By Stephen Dale

Forty years ago, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: “I would not be telling the truth if I were to say that I had ever seen guilt feelings transformed into anything other than hatred, solitary despair or blind idolatry. The religious feelings of my people are very deep — like their misery and helplessness — but their fervour has done nothing but return again and again to a well that has been empty for centuries.” Most commentators have
seen the cultures of the various Meso-American countries consisting of three layers: the Indian, of which the last dominant example was Aztec (destroyed by Cortez in 1521); the Spanish-Catholic, which dominated at least up to the Mexican revolution of 1910; and the confident Imperialistic economics of the U.S.A. which persists until today. Various revolutions (first in Mexico, then Cuba and now Nicaragua, with attempts in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) have tried to break out of this series of cultural fractures, with limited degrees of success.

Meanwhile, there are other competitions for the minds of the people, most of them emerging from the United States in the form of evangelical Christianity. One of the most remarkable phenomena in Meso- and South America (with Brazil, Chile and Mexico having the largest percentage of converts) has been the growth of “fundamentalist” Christian cults, in particular Pentecostalist and so-called “charismatic” groups. The debate has been whether these groups (because of the American origins of the belief-systems) are necessarily counter-revolutionary, or whether, because they are frequently based on dissenting Mestizo and Indian groups, they can become the focus for a new cultural and political opposition. After all, historically, in the U.S.A., central Africa, Britain, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and even in the U.S.S.R., similar groups have in the past acted as the basis for radical, even revolutionary movements. Not surprisingly, the debate rages most fiercely in Nicaragua. Stephen Dale reports on the situation as he sees it.

Alternative sources: E.J. Hobbsawm, Primitive Rebels; Imamul Amiri Baraka, Blues People; Eric Wolf, Sons of the Shaking Earth; Vittorio Lantenari, The Religions of the Oppressed.

Ivan Davies

It's mid-morning in a mixed industrial-residential barrio in Managua. Across the street, a brewery that spans several blocks is doing its best to keep Nicaragua supplied with Caracas Victoria, a mainstay amongst this country's potable liquids. The smell of half-fermented hops and malt permeates the neighbourhood, mixing in with the ambient sounds of industrial activity and child's play that drift into the clean, tiled courtyard at the offices of C.E.P.R.E.S., the Evangelical Centre for the Promotion of Social Responsibility. It is here that Miguel Angel Casco, C.E.P.R.E.S.'s director, thinks back to his own childhood, recalling for a Canadian visitor the visionary moment that foreshadowed a new religious synthesis in his life.

It was a day when there was no food in the house. "No cheese, no meat, no milk, no beans," Casco remembers, "Only salt." His father had sent one of his four brothers out to try and borrow some food from the neighbours. But when Casco's younger brother returned around five o'clock he carried with him only one tortilla. "So my father made this tortilla into four little pieces, one for each boy, and he sat in a big chair to drink a cup of coffee. He didn't have any of the tortilla, and I offered some of mine to my father. My father became very emotional and started to cry.

"Afterwards I asked him, 'Papa, why are we so poor? We have difficulties to eat. We don't have any chance to cultivate the land.' And he told me, 'Son, it is the will of God.'"

Casco takes another run at that last phrase to emphasise its irony. "It is the will of God," he repeats. "It was eight years old at the time and I was not convinced of what my father said, but it was the means to do the job. However, I had begun to read the Bible from seven years old, and by nine years old I had finished it — all of it, from Genesis to Revelation. After that I understood that maybe my father was right."

The have been Pentecostals in Nicaragua since 1906, when the Assemblies of God first started to stake out the territory, and connivance was one of the things that brought people like Casco's family, who had been taught by the American missionaries: trust in God and accept your lot in life. But that edict seems to have been followed by Nicaraguan Pentecostals as faithfully as North American Catholics have obeyed the Pope's commandments on birth control. Casco recalls that by the time he had become an adult and his country was in the throes of a revolutionary war, his childhood opposition to the existing social inequities had politically coalesced. Casco became an active supporter of the Sandinista revolutionaries while studying to become a Pentecostalist minister and working long hours on a cotton plantation — a circumstance which put him face to face, he recalls, with "the system of sin and corruption" where rich plantation owners would pay poor labourers little for back-breaking work, and then take most of it back by selling them provisions at high prices. He continued to support the Sandinistas after they assumed power, and for this Casco and five other Pentecostal ministers were stripped of their status by the Assemblies of God leadership in the U.S., about five years ago. But in his heart Casco has kept the faith, remaining both a Sandinista and a Pentecostalist — certainly a contradiction in terms for North Americans who automatically equate fundamentalist Christianity with right-wing politics.

