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## **Catholic and Protestant Culture Politics in Nicaragua A Media-Based Inventory**

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### **Introduction**

Roman Catholicism was the official religion of Nicaragua from the start of the Spanish colonial era until the Liberal constitutional reform of 1894. However, the religious map of Nicaragua has changed remarkably in the last forty years. In 1963, 96 percent of the population considered itself Roman Catholic. By 2000, however, the percentage had decreased remarkably to almost 76 percent (see Table 1). During the same period, the percentage of Protestants went up correspondingly from 4 to almost 19 percent. This means that there are nowadays approximately 3.85 million Roman Catholics in Nicaragua, against an estimated 1 million Protestants.

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TABLE 1  
**Religious affiliation as a percentage of the Nicaraguan population, 1900-2000**

<i>Year</i>	<i>1900</i>	<i>1950</i>	<i>1963</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>
Roman Catholic	94.6	95.9	96.0	95.5/ 83.9	90.7	85.6	85.6	73.0	75.9
Protestant (incl. evang.)	1.2	4.0	3.8	5.6/ 6.1	8.4	11.4/ 13.7	11.5	16.5	18.8
Nonreligious	0	0	0	0.2	0.2	1.2	1.3	8.4	9.1
Mormon, Jeh. Witness,	2.0	0.1	0.1	0.8	0.6	1.8	1.6	2.1	1.4
Islam, Amerindian, Judaism, Spiritist									
Doubly affiliated									-5.2

Sources. Barrett (1982: 522); Barrett, Kurian & Johnson (2001: 544); Johnstone & Mandryk (2001: 483); *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2000).

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This article will focus on the culture politics of Protestants and Catholics in Nicaragua. I will follow Droogers & Van Dijk (2002), who give the following description of culture politics: 'The process by which, in a context of power relations, a meaningful choice is made and propagated with regard to the question what is considered desirable and undesirable in culture and society.' The central question here is: What kind of culture politics do Catholic and Protestant leaders in Nicaragua propagate?

Since both the Catholic Church and the many Protestant churches have strongly hierarchical organizations, I will analyze especially the public statements by church leaders. The Catholic leaders are organized in the Nicaraguan Bishop's Conference (CEN), chaired by the authoritarian Cardinal Obando y Bravo. The Protestant leaders lack a similar organ. In 2002, there were three competing Protestant umbrella organizations in Nicaragua. The *Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Pro Alianza Denominacional* (CEPAD) was founded after

the 1972 earthquake and stood close to the Sandinistas politically. In reaction to that, the Assemblies of God and other, mostly Pentecostal, churches started the politically more conservative *Consejo de Pastores Evangélicos de Nicaragua* (CNPEN) in 1981.<sup>1</sup> The most non-politicized body was the *Alianza Evangélica*, headed by pastor Roberto Rojas, which was not functioning efficiently. On April 7, 2002, pastor Miguel Rivero of the Iglesia Centro Familiar Cristiano founded the *Hermandad de Iglesias Fundamentales del Nuevo Milenio*. Rivero said that 18 churches were interested in joining this non-politicized body that would, also be involved in social development projects. Nothing more was heard of this organization afterwards, but it illustrated the divisions with the numerous Protestant churches in Nicaragua. My main sources for analyzing Catholic and Protestant culture politics are scholarly literature, the extensive internet website of the Nicaraguan Bishop's Conference, and articles in the Managua newspapers *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa*, in combination with statements by bishops and Protestant leaders.<sup>2</sup> The year 2002, the last full calendar year at the time of writing, will be used as the random year of reference here.

The Catholic Church has remained a strong actor in Nicaraguan society, although it ceased to be the official religion in 1894. The Nicaraguan state, however, maintained a privileged position for the Catholic Church, which is exempted from taxes and receives many financial benefits. The grounds on which the new Managua cathedral was built, for instance, were donated by the Chamorro-government (1990-96). Various Protestant organizations have challenged these direct forms of state support for the Catholic Church, but so far without result. In this polarized religious climate, ecumenical cooperation between Catholics and Protestants hardly exists at all.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the situation is better characterized as one of fierce religious competition between Catholics and Protestants (see Gooren 2003b and below).

The structure of this article is as follows. A first section describes the involvement of the Catholic Church in Nicaraguan politics. This presents the context for a subsequent section on public expressions of a Catholic culture politics, as propagated by the national Bishops' Conference. I then give a short history of Protestantism in Nicaragua. Next I will look at the culture politics of Protestant leaders, which provide a clear contrast with the Catholic bishops. A final section of summary and discussion puts my findings into perspective.

## **The Roman Catholic Church and politics**

Before the coming of the Spanish conquerors, various forms of shamanistic indigenous religions were practiced in Nicaragua. During the Spanish colonial era, the Roman Catholic Church formed an almost inseparable part of the government. In 1826, Nicaragua's first constitution after winning independence from Spain proclaimed Roman Catholicism as the official state religion. It was not until the Liberal revolution of General Zelaya in 1893 that the institutional separation of the Roman Catholic Church from the state took a start.

