Religion in Nicaragua

Country Overview

The Republic of Nicaragua, the largest country in Central America, is located between Honduras and Costa Rica and bordered by the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The nation has an area of 49,998 square miles, slightly smaller than New York State, and had a population of 5.6 million in 2006. Administratively, the country is divided into 15 departments and two autonomous regions. Its major languages are Spanish, 97.5 percent; Miskito, 1.7 percent; and other 0.8 percent (source: 1995 census). English Creole (Afro-Caribbean) and Amerindian languages are mainly spoken on the Caribbean coast, also known as the Mosquito Coast.

The nation's terrain includes an extensive Caribbean coastal plain; a north-central mountain region (the highest point is Mogotón peak at 2,107 meters, located on the Nicaraguan-Honduran border) that divides the country north to south; and a narrow Pacific coastal plain interrupted by majestic volcanoes. Also, there are two large lakes on the Pacific watershed: Lake Nicaragua (*Lago Cocibolca*) is the largest fresh-water lake in Central America and Lake Managua (*Lago Xolotlán*) is considerably smaller.

The Mosquito Coast (*La Mosquitia*) of Nicaragua, is a wide coastal lowland along the Caribbean Sea that stretches from the Coco River in the north (border with Honduras) to the San Juan River in the south (border with Costa Rica), which contains mangrove swamps, lagoons, rivers, savannas and tropical rain forests. It has a population of about 118,000 inhabitants, consisting of 57 percent Miskito (Afro-Amerindian); 22 percent Creoles (Afro-Caribbean); 15 percent Mestizo (European and Amerindian); 4 percent Sumo (Amerindian); 1 percent Garifuna (or Black Carib, Afro-Amerindian); 0.5 percent Chinese; and 0.5 percent Rama (Amerindian). The Mosquito Coast's principal cities are Bluefields in the south and Puerto Cabezas in the north.

The capital is the City of Managua, located on the southwestern shore of Lake Managua on the Pacific coast. It was founded in 1819 and given the name of *Leal Villa de Santiago de Managua*. Efforts to make Managua the capital began in 1824, after Independence from Spain. Managua's location between the rival cities of León (Liberal) and Granada (Conservative) made it an ideal compromise site.

Current Religious Situation

The Nicaraguan Constitution of 1987 provides for freedom of religion and the govern-ment generally respects this right in practice. The government at all levels declares that it seeks to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution also states that no one "shall be obligated by coercive measures to declare their ideology or beliefs," and it prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

Although there is no official state religion, because of its historical presence in the country since colonial times, the Roman Catholic Church has often enjoyed a close relationship with the government and has wielded significant political influence, especially under Conser-vative administrations.

However, during the period 1985 to 1987, the Catholic hierarchy refused to participate in the constitution-drafting process during the first Daniel Ortega administration (1985-1990) of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation, and opted to support the counter-revolution (Contras) in its campaign to delegitimize the establishment of a new Constitution, which represented a

significant step forward in consolidating revolutionary power by the leftist Sandinistas. Although Catholic Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo was a strong opponent of the Sandinistas and supported the counter-revolution, after the second Ortega administration took office in January 2007 the retired Cardinal was appointed to lead the newly-created Council of Peace and Reconciliation, which many people criticized as a blurring of Church-State relations; this appointment was not endorsed by the Vatican.

The National Census of 2005 reported religious affiliation in Nicaragua as follows: Roman Catholic, 58.6 percent (down from 72.9 percent in 1995); Protestant, 23.2 percent (up from 12.2 percent in 1995); other religions (including marginal Christian groups), 2.5 percent (up from 2.0 percent in 1995); and none/no response, 15.7 percent (up from 8.5 percent in 1995). The most recent public opinion poll by M&R Consultores (March-April 2009) indicates that 54.4 percent are Catholic, 27.7 percent are Protestant, and 13.9 percent are Other/None. The Assemblies of God appears to be the largest evangelical denomination with more than 860 churches and 200,000 baptized members.

In 1950, Roman Catholic adherents were 95.8 percent and Protestant adherents were 4.1 percent of the national population, which shows a significant shift in religious affiliation that is characteristic of the Central American region: the Catholic population has declined at the expense of rapid and widespread Protestant church growth. Also, secularization has taken its toll on the Nicaraguan population, with about 14 percent now claiming no religious affiliation.

Historical Overview of the Political and Social Situation

Nicaragua has been plagued by a humid climate, perpetual poverty and under development, natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions), civil wars and foreign military intervention, repressive dictatorships and corrupt democratic governments. Many of these factors motivated many Nicaraguans to abandon their homeland during the 1970s and 1980s and seek refuge in Costa Rica, Miami, Los Angeles or elsewhere. Although this mass exodus of Nicaraguan refugees resulted in the separation of many families, it has also generated millions of dollars of support from those living abroad who send remittances to help their relatives in Nicaragua.

Turmoil continues to plague the nation today as political factions wage unending verbal warfare against their opponents, while seeking to gain advantage in the next elections. Historically, since 1821, the nation's various Conservative and Liberal political parties have vied for power and control of the executive, legislative, judicial and military branches of government. However, today, the nation's two major political parties are the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), led by President Daniel Ortega Saavedra – he was a member of the ruling junta from 1979-1984, served as President from 1985-1990, and was re-elected in 2007 – and the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC), led by former President Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo (1997-2002) who inherited the legacy of the Liberal Somoza dynasty.

During the period 1821 to 1909 Nicaragua experienced a great deal of civil strife, which encouraged the development of a variety of private armies controlled by the political and commercial interests of Conservatives and Liberals. Then, in 1893, Liberal President José Santos Zelaya (1893-1909) came to power and enacted a series of progressive reforms, which included improving public education, building railroads, establishing steamship lines, and enacting constitutional reforms that provided for equal rights, property guarantees, *habeas corpus*, compulsory vote, compulsory education, the protection of arts and industry, minority representation, and the separation of state powers. However, in late-1909, due to ongoing

conflicts with domestic and foreign powers (both political and commercial), President Zelaya resigned as President, turned over the government to José Madriz Rodríguez (who governed from December 1909 to August 1910) and fled into exile.

The chaotic political situation in Nicaragua between 1909 and 1912 prompted U.S. President William Howard Taft (1909-1913), a Republican, to send the U.S. Marines to occupy the country in order to provide political stability and safeguard U.S. economic and political interests. Opponents of the prolonged U.S. military occupation of Nicaragua (1912-1933) denounced this as "Yankee imperialism" and "Gunboat Diplomacy," and pointed to a series of previous U.S. interventions in Nicaragua between 1854 and 1909, which allegedly were to "protect U.S. lives and property" at the expense of Nicaraguan sovereignty and independence. Between 1910 and 1926, the Conservative Party ruled the country under a series of 10 presidents, amidst continued rivalry and civil conflict between Conservative and Liberal factions.

In 1925, the newly-elected government of President Carlos José Solórzano (b.1860 – d. 1936, ruled from January 1925 to March 1926) requested that the U.S. Marines remain in Nicaragua until a permanent constabulary (a military or para-military type force consisting of soldiers trained for police duties) could be trained. At the recommendation of the U.S. State Department, the Nicaraguan government hired retired U.S. Army Major Calvin B. Carter, with previous experience in the Philippine Constabulary, to organize and train the *Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua* (Nicaraguan National Guard) as a professional, nonpartisan force. However, regular Nicaraguan Army units under the leadership of officers and 5,000 troops loyal to the Conservative cause remained in control of military fortifications, while members of the National Guard in-training were assigned to patrolling the streets of Managua and served on the Presidential Honor Guard.

Although the U.S. Marines left Nicaragua in 1925, they returned in 1926 after a brief resurgence of violence caused by Liberal uprisings on both coasts to restore order and reorganize the disbanded National Guard. In 1927, Conservative President Adolfo Díaz (1926-1929; he previously served as President between May 1911 and January 1917) appointed retired U.S. Marine Lt. Col. Elias R. Beadle as commander of the National Guard with the rank of Brigadier General. In 1928, after elections supervised by the U.S. Marines, Díaz was replaced as president by former Liberal General José María Moncada Tapia (January 1929-January 1933). It was not until 1933, after the U.S. military occupation ended, that a Nicaraguan became head of the National Guard during the administration of President Juan Bautista Sacasa (January 1933 to June 1936). Sacasa had served as a professor and dean of faculty at the National University in León, and was a supporter of the Liberal regime of José Santos Zelaya. However, between 1926 and 1934, a formerly obscure Liberal leader, Augusto César Sandino, led a guerilla rebellion against the U.S. Marines, who had remained in the country to enforce a peace agreement (called the *Espino Negro* Accord) between dueling Conservative and Liberal forces.

