

11 When and Why Religious Groups Become Political Players

The Pro-Life Movement in Nicaragua¹

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In this chapter we ask when and why religious groups become political players, by analyzing the involvement of Catholic and Evangelical churches in the Nicaraguan “pro-life” movement. The movement emerged as a collective player after the 1990 elections that marked the end of the Sandinista regime and the transition to neoliberal democracy under the 14-party opposition coalition UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora). Its mobilizing capacity grew dramatically over time, especially in opposition to therapeutic abortion: while the first anti-abortion rally in 1994 drew around 5,000 people (Envío Team, 1994), in 2000 rallies drew 15,000 (La Prensa, 2000), and by 2006 200,000 people (Kampwirth, 2008: 129). The emergence and growth of the pro-life movement represented a major challenge to the quest for greater recognition of gender equality, sexual rights and reproductive rights in Nicaragua and culminated in a total abortion ban in 2006 – even when the life of the pregnant woman is at stake (Heumann, 2010; Reuterswärd et al., 2011; Kampwirth, 2006; Kampwirth, 2008). Much of this success is attributed to the political power and mobilizing capacity of the churches (Kane, 2008).

It may seem almost self-evident to see churches as political allies or even the driving force of the pro-life movement. However, as we demonstrate in this chapter, there is nothing natural about churches becoming an ally or active participant in this or any political movement. In the case of Nicaragua, we show how Evangelical churches were initially at odds with the Catholic Church and eschewed all political activism as outside their spiritual mandate. It was only after pro-life activists strategically targeted the church with their recruitment efforts that Evangelical churches decided to engage with the Catholic Church and with pro-life politics, transforming the pro-life movement’s influence in state politics. Also the Catholic Church, while having a longer history of political involvement, experienced dramatic changes and internal conflicts around what the “nature” and the extent of its political role should be, with “pro-life” and “pro-family” politics crystalizing as a salient

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issue only in the 1990s, partly as a result of a conservative backlash within the church.

Rather than starting with pre-given players, we show how political actors and arenas became constituted and transformed over time through constantly changing interactions: religious people – and this is true for both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics in Nicaragua – had to be actively recruited to the pro-life movement. They are not “naturally” or automatically mobilizable. In this case, the relationship between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics evolved over time from stiff competition to brothers-in-arms in the pro-life movement, a development that has to be understood as the outcome of complex interactions between different players, notably pro-life activists, clergy, church members, politicians, public functionaries, and last but not least activists from the women’s movement. These interactions don’t take place in a vacuum, but in particular contexts that change over time. Therefore, while we do not suggest a path-dependency argument, we see these interactions as being partly shaped by the history of these relationships: both in terms of how this history is subjectively perceived and (re)constructed on an individual and collective level and in terms of how it has defined the positions of these different players in relation to each other.

This chapter explores the interactions and strategies that made the emergence and growth of a collective player such as the pro-life movement possible from a historical perspective, while connecting them to the (changing) political contexts, constructions of meanings, and emotional responses that played a role in this process. Rather than taking for granted a connection between social conservatism and religion, and therefore the churches and the pro-life movement, we will look at churches as arenas of struggle to understand when and how certain churches became platforms of pro-life activism. We conclude that when scholars of social movements make movement strategies the object of analysis, it not only helps us understand a movement’s interactions with its opponents, but also how alliances and coalitions are formed, and how those alliances and coalitions not only depend on, but also transform, the respective arenas.

Our analysis draws predominantly on 25 semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted with Catholic and Evangelical social conservative advocates and activists in Nicaragua between 2004 and 2007, as well as newspaper clips, magazine articles, church pronouncements and institutional documents of the 1980s and 1990s (see Heumann, 2010).

Relationship between Churches, Politics and Social Conservatism

Even though religious organizations came to play an important role in the pro-life movement, in this study we question the idea that there is a “natural connection” between them. Wood’s analysis of the political role of religious institutions in the US is one of the studies that have shown that religious institutions do not have an “inherent” political nature but that their role depends on their relationship with other players, as well as on their internal struggles and politics (1999: 307-332). Christian Smith (1996) analyzes the strategic advantages that churches enjoy as social movement actors. He distinguishes between issues of motivation and identity, resources, social and geographical positioning, and privileged legitimacy. However, while these “assets” for activism are indeed important, especially to understand why religious organizations may be interesting for social movements, in themselves they are not sufficient to explain when and why religious actors become involved in political struggles and in which ways.

Katzenstein’s (1995) study on feminist activism of nuns and laywomen within the Catholic Church in the US also challenges a monolithic view of the Catholic Church as inherently conservative and in line with the positions of the Vatican. To understand the role of churches in the pro-life movement we have to look at struggles in various arenas and at subjective and emotional processes that led to the transformation of church members and clergy into pro-life activists.

The “causal” relationship between religiosity and social conservatism is also challenged in the findings of a study by Ziad Munson (2008) of the pro-life movement in the US: rather than seeing faith as the driving factor for social-conservative worldviews, he shows how people, once they are recruited for the pro-life movement, come to reinterpret their faith in terms of pro-life values. In our study this is most evident in the case of Evangelicals: for them the salience of the abortion issue was clearly a result of the recruitment efforts of Catholics, not a preexisting concern.