The Catholic Church, however, has always remained a strong actor in Nicaraguan society. 'Up until the 1930s, the Church's strategic political alliances had been basically defensive, reactions by the bishops to the threats posed by economic liberalism and anti-clericalism. During the 1940s and 1950s, their response was similar, but the threat changed. Now the concern was with communism and, to a lesser extent, protestantism.'<sup>4</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, the Nicaraguan bishops promoted the new 'social Catholicism' based on the papal encyclicals *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Rerum Novarum*, which contained a strong spirit of corporatism. In part, the social Catholicism was also a defensive measure against the perceived threats of atheist communism and, to a lesser extent, growing Protestantism. The international Catholic Action movement already started in the 1920s with the official goal to propagate orthodox Catholicism and increase lay participation in hierarchy-controlled organizations. At the first Central American Bishops' Conference in San José, Costa Rica, in 1956, the bishops planned

the defense of the faith by promoting Catholic Action. ‘The strategy for defence, *acción católica*, was designed to organize militant lay groups to carry the Church’s influence to the schools, the universities, and the factories, places where communism was perceived as grabbing a foothold.’<sup>5</sup>

The bishops formed an alliance with the Somoza-dictatorship since its start in 1936, in return for continued religious instruction in the primary and secondary schools and the guarantee of other privileges. These privileges even included personal financial favors to priests and bishops.<sup>6</sup> With few exceptions, most bishops gave the Somoza dictators their uncritical support until the early 1970s.

Meanwhile, however, the international Roman Catholic Church entered a process of renewal in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the 1968 Medellín Latin American Bishops’ Conference, both of which expressed the increasing attention to the situation of the poor and the oppressed. Although this process of renewal met with little enthusiasm on the part of the Nicaraguan bishops, a small group of clergy were eager to play a more active role in promoting social change. Between 1966 and 1968, a Spanish priest organized the first base community in a poor neighborhood of Managua and Ernesto Cardenal founded the Solentiname base community on an island in Lake Nicaragua. In base communities, poor people learned to discuss the Bible to reflect on their own situation of poverty and injustice. Base communities were soon considered ‘communist’ and repressed by Somoza’s National Guard.

As the Somoza-regime became increasingly corrupt and repressive in the 1960s, the Catholic hierarchy gradually started to distance itself from the dictator. Thus the alliance between the Church hierarchy and secular power holders slowly began to erode. The appointment in 1970 of Miguel Obando y Bravo as archbishop of Managua formed the catalyst to finally break with the former alliance with Somoza. The pastoral letters of the Nicaraguan bishops became increasingly critical of the regime and the country’s social situation throughout the 1970s. The Catholic hierarchy tried in vain to mediate between Somoza and the *Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional* (FSLN). However, the Bishops’ Conference did not show its open support for the Sandinista guerrillas until June 2, 1979—a mere six weeks before the final military victory of the Sandinistas on July 19. Relations between the Sandinista government (1979-90) and the Catholic hierarchy remained strained, reflecting intense political differences between the two sides. Bitter divisions ran through Nicaraguan society between conservatives and progressives and in the Catholic Church between the conservative hierarchy and the left-wing progressive clergy and lay leaders—the so-called ‘popular church’.

The Nicaraguan Catholic Church hierarchy reflected its class interests by moving politically to the side of the middle and upper class opposition to Somoza in the 1970s, although this happened only gradually. The strong anti-communist sentiments of the Church hierarchy made them highly suspicious of the left-wing Sandinistas. A significant number of the active lay leaders and priests in the popular base of the church, however, became increasingly radical and supportive of the Sandinistas, because of the violent repression under the Somoza-regime in the 1970s. Many priests and friars actually joined the Sandinista movement.

After the Sandinistas defeated Somoza in 1979, the relations with the Church hierarchy soon became strained. Priests with government functions, like the famous poet and liberation theology priest Ernesto Cardenal, were threatened by the hierarchy with sanctions and often expelled. The conflict was essentially a political power struggle over the control of the Catholic believers. On the one side, the progressive Catholics from the base (lower classes, left-wing intellectuals, priests, friars, and lay leaders) sympathized with the reformist ideas of the Sandinistas and wanted to help them in their utopian struggle for a more just society. On

the other side, the conservative church hierarchy wanted to control its progressive priests and keep them subject to church authority. They were driven by a deep distrust of the Sandinistas' left-wing ideas and by the hierarchy's traditional alliances with the middle and upper classes. Above all, the hierarchy wanted to avoid divisions within the Nicaraguan Catholic Church. Since the 1980s, with the support of the new pope John Paul II, they gradually but successfully started to marginalize sympathizers of the Sandinistas within the Roman Catholic Church. Their method to discipline priests and expel lay leaders showed results, but at the cost of increasing divisions within the Catholic Church.

Hence, the main division in the Catholic Church in Nicaragua still runs between the official, hierarchical church and the so-called 'popular church', existing of saints' devotion (popular Catholicism), base communities, and other lay groups. The popular church was very much alive in the 1980s. In part this was due to the fact that the poorer sectors were disappointed in the clergy, which had supported the Somoza-dictatorship from its start in 1936 until as late as the early 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Support for Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo and the politically conservative Catholic clergy was strongest among rural and urban elites. The poor were very critical of clerical authority, especially in low-income neighborhoods of Managua.<sup>8</sup> After the 1990 elections, a new political era started of various neo-liberal governments, which generally protected the interests of the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, however, Catholicism faced increasing competition by the numerous types of Protestant churches. The next section will look at the development of Protestantism in Nicaragua.