After Sacasa took office on January 1, 1933, the day prior to the scheduled departure of the U.S. Marines, he named Gen. Anastasio Somoza García (b.1896 – d.1956) as commander of the National Guard, at the insistence of the U.S. Ambassador. The following month, Sacasa met with rebel leader Sandino, during which Sandino pledged his loyalty to the new government and was promised amnesty and land for his troops. However, in February 1934, Sandino and several of his aides were assassinated in Managua under orders from Gen. Somoza. Despite Sacasa's disapproval of these violent acts, he proved unable to contain the growing power of Liberal Gen. Somoza and the National Guard. Somoza seized power in a *coup d'état* two years later and established a family dynasty that would rule Nicaragua for over forty years (1936-1979), which he treated as his personal fiefdom under the banner of the Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN).

Gen. Somoza García was the *de facto* dictator of Nicaragua from 1936 until his assassination in 1956. His younger son Anastasio (b.1925 – d.1980), nicknamed "Tachito" (his father's nickname was "Tacho"), was educated in the USA and graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1946. The following year, he was appointed head of the National Guard by his father, who had previously given many important and lucrative government positions to family members and personal friends. As commander of the National Guard, Tachito became the second-most powerful man in Nicaragua after his father, who by 1944 had become the nation's largest landowner.

The Somoza family's wealth was derived from a variety of sources, including vast coffee plantations, cattle ranches and other business enterprises, as well as from thievery, corruption and murder. During World War II, the Nicaraguan government confiscated the properties owned by German immigrant families (who were sent to concentration camps in Texas) and sold them to the Somoza family at absurdly low prices. Tacho Somoza also made substantial profits by granting concessions to foreign companies to exploit gold, rubber and timber, for which he received bribes and commissions. He manipulated the government to pass laws restricting imports, while organizing contraband operations that sold merchandise through his own stores. Tacho also enriched himself by extracting bribes from illegal gambling, prostitution and alcohol distilling. By 1950, the Somoza family had acquired a fortune estimated at $40 million, which allegedly made the dynasty's founder, Anastasio ("Tacho") Somoza García, the richest man in Nicaragua.

Following Tacho's assassination in 1956, his eldest son, Luis Somoza Debayle (b. 1922 – d. 1967), succeeded his father as President and ruled from 1956 to 1967. On 1 May 1967, shortly before the death of his brother Luis, Tachito Somoza himself was elected President for the first time (1967-1972, then again from December 1974 to July 1979) under the PLN. While Luis Somoza had ruled more gently than his father, Tachito was intolerant of opposition of any sort; civil liberties were restricted and corruption was widespread. Because he was prohibited legally from immediate presidential reelection, Tachito worked out a deal that allowed him to run for re-election in 1974: he was replaced as President in 1972 by a three-man junta consisting of two Liberals and one Conservative, while he retained control of the National Guard and was the *de facto* ruler of the country.

On 23 December 1972, a magnitude 6.2 earthquake and several large aftershocks hit the nation's capital and virtually destroying the city: about 80 percent of Managua's commercial buildings were destroyed, an estimated 5,000-6,000 of the city's 400,000 residents were killed, 20,000 were injured, and another 250,000 were left homeless. The earthquakes severely damaged an area of 27 sq km and destroyed 13 sq km in the city center. The majority of the buildings in the central business district sustained significant structural damage, which forced a redesign of urban development in Managua from the center to the periphery and suburbs. Two-thirds of Managua's residents were displaced and faced starvation and disease due to infrastructural damages and crippled emergency services.

The Nicaraguan government appealed for massive foreign aid, which it received from more than 25 countries during the following months, worth millions of dollars. However, after complaints were made that emergency relief supplies were not being distributed fairly, the ruling government junta and emergency officials became the target of severe criticism regarding mismanagement and corruption. They were accused of stockpiling relief supplies that never reached the victims and of selling these supplies on the "black market."

As Commander of the National Guard, Gen. Somoza immediately declared martial law and appointed himself as head of the National Emergency Committee. Then he and his cronies

proceeded to embezzle foreign aid monies and resell supplies sent for earthquake relief and rebuilding efforts. By some estimates, Somoza's personal wealth increased to $400 million by 1974, and his greed and corruption begin to alienate a large portion of the country's wealthy landowners and businessmen, as well as many of his middle-class supporters.

Nevertheless, Tacho Somoza was re-elected President in 1974, after declaring nine opposition parties illegal, despite growing opposition from an influential sector of the Catholic clergy who began to speak out against the Somoza dictatorship. One of his fiercest critics was leftist Jesuit priest Ernesto Cardenal, who was an advocate of Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology.

During the 1970s, numerous human rights groups, both foreign and domestic, condemned the Somoza dictatorship for its corruption and abuse of power, while support for the leftist **Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)** was growing inside and outside the country. The FSLN, named after nationalist guerrilla leader, Gen. Augusto César Sandino, who was assassinated by the National Guard under orders from Gen. Anastasio Somoza García in 1934, was initially organized in 1961 by a group of student activists at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) in Managua, with the aim of overthrowing the Somoza regime and establish a Marxist-Socialist state. During the early 1970s, a coalition of leftist guerilla groups under the FSLN launched armed revolutionary activities in the northeastern mountain region of Nicaragua, with limited financial and logistical support from Cuba and the Soviet Union. The Sandinista insurgency aroused the hopes and attracted the support of groups of workers and peasants (*campesinos*) throughout the country, as well as of university students and professors (especially at UNAN), and intellectuals and progressive religious leaders and their parishioners, among both Catholics and Protestants.

In 1975, President Somoza sent National Guard units to conduct a fierce military campaign against the FSLN and its supporters throughout the country, because popular support for the Sandinista rebellion greatly increased after the 1972 Managua earthquake. The National Guard, in addition to attacking armed FSLN guerilla bands, also increased its violence against individuals and communities suspected of collaborating with the Sandinistas. Opposition to the despotic Somoza government now included prominent national leaders, such as newspaper publisher and editor **Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal** (1924-1978) of Nicaragua's leading daily, *La Prensa,* who was assassinated, allegedly under orders from Somoza, in 1978.

The international outrage over this incident and other atrocities prompted U.S. President Jimmy Carter, citing human rights reasons, to denounce the Somoza dictatorship and withdraw U.S. government support from his regime, despite Tacho's fraudulent and cynical claims that he allowed freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Carter's decision proved to be critical, because the Somoza government had been able to hold onto power largely because of U.S. government support and its belief that Somoza was a "bulwark against communism" in Central America, which the U.S. government considered to be its own "back yard."

La Prensa's Pedro Chamorro, who headed the Democratic Union of Liberation (UDEL), campaigned against the systematic violation of human rights by the Somoza regime and for the restoration of democracy. His newspaper became the main opposition platform that brought the corruption of the Somoza regime into the spotlight of world opinion. While still a law student, he began taking part in demonstrations against Gen. Anastasio Somoza García and was briefly jailed in 1944 after making an anti-Somoza speech at a political rally. That same year, his family's newspaper, *La Prensa,* was shut down by the Somoza regime, and the Chamorro family fled to Mexico, where he began studying journalism. He returned to Nicaragua in 1948, and after his father's death in 1952 he become editor of *La Prensa*. Although the newspaper was never shut

down or completely censored, Pedro Chamorro was often jailed because of its anti-Somoza editorial content.

Following Chamorro's assassination in 1978, an estimated 30,000 people rioted in the streets of Managua; cars were set on fire and several buildings that belonged to the Somoza family were ransacked. Opposition leaders called for a general strike in Managua, and outside the capital popular unrest flared up in numerous cities and towns, particularly in areas where National Guardsmen had massacred *campesinos* during the counterinsurgency effort against the Sandinista guerrillas and their supporters.

The Somoza government responded by committing further violence against the civilian population, while reintroducing martial law and press censorship. During 1978 and 1979, numerous armed attacks and attempted bombings were perpetrated against the offices of *La Prensa*, and National Guard units strafed and bombed FSLN strongholds in Masaya, León, Chinandega and Estelí, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and many guerrilla fighters. During June and July of 1979, FSLN forces took control of the northern cities of León and Matagalpa, and there was heavy fighting between the Sandinistas and National Guardsman in the southern cities of Masaya and Granada. Then, in early July, FSLN units began a coordinated march on Managua, which was heavily defended by government troops.

