonio, Luis, who left the island in 2005, continues to practice the beliefs he has had all his life. Luis reflected on his affinity for the Catholic religion over his mother’s beliefs in Santería: “I would go to church with my grandmother. She was the one that guided me into Catholicism. That’s why I feel most comfortable within Catholicism and why I’m not as attracted to Santería. I respect those things, but I don’t like them.” Now living in Montreal for nearly two decades, he has held on to the beliefs and practices he had cultivated as a child: “I still practice my Catholic religion. I go to church once or twice a month...To be honest, I haven’t been in a while because I’ve been so busy. But I light my candles, I’ll pray the Our Father, and things like that. I have my crucifix.” Luis’s religious habits exist both inside and outside of the home, with his occasional church attendance reminding him of his Catholic grandmother. To him, religion is both a means to connect with the divine, as well as the grandmother he was so attached to. For the interlocutors, religion was not only a belief or practice, but a connection to their culture and heritage as well.

For some interlocutors, maintaining that connection to their culture has been difficult in Canada. An issue encountered by interlocutors who practice Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería is the lack of accessibility to both their religious community and religious materials. For Fernando, who, after a series of issues with his documentation, has not been allowed back into Cuba since 1995, his religious beliefs and practices have allowed him to retain a piece of his culture with him: “Since I left Cuba in 1995, I’ve continue worshipping...worshipping the same beings I know, the same deities that I’ve loved all my life. I keep worshipping them and if you

come into my home, it's very possible that you'll spot a little saint with a glass of water and a lit candle beside it once a year, because it's the saint's birthday, or because on that day something was being celebrated." While he continues to believe in his faith and has practices his religion in the home, Fernando also noted how difficult it is to find a community of practitioners in Montreal: "But here, we don't have temples or organizations that are dedicated to that. I never pursued the religion to that point. I keep loving them in my heart and in my memory." The lack of accessibility to Santería and other Afro-Cuban practices in Montreal was a recurring theme among those who practice such religions.

Other than having a difficult time finding a community here, the cost of ceremonies and ritualistic items such as roosters are expensive, making the participation in rituals even less accessible to people who cannot consistently afford such things. Felipe, who left Cuba in 1992 after marrying a Canadian woman, noted: "When I arrived here, I looked for people that practiced Santería and things like that. The problem is that here people only do things for money. They charge you for everything, the saint, food for this and that, a rooster, everything. It's different here." Felipe also explained that certain practices that are viewed as commonplace in Cuba, such as animal sacrifice, are often viewed negatively here: "Quebecois people don't like that. They don't like animal sacrifice. It's dangerous to do that here. In Cuba, yes. In Cuba, a bembé is three days of slaughtering animals, and cutting heads, because the saint eats the head and the blood, and people eat the meat." While animal sacrifice was a normal part of rituals for Felipe while growing up in Cuba, the cultural differences between Cuba and Canada pose a problem for this aspect of Afro-Cuban religion. To Felipe, animal sacrifice is a necessary part of his religious practice, however, due to it being taboo here, he refrains from it altogether. Felipe ultimately described his current practices as a mixture of domestic religion, with the occasional visit to local Santeros: "It's in my roots. I practice the religion and I go to Santeros' homes for readings. To know what's happening, what will happen, if my health is good or bad... I have my saints at home. I have a San Lázaro, a Santa Bárbara, and a Caridad del Cobre. And I light candles for them every Friday. And I give them aguardiente, which they drink, and wine. These are customs I've had since I was a child. To take care of the saints." For Felipe, as well as other interlocutors, religion allowed them to connect to their roots. Whatever religious (or non-religious) path the interlocutors chose for themselves, all felt comfortable and confident in their current beliefs and practices.