In a broader sense, this perspective challenges the idea that stable and preexisting belief systems in the churches determine church involvement in social movements. Morris (2000), for instance, argues that the US civil rights movement owed its success and mobilizing power to the African-American churches and that it was more than a “structural entity”; it contained the “cultural framework through which the movement would be framed” (Morris, 2000: 448). He argues that the “freedom and justice frame” emerged out of the church’s “transcendental belief system,” a process Morris calls “frame lifting.” In this article, we question this idea of a preexisting frame

in the churches that is lifted into the pro-life movement. We will show how pro-life activists target the churches strategically with recruitment efforts and seek to appropriate religious spaces as mobilizing structures for the movement. In doing so, they appeal to existing frames in these churches, but at the same time they provide these churches a language to politically think about abortion.

The Catholic Church and Politics

The Catholic Church has been the predominant church in the Pacific region of Nicaragua since the Spanish colonization, deeply influencing both popular culture and politics. Even though at the turn of the 20th century Nicaragua was officially declared secular, until the 1960s the power of the Catholic Church remained largely unchallenged (Gooren, 2003). In the latter part of the 20th century two developments would change that: the growth of Evangelical churches (addressed in more detail in the subsequent section), and the emergence of liberation theology, which challenged the church hierarchy from “within.”

During the first half of the 20th century the official Catholic Church openly supported the military dictatorships in Latin America, but the renewing force of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 changed the role that the Catholic Church played in the region. It gave way to the emergence of a liberation theology, which offered a reinterpretation of Christian dogma and declared its identification with the poor and the excluded (Stein in Walker, 1997: 235-247). The Christian base communities that were organized among the population as well as some members of the church hierarchy started to oppose the totalitarian regimes, and to struggle against poverty, social exclusion, and human rights violations, and in this way found a common cause with Marxist-inspired revolutionary movements in the region. The Vatican soon opposed this development. Liberation theology and the involvement of the clerics and devotees in liberation movements produced a significant split in the Catholic Church across Latin America, between those who followed the precepts of the Vatican and those who refused to.

The blend of Marxist-inspired liberation and Christian faith characterized the Sandinista movement, which in 1979 led a revolution that ended four decades of military dictatorship, the Somoza dynasty (Randall, 1994: ix-xiii, 1-27; Walker, 1997: 1-17). The Catholic hierarchy in Nicaragua had supported the Somoza dynasty for over thirty years. Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, appointed Archbishop of Managua in 1970, was the first to criticize

Somoza and throughout the 1970s denounced the human rights abuses of the Somoza dictatorship. Gill (1998) argues that interreligious *competition* played an important role here. In those countries where the Catholic Church faced the most competition from other churches, the episcopies started to oppose the military dictatorships during the 1960s and 1970s and sought to expand their social basis among the poor (Gill, 1998: 112), Nicaragua being a case in point.

Although critical of the Somoza dictatorship, Cardinal Obando was deeply conservative concerning the organization and mission of the church, and he feared the domination of Marxist and “atheist” ideas in the new Sandinista government, as well as the loss of control over his own constituency. Church conservatives could, however, hardly argue that the clergy was not represented in the Sandinista state, as the Sandinistas placed an unprecedented number of priests in important government positions. But these priests were thought to show more loyalty to the Sandinistas than to their own authorities, and conservatives feared the division of the church (Envío Team, 1981).

By 1980, the relationship between the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church and the Sandinista regime had deteriorated. A deep conflict developed between Nicaraguan bishops – supported by the Vatican – and the Sandinista state as well as between the church hierarchy and its own base communities that were supportive of and actively involved in the revolutionary process (Kirk, 1992). The conflict led to the excommunication of priests who had accepted high positions in the Sandinista state, and the persecution of right-wing clerics accused of counterrevolutionary activities by the government. This included the expulsion of foreign-born priests and bishops from the country, and the censorship of church pronouncements and the media in general. One of the most dramatic expressions of this conflict occurred during the 1983 papal visit to the country in which Pope John Paul II’s speech was drowned out by the crowd, because he refused to express any word of sympathy for those Nicaraguans who had died as a result of the aggressions of counterrevolutionary warfare (Envío Team, 1983). In general the church-state conflict was most intense in the first half of the 1980s. In the second half of the decade the first attempts at demobilization and negotiation between Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas started. In 1987, Obando was appointed to the Central American Peace Commission as a sign of and attempt at reconciliation. His role in the peace process earned him renewed legitimacy among the population (Kirk, 1992).

After the 1990 elections, under the Chamorro government in which Catholic charismatics were given key positions, many privileges of the

Catholic Church were reinstated. The Catholic Church was exempted from taxes (in contrast to Protestant churches), and also received public funds. The Cathedral of Managua was, for example, a “gift” of the Chamorro government to the Catholic Church. Chamorro also donated real estate to construct the Nicaraguan Catholic University (UNICA) that opened its doors in 1993 under the lifelong direction of Cardinal Obando (Loáisiga Mayorga, 2005).