### **Origin and growth of Nicaraguan Protestantism**

The first infringement on the Roman Catholic religious monopoly was the establishment of the Moravian Church, originally from Germany, in 1849. Its missionaries made many converts under blacks and the Miskitu Indian population on the Caribbean coast, which was still under British control in the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> After 1900, the Catholic monopoly was further undermined with the arrival from the United States of missionaries from three different church groups. First, interdenominational faith missions like the Central American Mission, already founded in 1900. Second, the so-called historical Protestant churches (e.g. Adventists or Lutherans). Third and most important, missionaries from the young Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God, which arrived as early as 1912.

The first period of Protestant growth in Nicaragua, roughly from 1900 until 1965, was characterized by institution building by mostly foreign missionaries: the foundation of schools, seminaries, and radio stations. In the first half of the 20th century, Nicaraguan Protestants were often persecuted and sometimes physically abused. Protestant growth during the first sixty years was extremely slow: by 1966 still only about 4 percent of the Nicaraguan population considered itself Protestant, compared to about 96 percent Roman Catholics.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1967 and 1970, the first boom of Protestant churches took place. The main factors were the high numbers of new Protestant churches, the high numbers of missionaries, the taking over of church leadership positions by Nicaraguans from foreign missionaries, continuous social turmoil, and various new and successful *In Depth* evangelization campaigns. Religious tolerance grew in the 1970s, because many progressive Catholics and Protestants alike were involved in the left-wing Sandinista movement and later in the Sandinista government (1979-90). By 1980, the Protestant proportion was already 8.4 percent. The 1980s were the second Protestant boom period. Protestant membership growth continued at high rates, until about 15 percent of the Nicaraguan population considered itself Protestant by 1990. Protestant population proportions for the 1990s varied between 7 percent (CID/Gallup 1990) and 17.3 percent (Johnstone 1995: 416). In the first half of the 1990s, Protestant growth seemed to stagnate: the Protestant population proportion remained stable at

12-15 percent. After 1997, three sources reported some moderate growth again. The latest Protestant population proportion (2000) is 18.7 percent (Johnstone & Mandryk 2001: 483).<sup>12</sup>

Looking closely, the 1965-90 Protestant growth explosion in Nicaragua was actually a Pentecostal boom. In 1965, only 20 percent of all Protestants were Pentecostals; by 1982, the Pentecostals made up no less than 73 percent.<sup>13</sup> Being a Protestant increasingly became synonymous with being a Pentecostal. The biggest non-Catholic church in Nicaragua in 2000 was the Assemblies of God, with 181,000 affiliated members. It is highly significant that in 2000, six of the ten largest non-Catholic churches in Nicaragua were Pentecostal churches. Pentecostalism has become the religion of the urban poor, especially in Managua.<sup>14</sup> The typical Pentecostal believer was young, poor, and less educated than the rest of the population.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the Catholic Church hierarchy, many Pentecostal (and Protestant) churches and leaders had a good relationship with the new Sandinista government, after it disposed of the Somoza-regime in 1979.<sup>16</sup>

Literature on the 1965-90 Pentecostal boom in Nicaragua is scarce.<sup>17</sup> It mentions only a few possible factors: intensive evangelization activities by an increasing number of churches, the emotional appeal of Pentecostalism (faith healing, speaking in tongues, singing, swaying), dissatisfaction with (Roman) Catholicism, different state-church relations, and changes in church leadership. Since the 1960s, the Pentecostal churches, led by foreign (mostly U.S.) missionaries, came increasingly under Nicaraguan leadership. They could communicate much more smoothly with their relatives, friends, and neighbors. This in turn contributed to higher church growth.

The Catholic Church may still claim to represent a majority of the Nicaraguan population, but it is likely that there are more people gathered in Pentecostal churches on any given Sunday than at mass. In poor neighborhoods of Managua, Pentecostals can make up as much as fifty percent of the population.<sup>18</sup> Most of the Pentecostal converts used to be Catholics, but it is unclear whether they were active participants in popular Catholicism or whether they were mostly nominal Catholics, who rarely went to church and knew little about doctrine and practice.

In the following sections I will take a closer look at the culture politics of Catholic and Protestant leaders in Nicaragua.

### **The Catholic Bishops' Conference culture politics**

This section deals with the culture politics of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua, focusing especially on its highly visible Bishops' Conference and its leader, Cardinal Obando y Bravo. I will analyze how the Nicaraguan bishops address some issues facing Nicaraguan culture and society by looking at the publicized documents of the Bishops' Conference and by looking at public statements by Catholic bishops in the Managua newspaper *La Prensa*.<sup>19</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church in Nicaragua consists of eight dioceses, which are all headed by bishops. For over thirty years, the leader of the Roman Catholic bishops in Nicaragua has been Miguel Obando y Bravo. Born in 1927, he became a priest in 1958 and a bishop in 1968. Only two years later, he was appointed as archbishop of Managua. In the 1970s, he gradually moved the institutional church away from supporting the brutally repressive and corrupt Somoza regime. However, under his leadership the church hierarchy remained closely allied with the upper and middle classes. He frequently clashed with the left-wing Sandinista government (1979-90) and disciplined the priests who were actively involved in it. He was made a cardinal of the Managua diocese in 1985 and maintained good relationships with the democratically elected neo-liberal governments after 1990.

