

A HISTORY OF THE “PERNICIOUS FOREIGNER”: *Jean Meyer and the Re-writing of the Mexican Revolution During the Global Sixties*

ABSTRACT: This article provides an intellectual history of Jean Meyer as an effort to shed light on the role that foreign historians played in the shaping of the Global Sixties in Mexico. His three-volume text composing *La Cristiada* (1972–74) has endured as one of the most cited and reprinted books in Mexican history, and to this day, its author has remained a hegemonic voice in Mexican academia. Yet little is known about the making of this groundbreaking book. In this effort, this article situates its methodology, revisionist arguments, and immediate perception in the political context of the era. It brings attention to Meyer’s rise in Mexican academia and examines the intellectual impact that three culminating events—the Cuban Revolution (1959), the progressive Catholicism of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), and the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968—had on his generation and in the shaping of the Global Sixties in Mexico.

KEYWORDS: the Global Sixties, revisionist history, Catholicism, revolutions, the 1968 student movement

INTRODUCTION

On July 3, 1969, a government agent knocked at the door of Jean Meyer, a French graduate student studying in Mexico City, demanding he present himself immediately to the French consulate. The authorities cited Article 33 of the Constitution, which allowed the government to expel all foreigners who were considered “undesirable” from the country without the necessity of prior legal process. Labeled a “pernicious foreigner,” Meyer was told that he had a few days to pack up his bags and return to Paris where he was writing a doctoral dissertation on Mexican history.¹ Not entirely surprised, he

I thank Jean Meyer for his generosity as well as Julia Young, Stephen Andes, Gema Santamaria, Enrique Ochoa, and Eric Zolov for their excellent comments in various versions of this article. I also want to thank the two anonymous readers for their constructive feedback.

1. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016. On Article 33 of the Constitution, see Pablo Yankelevich, “Extranjeros indeseables en México (1911–1940). Una aproximación cuantitativa a la aplicación del Artículo 33 constitucional,” *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 53, no. 3 (January–March, 2004): 693–744.

later found out that the administration of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz had disapproved of an article that Meyer published with the French journal *Esprit* condemning the Tlatelolco massacre that put an end to the 1968 student movement in Mexico.²

Esprit was one of several French journals that called for an urgent need to understand the needs, perspectives, and voices of the “Third World,” a term which the French demographer Alfred Sauvy first coined in Paris in 1952 and whose relevance in the making of the New Left peaked during the following years. This new generation of European intellectuals refused to continue to see the people of the colonized world as backward and inferior and instead celebrated them as “autonomous and capable of acting successfully.”³ The Bandung Conference of 1955, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and the Independence of Algeria in 1962 only made this more evident. Towering figures such as Frantz Fanon and Ernesto “Che” Guevara articulated innovative perspectives on the Third World that were central to the militancy of the era and which provided important points of reference for a broader critique of societies across Western Europe and the United States.

Scores of French intellectuals, including many friends of Jean Meyer, made plans to travel to Havana during these years. On their return to Paris, they celebrated Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in their writings, often describing their revolution as the most important test case for the broader independence of the Third World and its leading fight against capitalism and imperialism.⁴ In addition to *Esprit*, they articulated their enthusiasm for the urgent liberation of “*les damnés de la terre*” in *Les Temps Modernes* and in the more militant journal *Partisans*, where Jean-Paul Sartre and François Maspero, respectively, argued that a genuine solidarity with the Third World required their contributors to be true “practitioners of resistance,” meaning that, as their Cuban models did, they had to become, if not bearded *guerrilleros*, at least revolutionary intellectuals. But only a few of them came close to fully embracing armed struggle, namely Régis Debray, a friend of Meyer, whose *Révolution dans la révolution?* (1967) quickly became one of the most influential books in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. In stark contrast, Meyer would instead establish himself as a key influential figure in the more conservative (and Francophile) circles of Mexican academia during these years. While he initially hoped to visit Havana, like Debray, he grew critical of the authoritarianism of the Cuban Revolution and its endorsement of armed struggle in the broader Latin American region.

2. Jean Meyer, “Le mouvement étudiant en Amérique latine,” *Esprit*, vol. 381, no. 5 (May 1969), 740–53.

3. Christoph Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the Rise of the New Left in France, c. 1950–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

4. *Ibid.*

On his return to Mexico in 1972, Jean Meyer published his most influential book, *La Cristiada*. This was a three-volume historical text, written by Meyer in his late twenties, that celebrated a group of Catholic rebels who had proved capable of acting autonomously against the more powerful forces of the revolutionary state in the late 1920s. Known collectively as “*La Cristiada*,” this grassroots rebellion took up arms in response to a series of anticlerical measures aimed at curtailing the power of the Catholic Church, including seizure of its lands, the expulsion of its foreign-born clergy, and the closure of its schools. Intriguingly, Meyer’s was not the first book to bring detailed and bottom-up attention to the religious conflict that threatened the postrevolutionary government.⁵ It was also not the first scholarly work to rely on innovative methods of oral history to re-interpret the past.⁶ Nonetheless, unlike other historical monographs published on related topics at the time, *La Cristiada* has endured as one of the most cited and reprinted books in Mexican history, and to this day, its author has remained a hegemonic voice in Mexican academia. Yet little is known about the making of his foundational book, the historical context that politicized his *generation algérienne* in Paris, or the influence the idea of “Latin America” had on French scholars.⁷ The same is true about the political circumstances that placed Meyer as an influential figure in the scholarship of Mexico at a relatively young age and about the role conservative and Catholic intellectuals, such as Meyer, played in the shaping of what many historians of Latin America have recently called the “Global Sixties.”⁸

The intellectual trajectory of Jean Meyer, including his brief but important relationship with Régis Debray, is fascinating but, I argue, also emblematic of the more conservative and largely understudied aspects of the “Global Sixties.” As explained by historian Eric Zolov, the term points to “a new conceptual approach to understanding local change within a transnational framework,” one, as with the academic lives of those who shaped the intellectual ideas of the New Left, “constituted by multiple crosscurrents of geopolitical, ideological, cultural, and economic forces.”⁹ For Mexico, it was a unique moment in its history largely defined by an unprecedented expansion of a middle class that overwhelmingly

5. See, for example, Alicia Olivera Sedano, *Aspectos del conflicto religioso de 1926 a 1929. Sus antecedentes y consecuencias* (Mexico City: INAH, 1966), and James W. Wilkie, “The Meaning of the Cristero Religious War against the Mexican Revolution,” *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring, 1966): 214–36.

6. *Ibid.*

7. On the politicization of French intellectuals during the 1960s, see Kepa Artarz and Karen Luyckx, “The French New Left and the Cuban Revolution 1959–1971: Parallel Histories?” *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 17, no. 1 (February 2009): 67–82.

8. This is a critique of the literature that I also make in Jaime M. Pensado, *Love and Despair: How Catholic Activism Shaped Politics and the Counterculture in Modern Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

9. Eric Zolov, “Introduction: Latin America in the Global Sixties,” *The Americas*, vol. 70, no. 3 (January 2014): 354. See also the collection of chapters in Chen Jian, et. al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation Building* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018).

welcomed the secularization of the nation and called for a more democratic society. It witnessed the benefits that came with the apex of the “economic miracle,” when the country was transformed from a rural to a modern, youthful, cosmopolitan, and urban nation and when new notions of gender, sexuality, and consumption challenged the traditional status quo. Roughly stretching from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, these years “produced a simultaneity of ‘like’ responses across disparate geographic context, suggesting interlocking causes,”¹⁰ which in the broader cases of Latin America and France, included changing perceptions of Catholicism. As I have argued elsewhere, a new generation of lay activists and religious figures, just like their secular and Marxist counterparts, played a profound role in the articulation of the various competing notions of “liberation” that shaped the ethos of this era. These figures saw themselves polarized by utopian aspirations of radical change. In the redemption of the Third World, these were often expressed in the name of “love.” But their aspirations often faced harsher realities of “despair” that brought an end to the era, as evident in culminating years of frustration, contradictions, authoritarianism, and State repression.¹¹

Historians of Latin America have successfully described the multiple players of the New Left who were polarized during the Global Sixties, including political activists, state agents, intellectuals, artists, countercultural figures, and Marxist intellectuals.¹² Yet, little effort has been made to examine the role people in academia, religious actors, and conservative figures played in shaping the context of the era.¹³ In bringing attention to this scholarly gap, I look specifically at foreign historians of Mexico, with closer attention to the shifting ideology of Jean Meyer, and examine how and why he found it necessary to articulate innovative re-interpretations of the past. His pioneering questions and methods, I argue, not only marked his revisionist views of the Mexican Revolution but, in the context of the 1968 student movement, also put him into direct confrontation with the Mexican State. Yet, while some of his contemporaries witnessed little difference between the administrations of Díaz Ordaz (1964–70) and Luis Echeverría (1970–76) in their interpretation of State repression, others, including Meyer, instead found a more drastic difference.

10. Zolov, “Introduction: Latin America in the Global Sixties.” See also Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture during the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City’s Rebel Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

11. Pensado, *Love and Despair*.

12. See, among many other examples, Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter*, and Tanya Harner, *Beatriz Allende: A Revolutionary Life in Cold War Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

13. Recent exceptions include Vania Markarian, *Universidad, Revolución y dólares. Dos estudios sobre la Guerra Fría cultural en el Uruguay de los sesenta* (Montevideo: Debate, 2020), and Pensado, *Love and Despair*.