The National Guard, which increasingly was being denounced as brutal and sadistic, began aerial bombing of Sandinista strongholds in residential neighborhoods of Managua that reportedly killed tens of thousands of civilians. Faced with growing opposition from within Nicaragua as well as from other nations to end the civil war, Gen. Somoza and most of the high-ranking National Guard officers and their families fled the country in mid-July, allegedly in Red Cross planes provided by the U.S. government under President Jimmy Carter.

After the Somoza dictatorship was finally overthrown by the Sandinistas on 19 July 1979, FSLN commander Daniel Ortega became a member of the five-person **Junta of National Reconciliation,** which also included FSLN militant Moisés Hassan Morales (served as Mayor of Managua from 1985 to 1989); novelist Sergio Ramírez Mercado (later, Ortega's vice president, 1985-1990, and founded the splinter Sandinista Renovation Movement, MRS, in 1995); Conservative businessman Luis Alfonso Robelo Callejas (founded the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement in 1978); and Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the widow of the murdered journalist. Later, after the FSLN came to dominate the junta, Robelo and Chamorro resigned from the Junta and Ortega became the *de facto* ruler of the country. In 1985, Robelo joined the Directorate of the United Nicaraguan Opposition and was elected to the Directorate of the Nicaraguan Resistance, both of which were Contra organizations that opposed the ruling Sandinista government.

Following the Sandinista victory in 1979, the political situation in Nicaragua was far from stable since, in reality, there were two governments. Real power resided in the hands of the nine-member FSLN National Directorate that controlled the Sandinista combat units, which became the nation's new military and police forces. All matters of public policy had to be discussed and approved by the National Directorate. Many former members of the defeated National Guard were rounded up and arrested as prisoners of war and were held in detention until they could be tried for possible war crimes.

The National Guard, without its top commanders, virtually disintegrated following the Sandinista victory, and a new professional army had to be built from scratch from the various guerrilla combat units. The National Guard was formally abolished and in its place the Sandinista People's Army (EPS) was established, backed up by a larger Sandinista People's Militia (MPS).

The initial EPS units were formed immediately, and by July 1980 the MPS was fully-organized with some 100,000 trained volunteers between the ages of 16 and 60.

The new Sandinista government, led by Daniel Ortega, inherited an underdeveloped nation that was riddled with corruption and bureaucratic mismanagement, and handicapped by poverty, infrastructural destruction and economic ruin. The nation had over $1.5 billion in debts and only about $3.5 million in international reserves. Human and material losses due to the civil war were staggering. An estimated 30,000-50,000 Nicaraguans had been killed; about 100,000 were injured; an estimated 150,000 were homeless; at least 150,000 had fled to neighboring Costa Rica or Honduras and tens of thousands more had become internal refugees. Large-scale international efforts provided emergency relief, prevented starvation and averted immediate economic collapse, but the task of national economic recovery and reconstruction was over-whelming. Also, the eyes of the world were on Nicaragua to see what would develop under revolutionary leadership, which included both Marxist and non-Marxist political components.

In 1981, U.S. President Ronald Reagan condemned the FSLN for supporting Marxist-revolutionary movements in other Latin American countries, such as El Salvador, backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union. Reagan Administration officials authorized the CIA to begin financing, arming and training rebels, some of whom were former National Guard officers, as anti-Sandinista guerrillas, who became known collectively as the *Contras* (a nickname for contra-revolutionaries, which President Reagan called "freedom fighters").

This illegal action by Reagan Administration officials led to one of the largest political scandals in U.S. history, known as the Iran-Contra Affair. U.S. Marine Corp Lt. Col. Oliver North (who worked for the National Security Council out of an office in the White House basement) and several Reagan Administration officials defied the congressionally-approved Boland Amendment (the name given to three legislative amendments passed between 1982 and 1984, all aimed at limiting U.S. government assistance to the Contras) by covertly selling U.S. military weapons to the government of Iran thru intermediaries, and then using the proceeds to fund the Nicaraguan Contras who established base camps in neighboring Honduras and Costa Rica. Between 1980 and 1989, more than 30,000 Nicaraguans died in the Contra conflict with the Sandinista government.

Nevertheless, in November 1984, in the midst of the Contra war, Ortega allowed national elections; he won the presidency with 63 percent of the vote and took office on 10 January 1985. According to the vast majority of independent observers, the 1984 elections were perhaps the freest and fairest in Nicaraguan history. The seven political parties that participated in the elections represented a broad spectrum of political ideologies.

However, in the 1990 presidential elections, Ortega lost to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, his former colleague in the Junta of National Reconciliation, which finally brought an end to the illegal U.S.-backed Contra war. Chamorro was supported by a 14-party anti-Sandinista alliance known as the National Opposition Union (UNO), whose members ranged from Conservatives and Liberals to Marxists.

Contrary to what most observers had expected, Chamorro shocked Ortega and the FSLN by winning the election, backed by strong financial support (an estimated $10 million) from the U.S. government via third-party organizations. After her husband's assassination in 1978, doña Violeta took over the newspaper *La Prensa*, which was traditionally anti-Somoza and had initially backed the Sandinistas. Her rise to power can be attributed to her affiliation with *La Prensa* and the memory of her martyred husband, the lack of international support for the Sandinista regime, the weariness of the general population regarding civil conflict, the democratic symbol that she represented for the people, and her strong campaign focus on being

an opposition candidate with democratic ideas. Furthermore, Chamorro was seen as the mother figure, a hero and a martyr, whereas Ortega portrayed himself as the *macho* rooster.

In Ortega's concession speech the day after the election, he vowed to keep "ruling from below," a reference to the power that the FSLN still wielded among various social sectors. Ortega ran for election again in October 1996 and November 2001 but lost on both occasions to Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) and to Alemán's former vice-president Enrique Bolaños, respectively, both of whom had received substantial financial support from the U.S. government. In these elections, a key issue was the allegation of corrupttion by the ruling party.

Bolaños was a member of the PLC and was Aleman's V.P. until he broke with Alemán to help establish the Alliance for the Republic (APRE), which won the 2001 elections. At the beginning of his presidential term (2002-2007), Bolaños led an anti-corruption campaign against his predecessor (Alemán) and politically isolated himself from the influential PLC. Institutional struggles for power between the legislative, executive and judicial branches resulted in great inefficiency for the Bolaños government.

While in office, allegations emerged that President Alemán was concealing massive corruption in his administration (1997-2002). After his presidency ended, public information about alleged corruption committed by members of his government became available to the media. President Bolaños accused Alemán himself of illicit enrichment and helped to expose widespread corruption throughout the Alemán administration, and to bring Alemán and his 50 accomplices to justice during 2002. In December 2003, after a lengthy trial, Alemán was convicted of fraud and illicit enrichment while in office and sentenced to a 20-year prison term, which was later modified to allow for "house arrest" due to Alemán's alleged poor health. Then, on January 16, 2009, Nicaragua's Sandinista-dominated Supreme Court overturned Alemán's prison sentence, which allowed him to resume an active role in PLC activities and to possible run for the presidency in 2011.

During his presidency, Alemán developed a "strategic political alliance" (called "*el pacto Ortega-Alemán*") in 1998 with Daniel Ortega by offering employment in public offices and other privileges to key members of the FSLN, allegedly to stabilize the country. There are those who claim that the main purpose of this agreement, which led to a Constitutional reform, was to distribute the institutions of the state in proportion to the power managed by the country's two main political parties to the disadvantage of minority parties. This power-sharing arrangement with Alemán has allowed President Ortega, since taking office in 2007, to ramrod his agenda through the National Legislature without much opposition, except from minority parties, and to manip-ulate the judicial system to his own advantage.

According to Sergio Ramírez, Nicaragua is once again trapped in the bonds of *caudillismo*, an evil that has afflicted the nation through most of its post-Independence history. Today, two *caudillos* ("strong men") are sharing power as a result of the "*pacto Ortega-Alemán*" and their respective political parties. This is a curious political alliance, because the FSLN led the fight to depose the Somoza family dynasty, which ended with the Sandinista military victory in 1979, and Alemán's political party is essentially the same party as that of the Somozas, the Nationalist Liberal Party.

Geographical and Ethnic Divisions

In addition to its political divisions, Nicaragua has long been a nation divided by its geography and ethnicity. A central mountain range divides the country from north to south, and

there are few roads on the broad Caribbean coastal plain—an area over half of the national territory that is dissected by hundreds of rivers and streams. Historically, the Caribbean coast and the central mountain region have been thinly populated, whereas the Pacific coastal region has been more heavily populated, originally by Amerindian peoples and later by Spanish settlers and their descendants.

