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Jean A. Meyer

Excerpt

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Part I The Conflict Between Church and State

CHAPTER I

The Metamorphoses of the Conflict

From the Conquest to Independence

The Catholic Church arrived in Mexico at the same time as the Spanish conquistadors, and it is extremely difficult to distinguish between the spiritual and the secular in the acts and motivations of the former and the latter; this ambiguity was still further increased by the staunch determination of the Most Catholic monarchs to 'protect' the Church; this 'protection' was the underlying cause of all the conflicts between Church and state in the various regions which made up the Spanish Empire.

Iberian Catholicism, as reformed by Cisneros, was, of course, bound to exercise an overwhelming influence on the society of the New World, and this tendency was reinforced by the ancient chiliastic expectations aroused by the spectacle of a young and newly-discovered universe; the three centuries of the history of New Spain cannot be understood unless the historian bears in mind the ubiquitous presence of the Catholic religion and of the Church that enshrined it. It was, perhaps, the last time that Western medieval Christendom attempted to build the City of God here on earth, at the very moment when Europe was turning its back on this particular Utopia in order to pursue others.

As the essence and the substance of social life, and as an economic power, the Church, under the tight control of the Castilian monarchs, was an organ of government without parallel in history. The system of royal patronage (*Real Patronato*) was the fulfilment of the dreams of Philippe le Bel and of the jurists; in theory, there were no longer any grounds for conflict between the two swords, because the temporal monarch was, in fact, the head of the Church, and held both swords in his hands.

Conflicts did, nevertheless, take place, either in the form of quarrels that flared up all of a sudden or of disputes that dragged on for centuries. The conflict with the Jesuits was only one aspect, though the most obvious one, of the constant efforts being made by Madrid to keep the

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clergy under its tutelage. (The Palafox incident was one manifestation of this and, even if the Company did not appear in a favourable light on this occasion, and one is inclined to sympathise with the bishop, there is no doubt that the fathers discerned the problem more clearly; the root of it was Caesaro-papism and Regalism.) The dispute with the Jesuits was a manifestation of the state's desire to embrace all things, to intervene in all aspects of the problem, including the economic role of the Church (which was a real source of conflict) and the Indians, who were the apple of discord between the Church and the vested interests. One of the reasons for the expulsion of the Jesuits was, precisely, to be found in the antagonism between them and the colonists of the North at a time when the Jesuits appeared to be trying to convert the whole of that region into one vast 'reservation' for the protection of the Indians.

The best way to evaluate the influence of the Church in New Spain is, to this day, to employ the method of proof *a contrario*: the antagonistic policy of the Bourbons was one of the factors which explain the uprising of 1810. By forfeiting the support of the lower clergy and consequently of the people, and by identifying the cause of ecclesiastical immunity with that of independence, the royal power was destroying its own foundations.

The Independence Movement as a Clerical Reaction

M. N. Farris¹ has observed that the abolition of ecclesiastical immunity was part and parcel of the 'enlightened' policy of the Bourbons and of their programme of Church reform. The temporary decree promulgated by the Viceroy was an immediate response to the requirements of the struggle against the insurgents, who were only too often led by the priests. This was merely the logical conclusion of the Regalist policy initiated in the reign of Charles III.

After centuries in which the Habsburg monarchs, both firmly established in tradition and enjoying popular support and veneration, had rendered as many services to the Church as the latter had to them, the policy of the Bourbons came into direct conflict with a Church that until then had been accustomed to a situation of co-operation and interdependence. The reaction did not, of course, come from the bishops, who were progressive reformers and representatives of the Enlightenment; it came from the sector always considered to be lacking in political consciousness, the very sector that would be found deeply involved in religious conflicts in Mexico as late as the twentieth century – the lower

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clergy and the popular masses. The history of that era, therefore, evolved within the context of the rupture between the social elite and the Church on the one hand, and between the elite and the masses, on the other; this was true both in Europe and in the Latin American extensions of European conflicts. Those historians who have emphasised the military insignificance of the disturbances of 1767 (expulsion of the Jesuits) and of 1799 (cancellation of the judicial immunity of the clergy) have concentrated too exclusively on the governmental aspect of these problems, when the important thing is that what took place was a rupture between the government and the governed; this left the masses 'disposable', and ready to support a movement of subversion (1810), which was, in fact, to be mobilised by the priests.

