

The Many Faces of the Cristero Rebellion

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The power struggle simmering between the Catholic Church and the Mexican national government erupted with Catholic bishops and priests suspending religious worship in protest of the anticlerical policies of the Calles administration on July 31, 1926.¹⁹⁷ President Plutarco Elias Calles called for “submission to the law,” known as Calles Law, that implemented anticlerical conditions set forth in the Constitution of 1917.¹⁹⁸ Laws that controlled property rights in Article 27 of the Constitution forbade Church ownership of property and limited foreign ownership. All land served the public interest by the protection of communal rights of indigenous groups and redistribution of land under control of a strong national government.¹⁹⁹ Under Calles’ Law, the government nationalized all church buildings, outlawed religious houses, banned public religious functions, and required priests to register in order to avoid severe fines or imprisonment.²⁰⁰

Examination of the Cristero Rebellion as simply a conflict between church and state misses the many faces, or nuances, that surrounded the uprising. In the work of historians from Jean Meyer, in the 1970s, to Ramon Jrade in the 1980s, and more recently the works of Jennie Purnell and Adrian Bantjes, reveals a multilayered portrait of the rebellion. The secular nature and the anticlerical position of the Calles administration are clear. What proves more complex, however, is how the conflict is defined. Was the rebellion a “holy war” with religious motivations? Was the conflict based in an economic struggle between a variety of peasant groups and the policies of a strong national government? Was the rebellion the culmination of long-standing grievances between the Church and the state? Or, as Purnell suggests, was the rebellion the articulation of factional conflicts between various communities that included economic, political, regional, and community concerns?²⁰¹

This paper examines the complexities of the Cristero Rebellion, exploring the motivations of the many factions that emerged on both sides of the conflict and the many faces of the participants. The rebellion cannot

¹⁹⁷ Matthew Butler, “The ‘Liberal’ Cristero: Ladislao Molina and the Cristero Rebellion in Michoacan, 1927-9,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 31, no. 3 (October, 1999): 645; Jennie Purnell, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico: The Agraristas and Cristeros of Michoacan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 72.

¹⁹⁸ Purnell, 76.

¹⁹⁹ Earl Shorris, *The Life and Times of Mexico* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 272; Purnell, 76.

²⁰⁰ Matthew Butler, “The Church in ‘Red Mexico’: Michoacan Catholics and the Mexican Revolution, 1920-1929,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55, no. 3 (July, 2004): 530.

²⁰¹ Purnell, 3.

be characterized as purely a battle between two dominating forces. Like much of Mexican history, the story of the rebellion is one of continuing struggle for political, economic, and regional autonomy among a variety of groups. Indeed, the portrait of the Cristero Rebellion has many facets, each with its own interests, ideologies, hopes, and dreams.

The Face of the State

In 1925, Tabasco *cacique* Tomas Garrido Canabal criticized Catholic clerics and stated that “the cassocked vultures have seized their prey, digging their talons into the heart of the Indian, who is less prepared than any other race to resist the seduction of the whole ritual farse.”²⁰² President Plutarco Elias Calles, like Canabal, believed that the power of the Church obstructed modernization and that he must eliminate the power of the Church and its domination of the peasantry.²⁰³ Calles wanted absolute control and was suspicious of the politicization of the Church after the creation of a fairly successful Catholic Party in 1912. Although the party had dissolved, Calles sought to rid Mexico of the potential for Church control.

The origins of the ideology of de-fanaticization were found in radical liberalism of the nineteenth-century scientific positivism, Marxism, and Protestantism. Mexican revolutionaries understood the revolution as more than an economic struggle, but also one of spirituality. They considered religion, like many of their Russian counterparts, a “drug” and the “Catholic ritual [...] a seductive trick designed to exploit ignorant peasants ‘hallucinated by floats, adorned with clouds, little angels, chalices and all the artifice the clergy uses to cheat them out of their last penny.’”²⁰⁴ They clerics accused of sustaining the “backwards” nature of rural peasantry and presenting an obstacle to the formation of a modern state.

