

## CATHOLIC MOBILIZATIONS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MEXICO: *From Pious Lynchings and Fascist Salutes to a “Catholic 1968,” Maoist Priests, and the Post-Cristero Apocalypse*

This special issue, fruit of an American Historical Association panel on the entanglements of Catholicism and nationhood after Mexico’s Cristero War (1926–29), offers five new histories that cumulatively give the lie to anything so monolithic as a twentieth-century “Catholic history.”<sup>1</sup> As is well known, the Cristero War was a major armed confrontation between the Church and the postrevolutionary state and their respective bases, followed, as the story goes, by an uneasy truce and an enduring coexistence lasting for decades, to the 1950s and perhaps to the 1970s.

Here, however, few if any of the standard tropes of historiography in the years following 1929—a cozy *modus vivendi* between church and state, a torpid Acción Católica, an apolitical *guadalupanismo*—in a nutshell, a Catholic *pax priista*, hold true, or remain true for long. Just as historians have recently deconstructed the myth of an unchanging PRI state, they are now reappraising the idea of its Catholic *alter ego*: a complicit, clericalist, and hegemonic Church.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the contributors to this issue present five supremely diverse histories relating Catholics’ fierce political commitments, white-hot ideological conflicts, and pastoral innovations, if not radicalisms. Five different answers emerge, therefore, to the questions that animate this special issue: “What was the Catholic nation?” and “What was Catholicism?”

My thanks to Gema Kloppe-Santamaría and Luis Herrán Ávila, panel conveners and guest editors of this special issue, for the invitation to comment.

1. “Forging a Catholic Nation Amidst a Secular State: Religious Militancy and Contentious Politics in Twentieth-Century Mexico,” American Historical Association Meeting, New York, January 3–6, 2020.

2. For example, Paul Gillingham and Benjamin Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

The obvious conclusion is that there was neither a unified Catholic nation nor a homogeneous or stable Catholicism. Instead, through the authors' contributions we follow a series of vivid, sometimes disturbing Catholic reimaginings tied to changing concepts of religion, the Church, and revolution, to say nothing of regional and worldwide shifts: fascism, the Cold War, Vatican II, liberation theology, the Global Sixties, and bureaucratic authoritarianism, to name a few. Catholics were neither above, nor impervious to, nor irrelevant to any of this, even if some of the intellectual and pastoral formulations explored here, especially for the later decades, were clearly minoritarian. Maoist and traditionalist clergy in the 1970s were few in number, like Catholic regicides in the 1930s. Yet their significance lies not so much in numbers as in what they say about Catholicism's ineluctable importance as a processor of rapid historical change in twentieth-century Mexico. We need to understand them because they defined the limits of what was Catholicly possible. Nonetheless, the questions of how these religious actors and movements related to Catholicism's enormous religious, social, and political field, and what mainline Catholics thought of them, are sometimes open ones that only studies of parishes, lay associations, and less politicized devotional habits will answer.

As a whole, the articles chart the rise and fall of different kinds of militancy (some would say intransigence), with the 1960s representing a point of inflection. Thus, we go from Gema Kloppe-Santamaría's survey of the theological and social bases of religious violence in the 1930s to Julia Young's transnational reading of 1940s *sinarquistas*, with their vision of the nation as neo-Christendom, to be forged through the overthrow of, or mass mobilization against, the liberal-revolutionary state. We then move on to studies by Jaime Pensado and Jorge Puma Crespo of dissident, progressive, even revolutionary, Catholicisms in the 1960s and 1970s, with Pensado offering a history of Jesuit radical priests involved in labor organizing in the lead-up and aftermath to 1968, and Puma Crespo providing a history of Catholic-Maoist militancy in the northern region of La Laguna in the 1970s.

It would be hard to imagine a greater contrast, even so, with Luis Herrán Ávila's analysis of the imploding constellations of "traditionalist" (anti-modernist, anti-Vatican II) Catholicism in the same decades. Traditionalism, despite its name, represented the radical negation of postconciliar Catholicism and was thus a strictly 1960s and 1970s phenomenon, and in the post-Vatican II Catholic world a countercultural one. The ideological, left-right contortions of Mexican Catholics at this juncture were extreme and remarkably suggestive of the stresses that Cold War politics placed on the very idea of a universal Catholicism.

Catholicism's ideological interlocutors and political flags came thick and fast, giving the sense of dramatic change that Catholic actors experienced in the

aftermath of the Cristero conflict and going into the Cold War. Nonetheless, there were common threads. These histories are often violent ones, sometimes in a physical sense, from the 1930s lynchings of socialist teachers and 1960s land occupations carried out in religion's name, to the tortures suffered by priests in Mexico's *guerra sucia* and the vandalism of 1970s traditionalist Catholics who daubed swastikas on the walls of sell-out "liberal" clergy. But there was nearly always violence in a symbolic sense, whether ideological, theological, or rhetorical. Long after the Cristero war, Catholics' entry into the political realm remained, therefore, a metaphorically violent or bloody experience, showing how unsettled and volatile the frontier between religion and politics remained.

