

Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Concepts and Typologies

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## MEXICAN REVOLUTIONARY ANTICLERICALISM: CONCEPTS AND TYPOLOGIES

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an impressive effort has been made to supersede established interpretations of religious conflict in revolutionary Mexico that dismissed religious motivations as superstructural derivatives of “true” socio-economic and political factors. This has been accomplished by—pardon the cliché—“bringing religion back in” to the study of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Yet while our post-secular understanding of Mexican religions and their impact has been vastly enhanced, the same cannot be said of revolutionary anticlericalism and irreligiosity, which have similarly been dismissed as mere tools in the hands of a cynical, Machiavellian revolutionary leadership intent on mystifying a credulous people.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this special issue is to explore the motivations, manifestations, and impacts of the pervasive anticlericalism that characterized revolutionary discourse and policy. The essays included below examine a range of actors that contributed to Mexico’s attempted cultural revolution: local

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the recent historiography, see my “Religion and the Mexican Revolution: Toward a New Historiography,” in Martin Austin Nesvig, ed., *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 223-254. First and foremost, we should mention the pioneering work of Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada*, 3 vols. (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1973-1974); Jean-Pierre Bastian, *Los disidentes. Sociedades Protestantes y Revolución Social en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1989); and Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia Católica en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992). Recent examples of such work include the essays in Nesvig, ed., *Religious Culture*; Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927-29* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887-1934* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For an important exception, see the essays in Matthew Butler, ed., *Faith and Impiety in Revolutionary Mexico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 21-56, especially Alan Knight, “The Mentality and Modus Operandi of Revolutionary Anticlericalism.” An early culturalist interpretation is my “Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico: The De-Christianization Campaigns, 1929-1940,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13:1 (1997), pp. 87-120; For a revisionist interpretation that largely dismisses revolutionary anticlericalism, see Peter Lester Reich, *Mexico’s Hidden Revolution: The Catholic Church in Law and Politics since 1929* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

politicos, Freemasons, constitutional clergymen, and radical teachers. In their case studies, the authors unearth the rich and diverse roots that fed anticlericalism during the Mexican Revolution. As is often the case in Mexico, these origins tend to be rather complex. While the Enlightenment project and its liberal, anarchist, and socialist interpretations were its main source, together with a widespread popular anticlericalism, we must also acknowledge the influence of less well-documented beliefs, such as reformist Christianity, spiritism, and deism. This rich discursive *mélange* interacted with local political, socio-economic, and cultural factors to determine the development of anticlerical thought and action.

Unfortunately, historical research in this area has so far struggled to deploy clear conceptual definitions. Thus, a few elementary distinctions must be made. The term “anticlericalism,” which specifically refers to opposition to clericalism, must, of course, be distinguished from anti-Catholicism, anti-Christianity, deism, irreligiosity, and atheism. As French historian René Rémond reminds us, anticlericalism is in no way incompatible with religiosity, and detailed studies of nineteenth-century Mexico confirm this.<sup>3</sup> Anticlericalism’s primary target is the separate, often privileged status of a clerical “caste” that is perceived as hypocritical, immoral, and avaricious, especially when viewed from the perspective of the egalitarian concept of popular sovereignty typical of the modern nation state.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it frequently exhibits profound deist and reformist religious tendencies.

However, Rémond also makes clear that while moderate political anticlericalism merely advocates the independence of the state and freedom of conscience, more radical forms of anticlericalism can easily spill over into a broader attack on the “clericalized” laity and the religious phenomenon itself. In nineteenth-century France, a commonly held deism evolved in some cases into a sweeping rationalist rejection of all religiosity.<sup>5</sup> At times, the secularizing state became, to borrow Rémond’s phrase, “an instrument of the extinction of beliefs.” France’s late nineteenth-century *laïcisme de combat*, which emerged after the debacle of 1848, and was fed by Positivism, reactivated “its most irreligious ferments.” In its sectarian manifestation, *laïcisme* became “an antireligion with an ambition to replace traditional faiths.”<sup>6</sup> It should thus be stressed that while anticlericalism does not

<sup>3</sup> See Pamela Voekel, *Alone before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> René Rémond, *L’antichléricalisme en France de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1976), pp. 10-12, 21-30, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Rémond, *L’antichléricalisme*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> René Rémond, *Religion and Society in Modern Europe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 143-44.

by definition imply an anti-religious position—this point has been made repeatedly by Latin Americanists such as J. Lloyd Mecham, who pointed out that many early liberals and Freemasons were also devout Catholics,<sup>7</sup>—it has the potential to transform itself into irreligion.