However, the development of a secular state was not the only motivation for Calles’ actions toward the Church. Following the February 1926 proclamation of the “primate of Mexico” in which he “repeated a 1917 declaration that the Church did not recognize the constitution,” Calles proceeded to fully implement all the provisions of the Constitution regarding the Church.²⁰⁵ He called for “submission to the law” that would be required anywhere and explained that this did not indicate the ‘decatholicisation’ of Mexico.²⁰⁶ The Church antagonized Calles who

²⁰² *Manifiesto a los obreros organizados de la republica y al elemento revolucionario* (Villemososa, Tabasco, 1925), 9-10 in Adrian A. Bantjes, “Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico: The De-Christianization Campaigns, 1929-1940.” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13, no. 1. (Winter, 1997): 94.

²⁰³ Butler, 520.

²⁰⁴ Guanajuato Vecinos Moroleon, to Sec. Gob., 31 December 1934, DGG 2.347, exp. 2.347(8)15257, AGN in Bantjes, 96.

²⁰⁵ Butler, *Church*, 521.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

already sought its end, or at least minimizing its strong presence in Mexico.

The State sought to end what they believed to be the hegemony of the Church over the Mexican people, in particular, indigenous and rural populations. In order to modernize, the secular state must rid Mexico of fanaticism and mysticism that kept the people 'backwards' and without a national identity. The Mexican government wanted absolute control over the social, cultural, economic, and political lives of the people, and the Church was considered a significant obstacle.

The Face of the Church

The Catholic Church, although present in the daily life of many Mexicans and a fixture in many rural communities, was noticeably absent from the rebellion. The majority of priests, according to Jean Meyer, were quite hostile to the *cristeros*. Meyer found that in January 1927, out of 3,600 priests, only five were participated in the rebellion. One hundred priests were "actively hostile," sixty-five were neutral but provided support to the *cristeros*, forty were "actively favorable," and 3,600 priests left their parishes.²⁰⁷ The Vatican had forbade bishops and priests aiding the insurgents and demanded that they follow the law of the land. Many feared persecution as priests had been attacked and murdered and so fled to the cities or went into hiding in the hinterlands of Mexico under the protection of their parishes.²⁰⁸

Mexican clerics suspended of worship on 31 July, 1926, in order to encourage private worship. This was "an attempt to put the sacraments and the clergy beyond the reach of civil law."²⁰⁹ However, the "majority of clergy withdrew from rural areas and sought refuge in the big towns under the control of the Government."²¹⁰ Not only did the majority of priests withdraw from their parishes, they encouraged nonviolence, patience, and humility. According to Aurelio Acevedo, one of the *cristero* rebels, "the very Fathers forbade us to fight for Christ, for the religion our fathers taught us and then reaffirmed for us in baptism, confirmation and our first communion."²¹¹ Many priests offered sermons opposing the *cristeros*, calling them 'cattle-thieves' and discouraging parishioners from participation in rebel activities.²¹²

A few priests, such as Fr. Adolfo Arroyo, the vicar of Valparaiso, stayed with his parishioners and joined the rebellion in defense of the Church. Fr. Arroyo criticized his fellow priests and wrote, "The overwhelming majority of the bishops and priests, displaying a criminal

²⁰⁷ Meyer, 75.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 69.

²⁰⁹ Butler, 531.

²¹⁰ Meyer, 70.

²¹¹ Interview of Meyer with Aurelio Acevedo, in Meyer, *Cristeros*, 70.