This makes it easier to understand the Mexican belief that it was the Francophile ministers in Madrid who were conspiring to liberate America from the Antichrist Napoleon, the offspring of the French Revolution, the Beast of the Apocalypse: 'The Cadiz *Cortes* is composed of heretics, infidels and freethinkers, whom the men of Geneva would be ashamed to have as associates';²

likewise, you must understand that we are so far from being heretics that the sole object of our struggle is to defend and protect all the prerogatives of our Holy Religion, which is the main object of our regard, and to encourage the veneration of Our Blessed Lady the Virgin Mary as the visible protector and defender of our enterprise.³

This was the reason why the Constitution of Apatzingán (1814) proclaimed Catholicism as the only recognised religion and restored the religious orders suppressed by the Bourbons. When the Spanish Liberals came to power in 1820, the higher clergy of Mexico ceased to be Loyalist and rallied to the cause of Independence; the very bishops who had denounced the diabolical insurrection of Hidalgo and Morelos led the new secessionist movement when their interests were threatened because the king was no longer sufficiently monarchical. For the first time in the history of Mexico the Church was accused of 'taking advantage of the piety and submissiveness of the people' in order to involve the latter in conflicts in which religion would constitute a mere pretext. In 1820 those who made this accusation were the Spanish officials. Thereafter, and as late as 1938, the same accusation was to be repeated by those who governed Mexico. As against this trend, there appeared the pamphlets denouncing the 'Atheistic and Jacobin' government which was conspiring, in diabolical fashion, to destroy the Faith.

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In March 1822 the Archbishop of Mexico proclaimed that the *Patronato* was dead and that the Church had recovered its liberty. For the moment the objective of the Bourbons, that of subjecting the Church to the modern state, had failed, and the Church thereby recovered an independence which coincided with that of the nation; this marked the beginning of a conflict which was to last for 120 years, in the course of which the state attempted to recover, for its own benefit, the judicial prerogatives of the king. Because of the imperial structure of the Church of Rome, the religious problem was characterised by all the obstacles inherent in any conflict between a state and the Holy See. This first defeat to be suffered by the modern state was to lend an added ferocity to the conflict, and helps to explain the outbreak of a hitherto unknown degree of violence. The wars of the Reform (1857, 1867, and 1876), and the anticlericalism of the Constituents of 1917, the persecution that took place between 1926 and 1938, and the Cristero risings of the same period – all these events were consequences of the Bourbons' Regalist policy and its defeat.

The problem of the recognition of the American states by Rome, complicated as it was by the pressure exerted by Madrid on a succession of Popes who had excessively brief reigns (there were four Pontiffs in the space of nine years), had a profound influence on the history of Mexico. In 1824, Madrid persuaded the Papacy to publish the encyclical *Etsi jamdiu*, which condemned the Independence movement and which incurred for the Church the opprobrious accusation of treason and of collaboration with the Spanish oppressors. The unanimous protest of the Mexican clergy, who declared *ex cathedra* that the Pope had been misled, was of no avail: henceforth, the Liberals were able to assert that the Church was the 'shadow of Spain' under the guise of religion, and that it was necessary to establish a national Church in order to safeguard national independence. The long vacancies in certain sees, which occurred while the authorities awaited the tardy recognition by Rome, did nothing to ease this situation, and meanwhile the influence of Liberalism was growing.

Liberal anticlericalism, which is a term too narrow in scope but hallowed by long usage, was one aspect of the trend towards the secularisation of life and the tendency, in philosophy, to reject the past. To the Liberal, the child of the Enlightenment, it was necessary to *écraser l'infâme*, which was an obstacle to reason and virtue, the incarnation of the past, and a dangerous rival.

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After a first, and fruitless, attempt (1833–4), the Liberal party realised that it would have to operate less overtly; moreover, there were very few people who, before 1860, would have been bold enough to proclaim openly that they were not good Catholics. In a country where an all-pervading social conformism enjoined religious observance, the protestations of devotion made by the Constituents of 1857 are of purely sociological significance, and it was a pointless gesture to publish a book entitled *Benito Juárez, Católico, Apostólico, Romano*.