The Catholic Church is still today the institution with the most legitimacy and credibility among the population (Zovatto, 2002). Political leaders recognize the importance of having public support for the church, something that representatives of the Catholic Church actively cultivate to ensure that their interests are represented in national policy. Since the defeat of the Sandinistas, the Catholic Church hierarchy has therefore regained significant influence in public policy. The change in government-church relations between the revolutionary period and the 1990s, and the recognition that the approval of the church was crucial for any political project, were well illustrated during the pope’s visit to the country in 1996. On this visit, the Sandinista leadership officially apologized to him for the 1983 incident, which he deeply resented. The pope’s visit right before the elections and his indirect “warnings” against a possible restoring of the Sandinista regime are said to have contributed to the electoral success of the right-wing liberal party under Arnoldo Alemán in 1996.

In addition to its increasing political power, by the early 1990s the Catholic Church hierarchy – through exerting pressure on and employing the excommunication and relocation of priests – had also managed to regain power over its constituency, and to neutralize the Catholic Christian base communities that had emerged in the context of liberation theology during the 1970s. The base communities still exist, but have lost most of their former political and social significance (Aragón, 2009). In other words, the internal struggles between different factions that at some point produced visible divisions in the church have over time led to the hegemony of the more conservative sectors. This allows the church to appear in public as a more unified player but internal diversity, differences, and conflicts persist.

Evangelical Churches and Politics

Protestantism in Nicaragua, although present since the early 20th century, did not grow significantly until the late 1960s. In the 1980s and 1990s Protestant churches experienced an unprecedented growth to almost 20

percent of the population. Catholic affiliation in these 20 years decreased from 90 percent to 75 percent (Gooren, 2003). By 2002 there were more than 130 different Protestant denominations in Nicaragua with over 5,000 congregations (González, 1998; Zub, 2002).

Protestantism in Nicaragua is highly diverse, with considerable differences between but sometimes also within congregations. While in this chapter we look at both Catholic and Evangelical churches, Evangelical churches behave more like social movements because of their more autonomous forms of organization. The same denomination may have different characteristics in different locations or socio-political contexts. Protestants in Nicaragua tend to be indiscriminately called “*evangélicos*” and are often associated with emotional services that include singing, clapping, and trances (Gooren, 2003).

On the Nicaraguan Pacific coast, the Evangelical Pentecostal denomination Assemblies of God became the biggest denomination. They have undergone a similar process from historical rejection of politics and social involvement, to an increasing incursion into politics since 1990: while in 1986 the Assemblies of God expelled a well-known Sandinista pastor, Miguel Angel Casco, for being involved in politics, by the late 1990s several pastors and representatives were not only publicly involved in pro-life activism but also participated in politics in the strict sense, by working in the Ministry of the Family.

The Baptist Convention represented a significant sector of Nicaraguan Protestantism, especially because of the political role they played during the 1980s (González, 1998; Instituto Nicaragüense de Evangelismo a Fondo, 1998). Baptists in Nicaragua are typically middle class and more highly educated than other Protestants. They have been highly visible since the beginning of the 20th century because of their social engagement, including the founding of schools, a hospital, and social organizations. During the 1980s the Baptist Convention predominantly supported the Sandinistas. In the 1990s, however, the Baptists became more conservative (Zub, 2002).

The relationship between Evangelical churches and the Sandinistas was complex and also depended on the political orientation of specific denominations. On the one hand, the Sandinistas viewed Evangelical growth with suspicion and were alarmed by what they considered to be “the invasion of the sects.” Because Pentecostal churches and in particular the Assemblies of God were linked in the US to the political and religious right, the Sandinistas suspected Nicaraguan Evangelicals of engaging in counterrevolutionary activities. On the other hand, the Sandinistas also sought the support of Evangelicals, especially given their conflict with the

Catholic Church hierarchy, and they maintained good relations with the more left-wing Protestant churches, particularly the Baptist Convention and also some of the Pentecostal churches (Stoll, 1990).

With the restoration of the Catholic Church's power after regime transition, Evangelicals found themselves ever more marginalized from the state. The restoration of Catholic privileges triggered outrage and protest among Evangelical communities. In light of their growth and political marginalization, Evangelicals from both the left and the right engaged in repeated efforts to enter the political arena in the early 1990s by founding different political parties. Initially, these met with little success, and only one party managed to establish itself: the right-wing Camino Cristiano Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Christian Path, or CCN) in 1996 (Rodríguez Arce, 1998; Zub, 2002: 64).

Emergence of the Pro-Life Movement in the 1990s

The pro-life movement can be seen as a network of players including individual activists, civil society organizations, religious and political institutions and spaces involved in advocacy or activism to reinforce conservative worldviews, laws, and policies around gender, sexuality, and abortion. The main issue that mobilized the pro-life movement was its opposition to abortion, but the movement has also opposed homosexuality and young people's access to sex education and contraceptives. The first pro-life organization – ANPROVIDA – emerged in Nicaragua in the early 1990s and is a local branch of Human Life International (HLI). HLI, based in the US, claims to be the biggest pro-life organization in the world with over 80 organizations worldwide. It defines itself as a Catholic apostolate – meaning that it is of Catholic faith and has the aim of “spreading the word,” but is led by lay Catholics and is not a structural part of the Catholic Church. Toward the mid-1990s, in reaction to a vibrant international and national women's movement around gender-based violence and reproductive health and rights, other pro-life organizations emerged, such as ANIMU and *Sí a la Vida*. Rafael Cabrera, the founder of ANPROVIDA, also held a number of important positions, such as head of the Nicaraguan Medical Association, dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the American University, and head of the Pastorate for Life of the Catholic Church.