Another cluster of key terms that require definition includes “laicity” (*laicidad* in Spanish, *laïcité* in French), and “laicism” (*laicismo* in Spanish, *laïcisme* in French)<sup>8</sup>, terms which are increasingly used in current Mexican academic discourse as well as in debates on Church-State relations and are highly relevant to earlier periods as well. In French usage, *laïcité* refers to “a conception and organization of society based on the separation of Church and State,” while *laïcisme* denotes the “doctrine of those who are partisans of the laicization of institutions, notably of education.”<sup>9</sup> Rémond defines *laïcisme* as “the ideology that inspired [laicity] but set itself up as a counter-religion.”<sup>10</sup> *Laïcisme de combat* is used to describe a particularly pugnacious, sectarian form of laicism. Confusingly, in English both terms translate as ‘secularism’, though *laïcité* also refers to a state of secularity.<sup>11</sup> More on this complex issue below. Hopefully, this brief discussion of terminology as well as the findings presented in the case studies will serve to demonstrate that Mexico’s religious conflict was about more than clerical privilege, and that the term ‘anticlericalism’ in its narrowest sense may not be sufficient to cover the range of issues involved.

While this topic may seem somewhat esoteric, it remains highly relevant and provides a historical backdrop to urgent debates taking place in Mexico today. The current uproar over the inconclusive constitutional reforms that redefined Church-State relations and were passed by the Mexican Congress in 1992, clearly demonstrates that the matter is far from academic, and the debate far from over. As the Mexican social scientist Roberto Blancarte prophetically wrote in 1993, “the historical tendency toward confrontation between liberals and Catholics has not changed.” The Roman Catholic Church’s intent to continue to fight for enhanced religious freedom set the stage for “the continuation of the same historical conflict . . . in a new guise.”<sup>12</sup> Blancarte’s prediction has been borne out by recent developments. Leading intellectuals, such as jurist Jorge Carpizo, warn that “the political activism of many priests knows

<sup>7</sup> J. Lloyd Mecham, *Church and State in Latin America. A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966 [First ed., 1934]), p. 417.

<sup>8</sup> Neither term appears in the OED with this meaning.

<sup>9</sup> *Grande Larousse de la langue française* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1975), vol. 4, p. 2928.

<sup>10</sup> Rémond, *Religion*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Le Grand Dictionnaire Hachette-Oxford* (Paris: Hachette Livres; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 479.

<sup>12</sup> Roberto Blancarte, “Recent Changes in Church-State Relations in Mexico: An Historical Approach,” *Journal of Church and State* 35: 4 (Autumn 1993), pp. 781-805.

no limits,” and argue that constitutional reform is necessary “to protect the State and society from the activism of the churches.”<sup>13</sup> With the recent launching of Carlos Monsiváis’s polemic *El Estado laico y sus malquerientes* (2008), the dispute has become increasingly shrill. In a recent interview, Monsiváis denounced the Mexican Church’s “*integrismo galopante*” and “fundamentalist insistence on ‘religious freedom.’” The goal of the Vatican’s “grand campaign,” he argued, “evident in all Spanish-speaking nations, . . . is the full recuperation of its worldly powers.”<sup>14</sup>

