

Closing Comment: "Personal Enemies of God: Anticlericals and Anticlericalism in Revolutionary Mexico, 1915-1940"

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CLOSING COMMENT:
“PERSONAL ENEMIES OF GOD:
ANTICLERICALS AND ANTICLERICALISM
IN REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO, 1915-1940”*

In a contribution made some time ago, I stressed the diversity of factors which came together in the anticlerical constitutional articles and paragraphs that were approved during the Constituent Congress at Querétaro of 1916-17. The first of these factors—I argued—was the not unreasonable belief held by many Mexican revolutionaries that the Catholic Church had collaborated with the government of the military usurper, Victoriano Huerta, in 1913-14. In this regard, the political participation of the National Catholic Party had also been decisive in influencing anticlerical opinion. The Michoacán deputy, José Alvarez, to give just one example, argued as follows:

And you all know, *señores diputados*, that here we have persecuted nobody because he professed a particular belief; we have persecuted them [the Catholic clergy] because they were enemies of the Government of the revolution, because their doctrines, their preaching, and their religious practices, were simply a means of seizing power through that ill-named Catholic Party; from this [ambition] came all the political labors which, sheltering under the tolerance of *señor* Madero, developed so strongly at that time; against this sect we must proceed most energetically, and I am unable to explain to myself how revolutionaries of good intentions can also desire that these individuals, who are presently on the dividing line, hanging on our every act, and hoping that we open the gates so that they may again invade the Republic, should be told: “come in again; the revolution has triumphed on the field of battle; the table is ready; now come and help yourselves.”¹

In sum, one revolutionary tendency thought that there had been a war and that the victors therefore had the right to impose their conditions. They

* NB: editors' translation.

¹ Congreso Constituyente 1916-1917, *Diario de debates* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1960), vol. 2, p. 1049.

would not permit the return through democratic channels of those whom they considered enemies of the Republic, because their presence—the Catholic Party remained in Congress after Huerta's coup d'état—had formerly served to validate the counterrevolution.

The second factor motivating many revolutionaries was simply the desire to wipe from the face of the earth all vestiges of religion, whether of the Catholic, Protestant, or any other kind. As deputy Alberto Terrones of Durango—evidently influenced by Positivist philosophy—wished to make clear, “religions are the greatest and most sublime lies. . . .” Here religion was considered a cause of national backwardness, an ancestral superstition which revolutionaries must struggle to extirpate.

The third factor which drove some constituents to endorse the anticlerical articles of the Constitution was the desire to keep all ecclesial institutions out of public affairs, while respecting freedom of worship and the conscience of the individual. This was the case of the leading authors of Article 130, who had opposed the prohibition—supported by some—of auricular confession, as well as other restrictions which undermined the individual freedoms of believers.

There were, then, at least three groups inside the Constituent Congress of 1917, each of which had different reasons for attempting to restrict ecclesial activities: (1) those who thought that the Catholic Church and politically active laity were a defeated enemy; (2) those who believed in the necessity of eliminating all religions, since these were a powerful cause of national backwardness; (3) those who sought to limit the participation of churches in the nation's public business, while respecting the individual's freedom of conscience in the private sphere.

There were great differences among the congressional deputies concerning the treatment of the religious question. Nonetheless, it is clear that all these tendencies considered it necessary to limit the power of the Catholic Church in particular. And all of them—from the soldiers of the Revolution to those who believed it necessary to reach the Positivist stage of development; and even those liberals who would not involve themselves in individuals' beliefs since these were a private matter—shared an open anticlericalism. Even the moderates were anticlerical, though not necessarily anti-religious. There was no-one in the Constituent Congress to defend the Catholic Church, whether on humanitarian, historical, or other grounds.

The Mexican Revolution was, like its Constitution, anticlerical. But the roots of its anticlericalism were as much liberal as strictly revolutionary.

That is, this anticlericalism derived, no matter how viscerally or irrationally, only in part from the armed and political struggles of the years after 1910. Rather, it emerged from a longer struggle that involved liberals and the Catholic Church, and which later developed because of the opposition of the hierarchy to the social project of the revolutionaries. In this sense, we can say that “revolutionary” anticlericalism has liberal, Positivist, and revolutionary roots. Its roots are also sunk deep in popular culture.