In consequence, all those organizations appeared in the public debate as pro-life players. In the first half of the 1990s, Elida de Solórzano, the founder of the women's pro-life organization ANIMU (Nicaraguan Women's Associa-

tion) was also working in the Ministry of Education (together with another pro-life activist, Minister of Education Humberto Belli), and from 1998 onwards in the Ministry of the Family – together with Minister of the Family Max Padilla, who was recruited to the pro-life movement once he became a minister. In close cooperation, they transformed parts of the state into platforms of pro-life activism. While the UNO government under Violeta Chamorro was supportive of conservative values and of the Catholic Church, it was under the government of neopopulist Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002), leader of the right-wing liberal party, that the pro-life movement thrived under full governmental support. In the late 1990s, Evangelical leaders from the Assemblies of God – the biggest Evangelical denomination in the country, who were also coordinating an umbrella organization of Evangelical churches – were recruited by Catholic pro-life leaders and subsequently drew other Evangelical churches into the struggle. Together they formed the Nicaraguan Pro-Life Committee, an important factor for the success of the pro-life movement. We now analyze the different trajectories through which Catholics and Evangelicals were drawn into the pro-life movement and effectively became constituted as players.

Catholics: The (Trans)formation of Grievances

The precursors and “moral entrepreneurs” of today’s pro-life movement were a handful of activists who became sensitized to pro-life ideals in the late 1970s. They were lay Catholics mobilized in response to international population policies that promoted massive birth control in developing countries, and as a result of their participation in conservative parts of the Catholic Church, particularly the Catholic Family Movements that have proliferated throughout the world since the late 1960s. One of them, and also one of the most visible faces of today’s pro-life movement, is Rafael Cabrera, a gynecologist who in 1990 founded ANPROVIDA, the first pro-life organization in Nicaragua.

Catholic social conservatives rejected the Sandinista regime for different yet overlapping reasons. Many disagreed with their political and economic model, associating Sandinismo with communism, totalitarianism, and atheism. There was a consensus among respondents that the Sandinistas had a negative impact on the family, especially because their ideologies had divided Nicaraguan families along partisan lines, and forced relatives into exile and combat. Nevertheless, the conflict over the family was not (yet) perceived as more pressing than other issues, such as the general political

situation in the country or the challenge to church authority and power posed from inside and outside its walls. Of course the conflict with the Sandinistas could itself have been framed in terms of gender, sexuality, and the family during the 1980s – and in part it was. But this did not become dominant until the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Catholic social conservatives experienced the regime transition in 1990 – after the Sandinistas lost the general election – as a moment of joy and also an opportunity to undo the “damage” caused by the Sandinista regime to the Nicaraguan family: “The year 1990 as a year of transition, reconciliation, of national salvation. The aim was to reconstruct the families” (personal interview [PI], 2005: 15). Conservative Catholics used the state as a strategic player, as a platform of activism, especially through the Ministries of Health and Education. They received key positions in government and the Ministry of Education especially became a bastion of pro-life politics.

While many social conservatives perceived the new situation as advantageous to their cause, they also felt threatened. The flourishing of the women’s movement in Nicaragua in the early 1990s, especially in the context of two international conferences that put issues of women’s rights, sexuality, and reproductive health at the center of the political debate: the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the International Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995. Each had a significant impact on debates and government policies concerning women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights in Nicaragua (Heumann, 2010; Kampwirth, 2006). These developments, referred to with a range of terms, such as “gender ideology,” “feminism,” “ideologies of women’s liberation,” and “homosexualism” (sic), were held responsible for the perceived destruction of the “family” and “family values”:

There is the liberation, the ideologies of women’s liberation. ... [T]hey are so radical that the man is the enemy of the woman, so a family with a man and a woman is not desirable anymore, but two women or two men, of one and the same sex. All these influences provoke family disintegration. The ideological influence of what is called modernism in quotation marks. It can’t be something modern, modern should be what constructs, not what destroys. And this destroys the family, definitely a homosexual man can’t even procreate but has to adopt. So this is not natural anymore. (PI, 2005: 5)

The UN conferences inspired the first public mobilizations of the “pro-life” movement.

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Catholic social conservatives experienced the different governments that ruled throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s as favorable to their goals and ideals. This was especially the case with Arnaldo Alemán, a right-wing populist who governed Nicaragua from 1997-2002 and actively supported the pro-life movement. He introduced the “Day of the Unborn Child” as an official national celebration and personally headed pro-life mobilizations. Alemán also reduced the role of the Women’s Institute and instead founded the Ministry of the Family, which subsequently became another bastion for pro-life activism, once Minister of the Family Max Padilla was recruited by the pro-life movement. The combination of triggering threats and sustained political support throughout the 1990s spurred the power and growth of the pro-life movement.