Unlike socialist Cuba and the reactionary *juntas* in the Southern Cone, Meyer saw Mexico under Echeverría as exceptional and, in comparison to the previous administration, more democratic.¹⁴ Restricted to the conditions of Article 33, he then followed the path taken by many of his colleagues in Mexican academia, choosing not to denounce, in Spanish publications, the repressive policies that continued to rule the country throughout the 1970s.¹⁵ Instead, he saw greater relevance in objecting to the radical ideas of those who remained committed to armed struggle, such as those popularized by Régis Debray.¹⁶

Scholars who have interviewed Meyer have provided crucial details of his life.¹⁷ I expand on these published conversations in an effort to place the shifting perspectives in academia that influenced his work within the conceptual and historiographical framework of the Global Sixties. But in contributing to this scholarship, I also draw from some of Meyer’s early writings in French and Mexican journals as well as from two interviews of my own with him. On the basis of these materials, I examine the intellectual impact that three overlapping events had on his generation as well as on the broader scholarly debates that contributed to the shaping of the era in Mexico: the Cuban Revolution (1959), the progressive Catholicism of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), and the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968.¹⁸ I bring these overlapping narratives together to situate the methodology, revisionist arguments, scholarly debates, and immediate perception of *La Cristiada* in the broader political context of the Latin American Cold War. I also draw contrasts and similarities between Meyer and some of his contemporaries in addition to Régis Debray, including the Harvard professor John Womack, whom I also interviewed for this article and who, unlike many scholars of his generation, voiced a more critical opinion of the Mexican government of the 1970s. These years witnessed the efforts by President Luis Echeverría to distance himself from the Tlatelolco massacre. This political tactic was largely successful and was indebted, I argue, to the tacit support that the

14. Some of Mexico’s most important intellectuals of the 1960s, including Carlos Fuentes, shared a similar argument, suggesting that Mexicans were caught between the “Fascism” of the Southern Cone, on the one hand, and the authoritarian democracy of *Echeverrismo*, on the other hand.

15. In a public conversation with Jean Meyer in Mexico City, on May 29, 2024, he explained that while the restrictions of Article 33 limited his criticism in Spanish publications, he did express his dissatisfaction with the Echeverría administration in French outlets. See, “Presentación del libro *Love and Despair*,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oihfwpRdywY>.

16. See, for example, Claudia Gilman, *Entre la pluma y el fusil: Debates y dilemas del escritor revolucionario en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2003).

17. See, among others, Juan González Morfín, “Conversación en México con Jean Meyer,” *Anuario de historia de la Iglesia*, no. 25 (2016): 453–76; Alicia Salmerón and Elisa Speckman, “Entrevista a Jean Meyer,” *Secuencia: Revista de historia y ciencias sociales*, no. 52 (January–April, 2002): 199–216; Christopher Domínguez Michael, “III, Jean Meyer: el historiador de la libertad religiosa,” *Letras Libres* (March 31, 2010); and Fausto Zerón-Medina, “Entrevista a Jean Meyer. ‘Necesitamos la escuela democrática liberal de Madero,’” *Letras Libres* (March 1, 2019).

18. My interviews with Meyer took place on March 8, 2016, in his home in Mexico City and on April 17, 2017, at the University of Notre Dame. In addition, I followed up with Meyer during various communications via email, from April 26, 2017, to December 20, 2020.

Mexican government received from key intellectuals and scholars. The failure (or unwillingness) to criticize the repressive apparatus of the State on the part of intellectuals, I further contend, contributed to the misconceived idea that Mexico was “exceptional,” even democratic, in comparison to the broader Latin American region.¹⁹

EL FRANCÉS: FROM MARXIST PARIS TO CONSERVATIVE MEXICO CITY

Jean Meyer was born to a middle-class Alsatian family in the southern French city of Nice in 1942 and raised in Provence, where his parents moved to escape the Nazi occupation of Alsace. Both of his parents were teachers who influenced him to follow the same path.²⁰ In his teens he moved to Paris and enrolled at the École Normale Supérieure, where he established a relationship with a group of friends who had a profound impact on the shaping of the French New Left and who eventually emerged as influential Marxist philosophers and key students of Louis Althusser that included, among others, Régis Debray (1940–). With them, Meyer condemned the French occupation of Algeria and frequented the famous Cinémathèque Française, which housed rare films from across the world, including innovative Brazilian movies that had a profound impact on their generation. These and other films of the era shaped Meyer’s “enduring love” for cinema, and as “the early writings by Julio Cortázar” did, many of them served as his first introduction to what many Europeans romantically saw at the time as the “sensibility” of Latin America. Unlike many others of his generation, he was drawn by the religiosity of its people as depicted in the arts. He remembered that his friends often “mocked his Catholicism,” dismissed the possibility of engaging in a discussion of religion as “an aberration,” and saw Christianity as “detrimental to the masses.”²¹

At the Cinémathèque, Meyer also met the Marxist filmmaker Chris Marker, who at the time was presenting *iCuba sí!* Banned by the French censors, this was a 1961 experimental picture widely celebrated among French university students that included a powerful criticism of the Bay of Pigs invasion as well as fiery speeches by Fidel Castro and Joris Bialin, a Cuban priest who came out in support of the revolution, against the official stance of the Catholic Church in

19. This is an argument that I also make in Jaime M. Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa, *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018).

20. Jean Meyer, *El libro de mi padre* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2014); González Morfin, “Conversación en México.”

21. Jean Meyer, interview by author, University of Notre Dame, April 17, 2017. On the romanticism that many French intellectuals established with the Cuban Revolution, see Artarz and Luyckx, “The French New Left,” and Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World*.

Rome.²² By then, Meyer was already enrolled at the University of Paris Nanterre, where he intended to write a research paper on the diplomatic history of the United States during First World War. He also continued his relationship with Debray, who was enrolled in a series of workshops on *Das Kapital* with Althusser, the influential pious thinker who once proclaimed that he “became a Marxist because of the Catholicism in it.”²³

Chris Marker encouraged Meyer and his Marxist friends to go to Cuba to help him gather additional footage of the revolution and possibly interview Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who emerged, shortly after, as a folk hero of the New Left. Marker promised to give them an 8 mm camera and a letter of invitation signed by Fidel Castro. The young intellectuals were thrilled and made separate plans to go to Cuba. Meyer arrived in New York in May of 1962 with his friend and student of philosophy Michel Fennetaux. They bought a used car and initiated a trip across the US South. They arrived in Mexico in the summer of that year, naively hoping to travel to Havana. But they soon realized that the government authorities kept track of those who traveled to Cuba, meaning that Meyer would likely not be able to return to the United States, where he hoped to do research for his master’s thesis.

Mexico instantly seduced the then 20-year-old Meyer and made him reconsider his “romantic interpretation” of the Cuban Revolution. With his friend, he traveled across the nation for a total of three months “with [only] a bag on their back,” from Guadalajara to Yucatán. For them, Mexico appeared “like a communist country.” Meyer remembered that it was impossible to ignore “the excessive and flashy propaganda of the PRI,” present in every little town as well as the endless “cult-like images of President [Adolfo] López Mateos” pasted everywhere. Yet, what appeared to him odd at the time was that Revolutionary Mexico was also “a very conservative” and unequivocally Catholic country. He added that “many young people” of their same age did not entirely share the admiration French youth readily expressed for Fidel Castro. Instead, a significant sector of Mexican youth pointed with apprehension to the time the bearded leader of the revolution “gave a cynical speech” in which he defined himself as a Marxist Leninist, which many saw as proof that he was, if not an agent of the Soviets, then a deceiver of his people whose revolution could not be trusted. But in addition to the countless propaganda posters of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and its presidential figure, Meyer was also taken aback by the flashing banners that were present everywhere with the insignia “Christianity Yes, Communism No!” (a nationwide campaign that ecclesiastical authorities

22. *iCuba si!* (Chris Marker, 1961).

23. Christopher Caldwell, “Régis Debray, Radical Conservative,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (June–July 2021): 28.

organized during the early 1960 largely in response to the Cuban Revolution). To his surprise, ordinary people were eager to openly express their view of politics from their religious perspective and viewed communism with distrust. On first impression, it seemed to Meyer that Mexico had already experienced a revolution. Although change had come slowly, it was improving the lives of the people.²⁴

Upon his return to Paris, Meyer was convinced that he was no longer interested in writing a thesis on US diplomatic history. Instead, he proposed a project to his committee on the Mexican Revolution with a particular focus on Emiliano Zapata. This was a topic that he initially selected, with vague interest, likely after having watched Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952) at the Cinémathèque. By contrast, his friend Michel remained enamored with the idea of Fidel, and after his trip to Mexico, he travelled to Prague, where he finally made his way to Havana. There, Michel reconnected with Debray, who first visited Cuba in 1960, returned to the island a year later, and stayed for a longer visit with the support of the Castro government from 1963 to 1964. During these years Debray studied guerrilla tactics and established contacts with armed movements from Ecuador, Venezuela, Argentina, and Peru in Chile and Bolivia. He also published his first articles on Latin America in *Les Temps Modernes*, *Partisans*, and *Cahiers Marxistes-Leninistes* and taught philosophy at the University of Havana, where, in conversations with Fidel Castro, he wrote the initial draft of *Révolution dans la révolution?* in which he argued that US imperialism would only come to an end when clandestine communist groups were united across Latin America.²⁵ A year later he agreed to join Guevara in his Bolivian Revolution, only to be captured in April of 1967 and sentenced to 30 years behind bars but released from prison in 1970 following pressure from the former French president Charles De Gaulle and a broad range of leftist intellectuals and religious figures that included Jean-Paul Sartre, François Maspero, and Pope Paul VI.²⁶

In Paris, Meyer enrolled in the only Latin American seminar offered at the French university with Pierre Chaunu, who was a leading figure of the Annales school of historians, an expert in quantitative methodology, and author of *L'Amérique y Les Ameriques* (1964). For the most part, Meyer's peers were wealthy students from Latin America interested in writing colonial history. He presented his project on Zapata, but a Mexican Jesuit priest who was also enrolled in Chaunu's seminar

24. Jean Meyer, interview by author, University of Notre Dame, April 17, 2017; Salmerón and Speckman, "Entrevista a Jean Meyer"; González Morfín, "Conversación en México."

25. Melvyn Cox, "Régis Debray: A Study of His Political and Theoretical Works, 1962–1992." PhD diss., Loughborough University, 1996, 15–28.