The collection of essays now published by *The Americas* forms part of a booming and appropriately serious historiographical trend whose aim is to revise, broaden, and deepen our knowledge of this important aspect of Mexican history. The efforts of these historians are doubly significant because the subject of anticlericalism has for so long been bound up in animated debates whose religious, political, and symbolic content is high. Even today, with the building of churches and basilicas to commemorate the victims of religious persecution and the *cristero* war; the reappropriation of “revolutionary” days (such as 20th November) in order to canonize “defenders of the faith”; and with the widespread electoral victories of candidates who are not just Catholic but openly pro-clerical, it is evident that the question of (anti)clericalism is alive. This is not a dark relic of the past, but something that requires objectivity, impartiality, and analytical professionalism. In my view, the essays presented here exactly meet these criteria, which are necessary if we are to surpass Manichean, simplistic, or reductionist readings of a process as complex as the enactment of Mexican anticlericalism during the first phases of the Revolution.

It can be said that the essays presented here are unusually complementary, since they cover diverse aspects of the same phenomenon. Ben Fallaw describes the most important types of revolutionary anticlericalism in Mexico in order to demonstrate the complexity of the anticlericals’ positions, the accommodations that occurred locally, and even the resistance and opportunism of many revolutionaries when it came to implementing anticlericalism. Matthew Butler deepens our knowledge of the schismatic Mexican Catholic and Apostolic Church (ICAM), so as to demonstrate the doctrinal affinities between religious radicalism and revolutionary thought, and so as to highlight, above all, the reformist religious content of that anticlericalism. Ben Smith, for his part, makes a very important documentary contribution to the history of Mexican freemasonry—almost entirely neglected in Mexico—as well as to the history of Mexican state formation during the 1930s and 1940s. Robert Curley makes a detailed analysis of anticlericalism in the state of Jalisco in the decade from 1914–27, from the perspective of the construction of the revolutionary state. Finally, in his introduction,

Adrian Bantjes strives for a global understanding of the phenomenon of anticlericalism, and inserts the Mexican case in a wider context of secularization and modernity in the western world.

Together, these five essays offer us a panorama of Mexican anticlericalism, and of its links to the formation of the post-revolutionary state, that is definitively more informed, complete, and complex than anything offered in previous accounts. This said, in the remainder of this comment I will analyze carefully each of the texts—with which, to clarify, I am essentially in agreement—so as to make a few points about each and to raise some questions deriving from my reading of them. More than to query, my objective in this sense is to open up a dialogue that will allow us to advance our knowledge of this significant topic.

Ben Fallaw makes two main contributions, which I will note before analyzing them. Firstly, he identifies some key differences among the revolutionaries when he states that at no point did they agree on the means or the ultimate ends of attacks on Mexican Catholicism. Radicals favored the destruction of the Catholic Church (if not of organized religion entirely). Their reliance on iconoclasm—literal as well as metaphorical—also distinguished them. Some iconoclastic radicals hoped their attacks would create a humanistic, post-Christian belief system. More moderate anticlericals advocated less destructive and more persuasive measures, including education and the law, to weaken and/or reform Catholicism. Some moderates promoted alternative creeds, others hoped to remake the Catholic Church in Mexico. Certainly iconoclasts and reformers did collaborate at times, but they clashed as in the rancorous debates over the “religious question” at the Querétaro Constitutional Convention and again when Reds and Whites battled during the Maximato.”²

Fallaw’s other significant contribution is to identify local and political processes and through them qualify the grand generalizations made at national level: above all, he argues, we must “consider the interaction and relative strengths of iconoclasts and reformers in regional ‘middle politics’ and the federal education system during the Maximato, as well as considering the surprising strength of a third position: resistance, non-compliance, and opportunism.” I couldn’t agree more, but then to do this—and here is one of my suggestions to all the authors—we would have to see beyond the usual cases of the Bajío or Tabasco so as to make a map of the different types and degrees of revolutionary iconoclasm.