Miguel Angel Casco's case is not unique in Nicaragua — there are plenty of holy-roller Sandinistas around — and that's an indication of how complex the current climate of church-state relations has become. The intrigue has grown in recent times as a new wave of U.S.-supported proselytising has hit Nicaragua. At first, it appears obvious that the foreigners who are backing this evangelical bible have one clear purpose in mind: to push the right-wing political agenda held by fundamentalists in the U.S. and create an internal, social base for opposition to the Sandinistas. Yet given the unusual twists in the history of evangelical churches in Nicaragua, it's far from certain that this will be the result of the current influx. Some say it is just as likely that poor Nicaraguans will appropriate the spiritual trappings of the expanding fundamentalist denominations, but remain politically faithful to the Sandinistas — laggling the two allegiances in the way Miguel Angel Casco managed to do.

The lack of any consistent political attitude amongst evangelicals (it's a commonly expressed view that members of any single evangelical congregation with political sympathies spread the political spectrum from pro- to pro-Sandinista, with the majority in the middle aspiring to be apolitical) has led to a cautious state of constitution in relations between the Sandinista government and the community. Visiting American preachers, perhaps fearful of alienating those among the flock for whom defending "la patria" from the communists was an honorable and personally costly duty, have been soft-pedalling politics on their visits here. For its part, the Sandinista government seems to understand the appeal of this fundamentalist tide and is betting that it can maintain its support amongst the poor not by rebuffing fundamentalist preachers but by embracing them. Daniel Ortega, for instance, has appeared onstage with a Puerto Rican faith-healer who has an enormous following in the country. Jimmy Swaggart, meanwhile, performed three nights in Managua in February 1988, just four days before he was exposed by a sex scandal in the U.S., which coincided with widespread rumours that Swaggart's demise was orchestrated by the C.I.A., in response to Swaggart softening his line on the Sandinistas. But more astounding than Swaggart's appearance was the government's decision to sign a contract with Pat Robertson, one of the most prominent private backers of the contras, to have the "700 Club" broadcast on the state-run Sandinista television system. Robertson's trip to Nicaragua produced the unlikely spectacle of the American Christian broadcaster-cum-presidential candidate shaking hands with Nicaraguan vice-president Somoza Ramirez, an image that amazed and angered some Nicaraguans when it appeared in the papers.

Yet such spectacles of apparent reconciliation do not signify that the evangelical expansion presents no problem for the Sandinistas, and there's a kind of double vision in Nicaragua as to what this strange parade of events actually means. On the one hand, it is clear how this fundamentalist influx fits into the "psychological warfare" aspect of Low-Intensity Conflict (L.I.C.), the Pentagon's current strategic doctrine for dealing with third-world challenges to the U.S. As the Sandinistas restore the liberties that had been restricted during a state of war, they face the danger that incoming proselytisers will turn the people against the revolutionary project. The danger is underscored by several commentators who note that both the Rockefeller commission and the first document of the
Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the number
million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of
will trample my son who is not my son, and his son
be his, until the thousand and first generation, un
bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and
privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be
forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating
unable to live or die in peace.
mbers marching one two three, four hundred
of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they
son who will not be his, and his who will not
on, until a thousand and one midnights have
and one children have died, because it is the
to be both masters and victims of their times, to
lating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be
Jamelia Hassan