#### MEXICAN ANTICLERICALISMS AND BEYOND

In his brilliant *L’anticléricisme en France de 1815 à nos jours* (1976), Rémond argued that anticlericalism served as an essential element of France’s modern political history. Far from a cynical tool deployed to manipulate *le peuple* in pursuit of political or economic goals, “the ultimate goal [of this cultural struggle] was the soul of the believers, the esprit of the citizens.”<sup>15</sup> Rémond’s main contribution was to distinguish anticlericalism from atheism and irreligion and explore the complex diversity of France’s *anticlericalisms*. His useful typology of the phenomenon begins with a general distinction between *l’anticléricisme vulgaire* and *l’anticléricisme réfléchi* of the thinking classes.<sup>16</sup> As he probes deeper, he identifies an array of anticlerical manifestations: a tolerant, rationalist, liberal anticlericalism that, far from being atheist or anti-Christian, displayed spiritualist and deist leanings and sought freedom of conscience and the independence of civil society; a left-leaning, evangelical Christian *anticléricisme de l’intérieur* with a Gallican, Jansenist pedigree that dreamt of a return to a primitive true Christianity; a Protestant, anti-papist anticlericalism; a right-wing Christian anticlericalism; an ultra right-wing, Gallican, nationalist, aristocratic, anti-democratic anticlericalism; a radical democratic anticlericalism, positivist, materialist, and anti-spiritualist, that sought to end Church influence; a socialist or communist anticlericalism of atheistic inspiration that strove to liberate humanity from the shackles of religion; and an even more radical anarchist and libertarian anticlericalism.<sup>17</sup> Despite such diversity, Rémond argued that anticlericalism was a universal factor in the history of all predominantly Roman Catholic nations.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.milenio.com/mexico/milenio/notaantior.asp?id=845213>, accessed August 10, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> (Mexico City: UNAM, 2008). See for his recent statements: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/06/12/index.php?section=politica&article=012e1pol>, accessed August 10, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Rémond, *L’anticléricisme*, pp. 5-7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

The French Revolution and French nineteenth-century politics served as a constant “point of reference” for Mexican liberals during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even though, as Charles Hale reminds us, Mexican political theorists developed their own idiosyncratic interpretations of French ideas and political models.<sup>19</sup> As we will see below, Blancarte has argued that the French concepts of *laïcité* and *laïcisme* are particularly useful tools with which to approach Latin American and Mexican Church-State relations.<sup>20</sup> Comparisons with France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and most Latin American nations suggest that Mexican history ultimately followed a common historical path from a confessional state via disestablishment to state neutrality and a complete division of the public and private sphere, a move often accomplished, in Catholic nations, with the aid of brutal secularization campaigns.<sup>21</sup> As early as 1934, Mecham argued that though Mexico may have been an extreme case, “the position occupied by the Catholic Church in [Mexico] was not appreciably different than in other Latin American countries. . . . Although the attacks in Mexico were more bitter and the results more disastrous, to say that the Mexican remedies were more severe because the abuses were more glaring would not be absolutely true.”<sup>22</sup>

Did Mexican anticlericalism display a rich diversity similar to that found in France? Only recently has historical research taken anticlerical and antireligious ideology seriously by tracing its diverse roots, identifying its manifestations, and linking it with material and political factors.<sup>23</sup> Alan Knight has traced revolutionary anticlericalism’s roots back to the rationalist Bourbon Enlightenment, popular anticlericalism, and Rabelaisian skepticism. After national independence, a moderate liberal anticlericalism prevailed that, far from anti-religious, rather belatedly aimed at the separation of Church and State. However, the late Porfiriato and the revolution witnessed the emergence of a novel, combative anticlericalism, and, in some cases, even irreligion, among radical liberals, anarchists, Freemasons, Protestants, and spiritists. According to Knight, during the revolution such “ideational proclivities” interacted with mass agrarian and labor politics to produce a violent dénouement. Though the Enlightenment agenda must be considered

<sup>19</sup> Charles A. Hale, “The Revival of Political History and the French Revolution in Mexico,” in Joseph Klaitis and Michael H. Haltzel, eds., *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 159-161.

<sup>20</sup> Roberto Blancarte, “Laicidad y laicismo en América Latina,” *Estudios Sociológicos* XXVI: 78 (2008), pp. 139-164.

<sup>21</sup> Rémond, *Religion*, pp. 128-129, 141-142, 170; For an overview of the situation in Latin America, see Blancarte, “Laicidad.”

<sup>22</sup> Mecham, *Church and State*, pp. 418-421.