26. Jean Meyer, interview by author, University of Notre Dame, April 17, 2017; Francisco Juliao, "Del Papa Paulo a Regis Debray," *Siempre!*, no. 866 (January 1970).

encouraged him to reconsider the topic. He told him, "So much has already been written on the revolution. Why not write on the virgin topic of the Cristero Rebellion?" Meyer had barely heard of the rebellion and had little knowledge of how the State had engaged in a violent anticlerical conflict with militant Catholics. A doctoral dissertation that filled up an evident gap in the historiography made this topic particularly appealing to the French academy. Because of the observations he had made on the anti-communist campaigns during his travels in Mexico, Meyer also understood the important role ordinary Catholics had played in the popular politics of the nation. But the Jesuit warned him that, if he wanted to pursue the project, he had to be ready to face "censored archives" and deal with a polarizing topic that not many people dared to touch. Moreover, "like the anthropologist Oscar Lewis," whose famous book *Les enfants de Sánchez* (1963) preceded the Spanish translation, Meyer would have to rely on oral history. This was a methodology still in its infancy at the time that lacked scholarly rigor and was mostly dismissed by an older generation of historians as problematic and unscientific.²⁷ He became fascinated with the Cristero Rebellion, as vaguely described in the few references that he was able to find on the topic in French libraries, namely at the Musée de l'Homme, where the anthropologist and expert on Papantla Guy Stresser-Péan had donated his rich collection on Mexico.²⁸

Determined to write a dissertation on the Cristero Rebellion, Meyer met Silvio Zavala, the founder of the Center for Historical Studies at El Colegio de México in 1941 and president of that same university from 1963 to 1966. He invited Meyer to teach as a visiting guest, and although Meyer was flattered, he worried that his "rudimentary Spanish" would prevent him from taking the offer. At the time, he had only studied English (the default academic language) and German (the language of the occupiers of Alsace), to which Zavala replied, "that would not be a problem." After all, Zavala wanted Meyer to teach his courses in French and introduce Mexican students to the latest methodologies in Europe, which a number of leaders of El Colegio saw as superior to the new scholarly trends that were emerging from the US academy.²⁹

As a visiting member of the history faculty at El Colegio de México in 1965, Meyer initiated the research for his doctoral dissertation. Similar to Zavala, the co-founder of the university, Cosío Villegas, did not initially approve of the topic. For both, history ended with the Porfiriato (1876–1910). Luis González, who

27. Eugenia Meyer and Alicia Olivera Sedano de Bonfil, "La historia oral. Origen, metodología, Desarrollo y perspectivas," *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 21, no. 2 (October–December 1971): 372–87.

28. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016; Salmerón and Speckman, "Entrevista a Jean Meyer"; González Morfín, "Conversación en México."

29. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016; González Morfín, "Conversación en México."

had been an active member of the Center for Historical Studies since the 1940s, proved to be more sympathetic. At the time, González was writing *Pueblo en Vilo* (1968). This foundational book of microhistory, which the Italian historian Carlo Ginsburg listed as an inspiration for the making of *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), focused on a small Cristero town in the central region of the country and relied on an eclectic mix of innovative methodologies. It provided a voice to those who had been condemned to historical amnesia, situated forgotten pueblos on the map, and documented the everyday life of ordinary figures, all the while prioritizing regional and marginalized narratives. These perspectives “democratized” the writing of national history, in the words of Enrique Florescano (also an enthusiastic supporter of Meyer’s project), and influenced what Alan Knight once called the “baby-boomers of Mexican historiography.”³⁰ As examined later in this article, this was a new generation of professional historians, trained in Mexico, Europe, and the United States, who came of intellectual age in the Global Sixties.

Jean Meyer was only 23 years of age when he first taught with a diplomatic passport in Mexico in 1965, not much older than his students and much younger than most of his colleagues. At the request of Zavala, his first courses were presented entirely in French, mostly to aspiring doctoral candidates who were introduced to the foundational texts of the Annales school, including those of Pierre Chaunu, who had accepted to be the leading director of his dissertation. Zavala and Cosío Villegas grew fond of Meyer and respected him as an effective teacher. Yet, his elders frowned upon his style, and so did many of his colleagues, who were often shocked to see him teaching in front of the classroom “dressed like a hippie,” with long hair and wearing jeans, sandals, and manta shirts or attending to his toddler, who was often sleeping and playing by his desk during his lectures or “urinating in a piss pot” that he kept in his office. More importantly, most of his colleagues disapproved of his research and often tried to persuade him to find a different topic. Digging into the State–Church conflict of the recent past was a thorny topic for a research project. The methods that Meyer employed, which largely relied on oral history, were also not considered rigorous. He was repeatedly told that he was doing journalism and was often accused of becoming sympathetic to his subjects and, in the worst of all cases, even “fabricating their stories.” Yet, Meyer remained committed to his project. With the help from Luis González and surviving leader of the war Aurelio Robles Acevedo, he developed a large network of Cristero survivors who shared their stories with him. Having less success, he was told by Archbishop Miguel Darío

30. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016; Knight, “Interpreting the Mexican Revolution,” *Texas Papers on Mexico*, no. 88-02. On the influence that González had on Ginsburg’s work, see, among others, Carlo Ginsburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” in Anne C. Tedeschi and John Tedeschi, eds., *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 193–214.

Miranda that all archives of the church were closed, unless he was interested in the colonial period. He received similar letters of rejection from government archives. Instead, Meyer first consulted private, local, and Church archives in Mexico, including key parochial and Jesuit archives in Jalisco, and then others from the United States and France. In addition, every weekend he traveled to different parts of the country to interview Cristeros. When he returned back to work on Mondays, he was often teasingly asked, "Juanito, how many Cristeros did you make up this weekend?"³¹

Within a couple of years Jean Meyer started teaching courses in Spanish that included seminars on international relations, and he taught a new generation of talented historians. It was also during this period when he wrote short articles in *Esprit* that revealed the voice of an assertive interdisciplinary historian interested in the broader region of Latin America, invested in understanding the diversity of the continent from a conservative perspective, and aware of the revisionist scholarship on peasant movements that emerged during the early 1960s. He was well-versed in the Marxist language of the era and familiar with the long history of the Left, but concerned with its violent militancy. For example, in his damning 1967 article on the question of armed struggle, Meyer pointed to what he saw as the contradiction and shortcoming of "the socialist camp." In addition to "the continued subversion of the USA" that Fidel Castro so often stressed in his long and fiery speeches, these included "clumsy" and largely "ineffective" agricultural projects of collectivization to transform the sugar industry into an "ambitious industrialization plan" that concluded in neo-dependency on the Soviet Union. In addition, Meyer pointed to an unwillingness to incorporate a "middle class" that had difficulties relating to the radical language of the revolution, "the restriction of internal discussion," the "subordination of society to the party," and the "reduction" of the nation to its leader. Of particular concern to him was what he saw as the emergence of a police state, which "though initially defensive," had initiated "political repression that was not always judicious due to the obsession [of the Castro regime] with espionage and sabotage." What ordinary Cubans experienced was an "atmosphere of malaise and suspicion." Equally troubling was what Meyer referred to as the "puritan" language that the revolutionary leaders used to universally condemn "gambling, drunkenness, sexual irregularities, luxury, [and] idleness" with a broad brush. Similar to "puritans," he noted with disapproval of the Cuban leaders, "they know that the weakness and vices of man are condemnable and that the appearance of the new man is not possible before their elimination." The "average man," he argued in response to Guevara's famous "Socialism and Man" 1965 essay,

31. Jean Meyer, interview by author, University of Notre Dame, April 17, 2017.

cannot handle the interruption of his ordinary life for more than a certain stretch of time; the revolution has been ongoing for seven years and people are weary from the prolonged effort necessary to live in accordance with an elevated ideal. People have a hard time supporting the effort to make heaven come down to Earth, and can only do so for a certain stretch of time, and Virtue, to triumph, must call on their cousin Coercion.

Finally, in his contentious article on Cuba, Meyer strongly condemned Ernesto Guevara's goal "to Vietnamize the hemisphere," an ill-fated "adventurist" tactic romantically welcomed by young leftists across Latin America. Guevara failed to see that the continent was far from homogeneous. In providing an example, he wrote, "Mexico is closer to Paris than [it is to] Lima." Worse yet, if continental unity existed in the immediate aftermath of the Castro victory in 1959, "after the Tricontinental [Conference of 1966], Latin America had returned to the anomie of twenty nations, to 'Che's' despair."³²

Meyer's 1966 article on Camilo Torres also displayed his disapproval of armed struggle in Latin America. He wrote, "Let us recount that he died with his M-1 rifle in his hand." He added, "this Colombian priest had committed the error of taking the lessons of the Gospel seriously and, sensitive to the misfortunes and needs of his people, had wanted to take part in their suffering." Yet, his radicalism did not emerge in a vacuum, and the conservatism of the Colombian Church was largely to be blamed for it. He noted, "This Church is so mired in dishonorable economic, social and political activity, and the structures of the country do not permit the least reform; the evangelical message, the 'breath of God' has not shaken oppression, and the poor still hunger and thirst for justice." Unfortunately, as with Guevara, Torres had failed to see the full power of the enemy. His was a noble, but mostly delusional and largely irresponsible, approach.³³

Meyer was equally critical of the Christian Democratic movement in Chile, which originally presented itself to Latin America "as a possible third way," a "revolution without violence" based on the implementation of a three-pronged program of "communitarianism, Chilenization, and decentralization." Yet, by 1966, it was evident that Frei's "Revolution in Liberty" had failed to improve the lives of the people and break its dependency with the United States, mostly because of the government's unwillingness to expel the most reactionary figures of the party.³⁴

32. Jean Meyer, "Cuba's enferm  dans sa r volution," *Esprit*, vol. 358, no. 3 (March 1967).

33. Jean Meyer, "Camilo Torres: In Memoriam," *Esprit*, vol. 349, no. 5 (May 1966).

34. Jean Meyer, "Chili 1966: la d mocratie chr tienne a l' preuve," *Esprit*, vol. 350, no. 6 (June 1966).

Meyer’s condemnation of the Far-right was also evident in his 1966 article on Argentina, where he expressed concern that the rise of “Francoism” seemed inevitable. Lamenting, he predicted, in response to the Juan Carlos Onganía’s military dictatorship (1966–70), “clandestinity [and] repression would unite with justicialismo.”³⁵

Unlike many of his contemporaries in Paris, Meyer “cured himself of his vulgar Marxism” and once “romantic fascination” with Castrismo while teaching in Mexico City. At the same time, he familiarized with the writings of progressive leaders of the Church, especially with those of the Belgian priest and one of the key founders of Liberation Theology in Latin America, José Comblin, whose *Théologie de la Révolution* (1970) was widely read across Europe. Meyer became a regular subscriber of *Les Informations Catholiques Internationales*, whose columns were translated to Spanish in Mexico from 1963 to 1972, and pointed to this time as the years when he realized that Mexico was not the communist nation that he prematurely envisioned during his trip with Michel Fennetaux in 1962. In fact, he recognized that most Mexicans were subjugated to an authoritarian system, but one that was far less repressive in comparison to other Latin American countries. Yet, this was an argument that some of his students did not necessarily share.