A second theme in many of the articles (Kloppe-Santamaría, Young, Herrán Ávila) is the legacy of the 1920s Cristero Rebellion—Mexico's Catholic *Iliad*—and of divergent efforts by ecclesiastical and lay groups to resignify and own it. To the integralist *sinarquista* right of the 1940s and the traditionalists of the 1970s, the historical exemplar of the *Cristiada* became a kind of infallibility dogma for would-be nation-building and Church-building, not unlike the myth of the Revolution. Just as the Mexican state created a highly embellished legitimating narrative of itself as the product of a popular revolution, radical Mexican Catholics after 1929 evoked the Cristero War as their touchstone.

The Cristeros' never-say-die defense of the Church's rights showed them what was "true" and what was "false," whether their idea was to oppose political revolutionism in any form (social reform under *cardenismo*; student rebellion in 1968) or, worse, the terrible revolutions from within (1960s *aggiornamiento*, 1970s liberationism). This legacy conferred authority—enough to defy the bishops or Rome—on those that could wield it, from Kloppe-Santamaría's tyrannicides and Young's sun-crazed *sinarquista* colonists to Herrán Ávila's fractious super-ultramontanes. Sometimes, however, this pure, *cristero*-style intransigence is where we least expect to find it: progressive Catholics, rupturing with the staid 1960s hierarchy, retied the thread that led from *Rerum Novarum*-era social Catholicism to the *Cristiada*, but veered left. Catholics staked out these rival claims with internecine fury. As with the Revolution's own myth, ideological fatigue eventually set in. The *cristero* mythos played less well for the 1970s Catholic right than it once had, even among Catholics; traditionalist priest Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga and other fringe figures shook their fists at Church and state, but there were no peasant hordes at their backs.

Subsequent invocations of *Cristo Rey* have not attracted sufficient historical attention (the invocations continue, even now): by the 1970s the mainline Church was rapidly reclaiming social and political space from the decadent PRI regime, often under the guise of *guadalupanismo* (the building of the New

Basilica, the 1979 papal visit). *Cristerismo* was at a discount, and yet to bond with the political Catholics gathered in the ostensibly center-right National Action Party, or PAN.

Third, these are histories of contestation: of furious lay attacks on the authority of a pragmatic (or hypocritical) episcopate that made its peace with the revolutionary state in 1929 (Kloppe-Santamaría); of *sinarquista* nationalism contradicting the bilateralism of Mexico and the US's World War II, Church-endorsed effort (Young); of worker-centered pastoral experiments leading priests to ally with radicalized Mexican youth rather than the PRI (Pensado); of priests' furious response to Church complicity in the inequities of Mexico's "economic miracle" (Puma Crespo); and of attacks on the authority of Paul VI by Catholics who considered the pope himself to be a Jewish-Marxist imposter (Herrán Ávila).

Fourth, because they represent Catholic critiques of mainstream Church pragmatism, the articles offer interesting histories of Catholic subcultures. The Jesuits crop up in most of them, be it in Kloppe-Santamaría's article on Cristero-era tyrannicides or the study of the Jesuitical cold warrior (and excommunicate) Sáenz Arriaga, rendered in all his unhinged, schismatic glory by Herrán Ávila. Escamilla García, the Jesuit worker-martyr of 1977 who is a protagonist in Pensado's analysis, is clearly a figure who connects the earlier and later periods discussed here. This is because his career began in the embers of 1930s Catholic militancy but flowered in the progressive 1960s and 1970s. Thus, he is an exceptionally important presence, whose career should make us question year-zero readings of 1968. But even Puma Crespo's radical Monterrey priest, José Batarse Charur, was an alumnus of the Jesuit-run Pío Latino College and cut his teeth formulating a feminist eschatology in the pages of the Jesuit magazine *Christus*. These histories are, in one sense, a record of the Jesuits' many bifurcations, as the Church's Company and socially militant vanguard. In Pensado's study, perhaps, Marist priests stressing charity towards the alienated share center stage. Ecclesiastical identities, not just Catholic ones, still mattered through this period (c. 1930-75), though one wonders where the Dominicans, the Misioneros del Espíritu Santo, and others were in all this.

