INTRODUCTION

On 19 July 1979 jubilant guerrillas entered Managua, capital of Nicaragua, filling the Plaza de la República and ending the dynastic, despotic rule of the Somoza family. The regime of the last Somoza, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was especially unpopular and corrupt, its latter stages marked by such human rights abuses by Somoza’s Guardia Nacional (National Guard, GN) that President Jimmy Carter cut all military and economic aid to this former U.S. client. The assassination in 1978 of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, newspaper publisher and dogged political opponent of Somoza, had led to an outpouring of grief and a national strike that marked the beginning of the regime’s downfall. Brutal efforts by the GN to repress growing unrest were met with ever more daring military escapades by the Sandinista guerrillas (named after 1930s Nicaraguan nationalist hero Augusto Sandino). At the height of an insurrection costing some 50,000 lives, Somoza fled Nicaragua on 17 July. Two days later the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN, or simply the Frente) seized power.

This was a truly popular revolution, counting business leaders, trade unionists, conservative and liberal politicians, Marxists, peasants and religious among its numbers. Thus, the Nicaraguan revolution represented far more than the efforts of a single political party or guerrilla movement, and while the 1979 revolution and the Frente were, of course, not mutually-exclusive, neither were they fully synonymous. Nevertheless, the Frente was destined to lead the insurrection, not least because it had the organisational capacity already in place to do so. Moreover, after nearly two decades of armed struggle culminating in victory (often termed el triunfo, the Triumph), the Frente was not about to hand over the reigns of power to anyone else.

Aside from the broad support it commanded, the Nicaraguan revolution was significant for another reason: the central role within it played by Christianity. On a continent where Catholicism has traditionally looked after its own interests and often those of the elites, grassroots liberation theology Christians aided the guerrillas, some even taking up arms during the insurrection. The role of these revolutionary Catholics was later recognised when four priests, brothers Ernesto and Fernando Cardenal, Miguel D’Escoto and Edgardo Parrales, were given prominent
roles in the new Sandinista government. So the Sandinista revolution appeared unique, melding together Marxism, revolutionary socialism and that famously-derided ‘opiate of the masses’, religion. Even Marxist hardliners conceded Christians might, after all, have a role to play in the amelioration of Latin America’s poor.

But all was not well in revolutionary Nicaragua. After a honeymoon period, opponents increasingly rejected the Frente’s policies, ideology and ever stronger grip over the country. Even some Sandinistas became disenchanted, most notably former guerrilla leader Edén Pastora (nicknamed Comandante Cero), whose audacious capture of the Nicaraguan parliament in 1978 had secured the release of Daniel Ortega and other Sandinista prisoners, as well as capturing popular support and helping to propel the hitherto little-known guerrilla group to fame. Another civil war loomed as Pastora and others took to the jungles and mountains to form the Contra rebel groups. As leftist guerrilla movements across Central America threatened U.S. hegemony in the region, President Ronald Reagan backed the Contras in a bid to oust the Sandinista government. Thus, during a Cold War in which Nicaragua represented an ideological battlefield, a bitter propaganda war ensued as each side issued claim and counterclaim in a bid to secure the moral high ground. Christianity played a central role in this fracas, with Catholic Archbishop Obando y Bravo and Washington on one side, portraying Nicaraguan Christians as victims of a tyrannical regime, while on the other, Sandinistas and liberation theology allies projected an image of full religious freedom and Christian support for the revolution.¹

Liberation theology’s participation in the revolution naturally attracted much theological interest. But the central role of religion in an ideological and propaganda battle ensured that Nicaraguan Christianity became the focus of much wider scrutiny, as academics and journalists explored divisions within Nicaraguan Catholicism, together with Sandinista attempts to synthesise Marxism and Christianity. However, Nicaraguan Protestantism escaped this intense scrutiny, probably because the movement was much smaller than its Catholic counterpart. Moreover, the leadership of the Consejo Evangélico Pro-Ayuda al Desarrollo

¹ This propaganda war had a far-reaching and divisive effect among Christians in the U.S. See, for example, a series of letters sent to the Reformed journal The Banner in response to several pro-Frente articles it published. The series culminated with a sorrowful editorial encapsulating the divisiveness of the debate (‘Editorial: Nicaragua’, The Banner, 22 September 1986, 5).