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Introduction

José de León Toral hiked up Chiquihuite Hill near the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City in June 1928. He placed a newspaper against a ridge and stepped back fifteen paces. Aiming the revolver borrowed from a friend from his prayer circle, he shot six bullets. Not one hit the newspaper. He reloaded, took five steps forward, and shot again: nothing. He got closer still. Five paces from the paper, he emptied the revolver. All shots missed.[1] The young Catholic activist who killed revolutionary caudillo Álvaro Obregón in a Mexico City restaurant a week later could not have hit the side of a barn. Religious militancy was not new. The Cristero Rebellion had been roiling the countryside since the enforcement of anticlerical laws began two years before. But fighting was far from the urban, middle-class world of a church mouse like José. Even those close to him wondered, why did *he* kill Obregón?

Prosecutors called León Toral a *pelele*, an impressionable wimp.[2] His father attributed the crime to a childhood bout with diphtheria and requested that the court apply a Freudian analysis.[3] For the archbishop of Mexico, León Toral was among the "exalted fanatics who suffer from illusions, maniacs who believe they are sent by God."[4] The Vatican added

[1] "Declaración de José de León Toral ante la Inspección General de Policía del Distrito Federal," July 19, 1928, Archivo General de la Nación (henceforth AGN), Antiguo Fondo Reservado, Gobernación, caja 14, José de León Toral y Socios, vol 1.
[2] León Toral and Acevedo de la Llata, *El jurado*, II: 309, 25.
[3] "El padre de Toral cuenta una historia interesante," *El Universal*, August 2, 1928; Aureliano de Leon, "Aurelio de Leon pide examen psico-analítico según Freud," August 14, 1928, AGN, José de León Toral y Socios, vol 1, caja 14, exp. 29-A.
[4] "Calles Is Accused by Vatican Paper," *New York Times*, August 7, 1928.

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that such a delusional, self-appointed mystic could not have orchestrated the killing. It must have been a "member of the President's direct entourage."[5] As soon as Obregón fell dead into a platter of roasted goat, these stories dominated understandings of the assassination.

Most histories of the era of the Mexican Revolution feature León Toral, fleetingly, as the "fanatic" who pulled the trigger.[6] They then move on to the political consequences of Obregón's death. The succession crisis exacerbated tensions among revolutionary factions. A bureaucratic party machine arose to prevent further bloody upheavals that had accompanied elections since the beginning of the revolution.[7] This political aftermath is fundamental. Yet, matched with glimpses of the lone fanatic, the scholarly focus suggests that politics and religion occupy separate narratives and analytical categories. Just as he crashed Obregón's final banquet in La Bombilla restaurant in Mexico City, León Toral appears as an anomaly in the military and political trajectory of the man he killed. In the historiography of the revolution, political machinations are tractable; political violence is comprehensible. But the spiritual convictions that may have motivated the assassination are ahistorical, almost unfathomable. Religion, many scholars would have us believe, had little bearing on politics.

Why León Toral killed Obregón is lost in the shuffle. Works that focus on the assassination tend to skirt the reasons. Instead, they emphasize another aspect: Why did León Toral kill *Obregón*? A more logical target would have been Plutarco Elías Calles, the out-going president who actually enforced the anticlerical laws that had led to the Cristero Rebellion. Calles was the steadfast enemy of the church. His troops were killing Catholic rebels, and, according to conservatives, his laws were strangling the faith. In comparison, Obregón, who preceded Calles in the presidency, was a moderate. Had León Toral not killed him before his second presidential term, Obregón would have been more conciliatory toward the church. Instead, the assassination strengthened the hand of Calles, who lived on to exert decisive influence over the next presidents.

From this conundrum spring two arguments. One posits that León Toral chose to kill Obregón precisely because he was more moderate. Catholic radicals feared that church authorities would soften their stance

[5] "New Calles Attack in Vatican Paper," *New York Times*, August 10,1928.

[6] A brief sample may suffice. Simpson, *Many Mexicos*, 315; Buchenau, "Plutarco Elías Calles," 229; Aguilar Camín and Meyer, *In the Shadow*, 74; Corever, Pasztor, and Buffington, *Mexico: An Encyclopedia*, 32.