Obando y Bravo was one of the original founders of the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference (*Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua* or CEN), legally founded on July 5, 1975. However,

the Bishops' Conference was already functioning in the early 1970s, because its first pastoral letter was made public on March 19, 1972. The title was highly suggestive: 'On the principles which structure the political activity of the entire Church as such.'<sup>20</sup>

As the preceding section already showed, the bishops of the Catholic Church have always been extensively involved in Nicaraguan culture, society, and especially its politics. The internet website of the Bishop's Conference (CEN) lists the full texts of a total of 181 public statements, (pastoral) letters, and other documents made public between 1972 and 2003. I limited my analysis to the period starting with the legal foundation of CEN (1975) and ending with the last full calendar year (2002), which represented a total of 170 documents. This means that between 1975 and 2002, about six documents were published annually on average. However, in some years many more documents were produced. This is true for the years 1978 (eight), 1980 to 1986 (an annual average of almost eleven, with seventeen in 1983), 1990 (ten), and 2001 (seven): see Table 2.

TABLE 2

**Public documents of CEN (Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference), 1975-2002**

1975	1	1982	9	1989	6	1996	4
1976	1	1983	17	1990	10	1997	4
1977	1	1984	8	1991	5	1998	5
1978	8	1985	12	1992	3	1999	2
1979	5	1986	12	1993	6	2000	5
1980	11	1987	5	1994	3	2001	7
1981	6	1988	3	1995	3	2002	5

Source: internet website CEN ([www.tmx.com.ni/~cen/indiceprincipal.htm](http://www.tmx.com.ni/~cen/indiceprincipal.htm)).

In 1978, the Sandinista guerrilla struggle against Somoza was approaching its climax. In July 1979, the Sandinistas finally defeated Somoza and his National Guard and took over the government. Differences of opinion and power struggles between the Sandinista government and the Catholic Church led to an increasing number of Bishops' Conference statements between 1980 and 1986. By 1990, tensions were running high again, because of the elections. To the surprise of everybody, including the Sandinistas themselves, these fair elections were won by Violeta Chamorro as the leader of a center-rightwing coalition of parties, which had united against the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. The relationship between the Bishops' Conference and the subsequent—soon unpopular—neo-liberal government of Arnaldo Alemán (1996-2002) was even more cordial (see below). Hence, the generally low number of public statements from 1991 to 2002: five a year on average.

The reasons for the high numbers of CEN-statements in 1980-86, 1990, and 2001 (again an election year full of tensions) can also be discerned by looking at the contents of the bishops' statements. All 170 CEN-documents that were published between 1975 and 2002 can be categorized under the following four headings:

1. Politics and contemporary social issues	95 documents (56%)
2. Church matters (doctrine, legal matters, etc.)	51 documents (30%)
3. Religious holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.)	14 documents (8%)
4. Family, education, culture	10 documents (6%)
Total	170 documents (100%)

Based on this analysis of public documents, the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference appears to function more like a political organization than as a forum of leaders of a religious organization. More than half of all the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference statements between 1975 and 2003 dealt directly with national politics. Until 1980, these documents addressed themes like the Somoza-dictatorship, the Sandinista guerrilla uprising, and the brutal political repression by the National Guard. Roughly from 1980 to 1990, the statements decried the persecution of the Catholic Church and its hierarchy by the socialist Sandinista government. After 1990, politics still ranked high, but other contemporary social issues gained prominence: the rise in (violent) crime, natural disasters (like hurricane Mitch in 1998), and ethical issues like abortion. After 1994, there were markedly more statements on the importance of the family as a pillar of Nicaraguan society.

The above analysis of CEN-documents is confirmed by having a chronological look at public declarations of the Nicaraguan bishops as they appeared in the Managua newspaper *La Prensa* in 2002.<sup>21</sup> There were 54 newspaper articles for 2002, meaning that Cardinal Obando y Bravo, head of the Bishops' Conference, could be found in a *La Prensa* newspaper article every week on average.<sup>22</sup>

In January of 2002, the newly-elected President Enrique Bolaños succeeded Arnoldo Alemán (1996-2002), who was immediately accused of corruption in a criminal court. In one of his first statements in *La Prensa* of 2002 (January 2), Cardinal Obando defended Alemán ('Obando: medios exageraron corrupción del gobierno', the media exaggerated government corruption). Obando was quoted in *La Prensa* in January 21 and March 11 when he asked for aid to the poor and declared himself opposed to the strong increases in the prices of water, gasoline, and corn.

By April 2002, it was clear that President Bolaños and his vice-President Rizo would keep far more distance from the Catholic hierarchy than Alemán had done. They skipped the customary visit of the newly-elected president to Cardinal Obando and soon cut back on government spending by eliminating scholarships for the Universidad Católica. In early April, there were rumors that Bolaños had requested the Vatican to remove Obando y Bravo as archbishop of Managua. Obando was outraged. Bolaños made a strong denial on April 7 and wanted to close the polemics with the bishops. The bishop of León stated: 'With the current government the relations are of respect; the relations of the Church with doctor Alemán were cordial, even fraternal.' Cardinal Obando did not react directly to Bolaños' public denial that he had requested his removal. But on April 19, Obando accused the media of 'launching attacks against the Catholic Church' and called upon all citizens to pray for the current government.