Prior to Spanish colonization, the Caribbean coast was populated by the Miskito, Sumo, and Rama peoples of Macro-Chibchan origin (the predominant group in Colombia) who lived in scattered fishing villages on the coast and along the inland waterways, whereas the Pacific coast was largely home to ethnolinguistic groups that migrated south along the Pacific coast from present-day Mexico as early as 1000 B.C.E.: Chontales, Chorotegas (Dirianes and Nagrandanos), and Nicaraos (Nahua-Náhuatl-Pipil speakers of Uto-Aztecan origins).

Today, descendants of the later ethnic groups live in the departments of Matagalpa (Misumalpan), León (Subtiaba), and Masaya (Monimbó), although they no longer speak their mother tongues. However, the Amerindian groups on the Caribbean coast still speak their original languages and many are bilingual in English and/or Spanish. Overall, about 194,000 Amerindian peoples were reported to exist in 1990, the majority of whom were Roman Catholics on the Pacific coast, whereas the majority of the Miskitos, Sumos and Ramas on the Caribbean coast are Protestant (mainly adherents of the Moravian Church).

Spanish Colonial Period and Development of the Roman Catholic Church

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) discovered the territory of Nicaragua during his fourth voyage to the New World in 1502, when he sailed along the Caribbean coast and explored the area of Cabo Gracias a Dios at the mouth of the Coco River. It was not until 1522, however, that a formal military expedition, under Gil González Dávila, led to the first Spanish conquest of Nicaraguan territory. González launched an expedition from Panama, arriving in Nicaragua through Costa Rica. When González reached present-day Nicaragua, he located a village that was governed by a local chief named Nicarao, after whom the country was named. Chief Nicarao diplomatically received González as a friend and reportedly gave him large quantities of gold. Perhaps to appease the Spanish explorer and his band of armed men, Nicarao allegedly converted to Roman Catholicism, as did more than 9,000 members of his tribe, who were all baptized within eight days. Confident of further success, González explored the interior, where he encountered resistance from 3,000 Niquiranos, led by chief Diriagén. González and his men retreated and traveled south to the coast, then returned to Panama with large quantities of gold and pearls, according to the Spanish chronicles.

In 1523, the governor of Panama, Pedro Arias Dávila (known as Pedrarias), appointed Francisco Hernández de Córdoba to resume the conquest of Nicaragua, and he and his small army succeeded in establishing the first permanent Spanish settlements in Nicaragua in 1524: Santiago de los Caballeros de León and Granada, which later became the centers of colonial Nicaragua. From León, he launched expeditions to explore other parts of the territory. While the rivalry between Hernández de Córdoba and González raged, Pedrarias charged Hernández de Córdoba with mismanagement and sentenced him to death. González died soon thereafter, and the Spanish Crown awarded Pedrarias the governorship of Nicaragua in 1528. Pedrarias stayed in Nicaragua until his death in July 1531.

Although the Spanish conquerors were successful on the Pacific coast, their efforts were unfruitful on the Caribbean coast, which was dominated by the Miskito people and smaller Amerindian groups. Later, British explorers established an alliance with the Miskitos, who

became their intermediaries with the Spanish, and the British established not only trading colonies but also a military presence on the Miskito Coast (or Mosquito Coast) that lasted for several hundred years as a protectorate of the British Empire. In 1894, Nicaraguan President José Santos Zelaya took control of the Miskito Coast by military force, and the United Kingdom, not wishing to go to war for a territory of little value to the British Empire, recognized Nicaraguan sovereignty over the region.

The first Roman Catholic church was established in Granada in 1524 by FRANCISCANS, but most missionary work during the colonial period was done by the JESUITS. The Diocese of León was erected in 1531, which included all the territory of Nicaragua and present-day Costa Rica, with diocesan priest Diego Alvarez de Osorio as its first bishop. After Alvarez de Osorio's death in 1536, priest Pedro García Pacheco became the provisional vicar. Alvarez Osorio's successor as bishop was Padre Francisco de Mendavia (1537-1540), Order of St. Jerome, who previously served as prior of a monastery in Victoria de Salamanca, Spain. Mendavia's successor was Dominican Friar Antonio de Valdivieso (1544-1549). During the 16th century, 10 bishops served the Diocese of León. In 1850, the Diocese of Costa Rica was separated from the Diocese of León. A Concordat between the Vatican and the Republic of Nicaragua was established in 1861.

In 1894 and following, the government of President José Santos Zelaya (1893-1909) passed anti-Catholic legislation and other progressive reforms that provoked a protest from Bishop Francisco Ulloa y Larrios, which resulted in the bishop being banished to Panama. Upon his death in 1908, he was succeeded by Bishop Simeone Pereira. Although the Catholic Church had been the official State religion since the first Constitution of 1826, under Zelaya's adminis-tration Church and State were separated and freedom of religion was constitutionally guaranteed to all forms of religious worship.

In 1910, the Diocese of Nicaragua reported 42 parishes with 45 priests, a seminary, two *colegios* (primary and secondary schools) and two hospitals. In 1913 the Archdiocese of Managua was erected under Bishop José Antonio Lescano y Ortega (b.1865 - d.1952) and the episcopal territory was redistributed among the dioceses of Managua (departments of Managua, Masaya, Carazo, Matagalpa and Jinotega), León (departments of León, Chinandega, Estelí, Madriz and Nueva Segovia) and Granada (departments of Granada, Rivas, Chontales and San Juan del Norte) and the Apostolic Vicariate of Bluefields (department of Zelaya and the Comarca Cabo Gracias a Dios). At that time, the population of Managua was about 35,000 inhabitants.

Traditionally, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua generally supported the Somoza family – who ruled from 1936 to 1979 under the umbrella of the Nationalist Liberal Party – and other members of the ruling oligarchy, although the bishops were partial to the various Conservative factions. However, beginning in the 1960s, many Catholic priests begin to actively oppose the despotic Somoza regime, especially priests from the USA and Spain who became more dedicated to the Sandinista cause than were many Nicaraguan priests.

Diverse tensions arose within the Nicaraguan Catholic Church during the 1960s and following years, which resulted from challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. These powerful new currents polarized Catholic bishops, priests (diocesan and religious), lay brothers and sisters (members of religious orders), and the laity in general into various factions. ***Traditionalists*** wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s), with an emphasis on apostolic authority, orthodox theology, the sacraments and personal piety. ***Reformers*** generally supported the Church's post-Vatican II stance of modernization and toleration of diversity based on its official Social

Doctrine. ***Progressives***, inspired by reforms approved at the Vatican II and Medellín conferences, sought to implement the new vision for "a preferential option for the poor" through social and political action aimed at transforming Nicaraguan society and establishing greater social justice through peaceful democratic means. ***Radicals*** adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship and creating a Socialist State that would serve the poor marginalized masses. ***Charismatic agents*** sought to transform the spiritual and communal life of Catholics by means of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the "baptism of the Holy Sprit and speaking in tongues"), rather than by political and social activism.

Several *radical* Catholic priests (advocates of Liberation Theology) who supported the Sandinista uprising against the Somoza dictatorship were named to key posts in the new Sandinista government, following its July 1979 victory. These included Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann (b. 1933, a Maryknoll Missioner) who served as Minister of Foreign Relations; Ernesto Cardinal Martínez (b. 1925, a diocesan priest) became Minister of Culture; Fernando Cardenal Martínez (a Jesuit priest and Ernesto's brother) was director of the Sandinista's National Literacy Crusade, later director of the Sandinista Youth Movement, and in 1984 was appointed Minister of Education; diocesan priest Edgard Parrales was appointed Minister of Social Welfare and Nicaragua's Ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS); and Xavier de Gorostiaga (b.1937 – d.2003, a Spanish Jesuit priest) was given an advisory position in the Ministry of Planning.

Progressive and radical social and political advocacy among Catholics in Nicaragua were first apparent among priests, often Jesuits, who taught in private Catholic high schools and universities. By the mid-1970s, many of their former students, often children of wealthy families, had joined the Sandinista rebellion. And, as the fight against the Somoza regime intensified, several priests joined Sandinista guerrilla units in the field, while others helped organize people in poor neighborhoods via "church base communities" (called CEBs, *comunidades eclesiales de base*) in preparation for the "popular" insurrection. Many Catholic parishes played an indirect role in the Sandinista uprising by stockpiling food and medicine, giving first aid courses, and some gave direct assistance to Sandinistas guerrillas (including hiding combatants in their homes and churches).

The Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime with the help of a large segment of the Catholic Church, including the tacit approval of five out of seven bishops. However, since the Sandinista victory in July 1979, strains developed between the Catholic hierarchy and the Sandinista government. Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo of Managua, who opposed the Somoza regime but refrained from endorsing the Sandinista rebellion, became increasingly critical of the new, leftist government while many Catholics in the "popular church" still supported it.

However, it should be noted that the "popular church" in Nicaragua was neither homogeneous nor unified and that divergent notions of the "popular church" exist in Nicaragua. Various factors fragmented the Catholic community into at least four identifiable groups with religious and political differences, contradictions and conflicts. Debra Sabia, in *Contradiction and Conflict: The Popular Church in Nicaragua* (University of Alabama Press, 1997), divides the "popular church" community into four ideal types: the Marxist, the Christian Revolutionary, the Reformist, and the Alienated Christian. Each type is differentiated by its members' general orientation to a set of spiritual and political beliefs and practices.

The most common expression of the "popular church" is the CEBs, which were com-posed of Catholic lay people who were organized by progressive priests during the 1960s and 1970s in

Nicaragua, both in urban and rural areas. The first CEBs were founded in 1966 by Spanish priest José de la Jara and Maryknoll Sister Maura Clark. Father Jara, while teaching at the Catholic Seminary in Managua (*Seminario Mayor*), obtained permission from Archbishop Vicente Alejandro González y Robleto (1952-1968) of the Diocese of Managua to establish a new parish in marginalized eastern neighborhoods (*barrios*) of Managua, which was called *Parroquia Santiago Apóstol* (Apostle James Parish). The new parish included the barrios of Los Meneses, Ducualí, Nicarao, 14 de Septiembre and Reparto Shick.

The first CEBs were organized in this parish by Father Jara among the poor, uneducated and marginalized residents for the purpose of achieving "solidarity with the poor masses" as part of his commitment to the "preferential option for the poor" as defined in Vatican II documents. It was in Apostle James Parish that Father Jara and his associates created the "popular Mass" in Spanish using traditional Nicaraguan folk music and instruments that appealed to urban poor, accompanied by the active participation of lay leaders. This new worship format among the urban poor was identified as the "popular church" and emerged parallel to "official" Catholic Church activities and structures in Nicaragua.

CEB leaders had a great deal of freedom and autonomy in determining the activities and focus of their own groups. Generally, there are 20-30 lay participants from a local community who met regularly to discuss spiritual matters, read the Bible and make practical applications to their daily lives as Catholic Christians. But these groups also became forums for expression of daily concerns and vehicles for social action after the participants became more aware of the causes of poverty and social injustice; this process is called "consciousness raising" (*concientización*).

When the CEBs turned their attention to social issues, their programs typically became very progressive, such as organizing protest marches in the streets and denouncing social in-justice. These activities were possible due in part to the autonomy and administrative distance the CEBs had from the Catholic hierarchy. Consequently, the CEBs played an important role in the Sandinista revolution, because FSLN militants were recruited from the CEBs and the CEBs were used as "transmission belts" between the Sandinista guerrilla cadres and the popular masses.

Also, the role of lay Catholic *Delegados de la Palabra* (Delegates of the Word) and *catecúmenos* (catechists) during this period was very important in Nicaraguan history, as expressed by Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) in the following statement (issued in Rome on September 20, 2001):

> …the [Nicaraguan] people, as you very well know, have a soul that is deeply Christian. The proof of this is the existence of "church base communities" that are very much alive and operating, where so many persons, families and groups are motivated to live and give testimony to their faith, despite the absence of priests. It is fitting to also mention the untiring labor of the Delegates of the Word and the Catechists who have kept the faith of people alive. It is important to accompany them and offer them permanent theological and pastoral formation.

In different countries, especially in Central America, the "Delegates of the Word" have made a very special contribution to the Catholic Church. The majority of them are lay people who have acquired a biblical formation, while advancing from an elementary level to more advanced courses of leadership training. In the preparation of catechists, which is under the control of each diocese, the Bible also occupies an important role, along with instruction in the

catechism, the official statement of doctrinal beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church approved by the Vatican.

The Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, composed of the country's Catholic bishops, has not been uniform in its thinking about the role of the Church in society. Rather, the bishops have represented various schools of thought: traditional conservative beliefs (pre-Vatican II) that produce indifference concerning contemporary social problems and problem-solving; progressive beliefs and actions based on Vatican II and Medellín documents that include prophetic denunciations of abuses committed by those in power; and timid, accommodating and reformist thinking about social issues as exemplified by Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo (1970-2005).

One of the particularly bothersome issues for the Catholic bishops of Nicaragua was the fact that five Catholic priests held high-level administrative positions in the Sandinista government. On May 13, 1980, the bishops asked for the resignation of the priests who worked in government positions, and on October 23, 1980, they issued the following statement: "The fact that priests are occupying state positions is not a matter for the Vatican to resolve, rather for the bishops of Nicaragua."

On January 31, 1981, Miguel d'Escoto issued his own statement to the mass media regarding his conversation with the bishops:

> We have been called upon by the Government in an emergency situation not only in the economic aspect, but also when there exists an obvious lack of trained personal at a directive level. We asked permission to continue, which in no way violates the nature of our priestly ordination... We recognize the extraordinary character of the task that we presently exercise, in a transitory manner, with the Government. This responds in a fundamental way to the emergency situation that covers the country...we cannot hide behind our priestly ordination to avoid the duty of all good citizens in a time of national emergency. And every Christian should be a good citizen.

In August 1981, *Envío* magazine stated that "the problem of the Catholic priests who hold government positions has come to a happy resolution. They continue being priests, and they continue in their government positions. The concession that they have had to make is that of not exercising their priestly faculties, either in public or in private, while continuing in these public jobs."

However, Pope John Paul II tried to persuade the rebellious priests to step down from their government posts as a condition of his visit to Nicaragua in March 1983. But he received only a compromise whereby the priests agreed to steer clear of the Pontiff during his activities. Among the Pope's reported aims was to strengthen Catholic unity in the country in the wake of the Sandinista victory, due to concerns about the exiting polarization between Somoza loyalist and Sandinista supporters.

The Pope was especially adamant in demanding that popular priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal resign his post as Minister of Culture in the Sandinista administration, and he attempted to close the door on Liberation Theology and the "popular church" that aligned itself with the Sandinista revolution in defending the poor and seeking greater social justice. Human freedom and dignity, the Pope insisted, were grounded in deep faith and personal conversion, and not in political revolution.

In December 1984, the Sandinistas suffered some embarrassment due to pressure from the Vatican over the issue of priests serving in government posts. After five years of warnings, the Society of Jesus expelled priest Fernando Cardenal Martínez when he refused to resign as

Minister of Education. Jesuit officials in Rome cited a 1983 canon law that forbids priests from holding public office without permission from their local bishops. In a 19-page open letter, Fernando Cardenal defended his government job as a "pact with the poor." In January 1985, the other three priests were forbidden by the Vatican to perform their sacerdotal duties if they did not resign within weeks. Finally, in May 1985, the Vatican issued the suspension order to the three rebellious priests: Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto, Culture Minister Ernesto Cardenal, and Minister of Social Welfare / OAS Ambassador Edgard Parrales.

The swing away from revolutionary advocacy by the Catholic hierarchy in Latin America began five months before the Sandinistas took power in July 1979. At the third meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference held in Puebla, Mexico, early in 1979, the bishops followed the Pope's lead in striking a careful balance in defining Catholic political activism. While endorsing a strong mandate for Church involvement in social issues as a "preferential option for the poor," the bishops at the Puebla conference condemned Marxist political and social strategies and cautioned priests to "divest themselves of all political ideologies." The Pope had consistently spoken out on behalf of the poor and against social injustice, while warning bishops and priests not to become personally involved in revolutionary struggles.

The efforts of the Pope and many bishops to delegitimize the "popular church" in Nicaragua further complicated an already difficult situation for progressive Catholics, who experienced great difficulty in adapting to post-Somoza circumstances. Because most of them became very active in the revolutionary cause under the Sandinista government during the reconstruction period, religious leadership in the "popular church" dwindled. Consequently, the movement that enjoyed rapid growth and great popularity during the war of liberation largely stagnated, according to some observers. These limitations were aggravated by actions taken by the Catholic hierarchy against those who failed to conform to its new ideological convictions in support of the counter-revolutionary movement. One of the tactics employed was to transfer progressive priests out of parishes in poor *barrios* and into parishes in middle-class neighbor-hoods, where their politicized message based on the Liberation Theology was not well received. Although some progressive priests and religious workers were pressured into conforming to the new pastoral guidelines, others continued to provide leadership to the "popular church" and renewed their commitment to the poor and to achieving greater social justice in the larger society.

