EVANGELISM IN NICARAGUA

PHOTO BY DAVID KATTENBURG

RELIGION IN MESO-AMERICA

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

EVANGELISM in NICARAGUA

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 economism 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. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*; Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*; Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth*; Vittorio Lantenari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*.

Ioan 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 Cerveza 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. "I was eight years old at the time and I was not convinced of what my father said, but I didn't have the means to dispute it. 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 my father was wrong."

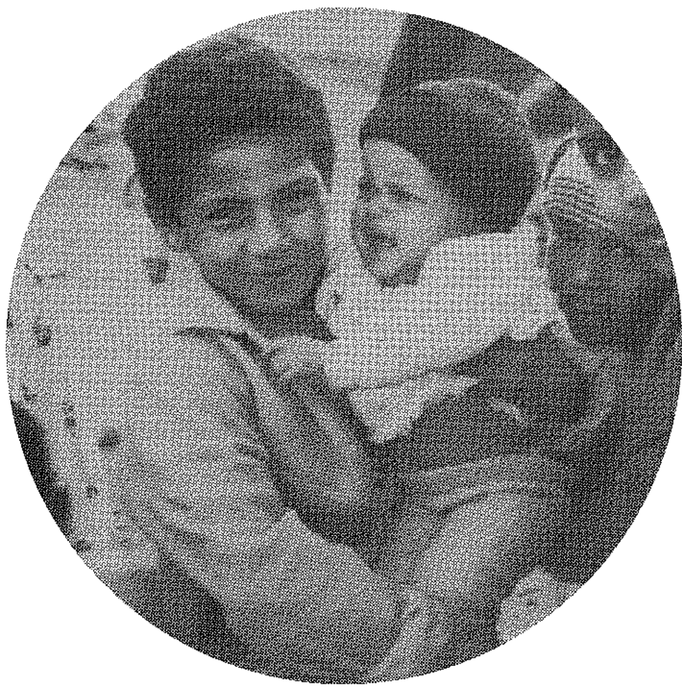
There have been Pentecostals in Nicaragua since 1906, when the Assemblies of God first started to stake out the territory, and complacency was one of the things the converts, like Casco's family, had been taught by the American missionaries: trust in God and accept your lot in life. But that edict seems 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 Pentecostal minister and working summers 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 Pentecostal — 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 blitz 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 — juggling 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 will span the political spectrum, from pro-contra to pro-Sandinista, with the majority in the middle aspiring to be apolitical) has led to a cautious state of equilibrium in relations between the Sandinistas and the growing fundamentalist community. Visiting American preachers, perhaps fearful of alienating those among the flock for whom defending "la patria" from the contras was an honourable and personally costly duty, have been soft-peddling 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 Swaggert, meanwhile, performed three nights in Managua in February 1988, just four days before he was exposed by a sex scandal in the U.S. — a coincidence which sparked widespread rumours that Swaggert's demise was orchestrated by the C.I.A., in response to Swaggert softening his line on the Sandinistas. But more astonishing than Swaggert'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 Sergio Ramirez, an image that amazed and angered some Nicaraguans when it appeared in the papers.

Yet such snapshots 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

MIDNIGHT'S
CHILDREN



Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the number
million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of v
will trample my son who is not my son, and his son
be his, until the thousand and first generation, u
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 annihilati
unable to live or die in peace.

mbers marching one two three, four hundred
of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they
s son who will not be his, and his who will not
n, until a thousand and one midnights have
and one children have died, because it is the
o be both masters and victims of their times, to
ilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be

Jamelie Hassan
from the installation *Midnight's Children.* Photos of children from the village of ________ and school children visiting the archaelogical site of Dendera, Egypt, December 1989. Text from the novel *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie. Arabic inscription and Islamic motif with the title and the name, Salman, from brass plate engraved by the artisan ________, Egypt, January 1990.

EVANGELISM in NICARAGUA

Santa Fe group specifically recommended the use of evangelical religion as a political tool against the Sandinistas. Karla 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 new 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 delegitimate the upcoming 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 cannot be 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, she 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 it's emphasis on large, uninhibited gatherings 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 who bring these rituals and experiences to Nicaragua attach to them a right-wing political agenda: the history of Protestantism in this country, she 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 proselytisers 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 event slated 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 rooms beside each other at the Inter-Continental.