The leaders of the movement expanded their networks throughout the state, civil society, and religious organizations. Pro-life activists not only had important connections with the churches and key positions in the government, but also kept direct channels of communication and lobbying in all state institutions that could be relevant to their goals, via personal contacts with government officials.

Evangelicals: Similar Grievances, Different Trajectories

Compared to conservative Catholics, conservative Evangelicals had similar readings of the Sandinista period, perceiving them as totalitarian, oppressive, and intolerant toward their religious faith and practice:

Being a church, the problem with Sandinismo lay in the fact that ... they wanted the church to be an instrument to incline people to the revolution. How many times did I have to tell them: “Remember that the church is not a political party, it’s not to politicize people. It’s a free, voluntary issue. In church, we have all the political parties; we enter the temple as church members.” ... It goes without saying that they didn’t accept that and this is why they always had us in the category of counterrevolutionaries, CIA agents. (PI, 2005: 34)

The Sandinistas recognized Evangelicals as an important political force and tried to gain their support, and they interpreted their refusal as hostility. Interviewees described how repressive actions against them ultimately undermined support for the revolution:

They committed various abuses. In the Assemblies of God they killed a pastor of ours, and they killed several deacons of ours. They closed temples of ours on the Atlantic coast, in Ciudad Sandino [and] they destroyed a hall that served us as temple in Villa Libertad. They wounded the pastor and some members by stoning. We had difficulties. But as an honest and objective observer not everything in the revolution was bad, but these aspects, yes. One of the most difficult aspects – and I think this was the reason why we Nicaraguans decided to put an end to the revolution – was that communism and Sandinismo as expressions of international communism, are a persecuting system, there is persecution, in the neighborhood, in the city, in the country, they intercept your telephone. It's a disaster. (PI, 2005: 34)

But some Evangelicals, as members of the poorer sectors of society, appreciated a number of the Sandinistas' social policies and redistributive measures, particularly those that gave them access to (higher) education and better living conditions:

In that period abortions could be easily obtained. There was no promotion of values as such. Of waiting, of abstinence, of faithfulness. They promoted other values, such as solidarity, sacrifice, these were also important values. But the official policy was very distant from God. (PI, 2005: 24)

Despite their resentments of the Sandinista regime and despite the Sandinistas' attempts to draw them into the political conflict, conservative Evangelicals tried to stay out of politics. There is no evidence that they were actively engaged in "pro-life" activism during the 1980s.

Conservative Evangelicals welcomed the end of Sandinista rule as eagerly as the Catholics. It meant the end of the war and military service as well as of the harassments they experienced under the Sandinista regime.

However, regime transition did not have the same effect for them as for the Catholics. On the contrary, the new government, in which prominent Catholics had key positions, regranted a number of privileges to the Catholic Church, and Evangelicals had less access to the state than before 1990. The Sandinistas had at least shown interest in their political support. Zub (2008) notes that after 1990 Evangelicals had no formal channels of communication with the state.

The incursion of Evangelicals into politics has to be seen in light of their growing constituency, their disappointment with existing politics (domi-

nated by Catholics), their quest for a government that would represent them, and also the hope and belief that Evangelical politicians would not be corrupt (Zub, 1992; Zub, 2002; PI, 2005: 33; PI, 2005: 34). The foray of Evangelicals into the political arena entailed a major change of their theological practice and was an important prerequisite for their later involvement in pro-life politics. Despite similar readings and grievances, Evangelicals only became involved in pro-life politics in the late 1990s, and they only did so in response to recruitment efforts by (Catholic) leaders of the pro-life movement.

Different positionings vis-à-vis the state, but also different characteristics of the churches, their politics, and their constituencies, explain the different paths Catholics and Evangelicals took toward social conservative activism. Evangelical involvement in the (Catholic) pro-life movement is remarkable for several reasons: they had to go through deep internal changes in order to become political actors in the first place and they had to overcome a relationship with Catholics that historically had been one of competition and conflict.

The Catholic Church and Pro-Life Activism

The official position of the Vatican toward birth control and abortion is well known. It is often wrongly assumed that this position has been uncontested and unchanged throughout history. Whereas abortion historically had been condemned as concealment of sexual sin, the hegemony of the “right to life” argument is a relatively recent development of the last 50 years (Catholics for a Free Choice, 1996). It was precisely the conservative movement that emerged in response to the Second Vatican Council that led to what is believed to be the most radical statement of opposition to birth control of the Catholic Church. *Humane Vitae*, an encyclical issued by Pope Paul VI, stated that “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life” (Shallat, 1994: 150).

In Nicaragua, the Catholic hierarchy as personified in Archbishop and Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, advocated for social conservatism during the 1980s. But at the beginning of the decade, he had been more concerned with the general political situation and the position of the church. A pastoral letter from 1984 expressed concern about the “materialist and atheist education that is mining the children’s and youngsters’ consciences” and the fact that part of the clergy were supporting these “materialist forces.” It also expressed concern about the censorship of the media (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 1984). Only in the second half of the 1980s did

“the family” increasingly become the focus of concern. In a pastoral letter from 1986, worries about concrete issues regarding marriage, divorce, and abortion come to the fore (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 1986). But the predominant concern of the church hierarchy remained the loss of control over its own constituency and its loss of power with the state.