In September of 1967, Meyer received a letter from an old friend in Paris expressing her anger at him for having criticized the publication of their mutual friend Régis Debray, *Revolution dans la révolution?* As noted earlier, this was the militant handbook widely read by young activists of the era and published that same year that provided a raw and thorough description of the precarious economic situation in Latin America and presented guerrilla warfare as the only path toward a genuine revolution. In his writings and teachings at El Colegio, Meyer specifically criticized armed struggle and described *foquismo* as suicidal madness. But he responded to his friend in Paris “with regret,” unaware that Debray had been tortured and imprisoned. “A month later, we received the news that Guevara had been killed in Bolivia,” Meyer recalled, the moment when the Argentine radical was immediately transformed into a mythical hero in nearly all of European and Latin American universities. To his students Meyer reiterated that the Mexican government was authoritarian, but “not Fascist,” as some of his most radical students insisted, and “it was best not to provoke it,” and much less to see the martyred example of Guevara as a viable option in Mexico.³⁶

35. Jean Meyer, “L’Argentine dans l’impasse?,” *Esprit*, vol. 352, no. 9 (September 1966).

36. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016.

In 1968, Meyer expressed sympathy with the democratic ideas of the student movement, but he was critical of some of its radical methods and did not see the need for the students to engage in massive and often aggressive protests that only agitated the police authorities. During a strike assembly, he allegedly warned students that, “if the bourgeoisie cannot be defeated, it is best not to make it feel threatened.” If they were genuinely interested in transforming the nation, the best thing they could do was to study, get professional degrees, and “transform the system from within.” After all, his written criticism of Mexico paled in comparison to those published on the much more authoritarian regime of Argentina, referenced earlier, where Fascist forces occupied important sectors of the government. Yet, despite his unwillingness to openly support the student movement, the critical lines included in the *Esprit* column, hinting at the culpability of the Mexican government, proved to be too much for the intolerant administration of Díaz Ordaz. In his government file, an agent erroneously wrote that Meyer had told students, “If the bourgeoisie cannot be defeated, it is best to stab it in the back.”³⁷

Following his meeting with the French authorities in the summer of 1969 in response to his *Esprit* article, Meyer understood that his teaching in Mexico had come to an end, but he was reassured by the ambassador that he would have a safe return to Paris. Following the advice of the ambassador, he attended the annual dinner hosted by the European embassy to commemorate the achievements of French intellectuals, artists, and politicians residing in Mexico—all indicating that, although he had been labeled a “pernicious foreigner,” he still enjoyed a privileged opportunity to leave the country diplomatically. At the dinner Meyer sat next to the ambassador, who introduced him to the Mexican authorities attending the event, including, to his surprise, the Defense Secretary General Marcelino García Barragán, one of the central figures involved in the Tlatelolco massacre, and the Secretary of Interior Mario Moya Palencia, later involved in the June 10, 1971, Corpus Christi massacre. The following day, Cosío Villegas hosted a farewell dinner for Meyer and invited Ignacio Chávez with them. Chávez was a vocal critic of Díaz Ordaz who was violently removed from the rectorship of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in 1966 by goon squads sympathetic to the president and who likely welcomed the lines that Meyer included in his article.

With the support that Jean Meyer received from Cosío Villegas, he managed to return safely to Paris in July of 1969, where his wife waited for him. The 27-year-old historian took his two children with him, including his youngest boy who had been born in Mexico City. Leaving Mexico proved to be difficult, but

37. *Ibid.*; Domínguez, “III, Jean Meyer”; Zerón-Medina, “Entrevista a Jean Meyer.”

possible, with the diplomatic backing Meyer received thanks to the intervention from Enrique Florescano, whose father-in-law worked in the government.

Meyer feared that, in addition to the possibility of not ever returning to his adopted nation, the government would also confiscate all the research he had done for his doctoral dissertation since he started teaching in Mexico in 1965, which then included rare documents hitherto unexamined by historians, dozens of photographs and corridos that he collected from various parts of Mexico, hundreds of videocassettes of recorded interviews with former Cristeros conducted by Meyer and others, and dozens of questionnaires that he developed with the help of the veteran of the war Aurelio Robles Acevedo. His mentor and principal supporter of his thesis, Luis González, placed all the research in a safe place at his home, and within a few months, he sent it with a French diplomat to Paris, where Meyer completed his dissertation. Following an invitation from François Chevalier, he also authored his first historical monograph, *La révolution mexicaine, 1910–1940*. This was a revisionist and synthetic account published in 1973 that highlighted the continuities of the postrevolutionary state with the Porfiriato.³⁸

Meyer found Paris “a mess.” He saw himself as “a foreigner” and had difficulties adapting to the radicalism that he found in the universities. “The Sorbonne,” where he started teaching a course on the Mexican Revolution, had been transformed into “a big dumpster.” To his disdain, anarchists, leftists, and a wide range of provocateurs had occupied halls, buildings, classrooms, and libraries. The environment was “often toxic” and violent, with little room for dialogue. The New Left of the late 1960s appeared to be tearing itself apart, and the enthusiasm that French intellectuals had expressed for the Third World during the early 1960s in *Les Temps Modernes*, and the more radical journal *Partisans* had diminished significantly in favor of new questions that leftist intellectuals expressed in relation to the rising feminist movement, the counterculture, psychoanalysis, and pedagogy.³⁹ A similar schism seemed to be present within the Catholic circles that experienced a sharp polarization during this period, ranging from the ultraconservatives, who grew angry and disappointed with the outcome of the Algerian War, to the leftists, who instead found inspiration in the radical writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Yet, for Meyer, this also brought about an exciting point in his life in which he was “lucky to receive a generous scholarship” that the National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS) gave to political exiles, which for a total of three years, he shared with two other exiled dissidents, including the famous sociologist and future president of Brazil

38. Jean Meyer, *La Revolución mexicana* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2013).

39. Kalter, *The Discovery of the Third World*, 199.

Fernando Henrique Cardoso—first expelled in 1964 from his native country to Chile and then exiled to France in 1969.⁴⁰

In Paris, Meyer used the scholarship to complete his dissertation and delve further into his readings of Catholicism. No longer entirely satisfied with the writings of Comblin and other progressive thinkers, he instead found greater relevance in the latest and most controversial work of Jacques Maritain and specifically pointed to his polemic *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (1968) as one of several books that transformed the understanding of his faith. “It was in Paris,” Meyer remembered, “when I became an orthodox,” partly meaning that, similar to Maritain, he grew concerned about the “excessive secularization” that emerged in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, similar to the Thomist philosopher, Meyer disapproved of what he saw as an attempt of neo-modernists, particularly those who welcomed a dialogue with Marxists, to bring about a complete temporalization of Christianity. Finally, as with Maritain, Meyer recognized the need for Catholics to fight against social and political injustices, but argued that this was not the only reality to which Christians must commit themselves to. Only grace and prayer rendered the energy of Christian spirituality effective. In this sense, similar to the elder Maritain, Meyer was less idealistic than many of his contemporaries, who instead enthusiastically embraced the political uprisings in France. He seemed less hopeful in a natural world removed from God.⁴¹

Among others, Meyer also found relevance in the salient and less controversial work of the Jesuit Henri de Lubac. His early writings had contributed to the progressive ideas of *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), one of the most influential documents on social justice published during the Second Vatican Council, but whose post-conciliar publications warned against a false equivalence between social liberation and the supernatural. In search of the latter, Meyer found spiritual gratification in the Orthodox Church of St. Irene, where Russian exiles introduced him to a more ecumenical understanding of his faith and one that saw no need to engage in dialogue with Marxism or psychoanalysis.⁴²

For three years Jean Meyer remained intellectually active in Paris. He continued to teach and used this time to review several books on Latin American history. He also kept in touch with his Mexican colleagues and often hosted some of them during their academic and leisure visits in Europe. Despite bright moments, he remained mostly unhappy in the “colder city of Paris,” largely disconnected from

40. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016.

41. *Ibid*; Jean Meyer, *La gran controversia* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2014).

42. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016; Meyer, *La gran controversia*.

the French academic life and the radicalism of its universities. “I felt like a person who had lost his homeland,” Meyer remembered.⁴³

In December of 1971 Meyer defended his 2,200-page doctoral dissertation, “La Cristiade: société et idéologie dans le Mexique contemporaine, 1926–1929.” In addition to Pierre Chaunu, his committee was also composed of François Chevalier and Pierre Vilar. A student of Marc Bloch, Chevalier was the most important French historian of Latin America during the 1950s, and his publications sparked great scholarly interest in the agrarian history of Mexico and the hacienda estates. During the 1960s, Chevalier taught courses on the Mexican Revolution and kept a close relationship with prominent Mexican intellectuals. By contrast, Vilar had little interest in Mexico and instead specialized in the economic history of Catalonia and Hispanism. During the day of the defense, Vilar allegedly “broke the protocol of the French academy” by interrupting Meyer numerous times during his presentation, questioning his use of oral history as a legitimate methodology and thus undermining the relevance of his sources. Fed up, Chevalier and Chaunu stepped in and defended Meyer. Shortly after, Meyer got a teaching job at the University of Perpignan, where he collaborated with other Latin American historians and founded the Institute of Mexican Studies. He successfully replaced Chevalier as the most influential scholar of Mexico working in the French academy.⁴⁴

Back to Mexico and the making of La Cristiada

Jean Meyer returned to Mexico in 1972, a few months after defending his dissertation in Paris.⁴⁵ The country was different, “much better. It all seemed more optimistic.” The paranoia of the 1960s appeared to have passed, he believed at the time, with little recognition to the State violence that only intensified during the administration of Echeverría. From his perspective, the opportunities for people in academia, film, and journalism seemed real. “[Carlos] Fuentes was named the ambassador in France,” while other intellectuals “spoke of the possibility of real change”; these intellectuals included Cosío Villegas, who had gathered a team of revisionist scholars to rewrite the most ambitious history of the Mexican Revolution with the financial support that he received from the government. “Don Daniel assigned me to write on the presidency of [Plutarco] Calles in volumes 10 and 11 with Enrique Krauze and Cayetano Reyes.” Shortly

43. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016.