Before their victory the Liberals declared that they intended to reform the Church for the common good of all, and even criticised the moral laxity of the clergy; after the victory they recognised frankly that the problem was that of the two swords, and that the state, which was still unstable, was obliged to challenge that eternal institution, the prosperity of which stood out in scandalous contrast to the universal poverty surrounding it.

In this situation of political instability and of the misery of the popular classes whose members lived at the mercy of bandits, there was a Church that had preserved its unity, institutions, practices, and principles. The root cause of the conflict was the contrast between an unstable state and a stable Church, the latter firmly grounded in a continuous tradition: both materially and symbolically, the state gradually placed its servants in the bishops' palaces, which were now those of the Governors, in the seminaries and in the churches. There was a great temptation for the Conservatives, and for their political cousins the Liberals, to try to control the Church. The most obvious conflict was that between the Reform (this term, adopted by the Liberals, embodied an entire political programme) and the Church; but there was a conflict no less real between the Church and the Conservatives. Protection was at times as burdensome as persecution, and during the Imperial era (1863–7) Maximilian, that romantic and confused reincarnation of Joseph II, became embroiled with the Papacy and the Church.

After the sale of the ecclesiastical properties, the 'enlightened' clergy, who were more numerous than is usually supposed, withdrew its support of the Reform, and the 'bourgeois' were condemned by the Church for taking part in what they considered to be a fair method of serving the nation by enriching themselves. The condemnation did, in fact, take place after the application of other religious reforms which regulated the life of a Church that, in law, did not even exist. Thereafter, it was possible to speak of an ecclesiastical party, in opposition to the Reform, which was identified with the purchasers of Church properties. As the

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ruling class became anticlerical, the common people adopted a clerical outlook. The Reform made charitable activities the responsibility of the public administration – in other words, it abolished them; it secularised all aspects of daily life, and threatened the power of the parish priests.

The people, uninvolved in the political movement that shook the country, unaffected by the international wars, and indifferent to the American invasion, a people thoroughly evangelised and practising a monolithic form of Christianity, reacted violently against the Reform as soon as it affected the sphere of religion; they reacted, in effect, against the Reform as an instrument of persecution, long before they rebelled against its 'liberal' character in the economic sense, in that their basic problem was that of the rural communities and their despoliation.

The Policy of Conciliation (1876–1910)

After his victory in 1867, Juárez was fully occupied with consolidating his power, so he temporarily suspended the anticlerical laws, which had been passed during the period of overt conflict, during a war when it seemed that all was lost; his successor, Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, the brother of Miguel (the real inspirer of the legal measures promulgated in 1859), exacerbated the religious conflict once more by incorporating those laws into the Constitution. The offensive undertaken by Lerdo must be considered within the context of the construction of the modern state; it coincided with the liquidation of all the centrifugal forces, for the benefit of the central authority. It is in this light that one should regard the Mexican *Kulturkampf*.

This policy provoked the insurrection of the *Religioneros*, a movement which resembled the Vendée and Spanish Carlism. During the course of 1874–5, peasant guerrilla warfare gradually spread throughout the western part of Central Mexico, and forced the President to request extraordinary powers to combat the insurrection which 'has had, and still has, the rare distinction of never having proclaimed any political programme, nor of being commanded by a leader who inspired any respect'.⁴

War under such conditions – that is to say, a war of the people – was bound to take the form of guerrilla warfare, lacking in any overall plan of operations or specific programme of action; bands would be organised, or would fall apart, in accordance with the vicissitudes of the military operations undertaken and the military and economic opportunities that presented themselves. They would be disbanded for the purpose

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of engaging in labour, sowing, and harvesting. They would then be formed once again in order to capture some town, only to disperse when the Federal troops advanced against them; they buried their arms, unsaddled their horses, and waited for more favourable times.