### Chapter Seven: Analysis

While a majority of the interlocutors have held on to or developed their religious practices here in Canada, all except one described having little to no contact with other religious or cultural groups in the city. When pressed about their knowledge of other religions, all of the interlocutors demonstrated little to no knowledge of other religions, while many held very negative attitudes towards particular religions, or to religion as a whole. This final chapter examines the interlocutors' personal religious knowledge, ranging from their knowledge of their own respective religions to their knowledge of other world religions. In this chapter, I make use

of the interviews to discuss the importance of religious literacy in relation to a state who inhibited the opportunity for its population to cultivate it. In conjunction with scholarly work on the subject, I argue that the Revolutionary government's suppression of religion within the education system, as well as religious persecution in broader public life has contributed to the interlocutors' religious illiteracies. Furthermore, this chapter also argues that both religious education and literacy is a necessary tool to promote a greater understanding and deeper open-mindedness towards other religious groups.

### I. Religious Literacy Among Interlocutors

Understanding the interlocutors' views lays the groundwork for examining how prohibiting religious education contributes to the development of religious illiteracy, as well as the proliferation of misinformation and religious othering. When discussing their views on religion, all of the interlocutors expressed knowing very little to nothing at all about them. Many of the interlocutors also held very negative views on religion. One interlocutor, Rafael, had difficulty describing his family's religious practices. When asked about his mother's religion, he replied with, "She was Catholic, yes. Well, you asked me this question, and I don't even know what Catholic is. I don't know anything about church." Rafael's religious literacy towards the religion he was raised with was essentially nonexistent. As described by Prothero, Rafael's ability to "understand and use in [his] day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions – their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives" was also nonexistent, as he could not distinguish between one Christian denomination and another.<sup>206</sup> As Rafael had been raised with the Revolution, religion had not only been confined to the home, but was also diminished within the household. As his mother practiced her religion behind closed doors, Rafael did not have the ability to involve himself in the religion, as exhibiting any form of religiosity outside of the home was forbidden. Since religion was not discussed in school, Rafael had been effectively barred for obtaining any sort of religious education. His lack of religious education highlights one of Marshall's concerns regarding the silence surrounding religion in schools, noting that "many people today lack even basic knowledge of their own cultural heritage, so that they are unable to appreciate literary references and other elements of culture and identity."<sup>207</sup> In Rafael's case, the lack of religious education in school due to the government's regulation of the education system, coupled with the diminishment of religion in the home as a result of the government's anti-religious stance in Cuban life, led to an overall lack of knowledge regarding his and his family's religious heritage.

This inability to distinguish different religions is something that occurred among other interlocutors, such as Felipe, who had not had contact with other religious groups until his arrival in Canada: "I only learned about Christians when I arrived here. I don't know how they work, what they do. I was reading a book a while ago; it was quite complicated. Those Jehovah's Witnesses. I don't know what kind of religion that is." Felipe's lack of knowledge surrounding

<sup>206</sup> Prothero. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't*, p. 15.

<sup>207</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 281.

the Jehovah's Witnesses was especially relevant, as they were one of the most persecuted groups throughout the height of the Revolutionary government. As Felipe had been heavily involved with the Revolution, he knew next to nothing about their beliefs and practices as a group. Felipe also expressed confusion towards Islam, stating, "Same with Muslims. What is that? What kind of religion is that? I don't know how it's practiced. It's complicated...The women have to be covered up; they have to cover their heads...They look like submissives. It's as if the wife of a Muslim is a slave." Having only encountered the religion upon his arrival to Canada, the little knowledge Felipe had about the religion came from what he had seen in the media. Not knowing or understanding anything about the religion other than the modes of dress followed by certain Muslim women led Felipe to developing assumptions about the religion that were especially negative. These negative assumptions and sentiments towards Islam became a recurring theme throughout the interviews with members of the Cuban community here in Montreal. Described by Shopes as a "shared social identity,"<sup>208</sup> and by Tweed as a "diasporic identity,"<sup>209</sup> this demographic of the Cuban immigrants residing in Montreal were not only bound together by age, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status, but also by shared views developed under the Castro government. These views not only functioned as a result of the Revolutionary government's restrictions on religious learning, but also as part of their shared social identity as immigrants who experienced the height of Castro's religious restrictions and religious persecution on the island.

