



INTRODUCTION

The overthrow of dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1911 began a decade of bloody strife and social upheaval known as the Mexican Revolution. By 1920, the triumph of a faction of warlords and civilian politicians ended the revolution's armed phase.¹ As the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Party of the Institutionalized Revolution), it held power until the year 2000. While almost every other Latin American nation experienced long periods of military rule or divisive social conflict during the Cold War, the PRI ruled without recourse to systematic repression. If not strictly democratic, the PRI regime was stable, inclusive, and favored by the United States.

Over the past two decades, scholars seeking to explain the PRI's longevity and apparent popular support have moved away from Marxist-inspired socioeconomic determinism. Instead, they have closely examined the ruling party's negotiations with diverse popular groups. Two complementary concepts drawn from Antonio Gramsci's political theory, "hegemony" and "civil society," have become increasingly prominent in postrevolutionary historiography. The former term posits that successful state formation requires both coercion and consent. Only negotiation and compromise with key social sectors creates hegemony. The concept of hegemony encouraged scholars to look beyond narrow institutional politics to the broader category of political culture. Consequently, Mexico's civil society—politically active groups in society that enabled the state to rule—received much closer attention.² By the end of the 1990s, a generation of scholars, especially those identified with the New Cultural History of Mexico, had opened up promising new vistas on the process of postrevolutionary state formation.³ The academic gaze shifted to the participation of subaltern groups in politics,

especially peasants and women, in politics.⁴ Three important sectors in civil society, however, have largely been overlooked: Catholic associations, the press, and business.⁵ Originally this project set out to examine all three, but it narrowed to focus just on Catholics because of their crucial role in several key aspects of state formation. The religious question—meaning the place of the Church in a Catholic country after an anticlerical revolution—profoundly shaped the process of postrevolutionary state formation. To avoid overgeneralizing regional idiosyncrasies, I researched four states: Campeche, Hidalgo, Guerrero, and Guanajuato. Chronologically, I limited my research to the eleven formative years from the end of the Cristero War in 1929 until late 1940, when the new president, Manuel Ávila Camacho, presumably resolved the religious question by stating that he was a believer.

I argue that Marxist revisionists of the 1970s and 1980s and more recent postrevisionist scholarship have overlooked the pervasive influence of Catholicism in complicating postrevolutionary state formation. True, by the late 1930s, most Catholics had grudgingly accepted the regime eventually known as the PRI, and many regional affiliates of the ruling party could not govern without the collaboration of some Catholic leaders. To be sure, the institutional Church partnered with the postrevolutionary state at critical historical moments, for instance, when suppressing a second Cristero revolt and supporting the nationalization of oil. Ultimately, however, the institutional Church's long-term strategy was to indirectly undermine the postrevolutionary state, albeit culturally and socially rather than directly challenging it militarily or electorally.⁶ Ironically, the regime's dependence on elections for legitimacy allowed Catholics to hinder key parts of postrevolutionary state formation. Time and time again, Catholic voters elected officials who nullified anticlerical regulations, opposed federal schools, and even resisted agrarian reform.⁷ President Lázaro Cárdenas's rightward tilt after 1937 resulted in no small part from Catholic opposition, opposition that continued even after most anticlerical restrictions had ended. Even after Cárdenas left office, this remained an uncivil society.⁸

Definitions and Methodology

This is a study of Catholics and Catholicism in postrevolutionary state formation as opposed to a religious or social history of Catholicism.⁹ Census data from the 1930s indicates that all but 2 percent of Mexicans self-identified as Catholic.¹⁰ Determining actual religious beliefs, however, is complicated by a

number of methodological and epistemological difficulties. This is especially true in the case of political leaders. Take the case of Governor Francisco Ramírez Romano of Nayarit (1927–28). Educated in a Jesuit college, he later joined the Freemasons, perhaps to advance his political career. Once governor, he toed the state's anticlerical line by jailing priests and lay leaders. At the same time, he also privately maintained close relationships with Catholic leaders, including the head of Nayarit's Knights of Columbus. When his tailor found a scapular in his suit and denounced him, Ramírez Romano was politically discredited. In 1930, he went to the archbishop of Guadalajara, recanted his anticlericalism, and asked for a letter of introduction and money. The archbishop demurred, fearing another "unpleasant surprise" from this unreliable ally.¹¹