44. Luis González, “La Revolución revisada por Jean Meyer” in Meyer, *La revolución Mexicana*; Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016.

45. Specifically, under the advice of Cosío Villegas, Jean Meyer returned to Mexico, via Guadalajara, where the Mexican authorities did not question his return. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oihfvpRdywY>.

after, Meyer posed a question that not too many historians wanted to address at the time in a new book, *Le sinarquisme: un fascisme mexicain?*, which was published in Spanish in 1979. A new generation of historians benefited from an unprecedented government spending on higher education, while the emergence of new publishing houses allowed for a greater production of more daring academic texts. From Meyer's privileged position, in short, the country remained authoritarian but was "much more democratic." With little recognition of his privileged status, he added that, moreover, a "strain of good luck, continued to be on [his] side." With the support of his colleagues, he was formally invited to give lectures for the history department at El Colegio de México, which moved from the Colonia Roma to its current location in 1976, and was eventually recognized as an official member of the university in 1978, the same year Meyer acquired his Mexican citizenship and officially resigned from the University of Perpignan.⁴⁶

Within months of arriving in Mexico, Meyer published *La Cristiada* (1972–74). This massive volume, composed of three self-contained books translated to Spanish by Aurelio Garzón del Camino, was not publicized nor was it widely evaluated upon publication (see below). It respectively examined the particularities of "The Cristero War," the history of "The Church State conflict," and the "Social composition and Ideology of the Cristeros."⁴⁷ But despite its massive length and lack of publicity, the volume quickly emerged as a best seller. Paradoxically, with the backing of Arnaldo Orfila, it also became one of the most successful books published with the Marxist press Siglo XXI during the 1970s. A collection of documents with commentary was also published in France in 1974 with the title *Apocalypse et Révolution au Mexique*, and a more descriptive narrative was then released the following year also in French as *La Christiade: l'Eglise, l'Etat et le Peuple dans la Révolution Mexicaine*. An abbreviated version appeared in English with Cambridge University Press in 1976, *The Mexican People Between Church and State*, following an invitation from the British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, whom Meyer described as the type of Marxist historian that he loved to engage with, one with a refined taste in jazz music and who saw little need to celebrate the radicalism of armed struggle.⁴⁸

Initially, the board of editors at Siglo XXI unanimously rejected the publication of *La Cristiada*, calling it a conservative and mostly biased celebratory account of the Cristero Rebellion. Orfila likely agreed with many of the objections given at

46. Jean Meyer, interview by author, University of Notre Dame, April 17, 2017; Álvaro Matute, "El 68 y la historiografía en México. Alcances y limitaciones," *Estudios Historiográficos* (1997): 87–95.

47. Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada. Tomo 1: La guerra de los cristeros; Tomo 2: El conflicto entre la iglesia y el estado (1926–1929); Tomo 3: Los cristeros* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1972–1974).

48. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016.

the board meeting, but he appreciated the historical rigor of the book, and with the insistence of Luis González, he foresaw its success.⁴⁹

The success and making of *La Cristiada* did not take place in a vacuum and largely responded to a set of questions that other scholars in Mexico had already developed in their respective interests on Catholicism. The first academic study to be published during the Global Sixties on the topic of the Cristero Rebellion and one of the books that influenced Meyer was Alicia Olivera Sedano’s *Aspectos del conflicto religioso* (1966). Three years later she founded the Program of Oral History in the company of historian Eugenia Meyer, and together they rescued the testimonies of veterans of the Revolutionary and Cristero wars.⁵⁰ Using original documents and relying on oral interviews (later deposited at the Program), Olivera Sedano examined the different factions that were involved during the war. In this effort, she “successfully broke with the Manichean version of the conflict,” written by, among others, the pro-Cristeros Miguel Palomar Vizcarra, Heriberto Navarrete, and the much more reactionary Antonio Ríos Facius, or by those who instead sided with the official narrative of the State, including Ramón Sender and Emilio Portes Gil.⁵¹

Additional and more analytical contributions were soon written on the topic. This included a 1966 article published by James Wilkie, where he examined the multifaceted aspects of the conflict.⁵² The work of US historians Robert Quirk and the younger David Bailey soon followed. As with Olivera Sedano and Wilkie, these also relied on rigorous academic research, but they distinguished their work by placing greater emphasis on the Church–State conflict that gave rise to the Cristero Rebellion, adding little interpretation to the popular actors who engaged in the war and making minimum effort to examine the diversity that existed with the Church. Meyer responded to these works, arguing that they had overestimated the power that the ecclesiastical authorities as well as middle-class members from the Liga and the Catholic Action of Mexican Youth (ACJM) had on the popular sectors that composed the bulk of the Cristero factions. Instead, he went as far as to argue that, with a few isolated exceptions, the clergy only played a minimal role in the conflict. When they did get involved, it was mostly as a result of the popular pressure. Moreover, in his review of Quirk’s book, Meyer noted that the author overstated the paganism of the common

49. *Ibid.*

50. Verónica Oikión Solano, “In memoriam. Alicia Esperanza Olivera Sedano de Bonfil (1933–2012),” *Tzintzun. Revista de Estudios Históricos*, no. 57 (January–June 2013): 234–42.

51. Luis Romo Cedano, “La inquietante originalidad de *La Cristiada*,” *Históricas Digital* (2015): 389–402.

52. Wilkie, “The Meaning of the Cristero Religious War.”

people who joined the rebellion, as an example of the failure of the Church to convert the countryside to Catholicism, and thus failed to see the profound understanding the rural rebels had for their traditional Roman Catholic faith.⁵³

For Meyer, the Cristero Rebellion was a religious conflict carried out almost exclusively from below. Select leaders of the ACJM, the Liga, and the Church saw a need to participate in the conflict, but they were not determining players. The “rural rebels” that came in defense of their Catholic faith were not fanatical pawns manipulated by ecclesiastical authorities, corrupt priests, or greedy landowners. They were not starving ignorant peasants pushed to the edge of desperation in need of agrarian reform. Rather, they were an eclectic, autonomous, and often democratic group of rural rebels who organized an impressive army of close to 50,000 people. Primarily active in the Bajío region of the country (from Zacatecas to Querétaro), they elected their own leaders. They built schools and developed their own justice system. Of greater moral authority, with a masterful geographical understanding of the region and overwhelming support from ordinary people, they claimed numerous victories against the more powerful Callista army. By the end of the conflict, more than 85,000 people had lost their lives, and while the Cristeros were ultimately defeated, they never lost their faith in Catholicism. By contrast, those who fought on the side of the revolutionary state won the war, but they lost their moral compass in the battles.⁵⁴

In prioritizing the voices of ordinary yet conscious people, Meyer largely relied on two methodological tools that were eventually criticized by future scholars: oral history and the mail questionnaire. As his critics have pointed out, both of these methodologies provided the author with rich information to describe the most thorough account of the Cristero Rebellion at the time, but they ultimately led him not only to “predetermined conclusions” that “lent support to Meyer’s apocalyptic vision of the rebellion” but also to a biased narrative that ignored the violence that Cristeros committed against representative agents of the revolutionary state, including rural teachers, as the American historian David Raby noted in *Educación y revolución social en México*.⁵⁵ With a few exceptions, however, the reviews of *La Cristiada* published in the 1970s overwhelmingly welcomed the book with enthusiasm as a bold and a foundational text that opened the academic door for those interested in religion during the twentieth century.

53. Jean Meyer, “Review of ‘The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1920–1929,’” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 54, no. 2 (May 1974): 324–6.

54. Romo Cedano, “La inquietante originalidad.”

55. Ramón Jrade, “Inquiries into the Cristero Insurrection against the Mexican Revolution,” *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1985): 53–69; Damián López, “La guerra cristera (México, 1926–1929): Una aproximación historiográfica,” *Historiografías*, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 35–52.

The first and only review of *La Cristiada* published in Mexico was written by Luis Córdova for *Cuadernos americanos* in 1974. The reviewer described the book as "an apologetic account," which had "plenty of narrative, but which lacked historical rigor." Worse yet, it was infused with the "incense" of the Church and written for the sole purpose of "provoking emotional reactions."⁵⁶ The author of *Communism in Mexico* (1965), Karl M. Schmitt, wrote a less damning but more erudite review. He described *La Cristiada* as a "fascinating, yet frustrating" book, a "mix of some probing research with some careless citations, a blend of cautious generalizations and passionate partisanship." Then, he said of the author, "[Meyer] becomes so enamored of his Cristeros that he loses perspective and becomes at times more polemicist than historian."⁵⁷ John Lynch seemed less bothered with the implied biases of the book and instead wrote,

It is difficult to categorize the philosophical position of Meyer, but he appears to write from the standpoint of radical Catholicism and popular traditionalism. At all events he knows what it means to be a believer, which is a good initial qualification for studying the Cristeros [...]. Inspired by admiration of "the rustic sanctity" of their men and for their resistance to the great Leviathan, forced him to understand them and, ultimately to rewrite the history of the rebellion and with it that of the Mexican Revolution.

He then concluded in disagreement with the Marxist critics, "The men whom history forgot have now been rescued from oblivion by a scholar who researched, interviewed and observed until he got their story right. And while so many heroes of the Mexican Revolution have been distorted by hagiography, these Cristero saints have found a true historian."⁵⁸

William Beezley, Maria Ann Kelley, Paul V. Murray, and David C. Bailey wrote positive reviews praising the originality of *La Cristiada* and its contribution to the field.⁵⁹ Murray, historian and author of *The Catholic Church in Mexico* (1965) wrote, "This is the most important book on any single aspect of Mexican Revolutionary history that I have read in the past forty years."⁶⁰ "What emerges," Bailey similarly noted in an enthusiastic but less embellished tone, "is one of the most original and provocative works of Mexican history to appear in recent years." "A triumph of multidisciplinary scholarship," the author of *Viva*

56. Luis Córdova, "Mucha narrativa, poco rigor histórico," *Cuadernos Americanos*, vol. 34, no.194 (May–June 1974): 187–93.