During the 1990s, the Vatican made sexual politics one of its main targets of struggle. John Paul II reaffirmed the “pro-life” statement of his predecessor in *Veritatis Splendour* (Ioannes Paulus PPII, 1993) and more explicitly in *Evangelium Vitae* (Ioannes Paulus PPII, 1995). It is no coincidence that these two encyclicals were published on the eve of the Population Conference in Cairo and the International Women’s Conference in Beijing, respectively. Through its controversial status as “non-member state permanent observer” of the UN, the Catholic Church hierarchy lobbied actively against birth control and abortion (Kissling, 1999).

We should not equate this hierarchy with the church as a whole. To appreciate the role Catholic networks play in the development of social conservative activism, it is important to distinguish between *platforms* for activism and advocacy (players) and *arenas* where discussion and dissent are taking place among various players. The universities are emblematic of this difference. Nicaragua has three Catholic universities: the Central American University (UCA), the Catholic University (UNICA), and Ave María College. UCA is a Jesuit university founded in 1961, and historically known to support liberation theology and the political left. It has an “Interdisciplinary Gender Studies Program,” and has offered room for discussion forums on sexual and reproductive rights organized by leaders of the women’s movement. UNICA, by contrast, was founded in 1992 by Cardinal Obando. It has received financial support from both the Chamorro and the Alemán administrations. Between 1997 and 2001 Alemán assigned one-third of the whole state budget for university scholarships to Obando’s UNICA (Loáisiga Mayorga, 2005). Ave Maria College (today Ave Maria University) was founded in 1999 as the satellite campus of a US private university founded by Thomas Monaghan, an American entrepreneur who founded Domino’s Pizza. It was headed until 2007 by Humberto Belli, a prominent Nicaraguan Catholic pro-life activist, member of the Catholic institution Opus Dei, with links to the US political and religious right since the 1970s, who also became Minister of Education in 1990 (Envío Team, 1990; Gonzalez Ruiz, 2005). The two conservative Catholic universities thus only emerged in the 1990s.

Some of the pastoral councils of the Catholic Church were also mentioned as important players promoting pro-life ideals. The Pastoral for Family, Life and Infancy, for instance, was led for several years by Rafael Cabrera

and also works closely together with the Catholic Family Movements and pro-life civil organizations.

The Catholic Lay Movements of Evangelization like *Cursillos* and *Encuentros Conjugales* were identified by informants as important spaces that triggered experiences of religious conversion and commitment to pro-life and pro-family ideals. These movements are organized around weekend retreats of self-reflection and community-building that worked as powerful tools of personal transformation.

It is important to see these organizations as dynamic, their political roles and positions continuously changing, and in that sense, at some moments in time more as an arena with conflicting voices than as united players. The role of *Cursillos* in particular has changed considerably. From its conservative origins in Spain under Franco, *Cursillos de Cristiandad* became very popular and important in liberation theology in Central America in the 1970s (PI, 2005: 36). Many left-wing Catholic leaders who joined the revolution, such as Fernando Cardenal, were first recruited through *Cursillos de Cristiandad*. During the backlash in the 1980s, huge internal tensions arose, eventually leading to *Cursillos* being taken over by the conservative Catholic hierarchy (PI, 2005: 38).

The Catholic Family Movements, by contrast, are less susceptible to these changes because they have as their primary goal the promotion of Catholic (sexual) morality. Other parts of the Catholic Church are known for their conservatism and their commitment to socially conservative (sexual) politics and operate in a less public way, such as *Opus Dei*, the *Neo-catechumenal Way*, the *Charismatic Movement* *City of God*, and the *Full Gospel Businessmen Fellowship*. These four groups were established in Nicaragua in the 1990s. Catholic organizations have proliferated since then with the support of the government, the Vatican, and other international actors involved in pro-life activism.

Neither the official position of the church nor its political role is monolithic or static, and therefore the church is not a natural or pregiven pro-life player, but an institution that has become constituted as an important player in and through national and international politics, in various arenas. Once appropriated as platforms for pro-life activism, religious networks help promote social conservatism. Messages, activism, and initiatives of social conservatives can take a variety of forms, including the religious service itself, Bible study groups, religious retreats for young people (*retiros juveniles*) or for married couples (*encuentros matrimoniales*, *encuentros conjugales*), talks in neighborhood centers, schools, and universities, as well as more direct forms of political action, such as petitions and public demonstrations.

Evangelical Churches and Pro-Life Activism

Conservative Evangelicals in the 1990s were mostly organized either through the Consejo Nacional de Pastores Evangelicos de Nicaragua (CNPEN) or the Nicaraguan Evangelical Alliance (Alianza Evangélica Nicaragüense, or AENIC), an interdenominational organization founded in 1990 (and a legal entity since 1996) that openly rejects “anthropocentric” worldviews (Alianza Evangélica Nicaragüense, 1996). AENIC also became an important pro-life actor at the end of the 1990s.