Filiberto Gómez, a key political leader in the state of Mexico, provides another example of how nominally revolutionary elites often kept a foot firmly planted in both camps. Gómez corresponded warmly with Archbishop Pascual Díaz. During the Church-state conflict of the early 1930s, Díaz recognized Gómez's past "good will" although he warned him that should he give in to pressure from Plutarco Elías Calles (president, 1924–28; maximum chief or *jefe máximo*, 1929–35) and harass Catholics, "the blow would cut into the Church of Christ."¹² Díaz summed up the dilemma of revolutionary politicians like Gómez who were Catholic offstage but anticlerical in public life: "even though a person privately wants to work for good, political obligations push them to do the contrary." After all, the prelate lamented, "before everything else, they are politicians."¹³

Defining state formation has its own peculiar challenges. Following Gramsci, many historians now see the state as much more than a set of formal institutions. In other words, the state is less a thing than a process. Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent productively defined that elusive yet pervasive process of state formation as a "repertoire of activities and cultural forms that have provided modes of organization, social practice and identity."¹⁴ Rituals and routines, then, enabled the postrevolutionary state to rule without constant reliance on coercion.¹⁵ Many scholars have convincingly shown how the postrevolutionary state intended to carry out a cultural revolution by incorporating popular aspirations and values, allowing it to reach deeply into everyday life.¹⁶

As my research continued, it became clear that many Catholics were not averse to supporting some aspects of postrevolutionary state formation, specifically routine governance that protected private property and the patri-

archal family. However, most Catholics rejected agrarian reform and the extension of federal schooling. Most contentious of all, of course, was revolutionary anticlericalism. Together, I term these three elements—agrarian reform, federal schools, and anticlericalism—the revolutionary project. By separating governance from the revolutionary project, I could reconcile Catholics' seemingly contradictory position vis-à-vis the postrevolutionary state.¹⁷

Eventually, I focused on six topics to explain how Catholics and Catholicism both facilitated and frustrated postrevolutionary state formation in the 1930s: anticlerical legislation, gubernatorial elections, socialist education, the Segunda (a second Cristero War in the 1930s), agrarian reform, and indigenism.

Anticlerical legislation provides an obvious starting point to understand the religious question. In the early 1930s, almost every Mexican state passed harsh *ley de cultos* (anticlerical regulations) which licensed priests to strictly control their numbers, location, and activities. Some such laws even prohibited parochial education and banned public religious practice. Catholics responded in numerous ways, among them by voting.

At first glance, examining Mexican elections to understand Catholic political behavior seems counterproductive. After all, balloting was often fraudulent, and the electoral process was in theory closed to counterrevolutionary candidates. In fact, elections served a vital role in Mexico's revolutionary democracy, a system with both exclusive and inclusive traits. Key elected officials, including many governors, generally came from a relatively small clique known as the Revolutionary Family and were ultimately nominated by its paterfamilias (Plutarco Elías Calles from July 1928 to July 1935, then Lázaro Cárdenas until November 1940).

Once tapped, however, candidates had to turn out the vote in order to claim office. Alcohol and money were commonly used to boost electoral turnout, and at times voters were transported in buses or trains across state lines. Electoral chicanery was not without risks, though, because the press and defrauded candidates could object. Fraud and apathy among the population made legitimate votes all the more valuable because they were harder to nullify or ignore. Candidates and their key campaign aides relied on intermediaries who mobilized clients and captive corporate groups—ideally worker and peasant associations, but in practice often Catholic associations. These electoral compromises were not always honored, and electoral brokers often sought political offices, contracts, or other favors for themselves.

Nevertheless, widespread bargaining between candidates and brokers meant that electoral results often expressed genuine social demands.