² Unless stated, all citations are from the authors’ respective essays in this issue.

Fallow also contends that there were “striking similarities in the iconoclastic assaults launched against the Church by different Carrancista units from Yucatán to Jalisco [which] strongly suggest a shared praetorian anticlerical ethos.” It seems to me that this is another gap in the essays collected here, that is to say, the absence of an analysis—notwithstanding minor references—of the ideological origins and diverse sources of revolutionary anticlericalism. For example, Fallow mentions—albeit briefly—popular anticlericalism. He also mentions the jurisdictionalist tendencies of the Mexican state, in the tradition of the *patronato*, but he does not firmly connect eighteenth- to nineteenth- to twentieth-century anticlericalisms. Bantjes explores the origins of anticlericalism in the western world, particularly in the Enlightenment and in secularization. But in no case is there a systematic study of anticlericalism’s origins that would enable us to explain the differences that existed among revolutionaries, or among other sectors of society. An important task to be developed in the future will therefore be that of unearthing the popular origins of Mexican anticlericalism. In recent contributions of a sociological kind, I have put forward the importance of popular religiosity and the absence of clerical Catholicism from the greater part of the country, as the key elements of such an interpretation. However, this hypothesis must still be given substance with a profound historical study showing, for example, the composition of the liberal armies of the nineteenth century and of the revolutionary armies of the twentieth. Only in this way will we be able to know which people, and on what grounds, supported the revolutionary armies in their anticlerical efforts.

Returning to Fallow’s text, I would like to make two further comments. Fallow, citing Butler, points out that ICAM “was but one attempt to replace an ultramontane, centralized Church with something that looked more like the Church in the early nineteenth century; a confederation of national churches that would co-exist with a liberal nation state in a secular society.” Here I would like to stress that the Church indeed changed greatly from the mid-nineteenth century—in the sense of undergoing much greater centralization and conforming to a position of Roman integralist-intransigence—and that this is an aspect of its history that we have neglected.³ That is, in these analyses, we have tended to neglect the changes and transformations that the Church itself has experienced, and to study anticlericalism with insufficient reference to *clericalism*, which is itself a dynamic form and also anticlericalism’s counterpart, without which it would not exist.

³ By “integralist-intransigence,” I refer to Émile Poulat’s extensive work on catholicism.

Finally—and concerning Lugo’s socialist catechism—to me it seems that this was part of a wide-ranging attempt to establish a dominant ideology in a world whose predominant social models were still being defined. The politico-cultural pillars of this world—the 1920s and 1930s—were also being defined, not just in Mexico but in the rest of the world. The struggle between the totalitarianisms and western democracy was in gestation, with other corporativist models occupying the middle ground. Thus, just as there was a “socialist” catechism, so both Catholicism and socialism developed their own sociologies and tried to interpose them at the expense of the liberal, scientific, and “bourgeois” sociology that predominates today.

The essay by Matthew Butler shows that revolutionary schismatics did not call for dechristianization—as did some revolutionaries in the 1930s—but instead departed from the position that Catholicism was a moralizing and positive force, and that a reformed clergy in a true church had a contribution to make in national life. Butler demonstrates, using significant documentary evidence about the ICAM, that not all anticlericalism was anti-religious and that the aim of some anticlericalisms, like the schismatic church’s, was “not just putting the Church out of business, but forcing it to revert to spiritual basics, to ‘clean up its act’ in imitation of primitive Christianity.” I am entirely in agreement with this conclusion—and I am glad that the author has decided to follow up an essential reference which, through a comparative exercise, provides theoretical reinforcement for his argument. I refer to the pioneering works on anticlericalism by René Rémond.