More generally, the articles describe a kind of Catholic Left and Right, or progressive-versus-conservative tension. In Herrán Ávila's article, we see this binary taken to its logical, or rather theological, conclusion. By the 1970s, the debate was so far gone that disagreements among Catholics were coming to be defined as "true" and "false" Catholicisms, not just political differences, not least among Catholic *ultras* who denounced their nearest foes as *las falsas*

*derechas* (“the fake Right”) and the pope himself as an impostor. Thus, a consolidated, quiescent, and clerical Catholicism after 1929—fatigued by the *Cristiada* and awaiting the steroid shots of Vatican II and the emergence of liberation theology (c. 1970)—is perhaps as much a myth as the uppercase Revolution. No less than the regime, the Church was a contested field of force, the control of elites ever unstable, in a perpetual state of Catholic decentering and recentering. The Mexican Church shown here also experienced its own “Long Cold War,” rendering it more lifelike and less exceptional, and revealing it to have been impacted by regional and global conflicts and trends.

Fifth, these articles point to the growing internationalism of Mexican Catholicism, with the exception of Kloppe-Santamaría’s study, with its more local focus. Hence, Herrán Ávila’s post-Cristeros with their obvious ties to *lefebvrisme* (the rejection by liturgical conservatives, starting in France, of Vatican II’s vernacularized rituals); Young’s Hispanophile *sinarquistas*; Pensado’s “prophetic” priests, radicalized in part through exposure to the regional Church (the Latin American Episcopal Conference, CELAM) or to Franco-Belgian militancy (the Young Christian Workers, or JOC); and Puma Crespo’s priests, influenced by Parisian Maoists and Argentine and Chilean “priests for the Third World.”

How “Mexican,” therefore, are the stories presented by the authors, or how representative are they of other regional or global stories of Catholic radicalism and recalcitrance? The answer, of course, is qualified in both senses. The afterburners of the *Cristiada* were strong, but Catholic Mexico was not altogether exceptional; as we see, it sometimes forged its own path, for instance, in developing a progressive Catholicism that borrowed from liberation theology yet innovated within the national Church’s own tradition of social militancy. Some features emblematic elsewhere, for instance, Christian Democracy, largely bypassed Mexico. Then again, outside influences were sometimes clear, given the myriad networks through which Mexican Catholics interacted with their co-religionists elsewhere. If nothing else, it is clear that, compared to the years before 1929, later generations of Mexican Catholics possessed a widening, more regional, array of interlocutors, not just Rome or that other old favorite, ultramontane France. More comparative histories would give us a clearer answer.<sup>3</sup>

3. See Yves Solís, Matthew Butler, and Camille Foulard, eds., *Cruce de fronteras: la influencia de los Estados Unidos y América Latina en los proyectos de nación Católicos en México, siglo XX* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Atzacapozalco, 2020).

## THE NEW MARTYRS: CRISTERO VIOLENCE IN THE 1930s

Turning to individual contributions, Kloppe-Santamaría's article, "Martyrs, Fanatics, and Pious Militants: Religious Violence and the Secular State in 1930s Mexico," is part of a systematic attempt to reconsider the relationship between religion, nationalism, and violence in the Maximato and in *cardenista* Mexico. It purposefully excludes the asymmetrical military belligerence of the Cristeros, to tackle other forms of exerting and signifying Catholic violence.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the article moves towards a typology of Catholic violence, whose prevalence, the author argues, has often been read through a liberal-revolutionary filter and naturalized as evidence of religion's "fanatical" character. For revolutionaries, Catholicism was indeed a medium for base human passions: irrationalism, intolerance, exclusion built around ancient taboos, persecution, and self-righteousness.<sup>5</sup>

In place of this reductionist view, the article proposes a tripartite formulation, and tracks the DNA of each part. First, Kloppe-Santamaría identifies a kind of sovereignty-based violence, prevalent in Mexico's central highlands, in which profanations of sacred local precincts and icons caused ecstatic *pueblo* tumults. She even seems to suggest that there was an "indigenous" *Cristiada*, its defensive violence rooted in the parish and *pueblo* and expressed through religious forms of lynching and lethally enforced community discipline.<sup>6</sup> Next, she identifies a kind of willful, "contentious martyrdom"—a Mexican "Joan of Arc" complex—in which Catholic nationalists (urbane, middle class, often Jesuit-coached) tested the theological limits of martyrdom, offering their own lives in atonement for life violently taken, their blood turning as purple as "the robes of the King of Kings," as one Cristero poet had it. Finally, Kloppe-Santamaría identifies a kind of Catholic paramilitarism in which groups of former Cristero urban activists and others gathered in underground meetings, denounced the pusillanimous bishops, and targeted socialist rural teachers and other state agents.

The article skillfully reconstructs the acts and the social and intellectual roots of this trifecta. Ultimately, we see a typology or matrix of Catholic violence in which popular or lay reworkings of the Church's theology, nationalist sentiment, community anxieties over territory, and ecclesiastical ambivalence

4. See Mark Lawrence, *Insurgency, Counter-insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico, 1926–1929: Fighting Cristeros* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

5. If this were true, we would expect levels of violence in Mexico to have declined in line with secularization and/or religious diversification. Sadly, we all know that this has not happened.

6. Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

provided the causal or framing factors. One of the most interesting sections involves the verbal violence that militants of the Liga (the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty, LNDLR) reserved for the Mexican episcopate. Perhaps unforgiving of the hierarchy's condemnation of lay Catholic violence during the Cristero conflict, Liga members performed theatrical plays in underground settings in which the bishops were denounced as "schismatics" because they submitted to state authority in 1929.

Over all, the religious violence outlined in Kloppe-Santamaría's paper seems to derive from two somewhat contradictory sources. One is a kind of cathartic community reaction to anticlerical provocation, tied to a defense of local, even indigenous, Catholicism; the other is a Catholic nationalism espoused by disgruntled elements connected to the LNDLR, the Cristeros' sponsoring organization. This was ultimately a conflict of theological interpretation and authority because, of course, the hierarchy had long outlawed armed resistance and was trying to make its peace with the revolutionary state. One of the article's most interesting features, then, is that it shows the remarkable resilience of Liga elements in Mexico, just as it underscores the very imperfect and contested hegemony that the hierarchy established over the defeated Cristero lay activists after 1929. By highlighting disputes over theological notions such as martyrdom, for instance, or LNDLR accusations that conciliatory clergy were "schismatical," the article shows how a kind of internal Catholic "culture war," filled with theological and political implications for intransigent Catholicism, developed from recriminations over the Cristeros' defeat.

This article also raises important questions of gender and indigeneity that suggest a reason other than mere ecclesiastical disapproval as to why Liga nationalism ultimately failed, namely that it was too narrow. It seems that Liga demands for regime change and the building of a Catholic nation were tied to notions of gender and race. The Liga's Catholic nationalism seemed to rest on a soldierly concept of Catholic masculinity, or on an ascetic "muscular Christianity" of the kind promoted by the Jesuits.<sup>7</sup> Yet the *agents* of much Catholic violence, especially of the communitarian kind, were often women—*indígenas* and market women especially. Were Liga mystics and indigenous Catholics therefore really fighting for the same thing? What place, one wonders, would indigenous Catholics have had in the Catholic nation? If indigenous Catholic violence was discrete from other kinds, what did drive it?

7. Compare Robert Weis, *For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

## IT COULDN'T HAPPEN HERE—OR THERE: FASCISM, SINARQUISMO, AND THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

Julia Young's contribution, "Fascists, Nazis, or Something Else? Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista in the US Media, 1937–1945," offers a transnational reading of sinarquismo and thus builds on her earlier work on the Cristero War.<sup>8</sup> The primary focus is on newspaper coverage of the UNS in the United States, of which there was a surprising amount. US public debates about sinarquismo and its putative connections to international fascism were central not only to the movement's rhetorical construction but to its political future, Young argues, given the United States' importance as regional hegemon. Indeed, the debate mattered because it would partly shape US governmental responses to the organization. UNS also had plenty to lose: it relied on migrants' remittances, had chapters in the United States, and promoted itself by cultivating US Catholic opinion makers.

Young's article shows that UNS was more than a Bajío-based nationalistic organization. In fact, UNS was a transnational actor not easy to understand unless we collapse an exclusively nation-centered frame of analysis and include in our considerations its reception in the United States. Young's work is a historiographical advance: while earlier historians of sinarquismo tied the UNS to elite/bourgeois clandestine networks (and hence to conservative Catholic economic interests within Mexico), Young's work leads a scholarly trend toward seeing the movement in international context.<sup>9</sup> This developing scholarship challenges a rather conspiratorial reading of the UNS as a front movement for Bajío *iluminati* seeking to break cardenismo by manipulating a Catholic peasantry. Viewing the sinarquistas transnationally allows Young to refresh the rather ill-tempered, false-consciousness debates about the UNS, not least the question of whether sinarquistas were fascists, Nazis, or, as she puts it, "something else." Young goes much further than other historians in explaining *why* the UNS was so mischaracterized, not least in the United States, and why this debate was nonetheless a meaningful one, not just a postrevolutionary or World War II canard.

8. Julia Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

9. Nathan Ellstrand, "Reclaiming the Patria?: *Sinarquismo* in the United States, 1937–1946" (PhD research, Loyola University, in progress); John Smith, "'True Patriots for the Salvation of the Fatherland': Sinarquistas and the Struggle for Post-Revolutionary Mexico." (2014). [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist\\_etds/70](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_etds/70). Compare Pablo Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu: el movimiento sinarquista en El Bajío, 1932–1951*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1992). Daniel Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity: Urban State Formation in 1940s León, Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).