Ironically, electoral bargaining represented one of the few ways politically excluded “reactionary” groups like Catholics could have their demands redressed. In state after state, many crucial brokers were in fact Catholic. Catholic men voted frequently, and pious women, although denied suffrage, actively participated in electoral campaigns as well. What I term the *voto morado* (literally, the purple vote; figuratively, Catholic ballots cast in supposedly revolutionary politics) mattered immensely in many states.¹⁸

A close examination of Catholics’ electoral participation sheds light on their role in state formation. It also brings into sharper focus the religious question in what Michael Erwin calls “middle politics.”¹⁹ Not just regional and local officials, but also “military leaders, the business community, the Church, urban-based workers, and even students, not to mention regional caciques,” dominated this sphere.²⁰ Historical studies based solely on a narrow range of primary sources, such as letters from peasant communities to presidents, underestimate the extent to which middle politics mediated relations between the state and subaltern groups. Certainly, in spite of a degree of manipulation, peasants generally accepted mediators who represented them to distant authorities.²¹ To avoid lapsing into what Quetzil Castañeda called the “ventriloquism of representing the subaltern voice,” I focus on why and how popular groups made tactical alliances with mediators rather than trying to re-create their worldview.²²

Nonviolent Catholic resistance to federal schools serves as my third focus. Vaughan’s pioneering study of schooling in the 1930s in the states of Puebla and Sonora suggests that Catholic responses to the Secretaría de Educación Pública (or SEP, the Ministry of Public Education) ranged from violence to participation.²³ My research suggests that the impact of Catholic resistance to federal schools was much greater than previously thought and was never really neutralized by a hegemonic pact with the postrevolutionary state.

A close reading of Catholic anti-SEP discourse and a careful examination of Catholic networks that convened illegal attendance strikes, set up underground parochial “home” schools, and covertly distributed the bishops’ pastoral letters show that women played crucial roles in both. While I agree with Kristina Boylan that Catholic women were neither counterrevolutionary dupes of the clergy and *latifundists* nor motivated by a backward-looking Marianism, their attempts to revitalize the Church brought them into direct conflict with the revolutionary project.²⁴ While they might have sought to

refashion this project over the long run, in the short run they sought to thwart or capture it.

Activist Catholic women were animated by Catholic values, energized by the Church's radial strategy of decentralized resistance, and tenuously linked to hubs of clergy and formal lay leaders. Religious networks that resisted socialist education exerted considerable pull over civil society at a time when the institutional Church was debilitated and the postrevolutionary state was still feeble. Moreover, these largely autonomous groups made up mainly of Catholic women participated in electoral campaigns, opposed agrarian reform, and at times supported the Segunda, or second Cristero War. The latter is my fourth focus.

For much of the 1930s, *ejidos* (collective land grants), federal schools and teachers, and other government agents were attacked in the name of defending the Catholic Church. Even the boldest and best armed never threatened to overthrow the state by seizing strategic towns or defeating the army. Instead, they menaced soft targets and then melted away into hamlets and hills before the army arrived.²⁵ Scrutiny of segunda violence in Guerrero and Guanajuato suggests it was of two different sorts: offensive and defensive. The former involved well-armed, all-male paramilitary bands operating with premeditation and strategic purpose. Offensive segunda violence was often linked to landowners and often blurred into white terror (violence aimed at ending agrarian reform or unionization). Defensive segunda violence, on the other hand, was usually a spontaneous, localized reaction to a specific provocation, such as iconoclasm or rumors of teacher immorality. Perpetrators often included women and even older children. Generally speaking, defensive violence proved much less lethal than offensive violence.

Segunda attacks against *ejidatarios* (peasants who received collective land grants) alerted me to a fifth area where Catholics and Catholic belief profoundly undermined state formation: land reform. Although the institutional Church tried to prevent its formal lay organizations and clergy from supporting segunda violence, it also condemned agrarian reform as an unacceptable affront to the natural right of private property. Moreover, affinity, kinship, and clientelistic connections linked many Catholic lay leaders and priests to landowners. Shared economic interest helped unite them: tithes were still collected in much of Mexico, and agrarian reform imperiled them. Antiagrarianism in the institutional Church, then, was not just ideological or cultural. It has been underappreciated because economic factors have been downplayed in much of the recent historiography of modern Latin