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Santa Fe group specifically recommended the use of evangelical religion as a political tool against the Sandinistas. Jack Koll, an American Presbyterian now attached to C.I.E.T.S., the Inter-Ecclesiastical Centre for Social and Theological Studies in Managua, adds that the timing of this wave of fundamentalist activity casts some light on the conservative Christian agenda for Nicaragua. "Right now we're seeing an incredible offensive by the evangelical right," says Koll, "and part of the focus seems to be asking the question, 'Well, the liberation the revolution has brought, has it been true liberation at all? You need God.' Clearly the ideological message seems to be an attempt to delegitimize the uprooting elections. None of this has been said directly, but there is an obvious attempt to create doubts in the evangelical community and to separate people from the political process." Despite this acknowledgement, Koll believes that there's another aspect to the story — that the fundamentalist phenomenon is not just adequately understood by reducing it solely to its political dimension, and that the sects offer something real and potentially positive to poor Nicaraguans. Religions such as Pentecostalism, he says, although often dismissed by intellectuals as mere emotionalism, "are legitimate forms of worship," which speak clearly to the condition and concerns of working-class people. Koll says that, with its emphasis on personal experience, in this day and age, the old-fashioned testimonies were the faithful sing, dance, and speak in tongues, and on the believer's ability to form a personal relationship with God. Pentecostalism shows itself as an egalitarian form of worship with the power to build community and, ironically, a popular appeal very similar to that of Sandinismo. Koll considers it almost extraneous that the people might be given these spiritual gifts and experiences to Nicaragua to help form a right-wing political agenda: the history of Protestantism in this country, he says, is full of examples where Nicaraguans have broken away from the mother churches of the missionaries to form "national churches" — retaining the ritual and faith but jettisoning the social and political edicts — and the foreign control — they couldn't live with.

Today there is a fresh crop of foreign missionaries looking for converts in Nicaragua. I met a couple of them quite by chance after taking a detour one day to Managua's Inter-Continental Hotel. In the lobby were two men — later identified as Mitch and Steve — talking very loudly in English, punctuating their sentences with phrases like "praise the Lord" and "God is good." When I approached them they confirmed that, yes, they were preachers from the United States. Mitch was here for a crusade in Managua and for a series of seminars with Nicaraguan pastors, while Steve had his own mission group for Ciudad Sandino, a former squatter settlement that had since been incorporated as a suburb of the Nicaraguan capital. Though they didn't know each other before now, Mitch related that he and Steve had a lot in common: they are both Jews who had converted to Pentecostalism, and were both instructed to go to Nicaragua, where they were given names beside each other at the Inter-Continental.

The next day Mitch Medina and I got together for a more formal session and answer session. Conversing with Mitch at Bilinguismo and, so to recall, an unusual experience under any circumstances: he speaks of his invisible world of miracles, angels and mystical interventions as casually as if he were describing walking to the store for a loaf of bread. Encountering Mitch in Managua, however, is doubly bizarre. His intense, otherworldly gaze, insistent speech and Wall Street wardrobe suggest that he has nothing in common with the humble Nicaraguans he has come to preach to; against this dusty, tropical landscape he appears very foreign.

That is not to say that Mitch is a stranger to Central America. Sketching his own background he recalls that his first visit to Nicaragua was in 1973. In the aftermath of the earthquake and during the rule of Somoza, when he was sent to sell the reproduction rights to greeting cards on behalf of the family business. The trip was part of an era of which he has strong memories: just before he left — while still a student at the State University of New York at Binghamton, and, so he recalls, student council president, anti-Vietnam war activist and doubter in psychedelic drugs — he "got saved." Medina made his formal conversion to Pentecostalism and picked up the ability to speak in tongues during the business trip that followed, having accepted a chance invitation to an evangelical congress in Mexico City. After several years of holding revival meetings in American private Medina claims to have developed the ability to heal, through the tutelage of preacher Morris Cerullo, Medina's two trips to Nicaragua in the 1980s have been made, in fact, on behalf of Morris Cerullo World Evangelism. Medina says he does not pass the hat to pay for these trips, but instead finances them by conducting his import-export business while on the cruise circuit — dealing in "do-hickeys with commercial potential." Like the magnetic paste snips he imports into the U.S. from the third world, and the stop-smoking sprays he exports from the United States to other countries.

The big question is about the evangelist's politics, but on this score Medina is evasive, insisting that his political viewpoint is a private matter that doesn't overlap with his role as a preacher. He makes no direct criticism of the Sandinistas, choosing instead to commend them for removing the roadblocks to foreign evangelists who want to enter the country.

Pleasantries aside, it soon becomes necessary to deduce where Medina stands on the political spectrum. A mention of General Earl F. "Buck" Kernell, (the born-again former president of Guatemala who oversaw a period of official violence in that country in the early 80's), elicits a positive response from Medina, who dismissed the General's political sins with the facile argument that they were numerically insignificant compared to the crimes of the leftist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. A closer look at Morris Cerullo World Evangelism adds to the suspicion that there's a deep-rooted political commitment behind Medina's reliance to discuss the affairs of state with a representative of the Resource Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico (an organisation which keeps files on private groups active in Central America, the literature produced by Cerullo's group speaks in militaristic terms of a showdown in the world between God and Satan, who is in league with Marxist governments. The Resource Center also quotes the organisation's literature as saying that Cerullo himself flew without permission to Nicaragua in 1981 — "to annul the work of the devil so evident in that country today" — and that he was detained for three hours and then forced to leave the country, heading to his next stop at a Guatemalan military airport. While in El Salvador two years later, Cerullo reportedly made the comment that "there is a new army in El Salvador... God's army."