²¹² Ibid.

degree of conformism, wallowed in an accursed inertia, all expecting sheer miracle from Heaven to give liberty to the Church.” They were content to give exhortations and say a few prayers. The priests had recourse to theology and, without further consideration, announced the illicit nature of the violent struggle in defence of the Church.²¹³ Msgr. Gonzalez y Valencia, Archbishop of Durango wrote in a pastoral letter on February 11, 1927, “We never provoked this armed movement. But now that this movements exists, and all peaceful means have been exhausted, to our Catholic sons who have risen in arms for the defence of their social and religious rights ... we must say: be tranquil in your consciences and receive our blessing.”²¹⁴

Because of Vatican-issued orders that bishops and priests abandon their parishes and spiritual duties, and submit to the mandates of the Constitution, priests rarely supported the rebellion. Fear of persecution and death also created a barrier to clerical support, although many priests found ways to remain with their parishioners as spiritual leaders and conduct the sacraments covertly. The face of the Church was not represented among the *cristeros*, only the presence of a few priests who felt they could not and would not abandon their charges. If the rebellion was a conflict between the Church and the state, the Church was missing.

The Faces of the Cristeros

In ideological, socioeconomic, and geographical terms, the *cristeros* were the most diverse of all the actors in the rebellion. They were, in other words, not engaged in a large collective action, rather the *cristeros* represented numerous causes and concerns, not all of which were religious. Jennie Purnell writes that “communities did not rebel *en masse* during the *cristiada* unless revolutionary anticlericalism and agrarianism attacked local resources, values, and institutions that had been successfully defended until the revolution itself.”²¹⁵ In fact, the peasants were deeply divided on the issue of rebellion and their opinions reflected their economic interests, the impact of agrarian reform on their villages and towns, and their feelings toward local authorities. Although various communities and factions shared religious beliefs, there were differing political viewpoints.²¹⁶ The rebellion acquired the name *cristero* because of the battle cry “¡Viva Cristo Rey!” and not necessarily because they shared a single view.²¹⁷

²¹³Archives of Aurelio Acevedo, notes on the religious persecution, armed defense, and agreements, by Fr. Adolfo Arroyo, MS of 8 pp., 24 January 1934, in Meyer, *Cristeros*, 69-70.

²¹⁴“Outside the Flaminian Gate,” pastoral letter of Msgr. Gonzalez y Valencia, 11 February 1927. Original sheet in the possession of Jean Meyer (double sheet written on recto and verso), in Meyer, *Cristeros*, 67.

²¹⁵ Purnell, 19.

²¹⁶ Ibid. 8.

²¹⁷Ramon Jrade, “Inquiries into the Cristero Insurrection against the Mexican Revolution.” *Latin American Research Review* 20, no. 2. (1985): 54.

Some *cristeros* engaged in rebellion for purely political and economic reasons. Ladislao Molina, a large landowner in Michoacan, did not demonstrate any religious motivation, and was known to embrace liberal ideology first, and Catholicism second.²¹⁸ According to Jose Perez, a delegate to the National League for the Defence of Religious Liberty (LNDLR), writing to his superiors, “he is not a *cristero*: whilst he is a Catholic, he is also a liberal, and does not fight for the same reasons as the Catholics. He has his own point of view, but it is personal.”²¹⁹ In the case of Molina, and most likely others like him, “Catholicism served as a dissident ideology for resisting state encroachments on his sphere of influence.”²²⁰

Some of the *cristeros* focused their revolutionary efforts on the local *agraristas* who benefited from Cardenas-era land reforms.²²¹ Agrarian land reform created sporadic problems throughout Mexico as villages and towns lost territorial autonomy. However, the problem for the *cristeros* did not necessarily revolve around the *agraristas*, it revolved around religion with political overtones. *Cristero* Jose Gonzalez Romo wrote in a letter to *agrarista* Jesus Morfin, “Tell the *agraristas* that we are not fighting them because they are *agraristas*, but because they support the tyrant who is trying to wipe out the religion of our country and hand us over to the Protestant Gringos.”²²² Government control over land distribution often meant foreign ownership and control, the previous statement suggests that some *cristeros* saw a connection between elimination of the Catholic Church, and the introduction of liberal, state-controlled, and foreign-based exploitation.