America.²⁶ Writing of the colonial “spiritual economy,” Kathryn Burns warns historians against neatly dividing “spiritual” and “economic” factors.²⁷ This is a concern for postcolonialists as well. By exploring Catholic antipathy to agrarian reform, I take up William Sewell’s challenge to pit the imperialistic paradigms of meaning (Geertzian culture), scarcity, and power relations (Foucauldian discourse) against each other. I posit that all three are at play in Mexico’s postrevolutionary religious question.²⁸

Initially, I assumed the Church in Mexico was a white or mestizo institution. As I examined how Maya, Amuzgo, Otomí, and Nahua Catholics reacted to the revolutionary project, my sixth and final focus emerged: indigenism. Revolutionary indigenism valorized the Mesoamerican past as the font of national identity and promised Indians modernity as part of state formation.²⁹ As a result, postrevolutionary state formation deeply divided some indigenous communities, pitting younger men and some women who fought in revolutionary militias, supported land reform, and at times demanded schooling, against elders who were tied to the syncretic Catholic *cofradía* (lay religious brotherhood). Fully examining the religious question required taking into account revolutionary indigenism’s impact on religious practice, and indigenous Catholics’ participation in the conflict over it.

Because most Catholic resistance was extrainstitutional, finding archival sources proved challenging. Actors carrying out illegal activities such as truancy strikes and *segunda* violence had good reason to cover their tracks. The institutional Church’s documents referred to these processes obliquely if at all. State actors noted their impact but were usually only dimly aware of the actors and ideologies behind them.³⁰ I aggregated information gleaned from three different types of archival sources (the Mexican government, the Church, and the U.S. State Department) as well as periodicals and published secondary sources. Mosaicing these sources fleshed out middle politics and shed light on the ideological underpinnings and social foundation of Catholic resistance.

In terms of Mexican archival sources, I drew on the Dirección General de Gobierno collection in the Archivo General de la Nación, specifically on complaints of violations of anticlerical legislation and detailed reports of gubernatorial and mayoral elections. Documents at the Fideicomiso Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanco proved indispensable in sorting out gubernatorial elections. Finally, the Secretaría de Educación Pública’s archives contained a rich, at times almost ethnographical trove of inspectors’ and superintendents’ reports on rural communities and the place of Catholicism in them.

To try to get away from state-centric narratives of the religious question, I utilized several Church archives. The archives of the Secretariado Social Mexicano and Acción Católica Mexicana yielded a wealth of information about lay activists. The Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México was especially useful, as it houses the correspondence of the two leaders of the national episcopate, Pascual Díaz and Luis María Martínez. The private archive of a key civilian leader of the *cristeros* (rebels in the first Cristero War) and champion of the *segunderos* (fighters in the second Cristero War, or Segunda), Miguel Palomar y Vizcaya, sheds light on Catholic advocates of armed struggle and the institutional Church's attempts to suppress it.³¹

To complement Mexican archival sources, I drew on Mexican newspapers and the U.S. State Department's consular reports. Each had its own fortes and foibles. A North American diplomat said of his informants, "among foreign residents in Mexico the longer the residence, the less reliable the information." Mexican or foreigner, their information was often distorted by "racial, political, or business bias."³² Still, consular officials took a keen interest in the religious question and tried to keep a finger on the pulse of regional affairs, including elections and the Segunda. The most famous (and easily available) Mexico City daily newspapers, *Excelsior* and *El Universal*, had comparatively little to say about these topics. However, in the national *hemeroteca* (periodical archive), I stumbled on two semiweekly national newspapers, *Hombre Libre* and *La Opinión*, filled with articles that often reflected Catholic sensibilities.