At the Inter-Continental in Managua, however, Mitch Medina does not seem inclined to echo the provocative tone of his mentor. He is clearly not here to preach hate and bitterness, but rather to make promises, big promises. Launching into an attack on Catholic liberation theology, which places God in the context of ongoing earthly struggles, Medina seems confident that his competing brand of Christian sorcery and salesmanship will win hands down every time.

Liberation theology, he says, "goes way over the heads of the people. That's for intellectuals, and these people here are not intellectuals. They're looking for a God who answers by fire, they're looking for a God who, if their kid is sick, they can pray and the kid gets healed; that's what they want. They're looking for someone who can help them: they're looking for a friend, they're looking for a counselor. They're not looking for some intellectual reconciliation of Christianity and Marxism — forget it."

The Nicaraguan people are also apparently interested in wealth, something that's in short supply in the country at the moment. The cause of this dearth, he says, is not the draining expense of war, or economic embargo, ravaged fields or closed-down roads — but the absence of the holy spirit. God meant his people to be rich — it says so in Deuteronomy 8:18 — if only
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Swaggart — with half a million dollars worth of film equipment rolling and translators simultaneously translating — looked out into space and asked the brethren to call the 800 number at the bottom of their screens. A wave of bewilderment came upon the crowd; it became obvious to some that they were just extras on a movie set.

Paul Jeffery has seen a lot of foreign preachers come to this country. An American who has lived in Nicaragua for five years, Jeffery is editor of the English-language bulletin of CEPAD, an umbrella group for most of the major Protestant churches in the country, formed during the 1973 earthquake in order to coordinate those churches' relief and development efforts. CEPAD's membership includes both liberal and "national" denominations (some of which have ties to liberal U.S. churches) and also business ones like the Assemblies of God. It also has a good rapport with the Sandinista government, and as such was called in to mediate when some of the evangelical sects outside of Sandinista or contra. Here we're here to talk about the second coming of Christ, to tell you that Christ lives. It's a declaration that Medina retires as soon as he reaches the podium, an almost apologetic assurance of appointment which I am guessing is meant not so much for any authorities that might want to close him down (there is no sign of a policeman or soldier anywhere near the hall) as for those members of the audience whose charismatic religion does not come with the same tight-wing political trappings as in the U.S.

There's more music and a little Bible thing at the beginning, and then there is the real attraction of the evening: the healing, Mitch's specialty. As the preacher holds his arms aloft and screams his orations calling for the healing power of God, church elders turn to face the masses from the front row, their arms similarly extended, while the crowd holds out several thousand pairs of hands to meet them, beckoning the healing power. Throughout this arena arises a supernatural chorus of uncontrolled mulling — a vast, enveloping, omnidirectional sound, like the roar of the ocean. Many people quake and convulse, losing control entirely. This happens several times, as Mitch offers specific prayers for those who cannot work, those who have arthritis, those who cannot hear or speak, and yes, those who have financial problems. Some of the people involved in this stage-thrashing away walking sticks or touching their toes, and one boy who's mother says he was more offers a few garbled words. It's not a completely convincing act, but one thing becomes totally clear; there are a lot of hurting people in Managua this night who — through the power of their kinship, their faith and whatever other means — have left the bull- ring salvaged of some pain and relieved of a little anxiety, at least for a while. Laid low by a huge and distant power which has killed family members and torn their country's economy to shreds, these people have appealed to an even greater power to help them rise again. Most of them seem sure that their prayers have been heard.

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triumph, popular groups associated with the Sandinistas seized several churches in various cities. Later, in 1981 and '82, at the height of the contra war, several conservative pastors returning from trips to the United States were accused of having been in contact with the C.I.A. and detained for periods ranging from a few hours to eleven days. According to Arnulfo Sanchez, an Assemblies of God pastor and vice-presi-
dent of C.N.P.E.N. (the National Council of Nicaraguan Evangelical Pastors, a conserva-
tive umbrella group which splintered off from CEPAD) there were also incidents such as the assault of a pastor's wife in Esteli and the suspicious death of a pastor in the Rio Coco war zone, near Honduras. In that case, says Sanchez, the pastor, who arrived in the area 15 days before his death, may have been the target of Sandinista soldiers because some of his parishioners were in the habit of giving shelter to the contras.