The Liberal historians, despite all their prejudices against those whom they labelled the 'Cristeros', have been unable to avoid the conclusion that these men deserved a better fate, especially in such cases as that of Socorro Reyes, who in a patriotic war would almost certainly have been a worthy successor of Juan Martín, *El Empecinado*. Socorro Reyes, the leader of a guerrilla band, who with serene fortitude faced his death before a firing squad, fortified by the last rites of the Church, was a fine example of the better type of *Religionero*. Socorro Reyes

was a straightforward and honourable man. In all his public declarations he was frank and truthful, and when he was asked who had encouraged him to take part in the revolution, he said 'my conscience commanded me'. On being taken to the place of execution, he asked permission to say a few words, but this request was denied. However, he asked forgiveness for any offences that his soldiers might have committed during their advance into the outskirts of the town. Socorro Reyes was not a thief or a murderer, and he died in poverty; his presence had been the most solid guarantee for anyone travelling between Morelia and Puruandiro. He forbade his soldiers to loot. The man whom they called 'general' wore only a pair of white breeches and a rough woollen shirt, plain shoes, a felt hat and a borrowed *sarape*. His capital totalled nine and a half *reals*, and out of that sum he provided for a pound's weight of candles to be lit in honour of Our Lord of Salvation from the moment of his death, and he gave one and a half *reals* to an uncle who had come to help him, to enable him to return to his hut. His family were unable to be with him at the last hour, on account of the poverty in which they lived. Socorro Reyes had been born in the San Isidro ravine, in the district of Huaniqueo. He was forty-five years of age, well-built, with a full and long beard. His calm demeanour was evidence of the inward tranquillity of a man whose actions were inspired by sincerity and deeply held convictions.⁵

Such, then, was the character of the popular religious movement that the excellent Federal army proved unable to defeat, even though that army had had fifteen years' combat experience and had overcome Manuel Lozada and all the ambitious generals. The most ambitious of them all, Porfirio Díaz, discerned in this movement his opportunity of attaining his goal after ten years of abortive *coups d'état*, and of representing himself as the First Consul who was capable of establishing peace. Lerdo de Tejada had reawakened the spirit of 1810, and the

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guerrilla warfare which broke out spontaneously as a result of his policy was evidence of a change sufficiently important to merit some attention.

Porfirio Díaz has been quoted as saying

There are no . . . uprisings of the people except when attempts are made to undermine their most deeply held traditions and to diminish their legitimate liberty of conscience. Persecution of the Church, whether or not the clergy enter into the matter, means war, and such a war that the Government can only win it against its own people, through the humiliating, despotic, costly and dangerous support of the United States. Without its religion, Mexico is ir-retrievably lost.⁶

Díaz, in his striving for unity, obsessed as he was by the expansionist threat of the United States, wanted to establish a government above the warring factions, whereas his predecessors had maintained themselves in power by identifying themselves with specific sectors. The Church, at first ignored and then heaped with favours, though at no time had the law been changed, was still in jeopardy and was yet able to contribute to the unity of the nation by supporting the government. Díaz, a great statesman, was the first to achieve a synthesis between the more intransigent of the Jacobins and the ultra-Papists. The Pax Porfiriana was based on this remarkable stroke of opportunism. The definition of the policy of conciliation, therefore, varied according to the point of view of the interested parties. To the Catholics, it was a *modus vivendi* based on what was in effect tolerance, subject to certain limitations; to the advocates of the separation of Church and state, it was liberalism at its best: in France, in 1905, Ribot was to quote the example of Mexico, and contrast it with that of the United States.

This peace proved advantageous to the institutional Church, which during this period achieved a real reconquest: internal reform, administrative reorganisation, improved training of the clergy and an increase in their number, the mobilisation of the laity, the expansion of the Catholic press and of Catholic education, and the renewal of the strength of the Church in rural areas that had been abandoned since the decline and secularisation of the Regular Orders. This process was so evident that a Liberal spokesman was able to declare that if the parish priests had been eligible to sit in Congress, they would fill it; the government took advantage of this situation and used the parish clergy to keep the provinces peaceful. Don Porfirio, a Freemason like Juárez and Lerdo before him, set an example in this sphere by maintaining continuously cordial relations with the bishops. Cárdenas, the most

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anticlerical President of all, was to fall back on this policy in order to govern efficiently.