The leaders of AENIC were also leaders of the Evangelical denomination Assemblies of God. These Evangelical leaders were originally approached by the then-Minister of the Family, a Catholic pro-life activist. In one of the follow-up meetings to the international conferences, he had been approached by the vice president for public policy of Focus on the Family, who urged him to seek an alliance with Evangelicals (PI, 2005: 12).

AENIC claims to encompass 70 percent of the Evangelical churches in the country (PI, 2005: 34), although members of more left-wing Protestant churches (GD, 2007) question this claim. It is even unclear to what extent these leaders are acting in the name of the constituencies of their own denominations. The study by Gonzalez (1998) revealed not only the economic marginality of Pentecostal church constituencies, but also their lack of familiarity with mainstream politics. Most of those surveyed couldn't name more than one or two leading parties in the country and did not know their full names. More than 40 percent of Evangelicals didn't know the leaders of their own denominations. Nevertheless, Evangelical church leaders have been able to mobilize considerable parts of their constituencies for the pro-life cause. Evangelical, and in particular Pentecostal, churches, are present across Nicaragua, literally in every neighborhood, and have very strong and dense networks. Members typically spend much more time at church or being involved in church activities than Catholics. On average the services last for two hours, compared to the Sunday masses of the Catholic Church, which are often only 45 minutes long. These institutions appear to exert more social control than Catholic churches, in that they are constantly active in the neighborhoods: going from door to door to gain adherents, but also organizing members to help each other out in all kinds of practical matters, such as borrowing construction materials for a house, helping in its construction, and aiding members to find employment.

In 1999, the strategic alliance between Catholic and Evangelical social conservatives gave way to the creation of an overarching coalition that claimed to represent the pro-life movement in Nicaragua: the Nicaraguan

Pro-Life Committee (PI, 2005: 17). Members of the committee claimed to be integrated and supported by a large number of organizations that signed on to its public pronouncements. A closer look at their constituency, however, reveals a small number of persons who appear and act as representatives of different institutions, ranging from medical associations to civil society organizations and religious spaces. The pro-life movement depends upon a rather small number of militants committed to the cause, in need of religious networks in order to expand their mobilizing capacity. This however is a choice riddled with strategic dilemmas.

The Extension Dilemma: Between Strategic Secularism and the Centrality of the Churches

While churches offer important platforms for the pro-life struggle, leaders from civil organizations like ANPROVIDA, as well as Evangelical leaders, complained that they often had to lobby within their churches in order to get their support. This is not to say that the churches don't support their goals or don't share their ideals, but they did not necessarily consider the pro-life struggle a priority. Particularly in the Catholic Church, a highly politicized player, informants found it was not always convenient to raise "pro-life" concerns (PI, 2005: 10; PI, 2005: 11).

In general, pro-life activists from civil society organizations consider their association with the Catholic Church a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is important and fruitful, because in the activists' view the secular pro-life discourse and the religious discourse complement each other. They also consider the church indispensable in organizing public mobilizations, as they are aware that they don't have the capacity or the social base to mobilize the masses. On the other hand, the inextricable link between the church and the movement was viewed as potentially harmful because it was seen as making them more vulnerable to the critique of violating the secular character of the state. Some felt it also weakened their arguments by making them appear "less scientific":

Because the message of ANPROVIDA – based on legal, scientific, or social arguments – was weakened when it linked us to the Catholic Church. Because what we had said ... about the scientific and medical arguments was ignored. ... And I think that this is a strategy of the pro-abortion groups, to focus on that [our link with the church] in order to weaken our arguments. (PI, 2005: 10)

In the interviews, some pro-life leaders from civil organizations also tried to emphasize the scientific and legal arguments and downplay the significance of religion. The latter nevertheless becomes evident when looking at their life histories. Pro-life activists view their relationship with the church with ambivalence, considering that without the churches a pro-life movement would hardly exist: “Personally I think that we shouldn’t have appeared together or very connected with each other, and that we had to focus on these topics and [appear together] only in necessary moments, where it was of necessity to appear all united, because of course there were [moments] where we had to appear together” (PI, 2005: 10).

Ultimately, civil society organizations that engage in socially conservative politics, like ANPROVIDA and ANIMU, consist of only a handful of members, who are very committed and keep the movement going. Still, they are not able to mobilize a significant number of people without the churches:

We don’t have the resources or a way to mobilize. This is to say, here we have to resort to the Christian churches. We are the ones who are in the initial position to contradict or to tell whoever, but to mobilize you require a big organization, and we don’t have the money to do that or the possibility that people will believe us. (PI, 2005: 12)

Despite the hesitation to resort to church support, an invitation by a church authority to join a protest or sign a petition is undeniably compelling. This extends to Evangelical churches as well:

Our church has something that is the unity initiated by the pastor. He invites us to be part of transcendental issues in the country where we can’t remain quiet, and he urges us to exercise that when these meetings or kinds of demonstrations take place, in defense of our rights as a church and as Christians. This motivates me to be part of something that is promoted in the church as unity. (PI, 2005: 23)

Political influence thus includes lobbying in the National Assembly or with important public functionaries through petitions, “consciousness raising” activities, public demonstrations and influencing public opinion, and, according to respondents from different sides, direct pressure from the Catholic Church hierarchy.