On May 20, Obando again insisted during his Sunday homily that 'there are certain people who want to disparage the Catholic Church, "by saying that it does not attack corruption."' Public opinion had it that Obando did not speak out against corruption, because this could be construed as an attack on Alemán, with whom both Obando and the Catholic Church entertained 'fraternal' relations. On July 16, Bishop Solórzano of Matagalpa confirmed that the Church hierarchy 'maintains cold relations with the Bolaños-government, with which there have been "certain problems."' He did not specify what, exactly, these problems entailed.

In early August, the Alemán family started a media campaign to get the ex-president out of prison, where he was awaiting his corruption trial. On August 9, *La Prensa* reported that the Catholic hierarchy contributed by offering 'mass, supportive prayers, and messages of solidarity.' Bishop Vivas of León, vice-president of the Bishops' Conference, condemned what he considered "abuses of injustice" of the current government's "cruel persecution" of the Alemán family. On August 13, the Bishops' Conference requested an "open dialogue"

between the government, all political parties, and Alemán. By September 20, *La Prensa* reported that Cardinal Obando was under heavy police protection, following ‘strong rumors of a possible attack or kidnapping.’

On October 7, bishop Montenegro lamented a “strong attack” against the Catholic Church by the media, who were accused of trying to “divide, destroy, and undermine the Church.” Various newspapers reported that Obando and Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega had met to discuss a deal on a financial fraud case involving a Church company. By now, the Vatican started to get uneasy over the way the Bishop’s Conference handled the mass media. On October 12, the papal nuncio made a highly unusual press statement, entitled: ‘The Church should not get involved in politics.’

The Episcopal Conference on November 14 called for a national dialogue. The CEN document also stressed the search for peace, the growing social inequality, and solidarity with Cardinal Obando. Cardinal Obando made a strong appeal against corruption at all levels in Nicaraguan society on November 25. This was what the people had been wanting to hear since January. An opinion poll published on December 5 showed that Cardinal Obando had become considerably less popular with the Nicaraguan population: only 38 percent of the interviewed people had a favorable opinion on him, against 41 percent with a negative opinion. On December 6, Obando carried on his populist discourse by denouncing the “mega salaries” of the president, the vice-president, and government ministers. Obando said literally: “Tienen que estudiar esos salarios y ser coherentes con la pobreza del pueblo” (They have to study these salaries and [see if they are] in line with the poverty of the people).

On December 15, *La Prensa* published an extensive interview with Humberto Belli, an ex-minister of education during the government of Violeta Chamorro (1990-96) and a member of the conservative Roman Catholic organization *Opus Dei*, under the headline: ‘The legacy of the cardinal.’ Belli praised Obando’s role in the country’s history and his resistance against the “aggressive” liberation theology and the “so-called popular church”. But Belli criticized Obando harshly for accepting favors from the Alemán-administration and for not speaking out against its corruption. ‘This created confusion among many Catholics, compromised the position of the Church, and negatively affected the prestige of the cardinal and the bishops.’ Belli wrote to the Vatican asking for Obando’s resignation. The year 2002 ended with televised Christmas speeches on December 25 by Bolaños and Obando, who independently of each other called for reconciliation in the country.<sup>23</sup>

Analyzing these public statements by the bishops in *La Prensa*, a few conclusions can be drawn on the Catholic culture politics. The Bishops’ Conference frequently employed a populist rhetoric, e.g., opposing the steep price increases allowed by the Bolaños-government and denouncing the high salaries of government leaders. However, the Bishops’ Conference refused to follow the voice of the people in denouncing the corruption of the former Alemán-administration. The ‘fraternal’ relationship between Alemán and Obando probably inspired feelings of loyalty in the latter and in the Bishops’ Conference. This explained Obando’s support of Alemán and his contribution the campaign by the Alemán family to get the former president released from prison. Public opinion, however, considered Alemán to be the most corrupt head of state since Somoza, leading to a public relations crisis for the Bishops’ Conference and Cardinal Obando. In defense, the Catholic hierarchy various times decried a ‘media campaign’ against them. But in opinion polls, both the popularity of Cardinal Obando and the confidence in the Catholic Church kept going down steadily. Since an alliance with the new government was impossible, Obando in the end had to give in to popular pressure and denounce corruption in general. He managed to do so without referring explicitly to Alemán.

The new government of President Bolaños kept more distance to the Catholic hierarchy for various reasons. Firstly, the Bolaños-government wanted to save money by eliminating some financial benefits for the Catholic Church and the Universidad Católica. They knew this

would lead to a confrontation with the bishops. Secondly, the new government wanted to distance themselves as much possible from the former, highly unpopular Alemán-administration. This implied guarding their distance from the Bishops' Conference, which often expressed support for Alemán. As the popularity of Obando and the other Catholic hierarchs continued to decrease, the government's need to keep their distance only became stronger. However, for various reasons, the Bolaños-administration did not need the public support of Protestant leaders either, as will become clear in the following section.