57. Karl M. Schmitt, *American Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 5 (December 1977): 1374–5.

58. John Lynch, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (November 1978): 364–6.

59. William Beezley, *The Historian*, vol. 39, no. 4 (August, 1977): 816–7; Maria Ann Kelley, *Journal of the Church and State*, vol. 21, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 341–3; Paul V. Murray, *Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 61, no. 5 (October 1975): 596–8; David C. Bailey, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 56, no. 1 (February 1976): 145–7.

60. Murray, 596.

Cristo Rey! (1974) added, “in both content and method, it is a magnificent contribution.” In his review of all versions of the book, including those published in Paris, the French scholar Christian Lalive d’Epinay also praised the originality of Meyer’s work and added, “The *Cristiada* is an episode that has been, up to this point, embarrassing for Mexico’s contemporary history and whose memory we have wanted to erase by eliminating witnesses and testimonies.” He explained,

[The writing on the Cristero Rebellion] is troublesome for the Church, who treated the peasants in an underhanded manner; it is a point of contention for the postrevolutionary state, because it is compelled to ask who is revolutionary. But it is also a bother for Marxism: rebels in the name of Christ and peasants capable of organizing themselves!⁶¹

Lorenzo Meyer, a young professor of El Colegio, agreed but more cautiously concluded, “Meyer wanted to destroy a myth, the black legend of the Cristeros, and he did it, but in such a unilateral way that he is risking the creation of a new one.”⁶² This proved to be the most perceptive review of *La Cristiada*.

In sum, with the publication of *La Cristiada* and his various academic articles, Meyer established himself as a powerful voice in Mexican historical studies as well as an influential figure for other foreign historians of Mexico who expressed a new interest in Catholicism. Intriguingly, while Meyer celebrated the Cristeros in the past, he was less sympathetic of those progressive Catholics of the era who called for a complete secularization of the Catholic faith. He welcomed some of the reformist overtones of the Second Vatican Council, but similar to some of his contemporaries, he warned against a false equivalence between social liberation and the supernatural. In his broader scholarship, Meyer’s vision was revisionist, critical of the authoritarianism of the Mexican government and the most radical voices that emerged in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre. In that sense, he broke with some of his generation in the New Left. The administration of Díaz Ordaz had been overcome by an irrational authoritarianism, he ultimately concluded, but nothing close to resembling the description he had provided in his reference of the military government of Argentina or the authoritarianism of the Cuban State.⁶³ By contrast, as I will elaborate in the next section, Meyer did not find it wise to violate Article 33 of the Constitution once again, preferring not to criticize the brutal repression that Echeverría launched against the militant sectors of the Left during the 1970s. Like many of his contemporaries, he instead saw these years as an opportunity for real change by drawing a distinction

61. Christian Lalive d’Epinay, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, vol. 21, no. 42 (July–December 1976): 173–7.

62. Lorenzo Meyer, *English Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 365 (October 1977): 871–2.

63. Jean Meyer, “Mexique incertain,” *Esprit*, vol. 362, nos. 7/8 (July–August 1967).

between the autocratic administration of Díaz Ordaz and the more populist government of Echeverría.

THE REDEMPTION OF “PRIMITIVE REBELS” AND DIVERGENT RESPONSES TO STATE REPRESSION

A few weeks before his expulsion from Mexico, Jean Meyer went to a movie theater to go see *Spartacus* (1960), the epic film by Stanley Kubrick featuring the slave revolt in antiquity. In one of its most memorable scenes, a group of enslaved men refused to betray the identity of their leaders as they all individually shouted, “I am Spartacus. I am Spartacus. I am Spartacus.”⁶⁴ At the exact moment, a young man in the theater who had participated in the 1968 student movement allegedly stood up on one of the seats and loudly decried that he was a “survivor” of the October 2, 1968, massacre, adding, “Tlatelolco would never be forgotten.”⁶⁵ Similar statements were voiced across the nation that year to condemn the role of the Mexican government in the repression of students.

Publications from across the world made similar statements to condemn the Tlatelolco massacre, including the May 1969 *Esprit* article that had Meyer expelled. Written on the topic of student movements in Latin America to commemorate the first anniversary of the student uprisings in France, Meyer stated that it remained unclear who had committed the massacre but argued that it was evident that the Mexican State was likely responsible for the crime. He blamed an irrational government unwilling to engage in a productive dialogue with a movement that, although legitimate in its demands, lacked the support of the working class. It was a massive protest that did not have the maturity of the Parisian student movement, but one that faced a more authoritarian regime.⁶⁶

Most foreign historians of Mexico likely agreed with Meyer and perhaps also disapproved (in private) of the repressive measures employed by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz throughout his administration. But only a few of them felt compelled to write in protest of the Tlatelolco massacre. An exception was John Womack, the Harvard professor of Mexican history and author of one of the most influential historical monographs published in the aftermath of the '68 movement, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (1969). In comparison to Meyer's article in *Esprit*, the one published by Womack in *The New Republic* a year earlier was far more condemning in its tone and sharper in its analysis of the political system in Mexico.

64. *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960).

65. Jean Meyer, interview by author, Mexico City, March 8, 2016; Jean Meyer, *Pro domo mea. La Cristiada a la distancia* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2004), 20.

66. Meyer, “Le mouvement étudiant en Amérique latine.”

Womack published his article on October 10, 1968, two days before the inauguration of the Olympic Games and eight days after the massacre. He provided one of the most perceptive narratives ever written on the movement to date that included a well-informed account of the legal and extra-legal mechanisms of control employed by the Mexican government to discredit and ultimately repress the students. Womack meticulously debunked the conspiracy theories given at the time to dismiss the legitimacy of the uprising and instead provided a clear explanation of the political and social reasons that compelled thousands of young people to organize a massive heterogeneous movement that demanded a more democratic nation. As Meyer did, Womack successfully placed the importance of the civil protest in the international context of the era, but more assertively insisted that the particularities of the movement rested almost entirely on its national character.⁶⁷

Two years later Womack published an equally insightful article with *Foreign Affairs* providing a longer history of State repression, rooted in the corruption and institutionalization of the Mexican Revolution. As Meyer did in his *Esprit* article, Womack viewed the PRI and the co-optation of its revolutionary rhetoric with apprehension, but unlike other scholars at the time, he seemed less enthusiastic about the presidential administration of Luis Echeverría. While many applauded the new president for his willingness to accept criticism and celebrated his populist policies with enthusiasm, Womack instead reminded his readers of Echeverría's long trajectory in the history of State repression in Cold War Mexico. He expressed little hope in his willingness to provide a greater "democratic opening" and described the political situation as dire, suggesting that State violence did not come to an end with the Tlatelolco massacre. Official harassment continued, rallies were "violently dispersed," and political activists were "suspiciously murdered," he accurately wrote. Furthermore, while others demanded support for the incumbent president, Womack instead argued that the authoritarianism that had characterized the administrations of Díaz Ordaz and Echeverría did not rest on one single individual; it also involved key members of their respective cabinets, whose anticommunist policies were largely to blame for the overt repression that characterized the Global Sixties in Mexico. "Echeverría is a perfect paladin of the established régime," Womack astutely explained, "with a long rap sheet of state repression that dated back to 1946, when he was recruited to the PRI." "Of the various presidential hopefuls" of 1969, he added with precision, Echeverría "was certainly the toughest . . . the canniest."⁶⁸

67. John Womack, "Unfreedom in Mexico. Government Crackdown on the Universities," *New Republic*, vol. 159, no. 15 (October 12, 1968).

68. John Womack Jr., "The Spoils of the Mexican Revolution," *Foreign Affairs* (July 1970).

The pessimistic (and accurate) description given of Echeverría by Womack differed from the one Meyer found at El Colegio on his return to Mexico in 1972. By then, a significant number of key Mexican scholars and intellectuals had sided with the ruling elite. In agreement with the incumbent president, they too argued that "*echeverrismo*" represented the best path to prevent the rise of "Fascism" in Mexico. While Meyer had found it necessary to condemn the authoritarianism of Díaz Ordaz, he nonetheless found himself restricted to Article 33 and therefore stayed away from making any public statements to criticize Echeverría in Mexican outlets and instead dedicated his energy and time to his numerous publications, which made him one of the most prolific historians of his generation. Prominent intellectuals weighed in. Most threw their support behind the new president, while only a small minority took more critical positions.⁶⁹ By and large, they refrained from criticizing the repressive politics of Echeverría, and in their silence, many of them saw little value in echoing the concerns that Womack voiced in his *Foreign Affairs* article.

Despite the ideological differences that polarized Mexican academia, however, the benefits that came with tacitly approving of the Echeverría administration were real. Intellectuals and scholars welcomed the greater academic freedom and substantial growth of government investment in higher education that marked the 1970s. Many of them also took advantage of the creation of new publishing houses that characterized these latter years of the Global Sixties, which simultaneously saw an unprecedented growth in the production of historical books on modern Mexico. Among others, these included the Marxist press Siglo XXI, the counter-cultural friendly presses Joaquín Mortiz and Diógenes, and the government-sponsored SepSetentas, a prominent but mostly understudied press, which provided young foreign scholars who specialized in Mexico with an unprecedented opportunity to publish their work in Spanish.

The Echeverría administration created SepSetentas with funds from the Ministry of Education in 1971. Under the direction of María del Carmen Millán, it translated and published the scholarly work of foreign scholars writing on the modern history of the nation with particular emphasis on affordable "*libros de bolsillo*," or "pocket books," that often touched on the topic of the Mexican Revolution. These featured doctoral dissertations and often included unpublished primary documents. Nearly all of these studies were written in response to the revisionist scholarship that emerged during the Global Sixties, including, among many others, the influential work of Stanley Ross (*¿Ha muerto la revolución mexicana?*), John Hart (*Los anarquistas mexicanos*), David Raby

69. See, for example, the respective positions described in Gabriel Zaid, "Carta a Carlos Fuentes," *Plural* (September 2, 1972).