Despite the economic and political tones of the rebellion, defense of religion still motivated many of the *cristeros*. Because of their commitment to Church restoration, they often defied the Church’s instruction to obey the laws and observe restraint and non-violence. In a letter to the parish priest, the Quintanar Brigade wrote, “without their permission and without their orders we are throwing ourselves into this blessed struggle for our liberty, and without their permission and without their orders we will go on until we conquer or die.”²²³ Many *cristeros* “believed they were fighting a ‘holy war’ against an anticlerical government frequently depicted as the Anti-Christ.”²²⁴

²¹⁸ Butler, 645.

²¹⁹ Archivo Aurelio Robles Acevedo, Mexico City, caja 20/expediente 90/foja 14117, Perez to Guerrero, Morelia, 22 February 1929, in Butler, *Molina*, 646.

²²⁰ Butler, 649.

²²¹ James Krippner-Martinez, “Invoking ‘Tato Vasco’: Vasco de Quiroga, Eighteenth – Twentieth Centuries,” *The Americas* 56, no. 3. (January, 2000): 23.

²²² Archives of the Society of Jesus, Mexican Province, 9 April 1929 in Meyer, *Cristeros*, 107.

²²³ Archives of Aurelio Acevedo; collective letter of the Quintanar Brigade to the parish priest of Mesquitic, Norberto Reyes, in Meyer, *Cristeros*, 71.

²²⁴ Javier Villa-Flores, “Religion, Politics, and Salvation: Latin American Millenarian Movements,” *Radical History Review* Issue 99 (Fall, 2007): 246.

According to Javier Villa-Flores, during periods of “accelerated cultural, political, and economic change,” increased religious and spiritual participation is common.²²⁵ He suggests that the *cristeros*, in response to crisis, mobilized around a religious belief that served as a source of motivation.²²⁶ Alliances and grassroots defense of the Church solidified in response to the rapid changes the government attempted to impose.²²⁷ In fact, *cristeros* were not only found in peasant communities and rural villages, but in urban areas as well, although their character and composition were significantly different.

In the cities, large urban networks formed. They engaged in clandestine operations collecting taxes for supplies, obtaining ammunition and food to sustain the rebels, and formed elaborate communication networks. Workers and artisans, along with professionals filled the urban ranks of the *cristeros*. Women played a critical role as *cristeros*. They carried messages, ammunition, obtained and delivered food, among many other duties, at great peril.²²⁸ What united the *cristeros* was their need to cope with and respond to government controls over every aspect of their lives. Government attacks against the Church mobilized the *cristeros*. The Church, in many ways, was the symbol of autonomy, of cultural identity, an institution that sustained the people through decades of turmoil.

Conclusion

The question remains, after this short discussion of the actors of the Cristero Rebellion, was this a conflict based on religion, or was it more a conflict between competing factions based on economic and political interests? We have seen that the Church as an institution played a very minor role, if any role at all. We have also seen that economics and local interests figured strongly in mobilizing the *cristeros* as in the ongoing conflict between the *agraristas* and the peasants. Agrarian and land reform provided much of the fuel for the *cristiada*.

Religion served as a common denominator mobilizing the lower and middle class against the elite. Devotion to the church bound diverse anti-government sentiments, and the government’s action against the Church and religious freedom were springboards that propelled the *cristiada*. In the Cristero Rebellion a variety of concerns converged, and the Church served as a symbol and catalyst for anti-government expression. The desire of the government to inflict its control over Mexican life and create a new national identity based on secular terms intensified the commitment of many Catholics to practice their religion, with or without clerical guidance or support.

²²⁵ Ibid. 243.

²²⁶ Ibid. 242.

²²⁷ Butler, 525.

²²⁸ Meyer, 95, 128-130.

Religion ultimately served as the spark that set the wheels of rebellion in motion. But religion was not the sole motivation for the rebellion. In the end, it appears the Cristero Rebellion was not a conflict of the Church and the state, rather a power struggle between the autonomy of peasants, workers, and the middle class against the elites and the government.

