

Thirty Questions for the Cuban Regime

Given its main objective, its need for international support in order to remain in power since the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, the government in Havana has attempted to fool the world and has managed to convince some that in Cuba religious freedom is no longer violated as it once was. Constitutional changes at the beginning of the 1990s, when the State ceased calling itself an atheist state and proclaimed itself to be secular (*laico*), and the papal visits, are the regime's principal arguments to call positive attention to itself.

However, the truth is that religious freedom continues to be trampled upon daily due to policies emanating from the highest levels of the central government. The Religious Affairs Office of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party is at the very pinnacle of power and issues guidelines about how to treat any religious group or individual who has decided to exercise their freedom of faith, whatever that may be. It is therefore inconceivable that, as if it did not already have a political monopoly as the only party, and as it is ideologically communist, the Cuban Government has an office devoted to pressurizing, manipulating and blackmailing historically established religious groups, and is dedicated to containing, confronting or eliminating new religious movements when they do not align with political interests, to keep themselves in power at any cost.

Given that the regime in Havana claims that it has changed and no longer violates religious freedom, it should be asked:

1. Why does it maintain the aforementioned Office, if, as a political power, it is not in its power to define who should or should not believe, or how they should believe?
2. Why don't they return the majority of properties confiscated during the years of open persecution, or reimburse the affected religious groups for their losses?
3. Why do they threaten to confiscate properties which are used for religious services, arguing that they are not legal churches or house churches, when they themselves are unwilling to legalise them?
4. Why haven't they asked forgiveness for the imprisonments of those interned in the concentration camps known as UMAPs, or even the murders of those who held different ideologies?
5. Why hasn't anyone been held to account for the wave of repression which took place during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, when hundreds of people were arbitrarily detained and threatened, some of whom are still in prison awaiting severe sentences, such as Sonia Garro?
6. Why do they continue to deny access to mass media to all religious groups?
7. Why does there continue to be a monopoly on education, without religious groups being allowed to open campuses, despite the government's own urgent admission that the Cuban people need a moral and civic education to re-instill the values held by Cubans all over the world and which today are absent?
8. Why do they impose an education that is supposedly secular, but is full of atheism and political doctrines which uphold violence, upon the children of believers, for example the symbols and slogans that students are forced to wear and repeat?
9. Why are religious groups which request registration, which have the same rights as those which are historically recognized, denied access to the Registry of Associations at the Ministry of Justice?
10. Why are new religious groups coerced, threatened and repressed, taking advantage of the legal limbo to which they have been condemned?

11. Why does the Office dedicated to religion in the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, assuming pontifical airs, meet regularly with leaders of the historically recognized religious groups in order to encourage, promote and instigate divisions and hatred towards other religious groups which do not enjoy the same rights?
12. Why haven't religious groups which were declared illegal, for example the notorious case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, been reinstated on the Registry of Associations of the Ministry of Justice?
13. Why don't they free the US citizen Alan Gross, who is a prisoner in Cuba for having supported the Cuban Jewish community with technology, and who now serves as a warning and a lesson to anyone else who might decide to show solidarity with any other religious community?
14. Why are the members of the pro-human rights women's group known as the Ladies in White denied access to churches, for example as they have been violently repressed in recent weeks, especially in Eastern Cuba and in the province of Matanzas?
15. Why are those religious leaders who insist on opening the doors of their places of worship to any Cuban, regardless of political affiliation, threatened, punished and harassed?
16. Why do they attack the group of pastors and churches in the east of Cuba known as Pastors for Change, who were blocked last year from distributing donations to those affected by Hurricane Sandy in Santiago de Cuba?
17. Why do they arbitrarily punish historically established churches when they adopt any position that conflicts with the government's exclusionary and unjust political positions, denying them the rights that are theirs by law?
18. Why do they attempt to isolate specific religious leaders, blocking any access to them; exemplified in the detention and unjust deportation of foreigners who attempted to visit the Catholic priest, José Conrado?
19. Why do they take advantage of their monopoly of banks, using church's bank accounts against them as a means of coercion? This is illustrated in the frozen dollar account of the Trinity Baptist Church in the city of Santa Clara, where the government also refuses to legally recognise the Luis Manuel Gonzalez Peña Baptist Theological Seminary.
20. Why did they announce that, as of January 2014, each religious association will be limited to only one bank account and that bank accounts of individual religious institutions will be eliminated, like the account of the Baptist church in Santa Clara?
21. Why, when the Office of Religious Affairs approves the visit of religious delegates from abroad, do they limit the movement of those who have received visas, forcing them into a rigid and extremely exclusionary and monitored itinerary?
22. Why do the content of minutes and agreements taken within religious associations have to be made available to and approved by the Office of Religious Affairs?
23. Why are lodges and fraternal societies whose services are not open to the public forced to turn over lists of their members, ignoring their right to confidentiality?
24. Why, as they themselves have admitted on their television program *The Reasons of Cuba*, do they have religious and fraternal groups under strict surveillance, including infiltrating them with spies at the highest levels, as in the notorious case of the highest leader of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Cuba?
25. Why are they so reluctant to give legal recognition to new churches, submitted by the associations, and in the few cases when they do, why do they impose such strict limitations upon the operation of these recognised house churches?
26. Why are they so reluctant to give permission to build new churches and make essential repairs on existing ones?

27. Why aren't the majority of the biblical and theological seminaries in the country recognized by the Ministry of Superior Recognition, despite being recognized by their religious associations, and why doesn't even one of the universities in the country have a Faculty of Theology?
28. Why, if they say that the deaths of believers like Juan Wilfredo Soto Garcia, Laura Pollan and Oswaldo Paya Sardinias, were not extrajudicial killings, do they refuse to permit any impartial investigations as requested, which would only confirm their innocence?
29. Why is there such a notable absence of any Law of Worship, which is necessary for a nation as profoundly religious as Cuba?
30. Why do some prisoners, especially political prisoners like Iván Fernández Depestre, continue to be denied the right to religious attention, and why does the government continue to reserve the right to approve or block specific religious leaders from carrying out prison ministry, including those who have been approved by their denomination to do so?

Sadly, there remain many more questions which would also challenge the façade of religious liberty which the regime claims to uphold. Specific violations of religious freedom have been meticulously detailed in reports such as that written and published by CSW in April of this year, which we endorse, and regarding which the majority of violations mentioned continue to occur. It is also worth noting that as they monitor religious freedom violations around the world, this organization has noted that those in Cuba have risen dramatically in the past two years.

The same people who today try to trick the world into believing that religious freedom exists in Cuba are the same people who years ago tried to root it out. Just as is noted in the pastoral *Hope does not disappoint* recently published by the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops, which says that political change on the island must take place, we also see that fundamental political change must happen if we are to have true religious freedom. Those who possess a wide, horrible and systematic history in terms of violations of religious freedom, must cede their broken position to others, who in a democracy would be capable of allowing for and respecting those rights. We pray and work for that to take place in a peaceful manner, but right away because it has now been too long without freedom. God bless Cuba and the United States.