This shared social and diasporic identity regarding ideas formed by and adhered to on behalf of members of the Cuban Montreal community manifested itself in negative sentiments towards certain religions, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Islam. What is more, the subject of religious extremism was a repeated theme throughout the interviews with the interlocutors. For Antonio, who had also never encountered Islam until his arrival in Canada, his views on religion were summarized in one sentence: "They've [the Quebec government] given a lot of power to...what are they called? Those religious people...Muslims." Antonio did not elaborate further, however, he described Islam as 'fanaticism.' These two statements indicated his understanding of Islam as potentially "taking over" in Quebec, as well as their perceived power in the province as being a negative thing. In conjunction to being described as 'fanaticism,' Antonio's understanding of Islam through Quebec politics and the media's rhetoric on secularism led him to come to the conclusion that Islam is inherently an extremist religion, regardless of the diversity present within the religion. According to Bakali, in the Quebec context, "identity politics combined with feminist and French secularist discourses have framed Muslims as a threatening 'Other' outside the 'nationalist space.'"<sup>210</sup> Negative perceptions of the threatening Muslim 'Other,' as potentially 'taking over' Quebec have been facilitated due to the

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<sup>208</sup> Shopes, Linda. "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities." *The Journal of American History*, no. 2 (Sept. 2002): p. 588, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092177>.

<sup>209</sup> Tweed, Thomas A. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 83.

<sup>210</sup> Bakali, Naved. "Islamophobia in Quebec Secondary Schools: Inquiries into the Experiences of Muslim Male Youth Post-9/11." *Muslim Students, Education and Neoliberalism*, p.145.



state policy of secularism, or *laïcité*. The concept of *laïcité*, can be understood as a “normative political culture in which there is a strict separation between church and state on matters of public policy.”<sup>211</sup> In contemporary times, however, *laïcité* has been geared towards the dichotomization of Muslims as the ‘Other’ within French society. In Quebec, the mistrust of Muslims is “conflated with secularity debates and State neutrality policies, wherein politics of “moderation” are asserted to define “desirable citizens,” and “appropriate” religious accommodations.<sup>212</sup> By depicting Muslims as threatening to Quebec’s political and cultural security and identity, the province’s neutrality laws worked to instill the notion of the “desirable citizen” as being mutually inclusive with secularism. For the interlocutors, the learned atheism developed under the Revolutionary government translated itself to Quebec and was further promoted the province’s secularism. To be a good citizen, in the eyes of the interlocutors, was to reduce public displays of religiosity to the domestic sphere or to appropriate religious spaces, such as churches. On the other hand, when religiosity entered the public sphere, it was no longer deemed appropriate and veered into the domain of ‘fanaticism.’

The term ‘fanaticism’ was repeatedly used throughout the interviews, especially when referring to both Islam and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The two religions were repeatedly singled out over others, and were exclusively spoken about in a negatively light. Along the same vein as the term ‘fanaticism’ and the term ‘radical’ was also used when discussing Islam. Luis, while discussing his overall thoughts on religion, used Islam as an example of religious radicalism: “I see that all religion has its meaning and its beliefs, and I think each person is free of himself, of their actions and their thoughts. Here, you can live how you want, in a democracy... There are many things that religions, such as the Muslim one, for example, exaggerate. They’re radicals. The Muslim religion is a radical religion. ‘You can’t eat that, you can’t eat this, Ramadan, etc.’” The extent of Luis’s understanding of Islam surrounded religious dietary restrictions, especially in regards to the four-week period of fasting Muslims undertake during the month of Ramadan. After bringing up that many religions, including Judaism, have different forms of dietary laws for a variety of reasons, Luis agreed and stated, “Jews, too. But they’re also radicals.” Luis did not elaborate on the notion of Jews being radicals, however, to him, terms such as ‘fanaticism’ and ‘radicalism’ were used to describe behaviors or traditions he viewed as restrictive. To Luis, adhering to different forms of religious laws was a negative thing, without considering the diversity and various expressions of religiosity that are present within a religion. Having little to no knowledge of Islam and Judaism, Luis had formed his opinions on the minimal information he had encountered in the media. The opinions he held were especially negative and assumed both religions were monolithic. Luis’s lack of religious literacy surrounding Islam and Judaism facilitated his negative views on the two.