But looking back at the period of open conflict, Sanchez's recollections are sur-
prisingly conciliatory, much like those of his liberal counterpart, Paul Jeffery. San-
chez says that in the cases of the major showdowns, CEPAD was called in to mediate and understandings with the govern-
ment were reached. As for reports of preachers permeating in areas of conflict, he is prepared to accept these as casualties of war.

"We know that in a country at war, such as ours," says Sanchez, "much can happen due to abuses by people in author-
ity, or because of unexpected circumstances or inexperience in the use of firearms ... We are not saying that there was a campaign of persecution, because there was not."

What there was and continues to be, however, are suspicions of a hidden politi-
cal agenda beneath the conservative church's claims to apostolicity. Critics from other segments of the church community say that C.N.P.E.N. is greatly influenced by a relationship with the U.S. neo-conserva-
tive think tank Institute for Religion and Democracy, and that some of its pastors have in the past spoken in favour of the contra. Sanchez rejects both suggestions. The organization's contact with the United States has been through individual church-
es, he says, and C.N.P.E.N. has always in-
hibited within such relationships its ethics and objectives be respected — in-
cluding the ideal that the organisation re-
main steadfastly non-political. It was pre-
cisely this commitment to staying out of politics, says Sanchez, which got C.N.P.E.N. into trouble in the early 80s: revolutionary zealots, fired up with a sense of mission and feeling threatened as the contra war began, interpreted the "conservative and 
Christocentric" church's apoliticism as di-
crect opposition.

Since then, C.N.P.E.N. has carved out a significant working space for itself within Nicaragua's current state of religious/politi-
cal detente. With his organisation holding

out big plans for growth in post-contra Nicaragua, Sanchez is eager to downplay the past and its problems. C.N.P.E.N. would seem to have as strong a desire for peace as anyone in Nicaragua; whatever its political agenda (or that of its foreign sup-
porters) might be, the conservative church seems poised to make greater gains in peace time than it could during war. C.N.P.E.N. has a big campaign on the hori-
zon to give its pastors more theological training. Sanchez says, as well as projects aimed at the community at large. The or-

ganisation has plans for the future to launch a health services project — based in Managua at first but later moving out to remote communities — an institute de-
velopment and educational programmes that not only propagate religious ideas but teach concrete skills such as accounting and mechanics. The timing of such initia-
tives is interesting: with three churches set
to take a more prominent social role just as the state, drowning in debt after a debili-
tating decade of war, is being forced to make huge cutbacks on its spending provi-
sion of services. With their own programmes filling in where the govern-
ment is forced to retreat, conservative evangeli-

asts no doubt see themselves as be-
com ing a much more powerful force in 
Nicaragua — providing not just spiritual sustenance for their constituents but whole systems of material support.

What the growing influence and social role of fundamentalist churches in Nicara-
agua will mean politically is still a ???

tion. But Kaela Koll of C.I.E.T.S. is one ob-
server who does not feel that the funda-
mamentalist boom will inevitably lead to a pacification of the poor or prove in-

With its emphasis on large, uninhibited gatherings where the faithful sing, dance and speak in tongues, and on the believer's ability to form a personal relationship with God, Pentecostalism shows itself as an egalitarian form of worship with the power to build community and, ironically, a popular appeal very similar to that of Sandinismo.

the idea that] Pentecostalism is a means of depoliticizing the population by construct-
ing this other world, within its other-worldly focus, that this is dangerous politically and works against popular movements. The other school of thought is that Pentecosta-

lism is a form of protest against the social conditions that do not provide adequate resources for living a dignified life; that within that experience, people recover their sense of personhood and dignity that the Pentecostal experience is one of protest that has the potential of being tapped and directed into movements for change. I tend to side with the latter. Maybe I look at it this way: that the Pentecostal movement itself does not have a preset ideological content, that you'll see Pentecostals in Guatemala who are in the military, but there are also Pentecostals that are in the guerrilla. So there's no set ideological content. I tend to think that there is a poten-
tial for drawing Pentecostals into move-
ments to better their conditions."