The most interesting section of Young's article is the fine-grained study of US press reportage on *sinarquismo*, which reveals why the organization generated such intense coverage and was suspected of crypto-fascism. This, Young contends, was partly because fears of fascist fifth columns were given credence by reports of UNS colonists announcing plans for Texas townships with names such as "Sinarcópolis." Some US commentators feared that Salvador Abascal, *sinarquismo*'s desert messiah, was a "führer," a Catholic Buzz Windrip. In the context of US rhetoric that presaged a descent into World War II, therefore, a parallel war of words about UNS also broke out. This was waged, on one hand, by concerned antifascist commentators who noticed disturbing parallels between *sinarquismo* and European fascisms (particularly Spanish Falangism), and on the other by Catholic apologists who applauded what they deemed a populist and nationalist movement with democratic aspirations and a Christian conscience. Because most US appreciations of *sinarquismo* were both secular and Eurocentric, however, they led to mischaracterizations, about the UNS's alleged subservience to the Nazis, for instance. Conversely, Catholic clergy and intellectuals rushed to the UNS's defense, not just because it was semi-confessional but because they viewed it as a stabilizing, democratizing agent.

In addition to describing the global geopolitical backdrop, Young notes US commentators' solipsism. Most tended to ignore the organization's Catholic identity, the history of Mexican state-Church relations that informed its creation, or UNS's similarity to other nationalistic movements in Latin America (for example, Argentine *peronismo* and Peruvian *aprismo*). The article also raises important questions about the diplomatic impact of *sinarquismo*. Was a fixation with the UNS in some way a projection of US fears concerning Mexico's reliability as an ally and the security of its southern border, if not the hemisphere more broadly? Was condemning *sinarquismo* perhaps a way to sanitize relations with postrevolutionary Mexico and present the latter as an ally waging a home-front struggle against fascism and anti-Americanism? Lastly, were fears surrounding the UNS's supposed atavism connected in any way to fears of a racialized or cultural (that is, Catholic) Mexican other? Perhaps the United States feared that people with brown skins were more likely to be manipulated into wearing brown shirts.

It would be interesting nonetheless to know more about how the perception of a *sinarquista* "threat" connects to the transnational social history of *sinarquismo* and its everyday aspects, as recorded, for instance, in family archives and epistolary sources.<sup>10</sup> One wonders, for example, if the US press coverage of

10. José Orozco, *Receive Our Memories: The Letters of Luz Moreno, 1950–1952* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

UNS was in any way connected to the impact of the Bracero program (1942) and US attempts to reindoctrinate migrant laborers, especially given that UNS was palpably strongest in the areas of greatest Bracero migration to the United States.<sup>11</sup> How was *sinarquismo* inflected by migrant experiences or translated to serve migrant communities' needs in the organization's main US centers (El Paso, Los Angeles)? Finally, given that we are in a transnational setting, it would be good to know more about how the US bishops or Rome responded to *sinarquismo*. Did they have a strong stance regarding the organization's existence?

## CATHOLIC 1968ERS

Jaime Pensado's contribution, "The Silencing of Rebellious Priests in Cold War Mexico: The Case of Rodolfo Escamilla García," describes a kind of parallel "Catholic 1968" by creating a composite history of radical priests' experiences. Such experiences, it becomes apparent, went way beyond the example of the Franciscan who, in 1968 mythology, barred the doors of a Tlatelolco convent to terrified students and instead opened them to white-gloved government *pistoleros*. Pensado's chapter shows that there was a group of socially conscious clergy who refused to capitulate to regime pressure or hierarchical conformism, contradicting the image of a willfully "muted" and complicit Church. The censorship and abandonment these clergy faced from the Catholic hierarchy, as well as their experience of repression and in some cases torture in Campo Militar #1, shatter another myth: that of Mexican exceptionalism in Latin America's "Dirty Wars." Ostensibly a conservative Catholic, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-70) was not above martyring clergy.

Foremost in Pensado's striking chapter is *mihoacano* Rodolfo Escamilla García, an alumnus of the Mexican Church's seminary-in-exile at Montezuma (New Mexico). Escamilla was radicalized through exposure to *jocismo* (the Catholic methodology of the Franco-Belgian Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, JOC) and joined the Jesuits in 1944. He piloted *jocista* ideas among mineworkers in Michoacán, and then formally founded Mexico's JOC in Mexico City in 1957, working tough working-class *colonias*. Escamilla faced a backlash from conservative archbishops, but two years later he was in Cuba cheering, one suspects, the Castro revolution. In 1964, however, Miguel Darío Miranda (then primate of Mexico) removed Escamilla as JOC director. For his part, Escamilla was among priests calling on the government to dialogue with

11. See Alberto García Maldonado, *Abandoning Their Beloved Land: The Politics of Bracero Migration in Central Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

striking students in 1968. These, no doubt, were among the reasons that the hierarchy banned priests from further collaboration with JOC (1969), at which point Escamilla moved on. In 1977, he was killed in Mexico City's Colonia Roma by a young communist (and patsy for regime interests).