(*Educación y revolución social en México*), James Hamon and Stephen Niblo (*Precursores de la revolución agraria en México*), and Barry Carr (*El movimiento obrero y la política en México*). In 1973, Meyer also published one of his earliest books with the press, *Problemas campesinos y revueltas agrarias*, and the work of other foreign scholars interested in the history of Mexican Catholicism and the Right soon followed, including those of Anne Staples (*La iglesia en la primera república federal mexicana*), Silvia M. Arrom (*La mujer mexicana ante el divorcio eclesiástico*), and Hugh Campbell (*La derecha radical en México*).⁷⁰

Clearly, a new generation of historians of Mexico were not immune to the tumultuous changes that took place during the Global Sixties and partly responded to the State violence that peaked with the Tlatelolco massacre by reinterpreting the nation's history "from the bottom up." In the words of the British historian Alan Knight, who first visited Mexico in 1969, "it was time for *los de abajo* [or "the underdogs" of national history, as the famous novelist Mariano Azuela once called them] to get their deserved attention."⁷¹ Prior to the establishment of SepSetentas, new archives were explored and became more accessible, while regional studies took priority. Oral, quantitative, and regional histories laid out the methodological work for alternative and more nuanced interpretations of the past. European and US historians also became more interested in Latin America. Graduate programs grew exponentially, and the "vogue" of the era sparked a new historical interest in revolutions and popular uprisings.⁷² Many graduate students who travelled to Mexico from Europe and the United States to do historical research sympathized with the Cuban Revolution and the student uprisings of 1968. Two telling examples were Barry Carr and John Hart, who were politically involved as graduate students. The terrifying events that took place during the Tlatelolco massacre and the repression that followed reinforced their academic interest in labor politics, anarchism, and Marxism. But these were not isolated examples.⁷³

The most influential monograph published in the immediate aftermath of the student movement was Womack's *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. As others have argued, this was an "emblematic book of the New Left" that aimed to recover the collective experience of the militant peasants that Meyer described in a 1971 review as "remarkable" and a "beautiful example of the inextricable synthesis between event history and social history." Meyer added in his review

70. María Del Carmen Velázquez, "Bibliographical Essay: The Colección SepSetentas," *The Americas*, vol. 35, no. 3 (January 1979): 373–89.

71. Knight, "Interpreting the Mexican Revolution"; Mariano Azuela González, *Los de abajo*, first published with the Fondo de Cultura Económica in 1916.

72. Matute, "El 68 y la historiografía"; David C. Bailey, "Revisionism and the Recent Historiography of the Mexican Revolution," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 58, no. 1 (1978): 62–79.

73. Matute, "El 68 y la historiografía."

that it is a book that "possesses the great merit [of its author] in liking his protagonists, the humble, those who are valued by the number, those whose habitual silence and immobility [have] mislead [others] to believe that their minds were empty." Womack "did not mention the role of religion in the Zapatista uprising," Meyer lamented, but unlike other historians of the revolution, "he recognized its full importance." But it is the detailed explanation that Womack presented in his book to explain how ordinary people "became sentimentally conscious of themselves and their situation vis-à-vis others" that made this a great book and an influential study that encouraged historians to revise their description of the masses, not as dupes manipulated by strong *caudillos*, but as active agents of their own history.⁷⁴

Meyer first met Womack in the summer of 1970, a few months before the publication of his review of *Zapata*. Five years younger, Meyer introduced his American colleague to a set of original documents available in the Parisian archives on Zapata. He also gave him a copy of his five-volume doctoral dissertation. "We clicked right away," noted Womack, as they talked for hours sharing their mutual love for Mexico and its history. Similar to Meyer, Womack had first arrived in Mexico to do archival research for his doctoral dissertation in 1962. He had little knowledge of Latin America, and similar to Meyer, Womack had minimal knowledge of Mexico, and his Spanish was rudimentary. Both found the country fascinating, but unlike Meyer, Womack would remain committed to Marxism and sympathetic to the principles and accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution. Womack remarked in an interview, "when intellectuals and liberal historians voiced their support for Echeverría, Cuba remained my North Star."⁷⁵

For Meyer, Womack was among a host of historians doing work that excited him. Meyer was equally enthusiastic about the books published by Enrique Florescano, William Taylor, and especially Luis González. In his review of *Pueblo en vilo*, Meyer wrote, "through his language, [the author] obliges us to respond to a number of more general problems, such as that of change and the role of the individual in history." It is "an exemplary" book. "If the title had not already been taken by a novelist, Gonzalez would have been able to call his book 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' [. . .]. Almost everything is there, the absence, reticence, and feint have confessional value." He explained, "It is up to the reader to look, to search; the reader is offered treasures that we have the vanity to not

74. Jean Meyer, "A propos d'un livre et d'un cinquantenaire: La mort de Zapata," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, vol. 26, no. 6 (1971): 1198–202. On *Zapata* as emblematic of the "New Left," see Pedro L. San Miguel, "Mito e historia en la épica campesina: John Womack y la Revolución Mexicana," *Secuencia*, no. 76 (January–April 2010): 135–56.

75. Womack, phone interview with the author, University of Notre Dame, December 10, 2020.

highlight; in this false jumble, everything that does not shine is oftentimes gold [. . .]. We learn what [the people of San José de Gracia] ate, the music they enjoyed, their joys and fears, their health and illness [. . .]. Everything is there, including their undergarments [. . .], their obsession with interior peace, with the ‘communion’ and their worry for the future.”⁷⁶ To some extent, this is what Meyer hoped to achieve with *La Cristiada*, a book, paralleled by Womack’s *Zapata*, as I argued earlier, that not only aimed to tell the story of those who lost a war to an immoral enemy but, in the language of the era, also hoped to present its common protagonists with dignity. Similar to the Zapatistas, the Cristeros appeared as epic subjects of the past, and in the context of the Global Sixties, also as “primitive rebels,” in the words of Hobsbawm, who had been erased from the official historiography and who fought against a totalitarian “status quo.”⁷⁷

Following the publication of *Zapata*, and other foundational books of the decade (including González Casanova’s 1965 *Democracy in Mexico*), new revisionist studies were soon published on labor unions, the economics of the hacienda system during the Porfiriato, *caudillismo*, *caciquismo*, agrarian politics, regional interpretations of the many Mexican Revolutions, and the Church–State conflict that followed in the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁸ Many of these revisionist interpretations, including the bulk of monographs later published with SepSetentas, were written from neo-Marxist perspectives. They were directly influenced by the political repression of the time and nearly all of them were published in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre. Emblematic of this scholarship is Adolfo Gilly’s reinterpretation of the revolution as an “interrupted” and thus still relevant process, written by the Argentine while imprisoned in Lecumberri as well as the ethnographic work on the persistence of *caciquismo* in the postrevolutionary period by the American anthropologist Paul Friedrich. Other key interpretations of the era included James Cockcroft’s emphasis on the “co-optation” of the revolution, and especially Arnaldo Cordova’s earlier and much more influential sociological interpretation of the conflict as a political revolution that brought about an authoritarian, nationalist, and populist state that successfully created a “mass politics,” based in the mobilization, cooptation, and repression of workers and peasants.⁷⁹

But not all revisionist studies were neo-Marxist interpretations. Meyer, for example, in expressing no interest in reviewing leftist interpretations of Mexican

76. Jean Meyer, “Histoire d’un village mexicain: San José de Gracia,” *Anneles*, vol. 25, no. 3 (June 1970); Jean Meyer, “Un nouvel instrument bibliographique pour l’histoire d Mexique contemporain,” *Anneles*, vol. 21, no. 6 (November–December 1966).

77. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).

78. Bailey, “Revisionism.”

79. Matute, “El 68 y la historiografía”; Luis F. Ruiz, “Where Have All the Marxists Gone? Marxism and the Historiography of the Mexican Revolution,” *A Contracorriente*, vol. 5, no. 2 (winter, 2008): 196–219.

history, argued that the revolution had failed to improve the lives of the marginalized. In contrast, he seemed far more intellectually invested with scholars who expressed critical views of celebratory accounts of radical revolutions. Meyer delighted in the fact that many of his French colleagues, in contrast to many American scholars, "at last sounded the death knell for the romantic dreams of the Left in Europe." Specifically, Meyer pointed to René Dumont, author of *Cuba est-il socialiste?* (1970), and to K.S. Karol's *Les guérilleros au pouvoir: Itinéraire politique de la révolution cubaine* (1970). Despite these authors' initial sympathy for the "caudillo Fidel," Meyer argued, they finally recognized that "the Cuban celebration was finished."⁸⁰

The need for revisionist interpretations of Mexican history reached an unprecedented audience during the Third Congress of Mexican and North American historians, held in Oaxtepec, Morelos, in November of 1969. Presided over by Cosío Villegas, the Congress gave priority to young scholars and included the participation of dozens of representative historians from Mexico, the United States, Canada, and Europe. The primary goals were to gather historiographical summaries of the work produced since the second Congress held in Austin, Texas, in 1959; explore the benefits of engaging in interdisciplinary research; and collectively identify topics in need of historical attention.⁸¹ The two papers that stood out because of their boldness, assertiveness, and meticulous engagement with the scholarship were those written by Womack, "Mexican political historiography, 1959–1969," and Meyer, "Historia de la vida social" ("Social History").

In his presentation, Womack was the only participant to directly mention the Tlatelolco massacre and the only historian to place his paper in the broader political context of the 1960s.⁸² He wrote, "In Mexico, the present still seeps back into the past, and the past up into the present, like blood through a bandage." Why shy away from our respective ideologies in the writing of the past? He added:

I would argue [. . .] that after all the popular strain and sacrifice, the meaning of the Great Revolution is that it issued in the regime prevailing since the 1940s, which itself issued in the government that massacred the citizens in [the] Tlatelolco Plaza in October [of] 1968. My position, I would admit, has political

80. Jean Meyer, "Review of René Dumont, *Cuba est-il socialiste?* and K.S. Karol, *Les guérilleros au pouvoir: Itinéraire politique de la révolution cubaine*," *Esprit*, vol. 393, no. 6 (June 1970).

81. François Chevalier, "Investigaciones contemporáneas. Memorias de la tercera reunión de historiadores mexicanos y norteamericanos. Oaxtepec, Morelos, 4–7 de noviembre de 1969, review," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 55, no. 2 (May 1975): 324–6.