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<sup>211</sup> Bakali. “Islamophobia in Quebec Secondary Schools: Inquiries into the Experiences of Muslim Male Youth Post-9/11.” p. 146.

<sup>212</sup> Mercier-Dalphon, Geneviève. “Local Tales of Sufism in Quebec: Secular Politics of Moderation and the Production of Charismatic Muslims.” *ReOrient* (2021): p. 129.

In conjunction with religious extremism, the notion of religious violence was also brought up during the interviews. This was especially discussed by Fernando, who mentioned not having had contact with religious groups in Montreal other than individual encounters and seeing religion depicted in the media. Fernando mentioned both the Jehovah's Witnesses and Islam, describing both as being inherently violent religions. Beginning with the Jehovah's Witnesses, Fernando stated, "To be honest, the people who've approached me to talk about religion are [from] religions that don't interest me. They're religions that made my country miserable. Jehovah's Witnesses. I don't know if they're Catholic or Christian, but they come with their little book. Wherever they went, they went on killing and assassinating, burning people alive. All those lies, I hate them." While Fernando was vehemently against the Revolutionary government and pointed out the persecution of religion on the island, his words indicated an agreeance with the discriminatory rhetoric that was put forward by the State towards Jehovah's Witnesses. As Fernando grew up surrounded by this rhetoric, his attitude towards the group demonstrated an internalization of government-sanctioned religious persecution. What is more, Fernando's discussion of the Jehovah's Witnesses demonstrated his confusion or uncertainty towards the religion itself, as Fernando was unable to differentiate which denomination the group belonged to, as well as whether the group was considered Christian at all. Similar to other interlocutors, Fernando's lack of religious education meant that he did not have even minimal knowledge of world religions. Continuing with Islam, Fernando's encounter with the religion stemmed from his experience with a Muslim man at his previous place of employment in Montreal. Not having known anything about the religion prior to this encounter, Fernando based his understanding of Islam solely on this one person. Describing how his former coworker mistreated his wife by not allowing her to leave the home or speak without his permission, he summarized his feelings towards Islam as such: "Another [religion] I don't agree with, I've been their boss, I've shared with them certain viewpoints on music, but I don't agree with the religion, because, with all due respect, it has concepts that are totally antisocial. It's the Muslims. I, like any other person, was born from a woman...and this Muslim religion mistreats their mothers, their sisters, their wives. They're completely discriminatory towards others. They adore violence and things like that. I don't want to get involved in that." Fernando's words echoed Islamophobic remarks that are often depicted in the media regarding Islam as both a violent religion, as well as a religion that is inherently oppressive to women. While Fernando did not have any further knowledge about Islam as he had not had any sort of religious education or contact with the religion prior to this experience with his former coworker, his words demonstrated that this first encounter with Islam had fundamentally shaped his understanding of the religion. With no prior knowledge of Islam, Fernando had therefore not had the access to learn about the religion in a nuanced manner, leading him to make assumptions based on this singular experience with a Muslim person.