<sup>23</sup> See the excellent essays in Butler, *Faith*.

a “genuine conviction,” representative of male, literate, petty-bourgeois, often Masonic elements, Knight also acknowledges the role of additional players: Catholic “fellow-travelers”; religious dissidents, especially Protestants; and individuals steeped in heterodox folk beliefs.<sup>24</sup> He declares the anticlerical policies of the revolution a failure and argues that the Church survived “relatively unscathed,” while religious faith remained strong.<sup>25</sup>

While Knight acknowledges the diversity of motivations that inspired anticlericals, Butler goes a step further by arguing that religious reformism was a much more significant motivating factor in state anticlerical policy and defanaticization than generally acknowledged. According to Butler, many revolutionaries did not seek to eradicate religion, but instead to purify Mexican spirituality and reestablish a true Christian morality.<sup>26</sup> Jean-Pierre Bastian has demonstrated that religious dissidents, Protestants, spiritists, and others who held strongly anti-Catholic convictions but maintained deeply spiritual inclinations joined the revolution in droves.<sup>27</sup> Butler in turn argues that “[r]eligiosity was reshaped by the Revolution . . . as a period of religious change and effervescence” as Mexico witnessed an outpouring of heterodox popular religiosity.<sup>28</sup>

Butler raises an intriguing possibility, especially when viewed from the perspective of Mexico’s current religious diversity. Even a cursory glance at historical and current Mexican census data on religious affiliation leads to several interesting conclusions, though it should, of course, be stressed that the available figures must be taken with a grain of salt. First, Mexico is today not dramatically less religious than it was in the past; it has averted the marked secularizing trend seen in some Catholic nations and instead experienced a shift towards greater religious pluralism. As of 2003, 98% of Mexicans declared to believe in God, while 90% indicated that God played an important role in their lives.<sup>29</sup> Second, despite such diversification, Mexico was and still is an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nation. While in 1900 an estimated 99.3% of all Mexicans considered themselves Catholics—these early data are naturally unreliable—, by 2000 that figure had declined to a still impressive 88%. Recent trends suggest that the Roman Catholic

<sup>24</sup> Knight, “The Mentality,” pp. 29-31.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Butler, “Introduction: A Revolution in Spirit? Mexico, 1910-40,” in Butler, ed., *Faith*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Bastian, *Los disidentes*.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, “Introduction,” p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Alejandro Moreno, *Nuestros valores: Los mexicanos en México y en Estados Unidos al inicio del siglo XXI* (Mexico City: Banamex, 2005), pp. 51-52.

Church may well have been successful in arresting this seemingly precipitous decline in all but a few southern states, notably Chiapas. Finally, though Catholicism may remain the majority religion, twentieth-century Mexico has witnessed the rise of a diverse and sizeable non-Catholic minority. According to some counts, by 2000 more than 7 million Mexican adults self-identified as evangelicals.<sup>30</sup>

To pinpoint the origins of this shift is quite a challenge. Though some would argue that its roots lie in the rising “nebulous heterodoxy” that, according to Bastian,<sup>31</sup> emerged during the Porfirian era, others might be tempted to view this trend as the result of post-revolutionary modernization. Butler, on the other hand, suggests that this cultural watershed may well lie somewhere in between, during the revolutionary era. The revolution not only generated repeated episodes of state-driven religious persecution and “defanaticization” (*desfanatización*), which seriously weakened the hold of the Roman Catholic Church over the faithful, but also encouraged the growth of a plethora of heterodox, non-Catholic religions. Thus, the revolutionary era may have possibly witnessed the beginnings of Mexico’s current religious pluralism.