The next day Mitch Medina and I got together for a more formal question and answer session. Conversing with Mitch Medina would have been 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, other-worldly 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 Medina is a stranger to Central America. Sketching his own history, 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 dabbler 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 prisons 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 crusade circuit — dealing in "do-hickeys with commercial potential" like the magnetic purse snaps 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 easy to deduce where Medina stands on the political spectrum. A mention of General Effraim Rios Montt, (the born-again former president of Guatemala who oversaw a period of official violence in that country in the early 80s), 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 reticence to discuss the affairs of the world. According to the Resource Center in Alburquerque, 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 hellfire and brimstone or anti-communist righteous indignation, 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 counsellor. 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

Pentecostalism is growing rapidly throughout Latin America largely on the strength of its theology of "radical verticalism," wherein the believer can have a direct, personal relationship with God without the need for intermediaries...

they would follow His blueprint. That's where Mitch Medina can help.

"When I came here," the pastor says, "the main thing I had in mind for the seminar was a spiritual message about faith, hope and love from a revelation perspective. I started that message but about the second night I was here, God woke me up at about four o'clock in the morning and changed the whole emphasis of what I was talking about. I've spent most of the week teaching on financial prosperity ... and praying for miracle breakthroughs in people's finances.... I say it in the name of the Lord: there's going to be a change, the explosion that has taken place in the spiritual realm will be changing the finances of Nicaragua. There's going to be a tremendous economic revival in this country."

Medina follows up on that theme the next night at Managua's Plaza de Toros (the bullring) which is, as he had predicted, packed with the faithful and the curious — about 6,000 people. There's a festive air right from the start, with a band playing Latin dance rhythms and a couple of warm-up preachers leading the clapping, singing crowd through some upbeat, devotional songs. After about an hour the sun has set and Mitch Medina bounds up to the stage in an immaculate blue business suit, tie tied as tight as a noose, lips pulled back in a blissful smile. He has been introduced by a preacher who has told the audience, "We're not here to talk about politics; we're not here to talk about Sandinistas or contras. We're here to talk about the second coming of Christ, to tell you that Christ lives." It's a declaration that Medina reiterates as soon as he reaches the podium, an almost apologetic assurance of apoliticism 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 bullring) as for those members of the audience whose charismatic religion does not come with the same right-wing political trappings as in the U.S.

Swaggert — with half a million dollars worth of film equipment rolling and translators simultaneously translating — looked out into space and asked the brethern 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.

There's more music and a little Bible reading, and then 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 muttering — a vast, enveloping, omni-directional 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 he invites up onto the stage throw away walking sticks or touch their toes, and one boy who's mother says he was mute offers a few garbled words. It's not a completely convincing display 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 bullring salved 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 their prayers have been heard.

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 conservative 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 CEPAD came into conflict with the government in the early 80s. As for Jeffery's own role, one extra-curricular function he assigned himself was that of chronicler and chaperon on the visits of both Jimmy Swaggert and Pat Robertson, tagging along wherever the evangelists went. Given those experiences, Jeffery has a few ideas as to why the Sandinistas have been so welcoming to the current evangelical invaders.

The first and most obvious reason, he believes, is that the Sandinistas are serious in their commitment to political pluralism and religious freedom in the country. But beyond that, Jeffery says that the recent influx of preachers illustrates the special place that religion occupies within both Nicaraguan society and within the Sandinista movement. Jeffery also conjectures that Daniel Ortega's personal fascination with theological matters was a major force in the adoption of an open door policy towards foreign evangelists. It is said, for instance, that of the nine Sandinista commandantes, Ortega is closest to foreign minister Miguel D'Escoto, a Catholic priest. D'Escoto has been quoted as saying that if Ortega has been born ten years earlier, he would have become a priest like him.

But beyond just having a soft spot for those who speak in the Christian idiom, the Sandinista leaders may have made a pragmatic gamble that American evangelists would not be credible competition in the contest for the hearts of the Nicaraguan masses. Jeffery says this was borne out by the Swaggert rallies, which were a good example of what happens when a preacher cannot speak to his audience's experience. With three successive evenings of crusades, Jeffery recounts, attendance was markedly lower at each one as audiences became annoyed with too many songs in English and references they couldn't relate to. He says the most profound illustration of this was when Swaggert — 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.

Yet Jeffery says the sore point between the Sandinistas and some evangelical sects was never the danger that huge groups of Nicaraguans would suddenly be absorbed into the Moral Majority, replacing the national heroes in their hearts with the Elmer Gantry types who fly down to save them. What prompted the conflict that marked evangelical-Sandinista relations several years ago was not simple mistrust, he says, but some deep philosophical disagreements.