While Islam and the Jehovah's Witnesses were certainly the focal point of the interlocutors' discussions, they were not the only religions that were spoken about negatively. Using the same language as other interlocutors, Ronaldo described Santería as fanaticism:

“Many people use religion as a subterfuge...But once they resolve their problems they forget about religion. So, in reality, they aren’t religious. Like Santería, for example, the Afro-Cuban religion. There are people who start following the Afro-Cuban religion because they think they can heal themselves. ‘I had an illness so I went and made saint.’ Thinking that that’s going to heal them. Some people are fanatics.” While Ronaldo acknowledged he did not know much about Afro-Cuban religions, the opinion that he had formed depicted a religion that is misused by people for personal gain. With this, Ronaldo therefore did not see the religion or its devotees as authentic, claiming that their religiosity was simply due to the desire to achieve what one wanted. He elaborated on this point further, arguing that Catholicism was losing its power in Cuba due to Afro-Cuban religions becoming a “trend”: “It’s a religion that has a lot of fanaticism. These people have thrown the Christian religion to the side, and now the Afro-Cuban religion has taken power. It’s a fad...It’s a trend. Before, you’d see the Catholic religion, the Christian religion.” To Ronaldo, the Afro-Cuban religion lacked the authenticity of the Christian religion. By dismissing the religion as a trend, he effectively dismissed the validity of both the religion and those who practice it. Ronaldo was also critical of people who practiced Santería in Canada, once again referring to it as fanaticism: “This woman I know, [name redacted], she’s a fanatic. She made saint and she’s here. So, Canadians will walk by her place and see outside her door a plate with honey and a lit candle and three coconuts, and they wonder what the heck it is. Canadians will walk by and see that!” Ronaldo’s words display a worry for the judgement that may occur when people display their religiosity in a public space. Given the anti-religious and atheist rhetoric of the Revolutionary government, as well as the secularist attitude of the Quebec government, Rolando had transplanted his experiences under one government into a new environment after migrating from one country to another. He went on, further describing his friend’s domestic religiosity: “In her living room, she has Francisca la negrita.<sup>213</sup> I don’t know if you know what that is. I don’t know anything about that, but I respect it. Candles everywhere, and the other day she called me and said, ‘Can you please go to my place and blow out the candles?’ I told her, ‘Let that shit catch fire.’ It’s fanaticism, fanaticism.” Ronaldo’s statement his lack of knowledge about Santería, coupled with his disparaging comments towards the religion, not only demonstrated a lack of religious understanding, it also revealed the impact of the Revolution’s religious restrictions on those living on the island. Other than not receiving religious education in school, Ronaldo had grown up in a strict Revolutionary household. Having learned the atheistic values of the Revolution at a young age, his career in the Cuban government further surrounded him with the anti-religious ideals of the Revolution. Shaped by his surroundings, Ronaldo had internalized the Cuban government’s rhetoric towards religion. Despite him developing his faith upon his immigration to Canada, the first decades of his life under the Revolutionary government had formed his opinions on religion.

Sentiments of hostility and suspicion towards religion were present with all the interlocutors, however, these sentiments also came with reflections on the Revolutionary

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<sup>213</sup> Francisca the Little Black Woman (Francisca Siete Sayas)

