

# SIMON ROBERTS

## ***An Epistle***

by Ossain Raggi Gonzalez, 2022

I take the opportunity of writing these words for your book to write this epistle, as I believe that a letter is a particularly appropriate way to talk about faith.

In order to write these letters, I have read excellent texts by various authors who study religious life in my country from different points of view and, as is logical, arrive at different conclusions. Far be it from me to try to embark on the same path. I am not a scholar of the subject, I lack the field work and in-depth research that would allow me to make the necessary quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Besides, I have always been reluctant to the absolute conclusions derived from academic texts. These texts for the sake of a necessary generalization lose the singularities. I do not believe in "them" as I do not believe in "us" when it comes to representations. I think that, at best, we can hardly characterize ourselves. I believe in the "I" when speaking of a human relation to phenomena. Therefore I do not consider that I can give a general opinion about religion of Cubans, or in Cuba, but what I can do is to tell you a particular story, my own story.

My story:

In my house we didn't believe in any gods. My father and mother were atheists (although my name was inspired by one of the Orishas of the Yoruba religious tradition). They and my grandparents had been baptized but did not practice any religion. In my close family environment no one practiced, so I had no examples of religious faith to follow of any kind. I believe that the heterogeneous ethnic and cultural background of my family helped to create

a balance conducive to reasonable doubt and, as is well known, doubt is the enemy of faith.

The first years of the revolution had been marked by the confrontation between the government and representatives of the Catholic clergy. On the side of the government there were many old communists for whom religions and churches were only a way to rob, control and keep the proletarian masses oppressed. On the side of the Catholic Church were many priests, almost all of them Spanish, who had bitter experiences of previous contacts with socialism and/or communism as well as compromises of all kinds with the upper and middle social classes who saw their way of life threatened by the young revolution. The clash was as predictable as it was inevitable. The situation became polarized, you were either religious or you were revolutionary.

When I was born, in 1967, the peak of this confrontation had passed, but there was still a certain suspicion towards these issues. In a manner of speaking, the mutual wounds were still fresh. At that time, there was little talk of religion in my country.

My first contact with anyone who openly practiced any religion was my neighbours. They were a black Protestant family, heavily influenced by Martin Luther King and his civil rights movement. I played with the family's children during the week, but on Sundays they dressed in suits, the women wore hats, and they all came out looking very solemn. At first I thought they went to wakes (my great-grandmother only wore a hat when she went to a wake), then my grandfather explained that they went to church. He had to explain many more things about religion after that.

My grandfather had been a communist sympathizer from a young age and his explanation was, as is to be expected, nuanced by his ideas; but he always spoke respectfully of this neighboring family. He considered them decent, hardworking and, therefore, respectable people.

Then the years went by and with school and other experiences I discovered the world of the various religions and met many who practiced them.

When I was in pre-university a friend who was a Protestant, with clear proselytizing intentions, suggested me to read the Bible and that's what I did. I read it cover to cover and continued reading its various versions. In fact, I think I read every text considered sacred by any religion that fell into my hands. I learned wonderful things and discovered a treasure of knowledge

that I have kept ever since. I did not find any God nor did I convert to any religion.

It was also at that time that I witnessed how my Protestant friend was denied membership in the UJC (Union of Young Communists) because he was religious. He would die shortly after in the war in Angola. Some of those who denied him militancy now make professions of faith on their Facebook pages, almost all from distant countries.

Then the hard years of the nineties made many turn to, or make visible, diverse religions. In some cases it was faith, in others it was opportunism, in others it was simple desperation. After the publication of the book "Fidel and Religion" (1985) people began to speak more freely about these issues and there was a climate of better understanding. For many of my generation, the Catholic education of many of the leaders of the revolution was a great discovery.

This atmosphere of détente and understanding, not without ups and downs, continued for many years and extended to practically all creeds. The expressions of the various religions have been increasingly evident and visible. Today it is common for people to speak publicly and freely about their religious beliefs and display elements that identify them with one creed or another. Virtually no religion is lacking in being represented in today's Cuba. I think you will remember when a mutual friend of mine, who practices a truly exotic and not very widespread form of Christianity, was amazed that in Havana there was a small group of her fellow believers.

Visits to Cuba by various religious leaders have been something to comment on, and I am not only referring to the opportunity we Cubans have had to see three Catholic Popes in person without the need to go to Rome (like many curious Cubans, I attended a mass given by John Paul II in Havana).

All these circumstances have been modulating the nuances of what was a situation of extreme contrast. Today I am happy to see the images that my friend Valentin, a Catholic priest, brings of his work in some of the poorest communities in eastern Cuba, I listen attentively to the capsules of knowledge contained in the pataquines (stories) that my other friend, Raonel, a babalawo of Ifa, narrates to me. I am pleased with the stories of Victor, who is a Muslim, and he tells me how they go out to proselytize in the vehicle lent to them by the members of the Hebrew Union.

It is not an ideal world, there are irreconcilable differences among many of my friends; but, in general, they have managed to agree on their disagreements and treat each other with a respect for differences that we Cubans lack in other areas. Your photos, Simon, remind me of that. The beauty of diversity that we must preserve at all costs. Catholic churches are beautiful in their baroque as are Protestant churches in their simplicity or Ifa temple houses in their colorful viscerality. Truth is not a singular concept and no one possesses it absolutely.

Our visit to the Ecumenical Seminary of Matanzas in 2020 comes to mind. After an incredibly busy day of work, I vividly remember the peaceful atmosphere that we experienced when entering the grounds of the seminary. With the exquisite attention with which we were treated by everyone, especially by the Catholic secretary and the Protestant director. It was a sense of grace that is the closest I have ever experienced to a religious experience.

As I conclude these lines my thirteen year old son is reading what I am writing and asking me questions which, like those always asked by thirteen year olds, are not easy to answer. I'm going to have to leave you in order to deal with the flood of questions over my right shoulder. I hope my experiences will be of some use to my son and the experiences of other parents to so many other children. After all, the future is very important; that, as Lezama Lima said, is where we Cubans build our cathedrals.

Forgive the brevity of this letter, another day we will continue talking. A hug from your friend.