[7] Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles* and *The Last Caudillo*; Castro Martínez, *Álvaro Obregón*; Medin, *El minimato presidencial*; Loyola Díaz, *La crisis Obregón-Calles*.

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More Information

if they dealt with flexible government negotiators. If met with more steadfast opposition, they would have to support the intransigent rebels. Fight to victory or die trying! The second argument about why Obregón was the target is that religion was a cover for the real motivation, politics. Infighting among revolutionaries was rampant. The final years of the revolution were nothing but internecine struggles, in which assassination was a common recourse. By the time of his death, Obregón had accumulated many political enemies. Only months before, a rebellion by former collaborators had ended in mass executions. An air of Catholicism – an assassin carrying scapulars and a rosary – could obscure the actual play for political power. The question, in this view, is *which* of Obregón's enemies had sent León Toral to pull the trigger.

As logically tempting as these arguments are, scholars have failed to unearth any solid evidence to support them. Novelists Graham Green and Jorge Ibarbengöitia have fared well, but the best efforts by professional historians rest on imaginative conjecture.[8] Moreover, both arguments are highly partisan. Especially in Mexico, where church–state relations remain a controversial topic, scholars use the assassination to blame either the clergy or the government for the religious conflict. Both sides have a stake in emphasizing that León Toral and his contemporaries lacked autonomous volition. Pro-church writers argue that government aggression "forced" young Catholics to turn to violence.[9] Anticlerical authors adduce the intellectual "mediocrity" of the "docile fanatics" as evidence of the clerics who manipulated them.[10] The "true face" of religious militancy, a recent account posits, was not the young "fanatics" but the ecclesiastical masterminds. The clergy of the 1920s formed the "Nazi roots" of the contemporary right wing in Mexico.[11]

Puppet or fanatic? Combing through the sources, it became clear to me that neither term could help me understand José de León Toral or why he killed Obregón. Nor would they allow me to fulfill one of the historian's basic tenets of portraying subjects in terms they would recognize. León

[8] Ramírez Rancaño, *El asesinato de Álvaro Obregón*.
[9] Aspe Armella, *La formación social y político*, 71.
[10] Ramírez Rancaño, *El asesinato de Álvaro Obregón*, 182.
[11] Barajas, "La guerra de los curas," *La Jornada*, July 3, 2017. Even less-partisan scholarship denies their agency, stressing that the church–state clashes "inevitably" pulled the young militants into the fray. Espinosa, "'Restoring Christian Social Order,'" 459. Hanson similarly posits that "The fateful combination of a Church revived by its social program . . . and the ascent of Calles to the Mexican presidency, made all-out war almost inevitable." Hanson, "The Day of Ideals," 467.

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More Information

Toral and his coreligionists would certainly not recognize themselves as fanatics. Still, a doubt nagged at me. How could I set aside the term "fanatic" without seeming to endorse León Toral's beliefs and actions? How could I show that killing Obregón *made sense* without justifying murder? As historian Robert Orsi notes, the "danger of empirical work in religion … is that it appears to endorse, in its initial suspensions of judgments and its refusal of the comforts of otherness – the religious worlds it describes."[12] At the same time, it struck me that scholars who study causes they do endorse feel no similar anxiety or compulsion to work through these problems. When carried out in the name of anti-imperialism or socialism, for example, violence may seem logical. In such cases, the necessary quality of violence obviates explanation. In contrast, killing for Christ seems to be a contradiction, for Jesus was born as the Prince of Peace. It is also a chimera, for Obregón's death did not yield any spiritual transformation. Therefore, any explanation of the assassination that draws on religion would have to point to León Toral's fanaticism or, more generously, his erroneous interpretation of scripture. Another option, of course, is to argue that religion concealed the more earthly motives of politics. A third course is to avoid the question of "why" altogether and focus instead on the seemingly bizarre details. Fernando González's provocatively titled *To Kill and Die for Christ the King* fails to query why anyone was willing to do either.[13] Highlighting secretive Catholic "cells," the author isolates militants from their surroundings. He thus ignores the thousands of ordinary Mexicans (including his grandmother) who hung pictures of martyred militants in their homes and poured into the streets to mourn them.[14] Orsi offers a path forward when he insists that "to work toward some understanding(s) of troubling religious phenomena is not to endorse or sanction them – cannot dismiss them as inhuman, so alien to us that they cannot be understood or approached, only contained or obliterated."[15]