Although not much is known about the history of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) in Nicaragua, on July 15, 2007, the CCR celebrated its 40th anniversary (1967-2007) at the Polideportivo La Salle in Managua, with the participation of the following clergymen: Archbishop of Managua, Mons. Leopoldo José Brenes Solórzano; Alvaro Jiménez Ortiz of the parish of San José de Sabanagrande in Managua, an advisor to the CCR; Neguib Kalil Eslaquit of the parish of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores in Carazo**;** Rolando Alvarez Lagos of the parish of Iglesia San Francisco de Asís in Managua, also director of Radio Católica de Nicaragua; and Wilfredo Talavera de la Llana of the CCR Central Council in Managua.

In many of rural areas of the Nicaraguan interior, the presence of the Catholic Church has been weak or non-existent due to a lack of clergy, especially in the North-Central Region and South Atlantic Autonomous Region. For example, Bishop Paul Ervin Schmitz (OFM) of the Apostolic Vicariate of Bluefields – established in 1913 and administered by Spanish-Catalan Capuchin Franciscan Friars from 1913 to 1943, accompanied by North American Capuchins since 1939 who now administer the mission territory – stated the following (Girard, Karen. "Bell from seminary will call Nicaraguans to worship" in *Your Catholic Herald,* August 21, 2008):

The Bluefields vicariate is about half the size of the state of Wisconsin, and is mostly rural. We have very few roads. We still have one parish that covers 8,000 square kilometers that does not have one road. All travel is done by walking or mule.

Our principal role is formation of lay leaders. One of our priests, Fr. Wilbert Lanser from Belgium, has 70,000 people in his parish and 110 mission stations. Our job becomes basically the formation of lay leaders and catechists. It's the lay people who give the sacraments [in the rural areas]; Sunday services are celebrated by lay people.

Praise the Lord for extraordinary ministers [laymen] of Communion! One parish has 100 extra-ordinary ministers of Communion; every year, they receive courses to appreciate and go deeper into their understanding of what is the Eucharist, what is Communion, what that means to the community.

Most of the urban centers have Mass every Sunday. Some of the rural areas have Mass once a month, while the really rural areas, only two or three times a year. In some rural areas, we have a Word service; in the developed communities, we have a Communion service, with the Bible, and a lot of songs, of course. You have to have singing and guitars; if you don't have singing they don't stay together very long!

When I arrived in Nicaragua about 36 years ago [ca. 1972], there were 36 North American Capuchin missionaries in the Vicariate; now there are only three in addition to two bishops. At that time, the population of the Vicariate was about 150,000; now it has almost 800,000 inhabitants, of which about 70 percent are Catholics.

Faced with this population increase and the lack of priests, there is a serious problem with sects. In those rural places where there is no organized Catholic Church, we try to always have Dele-gates of the Word [trained laymen]. But, in many of these places, there is a big problem with the sects [evangelicals, Pentecostals and others] who arrive and try to defame and destroy the work of the Catholic Church.

In 2000, the Nicaraguan Catholic Church administered eight dioceses (including the Vicariate of Bluefields) with 243 parishes, served by 247 diocesan priests and 127 religious priests (total of 374), of which 75.7 percent were native-born and 25.3 percent were foreign-born. Also, there were 196 religious brothers and 977 religious sisters (nuns) in the country. The current Archbishop of Managua, Mons. Leopoldo José Brenes Solórzano, was appointed in 2005 as the successor to Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo (b. 1926, archbishop from 1970-2005) who retired in 2005.

The Catholic Cathedral of Managua, built in 1920, survived the 1931 earthquake but was severely damaged by the 1972 earthquake and was condemned. This eventually led to the construction of a new cathedral, called *Catedral Metropolitana de la Purísima Concepción* (Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception), inaugurated in 1993. Each town and city has annual celebrations (*fiestas patronales*) for its patron saints, and special religious celebrations are held all over the country during Holy Week that ends of Easter Sunday.

Nicaragua is dedicated to *Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción* (Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception) whose sanctuary is located in the municipality of El Viejo, department of Chinandega, on the north-western Pacific coast. The object of veneration is a small statue of the Virgin Mary that was given to this parish in 1703 by Capitan Don Francisco de Aguirre. An annual pilgrimage and procession takes place here from December 6-8, which draws ten of

thousands of participants from all over the country. The ancient colonial church – built during the early 1600s, partially destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1835, and rebuilt in 1884 – was declared the National Sanctuary on September 9, 1944. It is one of the oldest Catholic churches in the country.

Another important religious festival is held in Managua in August, dedicated to Saint Dominic, whose small statue is paraded through the streets yearly. The procession begins at Las Sierritas Parish Church, located in a residential area on the south side of the city, and moves westward along the Managua-Masaya highway to the *Iglesia de Santo Domingo* located in the old city center. The statue is kept there for several days until it returns back to its original location in another procession; tens of thousands of people participate in these activities.

The Protestant Movement

Protestant missionary activity in eastern Nicaragua can be traced to Anglican efforts in the 1760s, although an Anglican influence was present as early as the 1620s among the scattered British trading settlements and logging camps on the Caribbean coast, known as the Miskito Shore. The Wesleyan (British) Methodists made a weak and unsuccessful attempt to establish themselves in the port of Bluefields in the 1830s, mainly among the Creoles (English-speaking Afro-Americans from the British West Indies). However, serious efforts to evangelize the Creoles and Amerindians in eastern Nicaragua did not begin until the arrival of the German United Brethren (MORAVIAN CHURCH) in the port of Bluefields in 1847. From this base of operations, the Moravians began evangelizing the various ethnolinguistic groups on the Miskito Shore: **Amerindians** (Miskitos, Sumos and Ramas), **Garifunas** (or Black Caribs, an Afro-Caribbean people deported by the British from the Island of St. Vincent in the Caribbean to the Bay Islands of Honduras in 1789; the Garifuna community in Nicaragua is located at Sandy Bay, north of Bluefields), and **Creoles** (English-speaking West Indians) who were concentrated in the port settlements. The Jamaican Baptists were active in the Corn Islands of Nicaragua during the 1850s, and the Angli-cans (now a diocese in the EPISCOPAL CHURCH) renewed their efforts on the Miskito Shore during the 1880s.

Prior to 1900, few Protestant attempts had been made among the Spanish-speaking population of western Nicaragua, either in the Pacific coastal region or in the central highlands. However, several successful missionary efforts had begun to produce fruit among the Hispanicized population (descendents of the original Amerindian peoples: Matagalpa, Subtiaba and Monimbó tribes) by 1940. The independent Central American Mission began its labors in 1900, independent Pentecostals in 1911, the American Baptists (now the AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES IN THE U.S.A.) in 1917, and the ASSEMBLIES OF GOD in 1936. The SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, which initiated mission work on the Caribbean coast among the Creoles in 1904, did not begin to expand their efforts to western Nicaragua until the 1940s.

Protestant church growth was slow in Nicaragua prior to the mid-1960s. In 1937, only seven Protestant mission agencies had begun work on either coast; however, by 1965, twenty-six Protestant denominations were active in Nicaragua and, by 1978, forty-six new denominations had arrived. In 1980, there were at least seventy-two Protestant denominations in Nicaragua with about fifteen hundred organized congregations that were served by over 300 ordained national pastors, 760 lay workers, and 83 foreign missionaries (up from 41 missionaries in 1973).

In 1936, 75 percent of Protestant church members were Amerindians and Creoles on the Caribbean coast, and only 25 percent were Hispanics on the Pacific coast. In 1980, the situation was reversed: 70 percent of the Protestant membership lived on the Pacific coast (including the

central mountain region) and only 30 percent lived on the Caribbean coast, which represented a drastic shift in the strength of Protestantism in Nicaragua during the previous 45 years.

Under the Liberal Somoza dynasty (1936-1979), Protestant denominations benefited from the principal of separation of Church and State, with the constitution guaranteeing religious freedom to all Nicaraguan citizens and to foreign residents. Consequently, most Protestant groups grew unhindered, engaging in evangelistic activities and planting churches at will, supported by constitutional law and the power of the civil authorities. The Nicaraguan police were occasionally called in to protect Protestant missionaries or national believers from religious persecution by fanatical Catholic mobs, led by both Catholic laymen and clergy, who attempted to stop mass evangelistic activities by Protestants in public places, such as the town square or an open-air street meeting. Protestants, in general, felt that the civil authorities were "ordained of God" for the common good and could be counted on for protection in times of crises.