Questioning Religion in Scholarly Literature

For the most part, the scholars who researched postrevolutionary Mexico's religious question thirty or forty years ago could not tap the archival sources mentioned above. But their conclusions still echo in scholarship today. Jean Meyer, Lyle Brown, and Albert Michaels depicted Church-state relations as evolving from conflict provoked by Calles (1926–35) to mutual accommodation under Cárdenas (1935–40). To court popular Catholic support for his progressive agrarian and prolabor policies, they argue, Cárdenas sought a truce with the high clergy. By rejecting revolutionary anticlericalism, the story goes, Cárdenas pacified the countryside, garnered the Church's support for his landmark nationalization of Mexico's oil in March 1938, and denied opposition politicians Catholic votes. In other words, the ruling party's social peace was predicated upon a high-level mutual understanding between Mexico's populist president and Church prelates.³³

More recently, Marjorie Becker sought to correct the materialism of the Marxist-inspired revisionism by dwelling on the symbolic and aesthetic in Catholicism. However, she essentially confirmed the revisionists' idea that Cárdenas solved the religious question by ending controversial anticlerical policies.³⁴

Vaughan's pathbreaking analysis of federal education made a theoretically innovative and empirically grounded argument that federal schools were crucial sites of cultural negotiation between the postrevolutionary state and Catholics.³⁵ Peter Reich leveraged recently opened Church archives to look at a very different kind of negotiation: pacts between revolutionary elites and the high clergy at the state and national levels. For him, this "hidden revolution" yielded a mutual accommodation that circumvented legal and institutional anticlericalism. Ultimately Reich, like Vaughan, argued that by the end of the 1930s, consensus and cooperation prevailed over conflict in Church-state relations.³⁶ In a series of articles, Adrian Bantjes reached a diametrically opposed conclusion, demonstrating how revolutionary anticlericalism provoked pervasive Catholic resentment and resistance. Bantjes called for a new, broader definition of political culture, one sensitive to religious conflict and cognizant of the human cost borne by Mexican Catholics during the Church-state conflict.³⁷ In different ways, Vaughan, Reich, and Bantjes each set new standards for methodological innovation and theoretical sophistication, but they required reconciliation. This study sets out to understand how Catholics could both fight a *Kulturkampf* and at the same time collude and cooperate in the creation of a postrevolutionary state.

To do so, I focus on the regional level to capture both national and grassroots perspectives. My approach to Catholicism follows those of Vanderwood and Rugeley, who examine the interplay of regional cultures, localized sacralities, and individual priests and lay leaders.³⁸ While the level of analysis is regional, my study examines the religious question of the 1930s in four quite distinct states. Three of the best regional studies of Catholics in regional politics—those of Jennie Purnell, Matthew Butler, and Chris Boyer—all focus on one state, Michoacán. Purnell argued that each community's decision to rebel in the *Cristiada* resulted from a complex series of historical factors, including local religious practice, petty political factionalism, popular notions of property rights, and interaction with individual officials and clergy.³⁹ Butler's detailed microhistories of rural parishes convincingly explained how localized social constructions of Catholicism and relations with priests determined whether peasant communities supported

the Cristero insurgency, embraced the postrevolutionary project, or remained neutral.⁴⁰ Christopher Boyer stressed how deeply the ideology of Catholic nationalism ran in much of Michoacán.⁴¹ Butler's and Purnell's monographs ended with the Cristiada's termination in 1929, while Boyer's ended in 1935—before the remarkable re-Christianization of much of Mexico took place in the late 1930s.

The Argument

To cast the religious question in a new light, I begin by examining its national context and considering it from the Catholic perspective in chapter 1. Rather than representing the Church as a single monolithic institution, I analyze key constituents such as bishops, priests, and formal lay organizations like Mexican Catholic Action (Acción Católica Mexicana or ACM, the umbrella group for all officially sanctioned lay groups). State repression and institutional weaknesses hindered the operation of the ACM in many regions until the end of the 1930s. Consequently, Rome and episcopal leadership authorized decentralized resistance via front groups like a supposedly independent civic organization for parents known as the UNPF, or Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia (National Union of Parents).