Gradually, I came to understand that *fanaticism* and *killing* belong to distinct orders of thought. Violence is not abhorrent because of the damage it causes. What determines whether violence is abhorrent is the meaning we attribute to its motivations. Assassination and fanaticism are not intrinsically linked. Assassination is what a historical subject does;

[12] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 158.
[13] González, *Matar y morir por Cristo Rey*.
[14] González, *Matar y morir por Cristo Rey*, 13–14. See similar reluctance in Olivera de Bonfil, "Cómo se forjó un mártir."
[15] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 8.

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Excerpt
More Information

fanaticism is an imposed label that delegitimizes. Once decoupled, it becomes clear how one could object to fanaticism as an analytical category without endorsing assassination. My objection to fanaticism has nothing to do with the actions and beliefs of so-called fanatics. Fanaticism is not a substantive force. It has no explanatory power beyond tautology: *León Toral killed Obregón because he was a fanatic/León Toral was a fanatic because he killed Obregón*. Its circular logic forecloses inquiry. Fanaticism attributes internal motivations to actions and thus detaches them from historical factors. Like "fanatics across time," wrote an anonymous pamphleteer shortly after the assassination, León Toral was driven by an "uncontainable hatred, born of the heat of Catholic fanaticism."[16] Fanatics are timeless, monolithic, invariable.[17]

The stakes are higher than they might seem. Obregón is a national hero. From small-town farmer, he became one of the greatest generals of the Mexican Revolution and then president of Mexico. A massive monolith rises in the spot of his death, now a beautiful park in bustling Mexico City. For decades, the monument housed the remains of the arm he lost in battle (hopelessly decomposed, the original was later replaced by a bronze cast). "Not merely a man," eulogizers sang, Obregón was "mountain of humble generations of workers, of peasants, of downtrodden masses."[18] The insistence on León Toral's fanaticism is not an accident; it is a partisan sleight of hand. Without it, we would have to break the circularity and connect his actions and beliefs to their historical context.

Instead of arguing that León Toral killed Obregón because he was a fanatic, I posit that he killed him because he was a tyrant. This formulation acknowledges both subjects, two "hes." The circles that each occupied – politics and religion – are no longer separate. Recognizing their intersection helps resolve the question of why Obregón was the primary target. He was, of course, anticlerical. During the revolution, Obregón had publicly humiliated priests. As president, he did not enforce the anticlerical laws with the same vigor as Calles, but he did antagonize the clergy. Anticlericalism by itself, though, was not a sufficient cause for killing. If it were, Catholic militants could have aimed at any number of government officials. Political considerations complemented religious motivations.

Before shooting Obregón, León Toral struggled to resolve the riddle of whether killing could have spiritual transcendence. Could an assassin

[16] Anonymous *¿Quiénes mataron al General Obregón?*, 9.
[17] Toscano, *Fanaticism*, xix. [18] León Toral and Acevedo de la Llata, *El jurado*, II: 265.

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More Information

become a martyr? Without consulting theological experts (who would have answered "No"), León Toral determined that killing Obregón constituted tyrannicide. His own death, at the hands of the caudillo's loyalists, would make him a martyr. This was more than convenient sophism. The notion that Obregón occupied power unjustly was widespread, and not only among Catholic militants. His first presidency came after the murder of incumbent president Venustiano Carranza. His (unfulfilled) second term violated the fundamental principle of *no reelection* that sought to prevent autocratic dictatorships such as the one toppled by the revolution. When Obregón trampled on this most sacred tenet of the movement he claimed to represent, political rivals took up arms. The ensuing repression was implacable, and his second elections also followed a bloody path. Obregón was not only anticlerical; he was a usurper.

This argument has several advantages. Foremost, unlike other explanations, it rests on a foundation of voluminous documentation. Second, it fulfills the historian's task of portraying subjects in terms they would recognize. Third, it is the explanation that requires the fewest assumptions and conjectural leaps. Whether we agree that Obregón was a tyrant is not the point. I do not seek to vindicate, and much less champion, León Toral, his actions, his beliefs, or the movement in which he participated. Instead, I aim to show how he and his contemporaries vindicated themselves.