While such revisionism is welcome in that it highlights the religious origins of some currents of Mexican anticlericalism, it should not detract from the fact that during the revolution powerful elements within the revolutionary elite, notably the Callista leadership, the educational establishment, the military, and, as Ben Smith clearly demonstrates in this issue, Freemasonry, were inspired by classic Enlightenment discourse, especially its radical liberal and anarchist varieties. Though it has long been recognized that Mexican Freemasonry was a crucial source of revolutionary anticlericalism, little has been published on the topic due to the difficulty involved in accessing lodge archives. Smith provides a unique and fascinating window into this secretive realm. His conclusions confirm what many have long suspected: lodges sought to rival the Catholic Church as an alternative mode of association and ritual practice. They increasingly disseminated strident Jacobin anticlerical and defanaticizing propaganda, spied on the clergy and Catholic laymen, and championed state anticlerical laws. According to Smith, anti-

<sup>30</sup> For statistical data, see [http://www.inegi.org.mx/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/censos/poblacion/2000/definitivos/Nal/tabulados/00re01.pdf](http://www.inegi.org.mx/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/censos/poblacion/2000/definitivos/Nal/tabulados/00re01.pdf), accessed August 11, 2008; Roderic Ai Camp, *Crossing Swords: Politics and Religion in Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5; On religious change, notably the rise of evangelicalism, and the persistence of religious beliefs, see Peter S. Cahn, *All Religions are Good in Tzintzuntzan: Evangelicals in Catholic Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), pp. viii–ix, *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> Bastian, *Los disidentes*.



clericalism was “the most important effect of state-masonic relations.”<sup>32</sup> Lodges were made up of a young, all-male, petty-bourgeois membership of students, politicians, soldiers, and bureaucrats, while later teachers and railway workers joined in significant numbers as well. Smith’s findings confirm Knight’s social analysis of anticlericalism, though we may have underestimated the role of the industrial working class. During the 1930s, lodges were closely intertwined with the State and the SEP educational apparatus. Masonic anticlerical and defanaticizing activity reached a crescendo as the lodges’ influence radiated farther out from the cities into rural areas in tandem with the “socialist” schools. Smith demonstrates that what ultimately doomed Masonic defanaticization was the lodges’ social isolation within overwhelmingly Catholic, clericalized communities.

Butler examines a rather different source of anticlericalism which, though initially supported by the revolutionary elite, ultimately muddled on independently, without official backing. Far from dismissing the constitutional clergy of the schismatic Iglesia Católica Apostólica Mexicana of the 1920s as a crude tool of the anticlerical Callista regime and the CROM, a “Trojan horse of secularization,” Butler attempts to restore dignity and agency to an often overlooked group of clergymen who broke with the established Church and collaborated with the anticlerical state.<sup>33</sup> He uncovers a profoundly religious discourse that sought to purify a decadent Roman Catholic Church and reestablish a true, primitive, biblical religiosity. This small breakaway church naturally attracted the ire of the Catholic clergy, much as the allegedly *chavista* Reformed Catholic Church of Venezuela does today. Importantly, Butler stresses the fact that ICAM’s anticlerical message resonated with popular constituencies, especially when the schismatic clergy decided to embrace central aspects of popular religiosity, notably the cult of the saints. How such clergymen rationalized this contradictory hybrid of purified, simple Christianity and the worst excesses of Baroque popular superstition is hard to fathom.

We eagerly await further findings on the popular reception of schismatic religion. Butler may be able to identify continuities between the popular schismatic churches of the revolution and the later spread of non-Catholic religions during the post-revolutionary era. What is left today of these scattered religious communities? Have they turned to Pentecostal or evangelical beliefs and practices, reverted to mainstream Catholicism, or maintained the

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Smith, “Politics and Freemasonry in Mexico, 1920-1940,” in this issue.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Butler, *Sotanas Rojinegras: Catholic Anticlericalism and Mexico’s Revolutionary Schism*, in this issue.

idiosyncratic practices that emerged during the 1920s? That is, did the schismatic revolutionary experiment constitute an authentic popular experiment and in some ways anticipate today's religious pluralism, as Butler persuasively argues, or must it be dismissed as a state-driven farce, as both the Catholic Church and earlier historians have maintained?