As a rule, Protestants abstained from assuming a critical stance toward the Somoza family dynasty, even though the National Guard increasingly used repression to stop political dissent, often with brutal and bloody consequences for political opponents or even those suspected of supporting the Sandinista insurgency during the 1960s and 1970s. For many Protestants, the revolutionary Sandinista movement, led by the FSLN against the corrupt Somoza dictatorship, created a climate of fear, confusion and uncertainty, both for the present and the future. Nevertheless, some Protestants, especially young people, openly embraced the Sandinista cause; others adopted a more cautious "wait-and-see" attitude in an attempt to remain politically neutral; and some even openly supported the Somoza government in submissive resignation to the belief that "the powers that be are ordained of God."

During the years of insurrection and conflict, the Evangelical Committee for Relief and Development (CEPAD), an interdenominational service organization (formed in 1972 following the Managua earthquake) that enjoyed wide support among the Protestant community, played an important role in channeling aid to thousands of victims of the civil war during late 1970s.

After the Junta of National Reconstruction assumed power in July 1979, CEPAD's Department of Socio-Pastoral Action (called RIPEN) sponsored a national pastors' conference, with the participation of over 500 pastors and lay leaders, who drew up a statement favorable to the programs of the new government, but without compromising their primary allegiance to God. However, a climate of uncertainty about the direction the FSLN was heading caused many Protestants to proceed with caution in the political arena, hoping for a clear demonstration of the promises made to the Nicaraguan public by Sandinista leaders. Many Protestants made their presence felt in revolutionary Nicaragua by actively supporting reconstruction efforts led by the Sandinista government.

Prior to the 1960s, most cooperative efforts among Protestants were fostered by Foreign Mission agencies, rather than by national church organizations, which were just beginning to develop as autonomous bodies. However, during the 1960s, national evangelical leaders and their respective ecclesiastical organizations played a more significant role in cooperative efforts than did the foreign missionaries.

Many evangelical mass campaigns in Nicaragua were sponsored by interdenominational committees, beginning in the 1920s with Harry Strachan of the Latin America Evangelization Campaign, then during the 1950s and 1960s in crusades sponsored by the Latin America Mission (LAM) and led by Kenneth Strachan, both in western and eastern Nicaragua. The most notable effort at this level took place during the 1960 Evangelism-in-Depth program, sponsored locally by a national coordinating committee composed of representatives from the Baptist Convention, Central American Mission, Church of the Nazarene, Assemblies of God, Church of God (Cleve-

land, Tennessee) and many other smaller groups – a total of 12 denominations and 125 local congregations. Never before had evangelicals worked together so hard and for so long; a strong spirit of unity prevailed during the many months of planning and implementing the Evangelism-in-Depth program, spearheaded by LAM missionaries and advisors. However, no permanent church council or evangelical alliance emerged from these united efforts.

Then, six years later, in 1966, concern about Church and State issues and basic religious liberties compelled nine of the larger Protestant denominations to form the National Evangelical Council of Churches in an effort to counteract intensified Roman Catholic activities against evangelicals. In the early 1960s, the Catholic Church sponsored the "Santa Misión" program, which was probably a reaction to growing evangelical visibility and credibility among nominal Catholics during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Managua. There, evangelicals had conducted several mass evangelistic crusades in public places, had marched down city streets by the thousands carrying banners with Bible verses and evangelical slogans, had begun dozens of radio programs and even founded an evangelical radio station, along with massive campaigns for Bible distribution, house-to-house visitation, prayer cells and Bible studies, literacy efforts, etc. The Catholic program to counteract activities by evangelicals was a logical reaction, especially when Nicaragua entered the modern period of mass communications. However, the National Evangelical Council was largely ineffective due to internal strife and the nonparticipation of influential evangelical leaders and their churches, such as those of the Baptist Convention.

Nevertheless, following the disastrous Managua earthquake in 1972, some 40 Protestant denominations and service agencies joined forces to organize the Evangelical Committee for Relief and Development (CEPAD). Later, the General Assembly of CEPAD formed a committee of pastors to promote interdenominational activities through a socio-pastoral action department. This committee, called RIPEN (Interdenominational Representatives of Evangelical Pastors in Nicaragua), organized regional pastoral committees in many parts of the country. CEPAD held training seminars, workshops and inspirational retreats and conferences, both at the national and regional levels, during the 1970s.

In the new environment following the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, there were lingering doubts among many evangelicals about the direction the Sandinista government was headed and about the enthusiastic support given by CEPAD and RIPEN to the Junta of National Reconciliation. Consequently, a group of about 50 evangelical pastors from a dozen or so ecclesiastical bodies – mainly smaller independent churches but also from some of the larger denominations – decided to form a new association of pastors in Managua during February 1980. This organization was called the National Council of Evangelical Pastors of Nicaragua (CNPEN) and was led by Ramón Salgado and Efraín Balladares, both of whom were pastors of small independent church associations. However, it should be noted that CNPEN is composed of individual pastors and not associations of churches (denominations) like CEPAD.

Therefore, CNPEN functions as an interdenominational ministerial fellowship, rather than as an inter-church council where delegates are appointed or elected by their respective church associations or service agencies to participate in a general assembly and conduct the business of the council. CNPEN is an autonomous movement among conservative evangelical pastors who took a more cautious stance toward the new revolutionary situation in Nicaragua.

A national study of the Protestant movement in 1979, conducted by INDEF-CEPAD as part of the **Central American Socio-Religious Studies Project (PROCADES),** reported a total of 1,531 Protestant congregations (churches and missions) with 78,387 baptized members among 72 church associations (denominations and independent church bodies). It also revealed that the Pacific region of the country, with 63.5 percent of the population, contained 52.3 percent of the

Protestant congregations; the North-Central region, with 29.4 percent of the population, contained 23.3 percent of the Protestant congregations; and the Atlantic region, with 7.1 percent of the population, contained 24.5 percent of the Protestant congregations.

The main Protestant denominations in Nicaragua in 1979, according to the National Protestant Church Directory produced by INDEF-CEPAD in 1980, were the MORAVIAN CHURCH (123 congregations with 12,950 members), Assemblies of God (186 congregations with 8,500 members), the Seventh-day Adventist Church (83 congregations with 6,073 members), CHURCH OF GOD (CLEVELAND, TENNESSEE) (116 congregations with 5,250 members), BAPTIST CONVENTION OF NICARAGUA (174 congregations with 4,659 members), Baptist International Mission (21 congregations with 3,040 members), APOSTOLIC CHURCH OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST (60 congregations with 3,600 members), the independent United Pentecostal Evangelical Mission – a split from the Assemblies of God in the mid-1950s (49 congregations with 3,004 members), and the Free Apostolic Church (43 congregations with about 3,000 members). Pentecostals represented 45 percent of all Protestants; the Adventists, 7.8 percent; liturgical groups (Lutheran, Episcopalian and Reformed-Presbyterian), 2.4 percent; other non-Pentecostal denominations (Moravian, Baptist, Brethren, Church of Christ, Nazarene, Central American Mission-related churches, Mennonite, etc.) 44.2 percent; and unclassified groups, 0.6 percent.

The National Protestant Church Directory, produced by INDEF-Nicaragua in 1998, reported 220 Protestant church associations and at least 113 independent churches in Nicaragua in 1997, for a total of 4,402 churches with a Protestant population of 534,284 or 12.2 percent of the national population (1995 Census). Geographically, it also revealed that the Pacific region of the country, with 56.6 percent of the population, contained 46.5 percent of the Protestant congergations; the North-Central region, with 31.1 percent of the population, contained 31.8 percent of the Protestant congregations; and the Atlantic region, with 13 percent of the population, contained 21.7 percent of the Protestant congregations.

The largest Protestant denominations in 1997 were the Assemblies of God (603 congregations with 65,315 members), the Moravian Church (144 congregations with 52,274 members), Full Gospel Church of God (Cleveland, TN; 363 congregations with 21,308 members), United Pentecostal Evangelical Mission (273 congregations with 19,200 members), PENTECOSTAL CHURCH OF GOD of Puerto Rico (211 congregations with 12,529 members), APOSTOLIC CHURCH OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST (187 congregations with 12,122 members), CHURCH OF GOD OF PROPHESY (170 congregations with 11,870 members), BAPTIST CONVENTION OF NICARAGUA (112 congregations with 10,158 members), Assembly of Christian Churches from New York City (98 congregations with 8,321 members), Pentecostal Mission of Christian Churches – a split from the United Pentecostal Evangelical Mission in 1975 (117 congregations with 6,024 members), Free Apostolic Churches (90 congregations with 5,727 members), CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE (98 congregations with 5,066 members), Seventh-day Adventist Church (75 congregations with 4,946 members), Churches of Christ Association – a split from the Baptist Convention in 1960 (37 congregations with 4,718 members), Convention of Mennonite Churches (83 congregations with 4,306 members), Fraternity of Central American Churches (102 congregations with 4,257 members), Baptist International Mission (38 congregations with 4,080 members), BRETHREN IN CHRIST (90 congregations with 3,682 members), INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF THE FOURSQUARE GOSPEL (55 congregations with 3,198 members), and Faith and Hope Lutheran Churches (25 congregations with 3,081 members). All other Protestant denominations reported fewer than 3,000 members each in 1997.