Beyond the extraordinary feat of killing Obregón, León Toral was unexceptional among the thousands of Mexicans who participated in or sympathized with the Catholic movement in 1920s Mexico. His beliefs and experiences were elements of a broad generational shift. Born around 1900, his contemporaries experienced childhood during the war and came of age amid the anticlerical reforms. They shared the fears of many of their older coreligionists. Like them, they believed that the Mexican Revolution had brought the threats discussed in the following pages: the return of ancient scourges, imperialism, tyranny, and an onslaught of sinfulness that threatened Mexico's civilization and national sovereignty. But, unlike the previous generation of Catholic activists, they did not pine for the prerevolutionary order. In fact, they accused their predecessors of being too conciliatory toward the secularization of Mexico. Older Catholics' pragmatic approach, which emphasized charity and solidarity over confrontation with the government, had weakened the nation's spiritual resolve. The resulting "feminization" enabled revolutionaries' later assault on the church. How else could the perceived wholesale attack on the religion of the majority proceed?

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Excerpt
More Information

The new generation insisted that asceticism and atonement would bring about a divine transformation. Their movement went far beyond defense and the mere desire to roll back anticlericalism. Militants opposed many government reforms, but they also aspired to cultivate a deeper sense of national spirituality and religious devotion. They preached sacrifice and zeal over concrete programs. In this light, León Toral's marksmanship takes on a new meaning. He was part of a generation of clumsy terrorists who embraced unpreparedness as a banner of devotion and a signal of urgency. Their reckless enthusiasm to launch assaults – without preparation – was an index of their devotion. Divine will, more than target practice, would determine the outcome. Training would compromise the divine with artifice. Asked by interrogators who his accomplices were, León Toral answered, "Only God."

When President Calles asked why he had killed Obregón, León Toral answered, "So that Christ would reign in Mexico."[19] Calles prodded: What kind of reign is that? "It is a reign over souls – completely, not halfway," José explained.[20] It was the Kingdom of Christ. For Calles (and many contemporary scholars) the claim that killing Obregón could somehow bring Mexico closer to Christ was proof of fanaticism. But, to use Robert Darton's phrase, the Kingdom of Christ is a "joke we do not get." Trying to understand it helps us approach a "foreign system of meaning."[21] Since the height of the revolution, Mexican Catholics coalesced around the notion of a Kingdom of Christ – an understanding that God would reward sacrifice and devotion with a "reign of justice and charity." It was vital to the Catholics around the world. Rather than a cohesive spiritual ideology, the Kingdom of Christ entailed an attitude toward religion, worship, and social engagement. It would deliver Mexico from weakness and flagging spirituality. Justice, peace, and prosperity would flow from strict adherence to the will and laws of God. Any attempt to shape society from another foundation (liberalism, socialism, Protestantism, or hedonism) would betray the essence of Mexico.

In their view, the diminishing scope of the church had led to an increase of concupiscence, vanity, selfishness, deterioration of the family, alcoholism, delinquency, revolutionary chaos, and now tyranny. Once Catholics

[19] León Toral and Acevedo de la Llata, *El jurado*, I: 78.
[20] León Toral and Acevedo de la Llata, *El jurado*, I: 56.
[21] "When you realize that you are not getting something – a joke, a proverb, a ceremony – that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it." Darton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, 78.

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Excerpt
More Information

reasserted their influence, these social and moral ills would recede. Activists working for the Kingdom of Christ emphasized faith in God's will over earthy programs. Their appeals transcended legal reforms and reached into the more mystical powers that God could offer if only Mexicans committed themselves to their faith. If the nation opened its heart to Christ, put its fate in his hands, and infused spiritual dedication into every aspect of their collective life, a better society would flourish. Such a wide-ranging vision of militancy was much more expansive than the previous forms of political and social Catholicism. It called for a transformation from cowardice to combativeness, from quiet piety to robust celebration – for a spiritual transformation that emphasized Christ with a sword alongside the loving protection of the Virgin Mary. While León Toral's use of the term "signaled", somewhat idiosyncratically, the redemptive potential of violence, his religious aspiration was widespread among Mexicans who felt acute anxieties during the revolution and the ensuing social reforms.

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