government's role in impeding religious learning. To Jose, his overall views on religion focused on the conflicts that arise among people who have vastly differing worldviews: "I think religion, in general, has separated a lot of people. Religion has a major societal influence, a great social impact, because, on occasions, it's separated families due to ideas. Many people have become fanatics and have caused many issues. We've seen that happen with Muslims, Jews, Catholics. Religion has caused social divisions." Once again, the subject of religious fanaticism was brought up, with Jose emphasizing the negative aspects of religion. When reflecting on religion in Canada, for example, Jose cited the misdeeds of the Roman Catholic Church as an example of religion's negative impact on society: "I came to this country and saw that religion has had a great negative influence on this country. Especially the Catholic religion, many negative things. That's why I never got involved in any of it...A negative influence of religion in Canada is how the Church abused children, children under their care in orphanages, how they abused these children, like the Duplessis Orphans." This discussion of the negative side of religion demonstrated that while Jose was aware of events that occurred surrounding the Catholic Church, his knowledge of the religion itself was nearly nonexistent. As Jose had grown up without religion inside and outside the home, he had not learned about religion other than what he had learned through the media upon his arrival in Canada. The conversation was followed up with Jose's reflection of how the Cuban government's crackdown on religion not only impacted people's practices, but also their ability to think and talk about religion: "What the government did was a violation of human rights. They prohibited the practice of any religion, regardless of the religion. The Cuban government had an impact on that aspect of life." Jose's words demonstrated the significant consequences of the government's control on religion in Cuban daily life. Castro's control of Cuban life meant the regulation of all aspects of a person's life, including religion. This not only entailed controlling religious practice as a whole, but also religious learning. Overall, what these interviews ultimately revealed was a significant lack of understanding, as well as prejudice, towards certain religions. The interlocutors had never been given the space to learn, speak, or think about religion openly, and were instead surrounded by the rhetoric put forward by the government – one of suspicion and hostility towards religion. The internalization of such rhetoric, coupled with the lack of religious education as a result of governmental oppression, led the interlocutors to harbor these sentiments towards different religious groups well into their adult years.

## II. Consequences of Religious Illiteracy

The role of the Revolutionary government in impeding religious literacy came with consequences for the interlocutors. As shown through the interviews, the government's oppression of religion did not simply impede public religious practice; these measures also impeded the development of religious knowledge, both towards one's own religion as well as the religions of others. I therefore argue that in not providing spaces where religion could be learned about in a nuanced manner, the Revolutionary government had a role in the proliferation of religious illiteracy among the interlocutors. As interlocutors experienced the rise of the

Revolution during their childhood years, the government had prevented them from obtaining any sort of religious learning. Many cited their lack of religious knowledge as being caused by the Revolutionary government's crackdown on religion in Cuba, therefore quashing religious curiosity among the youth through the persecution of their religious peers both in school and in public. The little exposure to religion the interlocutors had was often negative, laced with the discriminatory rhetoric put forward by the Revolutionary government. In schools, the interlocutors were typically forbidden from discussing religion in the classroom or witnessed their religious peers being discriminated against by staff. In doing so, the classroom as a "protected space where students are free to explore new ideas and follow lines of thought" ceased to exist, as students were taught that certain subjects, such as religion, were not only off limits, but were counterrevolutionary as well.<sup>214</sup>

A particular reason for the concern for religious illiteracy is due to the fact that "plural societies are the norm today and will surely increase in significance, yet relations among communities are impaired by lack of understanding across different communities."<sup>215</sup> While currently living in a plural society such as Montreal, the interlocutors' religious literacies had not been developed further. Marshall argues that an almost inevitable consequence of religious illiteracy leads to social tensions among different communities. As demonstrated during the interviews, interlocutors held negative or hostile feelings towards certain religious groups, such as Islam or the Jehovah's Witnesses. While in this case, tensions were not necessarily reciprocated between communities, the sentiments displayed by interlocutors could certainly have added to pre-existing discrimination towards certain religious groups. As the interlocutors had not had the opportunity to learn about world religions during their lives and were instead surrounded by what the Revolutionary government put forward, they arrived in Canada with little to no knowledge about religion. The little they had learned about religion post-migration to Canada was largely through the Quebec media and were therefore obtaining very specific, often negative, depictions of religion, especially in regards to Islam. As the interlocutors had little to no prior knowledge of religions beforehand, what they gleaned from the media had formed their opinions of different religions.

The Quebec government's depiction of Islam in the media especially contributed to the negative assumptions interlocutors made about the religion and its followers. As the interlocutors had never encountered Islam prior to their living in Canada, I argue that the Revolutionary government's prohibition on religious education in schools, coupled with Islamophobia depicted in both Quebec media and secularist political discourse has shaped the interlocutors' understanding of the religion in a detrimental manner. Stereotypes depicted in the media are particularly harmful as they contribute to misunderstandings about religious groups and

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<sup>214</sup> Howe Peace, Jennifer. "Religious Self, Religious Other: Coformation as a Model For Interreligious Education." *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education* (2020) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwxdr.13>, p. 206.