Robert Curley and Ben Fallaw examine a wider range of what Knight would call the contingent and structural factors that inspired local revolutionary actors to launch the anticlerical and iconoclastic campaigns that often provoked sharp and ultimately violent Catholic responses, notably the brutal Cristero War (1926-1929). In his detailed and rich study of the religious conflict in Jalisco, Curley demonstrates that however compelling ideological and cultural explanations might be, they need to be "operationalized" by articulating them with the local political and institutional context and with the violent and rapidly shifting flow of revolutionary power struggles. In Jalisco, anticlericalism evolved from Governor Manuel Diéguez's early attempts to control the local political arena amidst the uncertainties of war to the state-building project of Governor José Guadalupe Zuno. As the center of the most militant and powerful Catholic lay movement in Mexico, Jalisco may have been an exceptional case. Curley argues that here, in what today is sometimes referred to as the *Cinturón del Rosario*, the main objective of the state government's anticlerical campaign was to shut down a highly influential Catholic "public space," neutralize the potent threat to the revolutionary state posed by Catholic mass politics, and forge a new, secularized political sphere. Curley suggests that anticlerical policies were not primarily directed at the clergy, that is, clericalism in its narrowest sense, but targeted the wider realm of Catholic lay society. His findings point us in a new direction and demonstrate the limitations of the term 'anticlericalism'; in Jalisco much more was at stake than clerical privilege. Curley concludes that "tactical and institutional anticlericalism were crucial to shaping the development of a modern system of political representation during the 1910s and 1920s in Mexico."<sup>34</sup>

In his contribution, Ben Fallaw proposes a general taxonomy of Mexican revolutionary anticlericalism and, in the process, demonstrates how challenging such classification can be due to "the heterodox nature of anticlericalism[, which] reflects the fractured, non-linear nature of the revolutionary process [and] the daunting variety of its ideological influences. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Robert Curley, "Anticlericalism and the Public Sphere in the Mexican Revolution: Considerations from Jalisco," in this issue.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Fallaw, "Varieties of Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Radicalism, Iconoclasm, and Otherwise, 1914-1935," in this issue.

Fallow's typology divides revolutionary anticlericalism into radical, moderate, and popular varieties, though he reminds us that the lines between such currents were often blurred. Like Knight and others before him, Fallow acknowledges the centrality of a radical iconoclasm that went beyond anticlericalism and not infrequently assumed anti-Catholic, even irreligious dimensions. But he also suggests that true irreligious motivations only inspired a limited, though influential minority surrounding leaders such as Plutarco Elías Calles, Adalberto Tejeda, and Tomás Garrido Canabal, men who truly wished to eradicate the symbols, beliefs, and practices of both orthodox and popular Catholicism. In addition, Fallow identifies a moderate reformist current that, despite the repeated hegemony of the radicals, ultimately triumphed. This catchall term refers to an eclectic range of individuals who shared a common desire to reduce the scope of Church and religion to a clearly demarcated private sphere within the framework of *laicidad*. Some envisaged the gradual atrophy of religion due to the spread of enlightened state education, legal reform, civic engagement, and scientific knowledge. Most importantly, Fallow identifies a majority of opportunists and foot draggers who were merely along for the ride. They limited their action to dutiful rhetoric while negotiating confidential deals with the clergy, secretly resisted defanaticization campaigns, or failed to comply with the orders of their superiors. Such compromise doomed the radical agenda and opened the door to the 1938 *modus vivendi* between Church and State. Though it highlights pragmatic, non-ideological factors, Fallow's position is more nuanced than that of Peter Lester Reich, who in his revisionist analysis largely dismissed the religious conflict as a chimera.<sup>36</sup> In the end, Mexico's anticlerical agenda never assumed totalitarian dimensions due to the ideological and institutional weakness and incoherence of the state, as well as the strength and diversity of local cultural formations.<sup>37</sup>

#### OTHER DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT: LAICITY, LAICISM, IRRELIGION, AND ATHEISM

Mexico's religious conflict can also be viewed through complementary conceptual lenses that may serve to broaden our understanding of the revolution's aims in the field of religion. The important concepts *laïcité* and *laïcisme* have been successfully applied to the Mexican case, notably by Blancarte, who translates the terms as *laicidad* and *laicismo*. However, it

<sup>36</sup> Reich, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*.