### **Protestant culture politics**

If the Catholic bishops in 2002 could be observed trying to influence politics by seeking the attention of the written media, Protestant church leaders could be seen doing almost the exact opposite. I was unable to detect a presence on the internet of any mainline Protestant or Pentecostal church in Nicaragua. Various searches did turn up a few documents and also 111 hits on the web pages of *La Prensa* by using the search term 'evangélica.' However, only 28 of these articles turned out to be relevant to my central question, meaning that *La Prensa* only published an article on evangelicals every two weeks on average.<sup>24</sup> Out of these 28 relevant articles, 16 directly dealt with the theme of Protestant culture politics, 6 were news briefs (for instance on a new building of the Protestant Martin Luther King University or the importance of ecumenism in Nicaraguan Protestantism), 4 described Protestant development projects, and 2 were on evangelization activities. To compensate for *La Prensa's* lack of attention to Protestantism, probably due to its generally more educated audience (see note ii), I will include the coverage of Protestant leaders by the Managua newspaper *El Nuevo Diario*.<sup>25</sup> Here there were 12 relevant articles in 2002. Half of these dealt with national politics (like the Alemán-case or the meeting with vice-President Rizo), three covered personal fights between Protestants leaders in two Protestant political parties, and three discussed issues of morality in politics and religion (one article quoted a pastor speaking out against a supposed satanist group and one another pastor fiercely criticizing Halloween).

I shall give a short chronology of 2002, based on the articles which dealt directly with Protestant culture politics in Nicaragua. In 2002, a famous Protestant leader with a strong presence in the media was Guillermo Osorno. He founded the Protestant political party *Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Christian Path) in 1996. Osorno was a pastor in the biggest Pentecostal church, the Assemblies of God, and an ex-director of a Protestant radio station.<sup>26</sup> On January 23, Osorno strongly rejected Alemán's suggestion to invite state officials at the beatification of the Nicaraguan nun Sor María Romero: "The State does not have an official religion." On March 28, Osorno warned that the financial demands of international organizations like the IMF could put an end to state support of churches, NGOs, and development cooperatives in Nicaragua, which he thought was a very bad idea.

In April, the newspapers were continuously reporting on the bad relationship between the Bolaños-administration and the Catholic bishops. However, the first meeting between Protestant leaders and the vice-President of the Bolaños-government was also reported to be unproductive in *El Nuevo Diario* of April 18. On April 17, CEPAD had launched a strong attack on previous governments during this meeting with vice-President Rizo, arguing that these had always treated the Catholic Church with "favoritism." CEPAD President José Alguera Palma mentioned six specific and recent examples: donations of the Electoral Court (CSE) to the Catholic Church, grants totaling US\$ 360,000 from the Ministry of Education to the Universidad Católica, the presence of bishop Montenegro in the Board of Directors of the Managua airport, tax exemptions for the Church to import luxury cars, restoration of Catholic church buildings with funds from FISE (*Fondo de Inversión Social de Emergencia*), and the transfer of funds of the Municipality of Managua to the Catholic Church for the Santo

Domingo patron saint fiestas. The next day, the ex-director of FISE denied that Catholic church buildings were restored with FISE funds (April 18).

More than a month later, June 19, the leadership of the *Alianza Evangélica* expressed its support for a party initiative to establish a Truth Commission. Its goal would be to investigate human rights abuses during and after the armed conflicts with Somoza and the Contra guerrillas. Although the Catholic Church also supported this initiative, President Bolaños had already declared on June 17 that he considered the fight against corruption a far higher priority. The Truth Commission initiative was effectively killed with that statement. Hence, the *Alianza Evangélica* leadership was beating a very dead horse two days later.

Halfway 2002, it was clear that the Protestant church leaders were almost invisible in the written press. The contrast with the Catholic bishops could hardly be greater. Apparently, many Protestants were not at all happy with the public invisibility of their leaders. In a letter to the editor on June 28 ('Silencio Pastoral'), pastor Eduardo Gutiérrez lamented the silence of the Protestant churches, while Nicaragua was ablaze with corruption investigations, financial scandals, the Alemán-case, tax revisions, and price raises. "In none of these cases have we heard the voice of our beloved Protestant Church, represented by its respective institutions, with a Pastoral Letter that makes us reflect." The reference to the impact of the Catholic Bishop's Conference pastoral letters was quite obvious. But for at least two months, there was no visible response by the Protestant leaders.

Meanwhile, *La Prensa* reported with news briefs on developments in Nicaraguan Protestantism. These were quite heterogeneous: local Catholic and Protestant leaders came together in Tisma to fight domestic violence (June 30), the *Alianza Evangélica* and the Billy Graham Foundation organized a TV broadcast of the evangelizing film 'Road to Redemption' on Canal 4 (June 30), the importance of female pastors in all Protestant churches except the Moravians and Adventists was reported on July 21, and the canonization of the Mexican Indian Juan Diego was analyzed as part of a Roman Catholic campaign to stop its believers in Latin America from defecting to Protestantism (July 31). On August 1, a parliament member of the Protestant party Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense followed the Catholic bishops in calling for a national dialogue, as proposed by Alemán.