<sup>215</sup> Marshall. "Education for All: where does religion come in?" p. 281.

encourage animosity towards them as well.<sup>216</sup> According to Helly, Mc Andrew, and Oueslati, in the case of Muslim representation, “a negative image traditionally fed on the political perspective which tended to depict Islam and Muslims as the enemy, the symbolic frontier of “otherness,” with a cultural perspective on the Orientalist tradition.<sup>217</sup> In terms of Orientalism, while this notion romanticized the “Orient,” it also perpetuated the negative view of Islam and Muslim cultures as “monolithic and backward, oppressive to women, and inherently incompatible to democracy.”<sup>218</sup> Mass media has also contributed to the reinforcement of a biased perception of both Islam and Muslim cultures in the West through “shallow coverage that focused more on stereotypes and sensationalism than on objective analysis and facts.”<sup>219</sup> Post-9/11, this treatment of Islam in the media can sometimes lead to a form of cultural racism that “assumes the existence of an irreconcilable gap between Western civilization and the Muslim world.”<sup>220</sup> What is more, despite the official acknowledgement of pluralism in contemporary Quebec, surveys conducted between 2009 and 2015 demonstrated that up to 74 percent of the Quebec population supported banning religious symbols in public institutions.<sup>221</sup> Religious dress in the public sphere, such as the veil or the hijab, has long been viewed in both North America and Europe as visible manifestations of “essential differences between Western and Islamic values.”<sup>222</sup> For the interlocutors, whose lives had been impacted by Castro’s removal of religion in the public sphere, religious symbols in Quebec public institutions were deemed inappropriate to them, as they viewed religion and religious practices as something to be conducted behind closed doors. Further affected by legislation such as Bill 101, which legislated the French language as Quebec’s official language and whose institution “empowered Quebec separatists and Québécois who had awaited formal recognition of their distinct cultural identity,” this bill also added pressure for “allophones,” who spoke neither French nor English as a first language, to assimilate into Quebec society.<sup>223</sup> In the experiences of the interlocutors, their presence in Quebec society as allophones and immigrants was marked by their desire to assimilate into Quebec culture. Several interlocutors discussed their integration into society by learning French and forming meaningful relationships with other Quebecers. Others voiced their gratitude towards being accepted into a democratic society after having lived in Cuba. For them, living as an immigrant in Quebec meant adhering to the values put forward by the government as a means

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<sup>216</sup> Smock. “Teaching about the Religious Other.” p. 1.

<sup>217</sup> Helly, Denise, Marie Mc Andrew, and Béchir Oueslati. “Islam and Muslim Cultures in Quebec French-language Textbooks over Three Periods: 1980s, 1990s, and the Present Day.” *Journal of Educational Media, Memory & Society*, no. 1 (2011): p. 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43049360>.

<sup>218</sup> Helly, Mc Andrew, and Oueslati. “Islam and Muslim Cultures in Quebec French-language Textbooks over Three Periods: 1980s, 1990s, and the Present Day.” p. 6.

<sup>219</sup> Helly, Mc Andrew, and Oueslati. “Islam and Muslim Cultures in Quebec French-language Textbooks over Three Periods: 1980s, 1990s, and the Present Day.” p. 6.

<sup>220</sup> Helly, Mc Andrew, and Oueslati. “Islam and Muslim Cultures in Quebec French-language Textbooks over Three Periods: 1980s, 1990s, and the Present Day.” p. 6.

<sup>221</sup> Guzik, Elysia, and Meena Sharify-Funk. “Muslim Veiling and the Legacy of Laïcité.” in *Everyday Sacred : Religion in Contemporary Quebec*, ed. Hillary Kaell (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), p. 186.