<sup>37</sup> See my "Saints, Sinners, and State Formation: Local Religion and Cultural Revolution," in Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, eds., *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 137-156.

is worth mentioning that such a distinction was, to my knowledge, not used during the Mexican Revolution (the adjectives *laico* and *secular* were).<sup>38</sup> Even today usage of this terminology can be confusing. While the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* of the Real Academia Española defines *laicismo* as a “doctrine that defends the independence of man and society, and especially of the state, from any religious organization or creed,”<sup>39</sup> the term *laicidad*, which, as we have seen, refers to a conception and mode of societal organization, is apparently a neologism and does not appear in the dictionary.

In a helpful and illuminating piece of *Begriffsgeschichte*, Blancarte has attempted to clarify this terminology. Though the terms originated in France, and were not used in Latin America until quite recently, Blancarte makes a strong case for their use in the Mexican context. He defines *laicidad* functionally as “a system of association designed for respect for freedom of conscience within the framework of an increasingly pluralist society or one that recognizes an existing diversity,”<sup>40</sup> or, alternately, as “a system of association whose political institutions are no longer legitimated by the sacred or by religious institutions but by popular sovereignty.”<sup>41</sup> He considers *laicidad* “an institutional framework required for the development of religious freedoms, especially freedom of belief and worship.”<sup>42</sup> *Laicismo*, on the other hand, is then “a laicity under construction” that, though never intrinsically anticlerical or anti-religious, may assume a combative anticlerical nature where it confronts a hegemonic, deeply entrenched Roman Catholic Church.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of Mexico’s current debate on “religious freedom,” Monsiváis, on the other hand, defines *laicidad* somewhat more vaguely as “grosso modo that what is established and developed in relation to the separation of Church . . . and State,”<sup>44</sup> and *laicismo* rather pugnaciously as “the rejection of clericalism’s hegemonic claims, and as the confronting of an

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, *La lucha entre el poder civil y el clero. Estudio histórico y jurídico del señor licenciado don Emilio Portes Gil, Procurador General de la República* (Mexico City, 1934).

<sup>39</sup> [http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO\\_BUS=3&LEMA=laicismo](http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO_BUS=3&LEMA=laicismo). “Laicidad” does not appear in the most recent edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*.

<sup>40</sup> Blancarte, “Laicidad,” p. 140. The original reads “un régimen de convivencia diseñado para el respeto a la libertad de conciencia, en el marco de una sociedad crecientemente plural o que reconoce una diversidad existente.”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143. The original reads “un régimen de convivencia social cuyas instituciones políticas ya no están legitimadas por lo sagrado o las instituciones religiosas, sino por la soberanía popular.”

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145. The original reads “un marco institucional necesario para el desarrollo de las libertades religiosas, particularmente la libertad de creencias y la de culto.”

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>44</sup> Monsiváis, *El Estado*, p. 15. The original reads, “a *grosso modo* como lo que se implanta y desarrolla con la separación de la Iglesia...y el Estado”.

already retreating conservative thought, substituted by the emission of autocratic actions and orders and by false prophecies that take the place of the precepts of 'morality.'"<sup>45</sup>

Blancarte's approach is important because it has the potential of shifting our focus from anticlericalism to the eternal search for laicity, and, one might add, from culture to politics. Anticlericalism is no longer the crux of the matter as we raise our eyes to the ever tantalizing, yet ever receding horizon of a utopian laicity. Because in Mexico the goal of laicity could only be achieved by confronting an ultramontane Church, laicism was forced to assume a combative anticlerical stance.<sup>46</sup> Thus, anticlericalism must be considered a mere byproduct of the sweeping, teleological political process that leads to laicity.

This goal has yet to be accomplished. Though in Mexico the revolutionary state ultimately managed to impose a degree of *laicidad* through anticlerical measures and repression, the Church did manage to recoup some of its losses during the post-revolutionary era.<sup>47</sup> Yet the issue remains unresolved and true laicity and, for that matter, true democracy, unattained, as has become abundantly clear in recent debates on the constitutional reform of Church-State relations passed in 1992 during the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Mexicans continue to wrangle over the question whether the reforms went too far or not far enough. Twenty-first century Mexico still faces the challenge of constitutionally defining the nature of secularism.