At the same time, the Church was addressing itself vigorously to social problems, after the publication of *Rerum Novarum* and under the influence of German Catholic social thought. The appearance of a new generation of priests and laymen explains this trend: after the Reform the clergy, deprived of its privileged legal status, was thrown back on the masses for support, without forfeiting its spiritual influence among the elite, and it rediscovered the spiritual resources of a dynamic Church. The Liberal victory was a Pyrrhic one, because it aroused the conscience of the clergy and was a reproach to the priests of a population whose emotions were moved by persecution. This process of crystallisation, which was due to the traumatic atmosphere that prevailed, also resulted in the perpetuation of the antagonism between political liberalism and Mexican Catholicism. Apart from a few brilliant exceptions, there were no more Catholic Liberals, nor Liberal Catholics.

The Catholic Congresses (held in 1903, 1904, 1906, and 1909 in Puebla, Morelia, Guadalajara, and Oaxaca), which have received comparatively little attention from historians, provided evidence of the social preoccupations of the Church on the eve of the Revolution – the clergy played a vital role – which contrasted with the indifference displayed by the ruling classes towards the workers. It can be asserted that the Church, at that time, was leading the movement for social reform, a movement which, though timid, nevertheless existed and was a precursor of lateral developments. Who else was criticising the big landowners in these terms?

The worker, in return for this terribly exhausting labour, receives between 18 and 25 centavos a day, which is paid partly in seeds and partly in cash, and even with these low wages, there are some landowners who find ingenious ways of reducing them further . . . We understand Socialism . . . You rich men, there is no other way open: either you must open your hearts to charity and reduce the hours of work and increase wages, or you are accumulating hatred and resentment . . . and your riches and you yourselves will be buried [Banegas y Galván, Bishop of Querétaro].⁷

And the Congress of Oaxaca denounced, on the basis of a detailed study of working-class conditions, 'the unseemly, harsh, despotic and arrogant manner in which the workers in the factories are treated, with grievous damage to their dignity'.⁸

Whether it were the agrarian problem, the Indian problem, the prob-

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lem of the workers, or work among women and children, the Church was everywhere. The result of this activity, which marked the change of emphasis by the Church from the field of traditional good works to that of social action, was the development of a trade-union movement and the genesis of a new political party. Just as German influence was evident in the Congresses and in the adoption of the Raiffeissen system, it also made itself felt in the organisation of the 'Catholic Workers' Circles', and later in the foundation of a party modelled on the *Zentrum*, the National Catholic party (PCN), which was founded immediately after the fall of Díaz. The Archbishop of Mexico City appears to have taken an active part in its foundation, which was, perhaps, conceived as a move to counter Díaz's efforts to mobilise the Catholics in support of his regime.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-20)

The Catholics did not have a united attitude to the fall of the Díaz regime; the people rejoiced without a second thought, and the lower clergy were ardent supporters of Madero, but some prelates expressed misgivings about this leap into the unknown: 'The strict enforcement of the laws of the Reform is obviously quite consistent with the Revolutionary programme, and we will no longer be able to depend on the tolerance and the spirit of conciliatory supervision of the illustrious General Díaz, who has been, until now, our only defence under God.'⁹

Madero and the Catholics

The Catholics, after Madero's triumphal entry into Mexico City, found themselves with an opportunity of playing a part in politics, and even of founding a party. 'They upbraided us for our imprudence and said that we were preparing, with our audacity, days of mourning and desolation for the Mexican Church.'¹⁰ These words were prophetic. Despite the opposition of the more prudent, the National Catholic party (PCN) was founded, with the encouragement of Madero and the bishops. The Archbishop of Mexico City reassured the Archbishop of Guadalajara, who was a supporter of Díaz: 'Don Francisco Madero Sr. has called to see me, and has made it clear that the intentions of his son are to give full liberty to the Church, not only *de facto*, but also *de jure*.'¹¹

The free elections of 1912 resulted in the overwhelming victory of the Catholics in Jalisco and Zacatecas, and a large share of the vote in the Centre and West; this caused alarm among numerous Jacobins, and they persuaded the Government to annul the elections: of the