<sup>222</sup> Guzik, Elysia, and Meena Sharify-Funk. “Muslim Veiling and the Legacy of Laïcité.” p. 187.

<sup>223</sup> Guzik, Elysia, and Meena Sharify-Funk. “Muslim Veiling and the Legacy of Laïcité.” p. 189.

to both be accepted into society as well as display gratitude towards this acceptance. Their critique of those who failed to abide by these norms was therefore a result of this.

In Quebec's particular case, the public perception of Islam is especially negative, with public opinion polls and sampled interviews carried out in Canada during the ten years post-9/11 depicting Muslims as the least favored religious group compared to other communities.<sup>224</sup> What is more, this negative public opinion towards Islam was more marked in Quebec than throughout the rest of Canada. During the interviews, interlocutors often engaged with stereotypes regarding Islam. Several of the interlocutors made generalizing statements about the religion, referring to Islamic terrorism and religious extremism, as well as the oppression of women on behalf of the religion. These statements were rooted in Islamophobic representation depicted in Quebec media. The interlocutors often explained their prejudice towards Islam as being due to representations of the religion they had encountered in the news. Since they had not encountered the religion prior to leaving the island, the interlocutors had formed their opinions on Islam through what they had experienced while living in Quebec. The Revolutionary government's suppression of religion on the island, as well as its imposition of atheism on the education system had impeded the interlocutors from obtaining a religious education in which they could safely and openly engage with other religions. In this way, interlocutors had never been given the opportunity to engage with religion in a positive manner as religion under the Revolutionary government had been heavily framed as a negative in multiple facets of Cuban society.

#### Chapter Eight: Conclusions

This thesis examines the impact of Fidel Castro's restrictions on the Cuban population's religious activities. Through a series of ten interviews with ten different male Cuban immigrants who now reside in Montreal, this project analyzes how growing up in a country that did everything but formally ban religion impacted the interlocutors' abilities to learn, speak, or think about religion. The thesis ultimately argues that the Revolution's governmental oppression through the prohibition of religious education, as well as other restrictions on religion in public life ultimately fostered religious illiteracy among the population. This work engages with the interlocutors' stories to trace how their respective childhoods under the Revolutionary government and its restrictive measures on religion not only impacted their own religiosities, but also inhibited their religious literacy and continues to do so as adults in Montreal.

To conclude, this thesis examines the impact of the Cuban Revolutionary government's religious restrictions on the religious lives and attitudes toward religious practice and institutionalized religion of ten Cuban immigrants living in Montreal. The interlocutors' experiences under the Castro government revealed a climate that was especially hostile towards religion in public life. Interlocutors were therefore unable to develop their religious literacies as

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<sup>224</sup> Bakshaei, Mahsa, and Marie McAndrew. "The difficult integration of Muslims into Québec since 9/11: International or local dynamics?" *International Journal*, no. 4 (2012): p. 940, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704940>.

state-run schools did not provide or encourage religious education. What is more, as religion was taboo in the public sphere, interlocutors were unable to learn or speak about religion in an open and welcoming environment. While most of the interlocutors continued to practice their own faiths in the safety of their own homes, they did not have contact with much religion outside of the domestic sphere. In this way, interlocutors carried on their habits upon immigration to Canada. When reflecting on religion, interlocutors noted that they had not learned anything about other religious communities. They also proceeded to demonstrate negative opinions on religion as a whole, while also harboring negative sentiments towards specific religions, such as Islam or the Jehovah's Witnesses. Many made generalizing statements about the religions or referred to them as religious "fanaticism" or "extremism." I therefore argue that the Revolutionary government's restrictions on religion did not only impede interlocutors from practicing religion openly, but also hindered religious literacy by prohibiting religious education in a safe space. Thus, by creating an environment that was hostile and suspicious of religion, the Revolutionary government fostered an environment that would contribute to the spread of misinformation and stereotypes about religious communities.



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