These essays have relatively little to say about the important distinction between anticlericalism and irreligion and atheism. If anything, they tend to discount irreligious tendencies. Likewise, deistic inclinations are seldom mentioned though often implied. This is curious, given that the revolutionary leadership repeatedly denounced not just the clergy, but also Catholicism, religion in general, and, at times, God. The concept of atheism in particular is poorly understood and hard to grasp within the Mexican context. In his pioneering work on atheism in the Hispanic world, Basque anthropologist and historian Julio Caro Baroja distinguished between the *ateo a lo culto* who espouses "a cosmogonic atheism of speculative and erudite ori-

<sup>45</sup> Monsiváis, *El Estado*, p. 15. The original reads "el rechazo de las pretensiones hegemónicas del clericalismo, y como el enfrentamiento al pensamiento conservador ya en franca retirada, sustituido por la emisión de acciones y consignas autocráticas y por las falsas profecías que hacen las veces de dictámenes 'de la moral.'"

<sup>46</sup> Blancarte, "Laicidad," pp. 139-140, 143.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 158-60.

gins,” often of a materialist and scientific nature, and the *ateo popular*, whose inclinations are informed by the cruelties and injustices of life. He cautioned against generalizations: “the enemies of Atheism confuse it, at times, with a variety of positions that have nothing to do with it, accusing during the nineteenth century in pell-mell fashion individuals who obviously were not atheists, such as heretics, first, Freemasons, liberals, etc.”<sup>48</sup>

Ignacio Ramírez reportedly “inaugurated” atheism in Mexico in 1837, when during an admittance interview at the prestigious Academia de Letras he famously declared, to great effect, that “No hay Dios.”<sup>49</sup> Yet such audacious statements were the exception: most liberals and Freemasons retained their Catholic beliefs for much of the nineteenth century. Clearly, in the Mexican case we need to attempt the very difficult and often impossible task of disaggregating atheism from deism and anticlericalism. If today’s Mexican values are an indication of earlier sentiments—Mexican atheists constituted a mere 3% of the population during the 1990s—<sup>50</sup> it is most likely that few revolutionaries were true atheists, while rather more were irreligious deists or Christians of one type or another. An often repeated example that effectively illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing anticlericals, deists, and spiritualists from atheists is that of Calles himself, the supposed embodiment of revolutionary Godlessness. As is well known, in 1928 Calles had consulted the famous faith healer, El Niño Fidencio, in Espinazo, Nuevo León. Late in life, Calles embraced spiritism and dabbled in séances. What this suggests is that individual positions regarding God, religion, and spirituality were seldom engraved in stone, subject to change, and often contradictory.

#### CONCLUSION

What these studies clearly demonstrate is the diverse inspiration of Mexican revolutionary anticlericalism. Its roots included liberalism, anarchism, and socialism, but also reformist Catholicism, Protestantism, deism, and other forms of spiritualism. Its inclinations were similarly diverse, and ranged from a narrow opposition to clericalism via anti-Catholicism and reformist religiosity to irreligion and atheism. This suggests that the term *anticlericalism* may well be too narrow to encompass all currents involved. In addition, the introduction of the concepts of laicity and laicism and their emphasis on politics open up new perspectives while posing an interesting challenge to cultural interpretations that focus on the secularization of society.

<sup>48</sup> *De la superstición al ateísmo (Meditaciones antropológicas)* (Madrid: Taurus, 1974), pp. 252-253.

<sup>49</sup> Monsiváis, *El estado*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>50</sup> Camp, *Crossing Swords*, pp. 4, 124.

However, one thing is clear: the nuances of anticlerical discourse were seldom apparent to the average layperson or the village *cura*. While many Catholics tried as best as they could to adapt to the new circumstances, for others anticlericalism and iconoclasm at times assumed near apocalyptic dimensions and could only be interpreted as a Godless assault on the very foundations of religious faith, as Jean Meyer has shown. Moral outrage motivated the mass mobilization and resistance in Jalisco and elsewhere that initially proved so successful but ultimately degenerated into the Cristero morass that cost Church, state, and, especially, the laity, so dearly.

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