The closing sections show that Escamilla García was not alone. There was Mexican Catholicism's *enfant terrible*, the bishop of Cuernavaca, Sergio Méndez Arceo, whose see was the site of further experiments in liberationism and Catholic psychoanalysis. Engineer José Álvarez Icaza's Centro de Comunicación Social (CENCOS) also broke with the hierarchy and refused any Church funding because of the hierarchy's stance regarding 1968. Most hauntingly, Pensado recreates the torture of two Marist priests, Óscar Núñez and Rafael Reygadas, whose campus-based ministries and endorsement of *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo*, a leftist liberationist ecclesiastical group, made them targets of the regime. The violence they endured, alongside the hierarchy's complicity, saw one leave Mexico for France and the other, understandably, leave the Church in disgust.

Pensado offers a compelling, moving *radiografía* of radical oppositional Catholicism, repositioning the Church in relation to the "secular" 1968 without losing sight of the fact that dissident ecclesiastics (and laity) were in the minority and faced opposition from their co-religionists. The article invites questions about the extent to which such figures cohered as a group, or espoused specific Catholic identities. Why, for instance, the Marists? Some Catholics and priests saw 1968 theologically, as a moment of revelation—more than a pro-democracy movement with which they sympathized. For those who might hold such a view, it would be fascinating to know how religious ideas shaped their perspective. Did they have a prophetic commitment to social justice and democracy? Bill Cavanaugh's study of the symbolic and political struggles linking torture and the Eucharist in 1970s Chile is a model examination of the interplay of Catholic theology and the *guerra sucia*.<sup>12</sup> It is possible though, that Núñez, Reygadas, and Escamilla were just socially conscious priests, humane Christians who despite themselves were unable to dissemble or stand by as their student flocks went to prison or worse.

Pensado's article does not just nuance the Church's response to 1968 and set out a kind of typology (prophetic, pragmatic, and self-censoring priests). It helps us to understand the origins of priests' opposition to the repressive PRI project. The history of Escamilla is especially instructive, if not pivotal, given the formative

12. William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

role played in 1940s and 1950s Mexico by the jocista movement as an incubator for radical Catholic ideas, including priest-endorsed land invasions and labor mobilizations.<sup>13</sup> Jocismo thus appears as a bridge between the Leonine Social Catholicism of the 1910s and 1920s and the liberationism of the 1960s and 1970s, and as a precursor to Catholic involvement in 1968. Though Pensado notes Escamilla's formation in the Montezuma Interdiocesan Seminary, that fact is worth greater emphasis, given that Montezuma was a port of ideological entry into Mexico for jocismo.<sup>14</sup> A final question, perhaps, concerns the remembrance of Pensado's ecclesiastical protagonists, who suffered like Father Pro or León Toral. Why are they not remembered like them by the Catholic left? Why is Escamilla not Mexico's Óscar Romero?

## DECENTERING CATHOLICISM AND 1968

Jorge Puma Crespo's article, "The Nazas-Aguanaval Group: Radical Priests, Catholic Networks, and Maoist Politics in Northern Mexico," builds on Pensado's contribution and is more expansive. It both decenters the history of Mexican student radicalism, with its *capitalino*, urban, and UNAM biases, and complicates the Catholic/dissident binary of the Mexican 1960s by pointing to the existence of a frank Catholic-Maoist exchange. Puma Crespo begins by rehearsing the rise and fall of King Cotton in Mexico's Laguna region, which by the 1960s was generating pushback (strikes, land invasions) from campesinos and young provincial radicals in the Maoist group Política Popular (PP). This Maoist group also incorporated middle-class students energized by the 1960s youth revolution. Also in the mix, more importantly, were progressive Catholic priests, among them Benigno Martínez and former chemical engineering student José Batarse Charur. Batarse encouraged land squatters (*paracaidistas*) to form new urban colonies, which led to his being removed by his bishop and sent to Chiapas, a Subcomandante Marcos in a cassock. Martínez pushed for *ejidos* in the Coahuila vineyards. Together with other radical clergy they formed the Nazas-Aguanaval group, and provided a model for the Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Pueblo of the mid 1970s—a group that apparently included, almost incredibly, a youthful Onésimo Cepeda, later a complacent and politically compromised bishop of Ecatepec, near Mexico City.

13. See also Miguel J. Hernández Madrid, "Curas de pueblo y Acción Social Católica en Michoacán, 1940–1960," *Tzintzun: Revista de Estudios Históricos* 43 (2006): 49–76.