This French historian, in effect, demonstrates that to a great extent the origin of anticlericalism is religious, since anticlericalism indeed posits a return to the origins of the primitive Church:

Nor is anticlericalism precisely a militant irreligion: whatever he may think in private of the religious phenomenon, the anticlerical defends himself against the charge of wishing to combat or suppress it; he seeks solely to contain or reduce the influence of religion in accordance with the idea that he has made of the distinction between spheres and of the independence of civil society. As pointed out in 1817 by Lammenais, anticlericalism is even further away from confusing itself with the religious indifference that all Churches denounce today as the greatest danger; nothing is more contrary to them than anticlericalism’s religious attachment. Anticlericalism, far from having no interest in religion, thinks of nothing but religion. . . . Nor is anticlericalism anti-Christianity or anti-Catholicism, although it has frequently been obliged to place the Christianity of the Reformation—with which democracy, science, and freedom of conscience can co-exist without difficulty—against a Roman Catholicism whose propensity to clericalism was unbreakable. Whether out of

sincerity or tactical cunning, anticlericalism has always sought to strip Christianity—and, it may be, even Catholicism—of the falsifications that disfigure it, so as to restore its original purity; it prides itself on serving Christianity, and on doing so better than clericalism.⁴

There are no more than vague comparative references in Butler's essay, however, to the constitutional clergy of the Abbé Grégoire in France, or to the similarities and differences that there may or may not have been to or with this precursor.⁵ Hence, I find myself asking: was the French revolution's *église constitutionnelle* a precursor for the Mexican schismatics of the 1920s?

More interesting still is Butler's analysis of the compromises that Mexico's schismatic church ended up making with popular religiosity, as with the cult of saints or its pronounced *guadalupanismo*. In fact, this is what Jean-Pierre Bastian failed to grasp in his evaluation of the evolution of Mexican Protestantism when he "accused" it of not being a "true" Protestantism.⁶ In reality, what must be understood is that any religion or church, to the extent that it has a presence in the popular strata, tends to transform itself, in the same way that Catholicism has done. For Mexican Catholicism is no longer the same as Spanish, French, or North American Catholicisms: and, for the same reason, one cannot expect that it be any different with Protestantism, or with any other religion or church. Butler points out that "the schism's 'rationalist' ethos came undone when engaging with peasant, often Indian, devotional tastes and attracting a popular constituency." But, I wonder, could it have been any other way?

Butler also indicates that the experience of the ICAM "suggests that it was possible, in practice, to blend pseudo-primitive Christianity, revolutionary social engineering (*agrarismo*), and aspects of Mexican local religion (village *santos*) in a synthesis that was acceptable to village—especially indigenous or agrarianized—Catholics. Revolution and Catholicism were not necessarily irreconcilable opposites in practice, therefore." Is this not what happened at an institutional level, I wonder, with the Roman Catholic Church? Is this not the *modus vivendi*, as I described it in my *Historia de la Iglesia Católica*—the possibility of a minimal agreement between the Mex-

⁴ See René Rémond, *L'anticléricalisme en France de 1815 à nos jours* (1976. Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1992).

⁵ Although the bibliography here is vast, a good starting point is *Mémoires de l'Abbé Grégoire* (Paris: Éditions de la Santé, 1989).

⁶ Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Protestantismos y modernidad latinoamericana: historia de unas minorías religiosas activas en América Latina* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994); idem., *Los disidentes: sociedades protestantes y revolución en México, 1872-1911* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1989).

ican Revolution and the Catholic Church based on essential commonalities, such as a shared nationalism, or the idea of the necessary search for social justice?⁷ Finally, I wonder, how did the existence of the ICAM affect the Catholic Church? Did it, for example, encourage the Church's "nationalization," or necessitate some identification with Mexican patriotism, revolutionary nationalism, or the Church's own *indigenismo*, which disappeared towards the end of the sixteenth century and reappeared in the mid-twentieth century? In this case, the religious economy model could prove very useful in clarifying whether the Catholic Church improved its performance as a result of the rise in religious competition.⁸