The clearest public statement by Protestant leaders, representing three important Protestant organizations in Nicaragua (but not CEPAD), was reported on August 20 under the headline: 'Protestants demand an economic strategy by the government.' It was, in fact, a report of the first Protestant pastoral letter! The letter called for national dialogue and stressed the importance of spiritual factors, next to economic, social, and political ones. But the first Protestant pastoral letter ended almost on a defensive note: "That is why we consider it the mission of the Protestant Church to intervene by praying, so that God may act first in the personal sphere of all of us who make up the community of Nicaragua." It was signed by the leaders of the *Alianza Evangélica*, CIEETS (a leading ecumenical training institute), and the *Consejo de Pastores Evangélicos de Nicaragua* (CNPEN). There was never any response by President Bolaños.

Then there was a Protestant silence again until September 29, when hundreds of Protestants gathered on the Plaza de la Fe to celebrate the newly-established Day of the Bible, on the 433rd anniversary of the Spanish Bible translation. On December 13, a Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense (CCN) parliament member went against the party line by voting to keep Alemán in prison while awaiting his trial. CCN deputies were accusing each other of being liars and traitors, which probably did not improve the public image of Nicaraguan Protestantism much. On December 16, thousands of Protestants came together on the Plaza de la Fe for the laying of the first stone of a new Protestant mega temple. Pastor Marengo of the Iglesia Apostolar Centro Cristiano 'called upon all politicians, magistrates, and judges to be worthy representatives of the people in their quest for justice' (i.e., the trial against Alemán).

Four parliament members were present, including the Sandinista parliament member Tomás Borge.<sup>27</sup> Political divisions between Protestant leaders were quite visible in the public arena, when pastor Marengo said: “Not only Osorno, [but] many Protestants who got involved in politics have failed.”

Analyzing the culture politics of Protestant leaders as it appears from their public statements, various conclusions can be drawn. Firstly and obviously, there were a great many Protestant leaders who occasionally spoke out in public. About a dozen names showed up in all articles combined. Secondly, the many Protestant leaders were highly divided on all issues. Many articles basically described personal fights between Protestant leaders, especially in the two small Protestant political parties. Different pastors insisted calling public attention to their own personal preoccupations, like Satanism, Halloween, evangelizing films, the beatification of nuns... Although the Bolaños-government did not need Protestant support, they organized a meeting with Protestant leaders. Apparently acting on his own, CEPAD leader Alguera Palma used this meeting with vice-President Rizo to blast state favoritism of the Catholic Church. This was not only poor tactics, considering it was only a first meeting, but also quite beside the mark. The new Bolaños-government, after all, right from the beginning kept its distance to the Catholic hierarchy and, in fact, abolished some forms of state favoritism, e.g., subsidies to the *Universidad Católica* (see above).

When three important Protestant organizations (excluding CEPAD) managed to put aside their differences and wrote a united ‘pastoral letter’, its contents were so oblique that the government did not even respond to it. After all, calling for a national dialogue and stressing the importance of spiritual factors could not be considered a major contribution to the national debate on corruption in Nicaraguan politics and society.

## Summary and discussion

The Nicaraguan bishops seemed to occupy a central position in the public arena and made extensive use of the written mass media in 2002. However, their close relation to the unpopular Alemán-government and a financial scandal affected their public image in a very negative way. Their response was to use their common populist discourse (e.g. denouncing price explosions and politicians’ mega salaries), to make regular appeals for solidarity with the poor, and to call the country to dialogue, reconciliation, and peace. But popular opinion kept associating Obando and the bishops with the hated Alemán-administration, which the bishops reinforced by consistently speaking out in favor of Alemán during (the preparations for) his trial. Hence a more aggressive response was to denounce media campaigns against them, which the bishops did no less than four times. The December 5 public opinion poll, however, showed that more people had negative than positive views of Cardinal Obando, which was quite unprecedented.

The culture politics of the Catholic bishops that appears from their actions seemed directed not so much at the Nicaraguan people, but more at the media and at politicians. According to the bishops, Nicaragua’s national problems were poverty, polemical politics, aggression, violence, crime, and persecution of the Catholic Church. The solutions they presented were peace, tolerance, solidarity, and responsible behavior by the media and by politicians.

The situation on the Protestant side was quite different. There were over a dozen Protestant leaders and at least four important Protestant organizations (CEPAD, the *Alianza Evangélica*, CNPEN, and CIEETS). Protestant leaders were highly divided in their opinions on all aspects: with respect to their political views, their views of Nicaragua’s problems, and the question of whether they should even speak out in public on these issues.

In fact, Protestant leaders hardly ever spoke out in public through the written mass media; they often preferred the radio and—occasionally—the television. The few that did express

themselves publicly were party politician Osorno (who defended the interests of the Protestant churches and of ex-President Alemán), Protestant pastor Marengo (who blasted Osorno for supporting Alemán), *Alianza Evangélica* President Rojas (who supported a Truth Commission initiative that was already dead), and CEPAD President Alguera (who denounced state favoritism of Catholicism and was blasted for enjoying the same state favoritism during the Sandinista government). In short: the Protestant leaders were generally highly reluctant to speak out in public and on those rare occasions that they did, they showed little skill at doing it. They were unsuccessful in finding a common theme to bring to the attention of the Nicaraguan people. When they spoke out against corruption, they were following the populist agenda of saying what the people wanted to hear. When they called the country to unity, the fact that Protestant leaders were highly divided on all issues and often engaged in personal fights severely undermined their credibility. By the time when the three major Protestant organizations published their first pastoral letter, demanding a clear economic strategy from the Bolaños-government, there was no response at all from the government. The fact that Protestant leaders continue to win new members for their churches shows that they employed other media than the written press to be visible in Nicaraguan society. Radio broadcasting seems to be most prominent among these.<sup>28</sup>

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Freston (2001: 257).