14. Matthew Butler, "¿Bienvenidos al Hotel Montezuma? Negociaciones transnacionales y la formación de un clero 'mexicano' en el exilio, 1937–1947," and "El sacerdocio de Montezuma: el jocismo franco-canadiense y la identidad clerical mexicana, 1943–1962," in *Cruce de fronteras*, Solís, Butler, and Foulard, eds., 199–225 and 423–453, respectively.

Puma Crespo offers an original regional and genealogical history of Mexican Catholic radicalism, rich with oral testimonies and archival findings from the Dirección Federal de Seguridad. Most readers who know of *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* learned of them in the scattered mentions in Roberto Blancarte's classic history of the Church in Mexico.<sup>15</sup> Puma Crespo brings both the *Sacerdotes* and Coahuila's Nazas-Aguanaval group vigorously to life. The article is very well nuanced, offering, for instance, a judicious reading of the response of the Coahuila curia, which mixed paternalist protection and a desire to prevent a schism between Coahuila's popular and institutional churches, as well as a pragmatic desire to avoid political problems with the regime of the "Institutional Revolution."

A few paths would be worth pursuing farther. One is the importance of the historic Acción Católica to this history. Martínez and Batarse, Puma Crespo suggests, were the products of postconciliar ferment—in their case, of a kind of Liberationist and Maoist inculturation process. No doubt there is much to this, but it sometimes feels as if the 1960s are being presented as too much of a watershed. In this case, the role given to the Maoism of Política Popular as ideological driver might seem too determining. The priests appear to have collaborated with Maoists but not to have identified as Maoists themselves. It also feels significant that some of Coahuila's ecclesiastical radicalism was imported from the diocese of León (in Cristero and Sinarquista Guanajuato) by priests close to the *jocista* movement. Hence I wonder if there is an additional, or linking, backstory here, too, as in Pensado's paper.

As historians update the Catholic historiography and follow the trail of pastoral and theological radicalism into the 1960s and 1970s, it becomes a significant challenge to integrate the half-lives or rearview mirror projections of previous Catholic social movements and show how their meaning and course could change over time, sometimes dramatically. Also, projecting forward, was there a legacy of the pro-Política Popular pastoral in Coahuila? Perhaps so, considering the see's current progressive incumbent, Raúl Vera, who, like *obispo rojo* Samuel Ruiz, is a *guanajuatense*.<sup>16</sup> And one can only wonder what Puma Crespo's ecclesiastical radicalism contributed to the mobilization of Chiapanecan Catholics. All told, Puma Crespo's article is a fascinating exploration of Mexico's ecclesiastical underground that will drive historians to reconsider the role of Catholics in Mexico's version of the Global Sixties and to incorporate experiences from outside the Valley of Mexico. That we have not much done

15. Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México, 1929–1982* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992).

16. Raúl Vera López with Bernardo Barranco, *El evangelio social del obispo Raúl Vera: conversaciones con Bernardo Barranco Villafán* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2014).

so, perhaps, is yet one more legacy of the Cristero era and its exultation of a “Catholic” rural Mexico.

## BACKLASH: MEXICO’S CATHOLIC FAR RIGHT

Luis Herrán Ávila’s article, “*Las Falsas Derechas: Conflict and Convergence in Mexico’s Catholic Right during the Cold War*,” follows the maturation, internecine feuding, and exhaustion of Catholic right-wing ideas rooted in Cristero-era intransigence. His article tracks three different interpretations on the “traditionalist” Catholic Right—far to the right of PAN—concerning the meaning of the Mexican Revolution and, especially, the Church’s identity in the context of a shadowy, Manichean struggle between Catholicism as Tradition and worldwide revolution.<sup>17</sup> As the article shows, “Catholic Right” is itself a misnomer; in the 1960s and 1970s of which Herrán Ávila writes, the term designated a visceral hatred of communism and the New Left and basic denominational commitment, but precious little besides. The article is a fascinating exploration of fringe Catholicism, filled as it is with intense intra-Catholic backstabbing, ideological extremism, conspiracy theories galore, paranoia, and, ultimately, apostasy. As with Kloppe-Santamaría’s Liga assassins, political differences reflected theological ones, in claims and counter-claims as to who was doing God’s work. The article shows a generation of Cristero malcontents growing old disgracefully, but nonetheless achieves the curious effect of making one warm momentarily, in retrospect, to René Capistrán Garza (b. 1898), who appears in Cristero histories as an ineffectual poseur (he sat out the hostilities while claiming to be raising a war chest in the United States). Here, however, he is the voice of reason and accommodation, who for a time in the 1950s and 1960s could identify a Catholic origin to the PRI state and achieve some kind of tolerable synthesis of Catholicism and postrevolutionary practice, though not a reconciliation.