82. All the presentations were published in *Investigaciones contemporáneas. Memorias de la tercera reunión de historiadores mexicanos y norteamericanos, Oaxtepec, Morelos de 1969* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1971).

implications. [. . . After all,] the history of power that we try to make sense of depends inevitably on a criticism of power that we try to steer away from.⁸³

The presentation written by the then 27-year-old Meyer refrained from providing comments on politics.⁸⁴ Composed of a paper 32 single-spaced pages long, it instead laid out a long list of questions that had been ignored by an older generation of scholars related to agrarian issues, labor topics, the military, and religion. Of these, those pertaining to Catholicism were the most ambitious and assertive in tone. Meyer wrote, “It is truly a shame to witness our ignorance when it comes to the social history of Mexico.” Following the exemplary work of Luis González, “we must make a better effort” to understand “the psychology of the common people and their diverse pueblos,” their needs, hopes, aspirations, and diverse understandings of their world. “A lot has been said of Zapata and Villa, but who were the Zapatistas and Villistas, really?” Historians should no longer be concerned with “heroic personalities,” he added, but rather with the socioeconomic, political, and religious contexts that surrounded such heroes and transformed them into mythical figures. Experts in the field should not be exclusively interested in revolutions and class conflict, moreover, but also in the religious and conservative motives that pushed so many ordinary people to resist multiple forms of authoritarianism, including those that emerged with the Revolution, an event with mythical proportions, he argued, “that broke with the agrarian system of the past, but introduced new forms of exploitation.” He then asked: To what extent has religion shaped resistance? “What has been the historical relationship between religion and social tensions?” To answer these and many other questions raised in his presentation, Meyer then added, “we must acknowledge the diversity that exists in the various manifestations of Catholicism.” The notion that there is “a ‘Catholic Mexico’ is a cliché, a verbal illusion.” There are multiple geographical regions and sectors within the Church that have competing understandings of religion. A further complexity will also be noticed when historians take into consideration class and generational differences. But in addition to greater attention to local differences, historians must not fail to place Catholicism in the larger world context. Just as with the State, the Church was a heterogeneous institution composed of competing forces that have negotiated power with grassroots actors and ecclesiastical authorities. Unfortunately, historians have not examined this complexity. Meyer concluded, “Our modern world [and] our history will not be intelligible unless we explore the role that religion has played in the life of the masses. [We can no longer ignore] their beliefs, dogmas, revelations, and rituals.” Religious archives will likely continue to be closed, and considering the anticlerical environment that persisted in Mexico and the lack of interest in academia, “many of

83. Womack, “Mexican political historiography,” in *Investigaciones contemporáneas*, 479 and 491.

84. Andrés Lira González, a doctoral student at Stony Brook and visiting professor at El Colegio at the time, read the paper to the audience in Meyer’s absence.

them will probably be destroyed." Thus, "the historian must take full advantage from other disciplines. [She/he] must be willing to play the role of the pollster and the interviewer."⁸⁵

Meyer was not alone in calling greater attention to historical research on Catholicism. Similar to the revisionist interpretations of the Revolution, a new interest also emerged on the topics of religion, the Church, conservative movements, and the Cristero Rebellion, largely written in direct response to the once official narratives prioritized by the State. In 1971, for example, Francisco Miranda published an essay in *Historia mexicana* that further drew attention to the "urgency" of revising national history and called on scholars to "consider the ecclesiastical church not as an eternal rival of the state" but rather as an influential institution that has "shaped our social, cultural, economic, and political reality."⁸⁶ Two years later, the American historian Donald Mabry also published his pioneer study of the chronology and political history of the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), for which he had unprecedented access to party files.⁸⁷ It was also in 1973 that Meyer published one of the first books on the Hispanic origins, nationalist politics, and social dimensions of the *Sinarquistas*, and as referenced earlier, it was also in the context of the 1960s when Olivera Sedano, Quirk, and Bailey joined Meyer in bringing revisionist attention to the study of Catholicism. Finally, it was also during these years when the American historian James Wilkie and his Guatemalan wife Edna Monzón conducted their groundbreaking interviews with the leader of the Sinarquista movement Salvador Abascal, the founder of the PAN Manuel Gómez Morín, the key ideologue of the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty Miguel Palomar Vizcarra, and the leading figure of the Cristero Rebellion Aurelio Robles Acevedo.⁸⁸

In short, it was during the Global Sixties when a new and more sophisticated scholarly interest in Catholicism and conservative movements emerged, not simply as reactionary forces but as influential in the shaping of the nation. Meyer, who distinguished himself from other foreign experts on Mexico, placed himself at the vanguard of this rising academic interest. In the words of Mabry, "The Frenchman had no special affection for the United States or obligation to fit the story a predetermined ideological mold; instead, he had the desire and the time to uncover all of the story." Unlike his colleagues from

85. Meyer, "Historia de la vida social," in *Investigaciones contemporáneas*.

86. Francisco Miranda, "Problemática de una historia eclesiástica," *Historia Mexicana*, vol. 21, no. 2 (October–December 1971): 269–84.

87. Donald J. Mabry, *Mexico's Accion Nacional. A Catholic Alternative to Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973).

88. James W. Wilkie and Edna Monzón de Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1995).

the United States, moreover, “he had an historical consciousness of a truly revolutionary revolution and was not seduced by the charms of the Mexican experience.”⁸⁹

CONCLUSION: PRESENTISM IN THE PAST?

Today, many historians of Latin America find themselves polarized debating how to “do” history in a politically charged environment. As some have taken a position “against presentism,” others have not shied away from the temptation of reinterpreting the past through a contemporary lens.⁹⁰ Public discussions of this polemic issue were mostly absent in academia during the 1960s, but as I have argued in this article, “In Mexico, the present [always seeped] back into the past, and the past up into the present,” as John Womack put it during the 1969 conference in Oaxtepec.⁹¹

The scholarly work of Jean Meyer and those of his contemporaries provide us with great insight into the Global Sixties. This was a polarizing period of utopian expectations and an increasing sense of disillusionment that brought the study of Catholicism and the celebration of militant Christians to the forefront of the revisionist scholarship of Mexican history. As with their Marxist counterparts, these historians of religion prioritized the voices of the marginalized and welcomed new methodological tools. In the case of Meyer, these ranged from oral history, as Olivera Sedano and Wilkie pioneered in their respective work, to the less successful use of the mail questionnaire. The political questions of colonialism, imperialism, and armed struggle that surrounded the multicausal influences of the Cuban Revolution shaped these methodologies across Latin America and encouraged a new generation of French intellectuals to give greater attention to the Third World; however, in the case of Mexico, so did the divergent interpretations of Catholicism that simultaneously welcomed a renewed interest in the Cristero Rebellion in Mexican academia. The monographs published on the subject successfully revised the once official interpretations of the Mexican Revolution. This renewed academic interest on the topic thrived in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco massacre, which Echeverría saw as opportunity to provide a fruitful space for criticism and intellectual production that benefitted an influential group of liberal and conservative scholars who saw little need in exposing the repression that the government unleashed on those who continued to protest against the system, including

89. Donald J. Mabry, “Mexican Anticlerics, Bishops, Cristeros, and the Devout during the 1920s: A Scholarly Debate,” *A Journal of Church and State*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1978): 81–92.

90. See, for example, James H. Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present,” *Perspectives on History* (August 17, 2022).

91. Womack, “Mexican political historiography,” 479.

workers and campesinos who tried to create independent unions from the government and young activists who saw no other option but to embrace armed struggle.

Jean Meyer never aspired to be a politician, and unlike some historians of his generation, he did not express interest in becoming an intermediate of the State. As an intellectual with a sense of “moral authority” who often published outside academic journals, however, the French scholar ceased to be a “pernicious” threat to national academia and instead emerged as one of the most important and hegemonic voices among historians of Mexican Catholicism.⁹² As the essayist Jorge Volpi once argued:

In a country built on the notion that a single party—or a single individual—should dominate the entirety of the social sphere, not many options remain for intellectuals. They can either exercise a no-holds-barred critique and thereby risk imprisonment (or worse), or they can moderate their criticism in order to curry the favor and recognition that allows them to carry out their work with a certain freedom, under the condition that they not exceed the limits that have been imposed on them.⁹³

Like most of his colleagues at El Colegio de México, and other foreign historians of Mexico, Meyer’s career benefitted by choosing the latter position when he returned to his adopted nation in 1972, and while he expressed a position of condemnation in describing the administration of Díaz Ordaz, the chilling effects of Article 33 forced him to be less critical of future presidents.⁹⁴

In my interviews with Jean Meyer, he repeatedly emphasized that luck always seemed to be on his side as a key explanation to a highly successful career. In reality, the Francophile character that continued to dominate Mexican academia during the 1960s, combined with a prolific scholarly production that a few historians of his generation matched, contributed to the predominance that Meyer achieved among many of his contemporaries, and so did a privileged status in academic spaces that favored the voices of male (and white) figures.⁹⁵

To conclude, the history of Jean Meyer provides us with an intriguing, yet mostly unexplored aspect of the Global Sixties, one that prioritizes a European perspective on Latin America and one that draws attention to a conservative view

92. Gabriel Zaid, “Intelectuales,” *Vuelta*, no. 14 (November 1990): 21–3.

93. Jorge Volpi Escalante, “The End of the Conspiracy: Intellectuals and Power in 20th-Century Mexico,” *Discourse*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 145.

94. Most recently, Jean Meyer has expressed a critical view of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

95. This is particularly true of Alicia Olivera Sedano. See Oikión Solano, “In memoriam.”

of the era. His story, moreover, is one that has a parallel story to the French New Left, which initially fell in love with the utopian ideas of the Cuban Revolution but which, at the end of the era, established a more critical view of its limitations and contradictions. For Meyer, this took place very early on, during his first visit in Mexico in 1962. But for most of his contemporaries in Paris, this happened in the late 1960s, when Fidel Castro failed to condemn the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968, and three years later, imprisoned the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla for criticizing the revolutionary government.⁹⁶ Régis Debray said little to condemn the Castro regime, but as many of contemporaries in Paris did, he distanced himself from the radicalism that made him such an influential figure in Latin America. In 1970, he wrote, “Nothing assures that socialism will one day appear as the momentary fad of a century, a laughable illusion with no memorable consequences.” Five years later he then referenced the study of revolutions by other European intellectuals of the era as “entertainment for obsessives.”⁹⁷

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96. Artarz and Luyckx, “The French New Left”: 77–8.

97. As cited in Cox, “Régis Debray,” 7.