<sup>2</sup> *La Prensa* is a quality newspaper with a higher-educated and more liberal audience. It tends to devote less attention to Protestant churches, perhaps because these are associated more with the lower classes. Hence, I will also analyze articles from the newspaper *El Nuevo Diario*, which has more articles on Protestantism. See [www.elnuevodiario.com.ni](http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni).

<sup>3</sup> Samandú (2001: 20).

<sup>4</sup> Williams (1985: 346).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 347.

<sup>7</sup> Barrett, Kurian & Johnson (2001: 545).

<sup>8</sup> Lancaster (1988: 101).

<sup>9</sup> Samandú (2001: 5, 23).

<sup>10</sup> Barrett (1982: 523); Martínez (1989: 30); Hawley (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Bastian (1986: 56).

<sup>12</sup> Church statistics are always controversial, of course, but the trend is clear: growth took off after 1965 and lasted at least until 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Martínez (1989: 34). Niño Chavarría (1992: 47) reported that 85 percent of all Protestants were Pentecostals in 1990, but gave no source.

<sup>14</sup> Lancaster (1988: 101-102) showed for Managua that the poorer the neighborhood, the higher the percentage of Protestants.

<sup>15</sup> Smith & Haas (1997: 444).

<sup>16</sup> 'The Sandinistas used religion as an added source of legitimation and encouraged Christian involvement in its project' (Freston 2001: 252). Nauta & Snoek (1994: 32) are more specific: 'The enthusiasm of certain groups of Pentecostals for Sandinism was certainly also stimulated by the promise of the new government to observe a strict separation between church and state.' In October 1979, only three months after the ousting of Somoza, 500 Pentecostal pastors, representing over 20 percent of all Nicaraguan Pentecostal pastors, issued a declaration in strong support of the new Sandinista government (ibid.).

<sup>17</sup> See Lancaster (1988: 110-113), Martínez (1989: 27-37), Niño Chavarría (1992: 47-57), and Brouwer & den Hartog-Geluk (2000: 44-47). See also Gooren (2003b) for a more extended analysis of Protestant growth in Nicaragua.

<sup>18</sup> Lancaster (1988: 102).

<sup>19</sup> All newspaper sources can be found on the internet. CEN website: <http://www.tmx.com.ni/~cen/indiceprincipal.htm>. *La Prensa* website: <http://www-usa.laprensa.com.ni/>. *El Nuevo Diario* website (used additionally in the section on Protestantism): [www.elnuevodiario.com.ni](http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni).

<sup>20</sup> In Spanish: 'Sobre los principios que rigen la actividad política de toda la Iglesia como tal.' See CEN website: <http://www.tmx.com.ni/~cen/indiceprincipal.htm>. Year: 1972. Accessed on November 12, 2003. The second pastoral letter, incidentally, dealt with the devastating December 23, 1972 earthquake.

<sup>21</sup> The year 2002 was chosen at random. The articles on the Nicaraguan bishops in *La Prensa* were found by using the Search button at the *La Prensa* website (<http://www-usa.laprensa.com.ni>). The search term 'católico' yielded over 150 results, but most of these were obituaries and social announcements. The best results were obtained by using the search term 'Obando y Bravo': 150. Out of these 150 results, 45 were left out because of repetitions and 51 were again obituaries, social announcements, or letters to the editor.

<sup>22</sup> By way of comparison, I checked how often archbishop Rodolfo Quesada Toruño of Guatemala City was mentioned in the Guatemala newspaper *Prensa Libre* in 2002: only eleven times or not even every month on average. See *Prensa Libre* website: <http://www.prensalibre.com>, search term: 'arzobispo.'

<sup>23</sup> Obando y Bravo was still cardinal and archbishop of Managua on December 25, 2004 and kept figuring prominently in *La Prensa* articles throughout 2003 and 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Out of a total of 111 hits on the search term 'evangélica' in *La Prensa* in 2002, there were 24 repetitions and no less than 59 documents that turned out to be irrelevant: short news listings (*sucesos*), letters to the editor, and opinion articles. Many of the 14 news briefs (*sucesos*) were reports of theft in evangelical churches or of people who were stabbed in or near evangelical churches.

<sup>25</sup> Out of the total of 118 hits in *El Nuevo Diario* between 1999 and 2002, the search term 'protestante' yielded 83, 'Pentecostal' 26, 'evangélico' 7 and 'evangélica' 2. Of these 118 hits, there were 47 repetitions, but only 4 documents that turned out to be irrelevant short news listings (*sucesos*) and letters to the editor. For 2002, there were 12 relevant articles.

<sup>26</sup> Freston (2001: 260). Nauta & Snoek (1994) already reported on the first signs of growing political involvement by some Pentecostal leaders in Nicaragua.

<sup>27</sup> Freston (2001: 253) wrote that Borge was already sympathetic towards Protestantism during the Sandinista government (1979-90).

<sup>28</sup> My current research project in Nicaragua is a detailed study of the competition between Catholics and Pentecostals and the subsequent conversion process in a low-income neighborhood of Managua.

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