"Some people think that every Pentecostal pastor is an agent of the C.I.A.," says Jeffery, "I obviously don't think that's true ... but I do think that in some ways the real threat that Pentecostal pastors represent is [seen in] the theology of fundamentalism — which people use the word 'dispensationalism' to describe. This involves the idea that the history of the world is divided into stages; there's a certain predetermined nature to what is happening; we're in a certain period now which is about to end, and part of the nature of this period is that people are going to suffer wars and rumours of wars, so that wars are inevitable, suffering is inevitable. You can't really do anything about it, in fact if you try to stop it, some would claim that you are working against the historical project of God and cooperating with Satan, so its best to just sit back and accept what happens to you. That obviously is very different from liberation theology, and it puts one at odds, say, with the revolutionary project of the Sandinistas. That's why you got, in the early years, people preaching against the literacy and vaccination campaigns. In some cases they were preaching, 'Don't drink this vaccine, it's really from Satan.' But they also just preach a kind of passivity, and as such they represent a threat to the Sandinistas, partly because they are preaching to the same group of poor people — *campesinos* and urban poor — whom the *frente* claims to be its base."

Although there now seems to be a truce in effect, in the early stages of the revolution these differences of perspectives — which were beginning to be seen in the context of the contra war — led to open conflict between competing religious and political interests. Shortly after the

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-president of C.N.P.E.N. (the National Council of Nicaraguan Evangelical Pastors, a conservative umbrella group which splintered off from CEPAD) there were also incidents such as the assault of a pastor's wife in Estelli, 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 surprisingly conciliatory, much like those of his liberal counterpart, Paul Jeffery. Sanchez says that in the cases of the major showdowns, CEPAD was called in to mediate and understandings with the government were reached. As for reports of preachers perishing 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 authority, or because of unexpected circumstances or inexperience in the use of firearms ... We are not going to say that there was a campaign of persecution, because there was not."

What there was and continues to be, however, are suspicions of a hidden political agenda beneath the conservative church's claims to apoliticism. 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-conservative think tank Institute for Religion and Democracy, and that some of its pastors have in the past spoken in favour of the contras. Sanchez rejects both suggestions. The organisation's contact with the United States has been through individual churches, he says, and C.N.P.E.N. has always insisted that within such relationships its ethics and objectives be respected — including the ideal that the organisation remain steadfastly non-political. It was precisely 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 direct opposition.

Since then, C.N.P.E.N. has carved out a significant working space for itself within Nicaragua's current state of religious/political 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 supporters) might be, the conservative church seems poised to make greater gains in peacetime than it could during war. C.N.P.E.N. has a big campaign on the horizon to give its pastors more theological training, Sanchez says, as well as projects aimed at the community at large. The organisation 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 of development and educational programmes that not only propagate religious ideas but teach concrete skills such as accounting and mechanics. The timing of such initiatives is interesting: with these churches set to take a more prominent social role just as the state, drowning in debt after a debilitating decade of war, is being forced to make huge cutbacks on its spending provision of services. With their own programmes filling in where the government is forced to retreat, conservative evangelists no doubt see themselves as becoming 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 Nicaragua will mean politically is still a ????? question. But Karla Koll of C.I.E.T.S. is one observer who does not feel that the fundamentalist boom will inevitably lead to a pacification of the poor or prove incompatible with Sandinismo. Her optimism is partly supported by the experience of CEPAD, which has brought religious groups of varying social characters into dialogue with the Sandinista government, laying the groundwork for a common understanding. She also says that charismatic religions operating in the third world foster a sense of solidarity amongst the poor which may make them eminently suited to partnerships with political movements like Sandinismo.

Koll notes that Pentecostalism is growing rapidly throughout Latin America largely on the strength of its theology of "radical verticalism," wherein the believer can have a direct, personal relationship with God without the need for intermediaries — where every person is therefore important because of their potential to plug in to the divine. Ever since it came into being in the United States earlier this century, says Koll, Pentecostalism has appealed to the disenfranchised and the poor, with its egalitarian message and its participatory style.

"There's a controversy going on amongst sociologists of religion," says Koll, "that's been going on for a couple of years and was started by two different studies of Pentecostalism in Chile. [On one side is the idea that] Pentecostalism is a means of depoliticising the population by constructing this other world, with its other-worldly focus; that this is dangerous politically and works against popular movements. The other school of thought is that Pentecostalism 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 guerilla. So there's no set ideological content. I tend to think that there is a potential for drawing Pentecostals into movements to better their conditions." ■

PHOTO BY DAVID KATTENBURG

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 Sandinisimo.

Stephen Dale is a Toronto-based freelance journalist.