Concerning Ben Smith's work—which is admirable in many ways—I would say that it has the virtue of corroborating with data and documents much of what was already known or suspected about the development of freemasonry in Mexico, but could not be proved for lack of published work based on archival research. We knew, for example, that freemasonry had acquired a more popular character since *cardenismo*. We knew about the conflicts between the various lodges. But Smith's work allows us to go deeper into the effective social composition of these lodges. More importantly still, his essay shows us the struggles between the diverse social sectors involved in freemasonry and the conflicting visions that co-existed among them concerning freemasonry's role and objectives. Smith argues that "if on the surface the Masonic lodges appeared like microcosms of the perfect, patriotic liberal state, underneath they were afflicted by the same political problems which affected Mexico itself." In effect, it seems to me that we must understand—and his work allows us to move in that direction—that Mexican masonry was slowly corporativized during the 1920s and 1930s in the context of an increasingly all-embracing state (albeit one that was more corporatist than totalitarian). Consequently, masonry essentially functioned thereafter as a political instrument at the service of the conjunctural interests of governments, and especially of *prístas*. Allow me to demonstrate anecdotally by pointing out, in symptomatic fashion, that the two portraits now found hanging in the offices of the *Gran Maestro* of the Great Lodge of the Valley of Mexico are those of Benito Juárez and . . . not those of either Plutarco Elías Calles or Emilio Portes Gil . . . but of Lázaro Cárdenas.

⁷ Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia Católica en México, 1929-1982* (Mexico City: El Colegio Mexiquense-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992).

⁸ See, for example, Anthony Gill's *Rendering unto Caesar: the Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), and R. Andrew Chesnut, *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Robert Curley's work reveals very effectively, and to a great extent, the construction of the revolutionary state through its anticlerical policy. This should not seem surprising if we recall that what was at stake during precisely these years was the control of the masses. Plutarco Elías Calles said so very clearly in his famous speech in Guadalajara, in which he affirmed that the Revolution must win the battle for the minds of the youth; and the various anticlerical measures then emanating from government circles also had this logic, which does not always appear in the various essays. It was not simply a question of an ideological dispute, but of a concrete battle that would be decided by control of the growing mass organizations, especially those of peasants and workers. In this sense, it is not strange that one of the primordial anticlerical actions should have been directed at the banning of Catholic or confessional trade unions. For this reason, some of Curley's comments concerning the types of anticlericalism that were in vogue, depending on whether the state was stronger or weaker, are interesting: "while state power remained relatively weak, anticlericalism took the form of *ad hoc* vandalism, rioting, shootings, and bombings. To some extent, this violence was independent of government policy, carried out by proxies such as *cromistas* and militant agrarians." This is an interesting hypothesis, though one would then have to go further into what we previously called popular anticlericalism. It also runs counter to other claims concerning the very precise organization of anticlerical actions on the part of the local or federal governments. It may also be that this kind of anticlericalism was the expression of internal battles within the revolutionary movement. In my *Historia de la Iglesia Católica*, for example, I ventured the hypothesis that anticlericalism was manipulated by Calles during the period of the Maximato so as to maintain successive presidents in a state of permanent instability; and that Cárdenas realized as much, which was why he decided to put an end to the persecution and introduce the *modus vivendi* in practice.

Curley also makes an interesting point about anticlerical policies and their collateral or unwanted consequences. He states that revolutionaries' anticlerical policy ultimately "destroyed the political spaces in which Catholics had not only organized themselves but erased the practical distinction between militants and neutrals. In this context, it made sense to a growing number of Catholic militants to take the step from politics to rebellion." This is the law of unintended consequences. To what extent, for example, did anticlericalism have the effect of promoting priestly vocations in the Bajío? In what measure did anticlericalism effectively eliminate the barriers separating practising and militant Catholics? It is hard to tell. But, in any case, it is worth reflecting on the fact mentioned by Curley that the animus of Jalisco's revolutionaries towards Catholicism "translated into strongly

anticlerical policies directed less at the clergy and more at political Catholics.” In this regard it was less “anticlerical”—in the sense of the word used by the majority of the essays here—than it was opposed to the form of political participation that lay Catholics practiced directly. In this guise anticlericalism was more Jacobin, politically speaking, and more anti-religious in philosophical terms, since the problem no longer seemed to be the clergy directly, but Catholics themselves. It is therefore worth asking about something that is completely off the radar in Curley’s text: what was the relationship between the clergy and laity (or political Catholics, as Curley calls them)? Here there are a lot of histories to recover, from the National Catholic Party (another notable absence in the essays) to the different ways in which the Catholic clergy and laity relate to the world. It would also be worth thinking about mapping anticlericalism, since an anticlericalism that develops in a context of a weak ratio of priests to believers (Tabasco) is not the same as one that develops—like Jalisco’s—in a clerical atmosphere.