Chapter 2 explores the religious question in the southeastern state of Campeche. Inspired by Tomás Garrido Canabal's Tabasco and Marxist-inflected Catholicism, the SEP made Campeche's Maya villages an important laboratory for the revolutionary project. Federal educators opened Mexico's most radical normal school, set up peasant cooperatives, angled for influence over regional elections, and tried to shake Catholics' faith. Catalyzed by iconoclasm and the specter of a collectivized economy, Campeche's Catholic mestizo ranchers and merchants fought back. Informal anti-SEP lay groups, as well as semiofficial syncretic *gremios* (guilds), channeled resistance against federal teachers. Several key Catholic leaders were also local bosses in the nominally revolutionary regional socialist party. The Catholic–Socialist axis bested the radical teacher–peasant bloc in the decisive 1935 gubernatorial election.

Chapter 3 explores how Bishop José de Jesús Manríquez Zárate built his newly minted Diocese of Huejutla (Hidalgo) to showcase social Catholicism. He ministered to his Nahua *inditos* while blessing the tithes and labor drafts that sustained a racialized social hierarchy. To counter his Catholic indigenism, federal teachers used his diocese as a revolutionary testing ground for

their brand of indigenism. The SEP's point man, Inspector Francisco Zárata, founded schools and advanced agrarian reform. But his iconoclasm and treatment of female students seemed to confirm Catholics' worst fears about federal teachers' true intentions. As a result, Catholic mass mobilization complicated efforts to dismantle *cacicazgos*. Ironically, Cárdenas's hand-picked governor allied with local politicians who were protecting Catholics, which sealed the fate of the revolutionary project.

Beatas (pious laywomen), the *voto morado*, and *segunderos* in the famously fractious southwestern state of Guerrero are analyzed in chapter 4. Geographically fragmented, desperately poor, and ethnically divided, *bronco* (wild) Guerrero long defied national and Church authorities. During the 1930s, the revolutionary project floundered, and the decentralized Catholic strategy of resistance thrived. *Beatas* helped elect pro-Catholic, antiagrarian candidates. Catholic networks led by clergy, *hacendados*, and elected officials coordinated truancy strikes against schools and repressed *agraristas*. They also eluded Church discipline. A close reading of *segunda* attacks reveals two distinct types of violence, offensive and defensive. In the former, male bands (some bi-ethnic) led by mestizo landowners deployed antiagrarian and anti-teacher violence strategically against the revolutionary project; in the latter, Catholics (including Indians) of both sexes and all ages reacted spontaneously to specific insults to religious beliefs. By the end of the 1930s, Catholic authority reasserted itself through the ACM.

Chapter 5 examines a series of Catholic *cacicazgos* in Guanajuato that coexisted with a dense web of formal Catholic groups. Together, they delegitimized the revolutionary project, especially federal schooling, and encouraged *segunderos*. Ex-cristero Salvador Azanza, scion of a pious land-owning dynasty, used his social standing and ties to the federal military to carve out a fiefdom across the northern half of the state. Azanza championed conservative Catholic interests by surreptitiously aiding *segunderos*, personally assaulting two SEP inspectors, and murdering *agraristas* and a key Cardenista leader with impunity. Attempts to expand *ejidos* (collective land grants made by the federal government) and SEP schools in Ciudad González led to a bloody skirmish with Catholics on March 28, 1936, that left nineteen dead and raised a national outcry. President Cárdenas sermonized against fanatics martyring revolutionaries yet accelerated the state's retreat from anticlericalism. At the same time, Cárdenas redoubled agrarian reform in northern Guanajuato, hoping land and an end to Jacobinism would refill schools and legitimize the postrevolutionary regime. Yet his overtures to

Catholics were largely spurned, and ejidatarios had to be imported from neighboring states.

I conclude by arguing that the religious question was never satisfactorily answered by Mexico's postrevolutionary politicians. By the late 1930s, Cárdenas had presided over a dismantling of the most egregious anticlerical legislation, and socialist education was on its last legs. Many key Catholic leaders were ensconced in the state, as electoral brokers drew on Catholic sociability and symbols to barter for political spoils. At the same time, this was in many ways an uneasy and incomplete truce. While the institutional Church acquiesced to the postrevolutionary state's governance and suppressed the *Segunda*, Catholics retained a lasting antipathy to key elements of the revolutionary project, such as agrarian reform and revolutionary schooling. Consequently, Mexico's predominantly Catholic civil society denied the revolutionary ruling party generalized consent.