Compare Capistrán Garza to the Jesuit Joaquín Sáenz Arriaga (b. 1899), the stand-out figure in Herrán Ávila’s article, who first emerged in 1930s Catholic student politics in Jalisco and in the 1950s was influential in the anticommunist fight at the Universidad de Puebla. By the 1960s, he was espousing intense theological anti-Semitism, denouncing ecumenical overtures to “the Jewry” and the Church’s new vernacular liturgy as a Jewish-Marxist playbook. In the 1970s, he became the doyen of Mexican *sedevacantistas*—Catholics who believed that the papal throne was empty because the supposed incumbent, Paul VI, was a Judaist and a Masonic and Marxist puppet. These Catholic

17. See the various works of Austreberto Martínez Villegas.

deep-staters denounced even the *sinarquistas* (!) as embodiments of a “fake Right,” and for that they were dismissed as insane by no less a militant than Salvador Abascal (b. 1910), *sinarquismo*’s Moses, also accused by *sedevacantistas* of being a “crypto-Jew.” It feels supremely ironic that super-ultramontanes like Sáenz Arriaga became virtual antipopes: it turned out that they could support papal infallibility only if the pope agreed with them.

As Herrán Ávila convincingly argues, this was the spirit of Cristero-era intransigence, supercharged by fears of communist infiltration and the Cold War. Sáenz Arriaga lashed out at Catholic progressives, mainly those behind the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca. Politically, his outbursts cannot be understood without reference to Castro, Allende, and 1960s and 1970s Catholic liberationism. But it feels more personal than that, especially as such figures were writing at a time when *prúismo*’s authoritarian excesses were forcing repressive cold-warrior presidents (Díaz Ordaz, Echeverría) to readmit Catholicism into the public realm for purposes of regime legitimation. Why, then, the Traditionalists’ utter panic, their fear of betrayal, as the Church’s moral and political stock rose and the state’s sank? Why, too, the inability to cohere, when they were so few in number?

I am usually skeptical about applying psychological theories to historical actors, but the loudly ranting and ever-shrinking circles in which such figures operated make me wonder if, in this case, there might not be something to be said for it. How traumatic must it have been for such post-Cristeros when the infallible papacy welched on the Cristeros and then, about 1965, opened the Church’s doors to the profane world, destroying even the consoling theory that Pius XI had erred in canceling *cristerismo* only because cowardly bishops deceived him! Sáenz Arriaga must have been doubly tormented when in 1971 Cardinal Miguel Darío Miranda excommunicated him for insulting the pope and high clergy that stood behind Vatican II. By this time, the changeable Capistrán Garza was with him. Abascal had been broken on the wheel of his own obedience long before: he was called to order and sent into the UNS camp at María Auxiliadora by the previous archbishop of Mexico, Luis María Martínez, as a sacrifice, it was supposed, to show good faith to the regime. Upon his return to political life in the 1970s, Abascal turned his fire not just on Allende’s socialist experiment in Chile but on “false traditionalists” who showed a “satanic” hatred of contemporary popes. Herrán Ávila’s article is not only a full-spectrum ideological study of Mexico’s Catholic far-right but a character study that plumbs the deep, self-defeating narcissism of these Catholic fundamentalists. Their compulsive intransigence helps to explain why, after 1960, religious schisms—which historically came from the liberal Catholic camp—multiplied on the traditionalist right.

To what extent did invocations of the Cristeros see popular support for traditionalist movements develop in old Cristero heartlands? Was the ideological geography mutable? One wonders about the social constituency underlying these ideas. To what extent was this a generational surge? How successful were these Catholic *cartuchos quemados* (“spent cartridges”) at passing their ideology on to younger generations, including organizations of more recent vintage (for example, El Yunque)?

## CONCLUSION

All told, this is a valuable and stimulating collection that gives readers novel vistas for exploring the development of Mexican Catholicism after 1929. There are, of course, lacunae for further research: the tense ecumenical history of Catholic-Protestant relations; historical continuities in Mexican Catholic Action running through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s; the Church’s development of an indigenous pastoral in the 1950s and an urban one in the 1960s; international comparisons, especially with other regions of Latin America; changing regional and local patterns; and the view from Rome—soon to emerge, one hopes, from the newly opened papers of Pius XII. Yet these excellent studies establish many useful coordinates for others.

The Mexican Church did not cease to be intransigent, though the meanings of intransigence diversified, going left as well as right, entering and exiting diverse secular categories: fascism, 1968, right-wing Cold War politics, Maoism. Mexico did not cease to be “Catholic,” though some Catholics would have had trouble recognizing one another by the 1960s and 1970s or, frankly, would have doubted one another’s catholicity. The Cristero War was the dark glass through which Catholic Mexico often saw itself. There was the paradox that a very Catholic country could not agree about what constituted a Catholic nation, and so could never really have become one.

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