Also, the 1998 National Protestant Church Directory listed 1,182 congregations in the City of Managua, which had a population of 1,093,760 in 1995. By comparison, in 1979, there were

only 253 Protestant congregations in the City of Managua with a population of 511,767, according to the PROCADES study.

Moravian and Anglican-Episcopal communities are concentrated on the Atlantic coast, while other evangelical churches dominate the Pacific and North-Central regions. There is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion between the various regions. Creoles (Afro-Caribbean) predominate in the coastal towns where English-speaking congregations were established by Baptist and Methodist immigrants from the British West Indies during the 19th and 20th centuries, whereas Seventh-day Adventist missionaries from the USA first arrived in 1904. Most of the other Protestant denominations that now exist in Zelaya Department (now divided into the North and South Atlantic Autonomous Regions) did not begin work there until after 1950, and most of their congregations are Spanish-speaking. Amerindians (Miskito, Rama and Sumo) who live along the Caribbean coast are more likely to belong to Moravian, Anglican-Episcopal or Seventh-Day Adventist churches.

Some evangelical denominations (mainly Pentecostal) have a strong presence in the remote towns of the North-Central Region and South Atlantic Autonomous Region, where Spanish-speaking migrants arrived to clear the forest and create new communities and farms since the 1940s. However, the North-Central region of the country has experienced the most significant Protestant church growth in Nicaragua between 1979 and 1997 (a period of 18 years). In 1979, the North-Central region, with 29.4 percent of the population, had 23.3 percent of the Protestant congregations; whereas in 1997, the North-Central region, with 31.1 percent of the population, had 31.8 percent of the Protestant congregations.

According to research conducted by the **Latin American Socio-Religious Studies Program (PROLADES – a broader geographical version of PROCADES),** the highest rate of Protestant church growth in Nicaragua took place during the 1970s (12.2 percent annually), which corresponds to the period of greatest civil conflict between the Sandinistas and the Somoza dictatorship. The proportion of Pentecostal adherents in Nicaragua increased from 44.8 percent of all Protestants in 1979, to 51.5 percent in 1991, and to 55.7 percent in 1997; whereas the evangelical non-Pentecostal proportion decreased from 44.5 percent in 1979, to 34.7 percent in 1991, and to 32.4 percent in 1997. Therefore, the evidence shows that Pentecostal membership was growing more rapidly than non-Pentecostal membership between 1979 and 1997.

In 2007, the largest Protestant denomination in Nicaragua was reported to be the Assemblies of God with more than 860 congregations and an estimated 200,000 baptized members (mainly Spanish-speaking). The second-largest denomination was the Moravian Church with 188 congregations and 82,944 members (predominantly among Miskitos).

Today, there are four private Protestant universities that operate with official government authorization: the Nicaraguan Polytechnic University (founded by Baptists), Martin Luther King Evangelical University (nondenominational), the Adventist University (founded by Seventh-day Adventists), and Bluefields Indian and Caribbean University (founded by Moravians). Also present are dozens of evangelical Bible institutes and several theological seminaries that train pastors and lay workers.

Many of the more conservative Protestant denominations are associated with the *Consejo Nacional Evangélico de Nicaragua* (National Evangelical Council), which is affiliated with the Latin American Confraternity of Evangelicals (CONELA) and the WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE (WEA). The Baptist Convention and the Moravian Church are the only members of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) in Nicaragua, which is affiliated with the WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC).

Other Religions

Present in Nicaragua are the following **non-Protestant marginal Christian groups**: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES (322 congregations and 19,003 adherents in 2005) and the CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (92 congregations and 59,886 adherents in 2007) – for a history of the Mormon Church in Nicaragua, see Henri Gooren: "Latter-day Saints under Siege: The Unique Experience of Nicaraguan Mormons" (2007); the Light of the World Church (from Guadalajara, Mexico); Philadelphia Church of God; the UNIVERSAL CHURCH OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD and the GOD IS LOVE PENTECOSTAL CHURCH (from Brazil); the VOICE OF THE CORNERSTONE, Mita Congregation and the People of Amos (from Puerto Rico). On June 27, 2007, the Nicaraguan government reportedly denied entry to José Luis de Jesús Miranda, self-proclaimed antichrist and international founder of the Growing in Grace International Ministry, with headquarters in Miami, Florida. The group claims to have at least 1,000 members in Nicaragua – Matagalpa, Estelí, Juigalpa, Jinotega, Ocotal, Bluefields, etc. – and has been active since 1997.

Christian immigrant groups include Palestinian Christians (Eastern Orthodox) whose ancestors came to Central America in the early 1900s, as well as Chinese and Korean Christians who arrived after the 1960s.

Several other Christian groups (Eastern and Western Rite) exist in Nicaragua as well: the Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church-Virgin of Perpetual Help Mission (Padre Basilios Victorino Castro Mejías) and the Orthodox Church of the East/Church of Utrecht in America. The latter group was founded in the USA by Richard A. Marchenna (1932-1982), who was also associated with the Old Roman Catholic Church; he was succeeded by Derek Lang of the episcopal diocese of Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Mission operates St. Martin's Seminary in La Esperanza, Zelaya. In addition, the Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church has one "religious community" of monks and nuns, the Monastic Community of Saint Basil, located at St. John's Monastery in Nicaragua. This denomination is led by the Rev. Stephen Thomas, who became the sixth Metropolitan Archbishop after the death of Metropolitan Archbishop Joseph in 1987. Its headquarters are at Our Lady of Sitka Monastery in Cleveland, Ohio, USA. The church officials claim to possess a valid priesthood and episcopacy coming from the Syrian and Russian Orthodox Successions; and it uses the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom with Syriac-Greek Typicon (Rubrics).

World religions in Nicaragua include: (1) the **BAHA'I FAITH**; (2) **Buddhism** (Bodhichitta Buddhist Center, Compassion Buddhist Center, and Paget Sayers Buddhist Center); (3) **Hinduism** (Devanand Yoga Center, INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS, International Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization, and TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION; (4) **ISLAM** and (5) **JUDAISM** (see below); (6) **Ancient Wisdom Tradition** (Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosaecruz -AMORC, GRAND UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY-ORDER OF ACUARIUS from Venezuela, and the Universal Gnostic Movement founded by Samael Aun Weor; and (7) **Spiritualist-Psychic-New Age movements** (Ishaya Techniques, Kardec School of Spiritualism, and the UNIFICATION CHURCH OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon). In addition, there are numerous independent psychics, mediums, clairvoyants and astrologers who announce their services in local newspapers.

Although there are few **adherents of pre-Colombian religions** in the country, there has been a "freedom movement" within the Moravian Church to allow some Amerindian spiritual expression, often through music. **Animistic religions include:** (1) **Amerindian traditions** among the Miskito, Sumo and Rama; (2) **Myalism-Obeah** among the Creoles; (3) **GARIFUNA religion** (Afro-Amerindian) among the inhabitants of Sandy Bay, located north of Bluefields; and

(4) **"popular Catholicism"** among the Hispanic population (syncretistic), which includes the use of magic, witchcraft (*brujería*), folk healing (*curanderismo*) and spiritual guides (*chamanismo*).

The Jewish community has only about 50 adherents (including expatriates); they gather for religious holidays and Sabbath dinners but do not have an ordained rabbi or a synagogue. According to community members, the last synagogue in the country was firebombed by a Sandinista street mob in 1978.

There are approximately 1,200-1,500 **Muslims** in Nicaragua, mostly Sunnis who are resident aliens or naturalized citizens from Palestine, Libya and Iran. The Islamic Cultural Center in Managua has approximately 320 men attending on a regular basis. Muslims from Granada, Masaya, Leon, and Chinandega also travel to the Managua center on Fridays for prayers. Granada, Masaya, and León have smaller prayer centers in the homes of prominent Muslims. Also present are the Iranian Cultural Center and the Arab-Lebanese Cultural Center.

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Last updated on June 13, 2009

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