My principal, although relative and relativized, criticism of the essays would therefore be the following: there are many contextual lacunae that are not covered in the various texts. Curiously, in none of the texts is there a sustained analysis of the impact of secular education, of the concepts deriving from it, or of the political consequences that resulted from its implementation. Other notable absences are the relationship between the clergy and the faithful, as previously mentioned; and the lack of references to anticlericalism’s historical sources—for instance, to positivism, the jurisdictionalism inherited from the patronato, and other kinds of social radicalism—all of which would allow the authors to situate the processes analyzed here better. Adrian Bantjes, in his introduction, endeavors to fill these gaps, and is relatively successful. He is interested in using comparative perspectives on religion, church-state relations, and secularization to shed new light on the Mexican case. Bantjes is thus able to situate the history of Mexico in the wider context of the Enlightenment, modernity, western liberalism, nationalism, and attempted secularization. In particular, he proposes that a strident *‘laïcisme de combat’* that went beyond anticlericalism to embrace anti-religion characterized certainly not all, but a significant number, of anarchists and radical Constitutionalists in Mexico during the period of 1914-38. The secularizing state now directed its ire not just at priests but at religion itself, becoming, at times, to use Rémond’s phrase, “an instrument of the extinction of beliefs.”

There is, however, a fact that at least relativizes this statement. And it is the fact that Mexico received its greatest Jewish immigration precisely in the years of anticlerical persecution—that is, between 1925 and 1935, in the

years of the pogroms in Europe and the east. Hence the Mexican state cannot be accused of being systematically anti-religious in a time in which it was receiving a large migration caused by the existence of religious persecution in other parts of the world. The fact is that the anticlericalism of the 1920s and 1930s was not incompatible with the reception of religiously-motivated refugees, showing that there was not a systematic attempt to drive God out of Mexico. This theme of migration, moreover, was often heard in the discussions between Mexican and U.S. politicians during these same years.⁹ On this question, and for many of the reasons set out previously, I am in closer agreement with the arguments of Butler and Fallaw concerning the existence of a regime that was not anti-religious but anticlerical.

It still seems to me that Bantjes's comments are pointing us in the right direction, although there is still a long way to go. Just revising so-called secularization theory and its application in the case of Mexico is a major challenge that some of us have begun to confront in recent years. Likewise, the theme of the "laicization" of Latin American political institutions, on which some of us are working.¹⁰ Authors such as Michael Burleigh¹¹ have recently made interesting contributions to these debates, which undoubtedly must be developed further. The various essays in this collection contribute in their own ways to deepening our understanding of a subject that, as I mentioned at the beginning of this comment, remains alive and present in Mexico's political reality.

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⁹ On this see my contribution, "Aspectos internacionales del conflicto religioso mexicano en la década de los treinta," in *Cultura e identidad nacional*, ed. Roberto Blancarte (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica-Conaculta, 1994), pp. 233-260.

¹⁰ The concept of "laicity" (which does not truly exist in English) is borrowed from the French *laïcité*, translates in Spanish as *laicidad*, and has a similar but not identical meaning to the concept of "secularity." The term "lay" comes from the Greek word *laikós*, meaning "of the people," and led to both *laïc* in French and to *laico* in Spanish. It was originally used in reference to faithful Christians, to distinguish them from members of the clergy who control the sacraments—deacons, priests, prelates, or bishops. It was not until the nineteenth century that the term "lay" made reference to a social space beyond ecclesiastical control. See my contribution, "México: A Mirror for the Sociology of Religion," in James A. Beckford and N. J. Demerath III (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2007), pp. 710-727.

¹¹ Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers. The Conflict between Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War* (London: Harper Press, 2005); idem., *Sacred Causes. Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (London: Harper Press, 2006).