The pro-life movement consists of a core of militant activists who use a diversity of arenas to promote their ideas. However, these activists are relatively limited in number and don’t have any significant mobilizing capac-

ity. Hence, the Catholic and Evangelical churches play a crucial role in the pro-life movement: they offer a platform for the daily “consciousness raising” activities, for the establishment of transnational projects and networks, and most importantly, they offer the grounds for a common identity based on a shared interpretation of Christianity and the Bible. In this way they constitute a powerful basis for collective mobilization: people are mobilized through church networks, the authority of church leaders, and religious discourse. Pro-life leaders make use of both national and transnational networks. Despite the claims of Nicaraguan pro-life leaders that they speak the native, authentic voice and are guardians and representatives of traditional Nicaraguan values, we find that local organizations have structural and personal links with transnational conservative networks that play an important role in the development of the social-conservative movement in Nicaragua through direct recruitment, financial support, advocacy messaging, and strategic advice.

While religious groups have boosted the pro-life movement’s capacity to influence the state, their mobilizing capacity, and their discursive resonance, pro-life activists experience trade-offs between “secularism” and “religiosity” as political strategies. In the current context, in which secular and religious worldviews are increasingly presented as opposite and incommensurable, and in which religiosity is presented as irreconcilable with the public sphere and the very idea of “modern democracy,” political activists come increasingly under pressure to make a clear “choice” of one or the other. In such a situation, the religious extension of the movement may prove increasingly restrictive.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the strategic interactions between churches (both the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical), the pro-life movement, and state actors? We can draw three main conclusions regarding the strategic interactions that turn religious groups into political players:

- Political mobilization of religious individuals and groups is sometimes more driven by interreligious competition than by a specific common religious cause (e.g., pro-life): the incursion of conservative Evangelicals into the political arena was mostly caused by interreligious competition. Once they became a political force that could not be ignored, Evangelicals were recruited by Catholic pro-life leaders to join the pro-life coalition. While they share similar frames of understanding about the Family and Christian Morality (with capital letters), the decision to become active

reflects their general quest to gain political influence and participation. This reveals the strategic aspect of the interaction: Evangelicals who had tried without success to fight against the privileges and power of the Catholic Church concluded that they could gain by collaborating with it. In turn, Catholics were forced to acknowledge Evangelicals as a growing political force and potential competitor. As pro-life activists, they considered collaboration advantageous when they could channel their political action toward goals that would favor both their interests. Therefore, rather than presenting a puzzling development (Kane 2008), the historically antagonistic relationship between Evangelicals and Catholics in part explains their subsequent coalition.

- The transformation of churches into platforms of political mobilization demands a lot of bottom-up efforts and top-down support. There is an important and complex relationship between religious networks and the pro-life movement. Most activists have important personal roots in religious communities. In the case of the Catholics, they typically have a history of involvement in the Catholic Family Movements. In Nicaragua the churches became important organizational structures for recruitment and are crucial for collective mobilization, but their participation is a product of active and strategic recruitment by pro-life activists.
- The support of the churches and their constituency will be welcomed by pro-life organizations but the “visibility” of their religiousness in public manifestations will depend on the legitimacy of religious arguments in the political arena (sometimes and by some primarily understood as a secular arena). As the Nicaraguan case has shown, dependence upon the churches is also seen as an Achilles’ heel for some social-conservative leaders, who feel increasing pressure to craft a “scientific” and secular image in order to reach a public that values a secular state, ruled by law and informed by science. In addition, when churches become political players, they are also subjected to competing political goals and, as pro-life activists complain, the support for pro-life politics by church leaders sometimes depends on how strategic it is for churches in a particular political context.

In this chapter, we have dealt with the question of how churches become part of social movements. Assets of churches as outlined by Smith (1996), which give them strategic advantages as social movement players, can contribute to explaining why it may be strategic for some players to recruit church members and appropriate religious organizations as mobilizing structures. But it does not explain how and why church leaders or church

members decide to become involved in social movement activism. To do so, it is necessary to empirically analyze strategic interactions between religious actors and other players (state actors, social movement actors, protestors), and to scrutinize the precise meanings that get attached to “religion” in those specific struggles. Other players may prefer “strategic secularism” to alliances with religious actors, just like religious players may prefer not to become part of movements that are partly secular, let alone being “absorbed” into a secular state. We therefore conclude that churches’ preexisting belief systems do not determine their involvement in social movements, but the strategic interaction among themselves, with third parties and the state. Churches don’t automatically provide the “cultural framework through which the movement would be framed,” as Morris (2000: 448) has argued for the civil rights movement. We didn’t find a clearly circumscribed or uniform pro-life frame in the churches that was subsequently lifted into the pro-life movement. On the contrary, we saw that the churches are internally diverse and changing over time, and are better understood as arenas of struggle between different and often competing forces. Pro-life activists targeted the churches strategically with recruitment efforts in order to appropriate religious spaces as mobilizing structures for the movement – thereby transforming them into platforms of pro-life activism.

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