Religion, Violence, and the Secular State in Mexico

Project Launch Grant
Summary of Main Findings

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Background and relevance (1/3)

• Latin America is the region with the highest percentage of Catholics worldwide

• Mexico is home to the second largest Catholic population in the world, only after Brazil

• Mexico is also considered one of the world’s most violent countries, based on number of homicides

• Over the last decade, priests, together with human rights activists and journalists, have increasingly become targets of criminal violence in this country

• The victimization of priests is not new to Mexico
Background and relevance (2/3)

• In the context of the Cristero War (1926-1929), the Mexican federal army and revolutionary anti-clericals killed dozens of priests.

• Priests and thousands of Catholic armed peasants (commonly known as Cristeros) opposed the secular and anti-clerical policies promoted by the Mexican state through both pacific and violent means.

• Although the Mexican state and the Catholic Church reached a détente that put an end to this conflict, violence committed by and against religious individuals and leaders did not recede.

Execution of Miguel Pro, SJ (1927)
During the mid-1930s, Catholic vigilantes attacked rural teachers that promoted the government’s socialist and anti-clerical education policies.

Throughout the twentieth century, Catholic individuals and organizations participated in riots, lynchings, and expulsions of people that identified as Protestant.

Religious violence - involving Catholics and Protestants - continues to this day.

"Professor Juan Martínez Escobar" by Leopoldo Méndez (1939)

La Prensa newspaper (1945)
Research Questions

• Why and under what conditions does religion contribute to legitimate or deter the use of violence across different periods of time?

• By looking at the contentious relation between religion and violence in Mexico (1920-2020) this project asks:
  • What are the theological, political, and cultural bases that have contributed shaping Catholics’ understanding of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of violence?
  • How has the notion of “religious violence” been historically construed by the Mexican secular state?
  • How have Catholics’ understandings of justice and citizenship contributed to the rethinking of alternative paths to peace building?
Methodological design

• This project’s methodology involves the examination of historic newspapers and archival materials, including ecclesiastical sources, official documents, correspondence, as well as Catholic publications and periodicals.

• Archival research is being conducted in several cities of central and southern Mexico, including Puebla, Mexico City and Guadalajara.
Contributions to the literature

- This research is built in dialogue with a growing historiography that recognizes the central place of religion in Mexico’s political and cultural history.

- While most historical literature on religious violence in Mexico has focused on the Cristero War, my work examines the relation between violence and religion beyond this armed conflict.

- My research also builds upon, and seeks to contribute to, a growing body of literature that recognizes the “ambivalent” relation between religion and violence in different contexts and time periods.

- The centrality of Catholicism for the religious experience in Mexico, and the significance of Mexico in the history of Catholicism past and present, makes the Mexican case a particularly relevant one to examine this relation.
Main initial findings (1/3)

Historical evidence suggests that Catholics’ recourse to violence in Mexico has traditionally been based on popular – as opposed to official or institutionally sanctioned – understandings of martyrdom, sacrifice, and redemption

- For instance, during the 1930s and 1940s, Catholic militants understood martyrdom outside of formal theological interpretations or the official position of the Catholic Church
- These Catholics recognized belligerent individuals as martyrs regardless of their use of violence. In so doing they challenged notions of martyrdom traditionally associated to piety, moderation, and restraint
- They also celebrated the virility and courage of young men and their willingness to sacrifice their lives against a tyrannical state and against impious individuals
Main initial findings (2/3)

Although religious violence in Mexico has predominantly been studied through the lenses of state-church relations, religious violence is not merely a function of this relation.

- The prevalence of anti-Protestant violence at a moment of cordial and even collaborative state-church relations (e.g. 1940s to 1950s) exemplifies this.
- Anti-Protestant violence in Mexico was and continues to be related to intra-community conflicts informed by political ideologies and struggles over access to resources (including land).
- Although officially decried by the Church’s hierarchy, religious violence was and continues to be selectively tolerated by priests at the local level.
Historically, Mexican church leaders and faith-based communities have held divergent views regarding the use of violence

• Contrary to traditional representations of religious individuals as inherently prone to violence, evidence indicates Mexican Catholics have been deeply divided regarding the legitimacy and utility of violence

• Furthermore, several priests and religious leaders have actively contributed to advance civil and pacific forms of resistance throughout the twentieth century

• In contemporary Mexico, where criminal violence has become widespread, religion has allowed people to mobilize for peace and to deal with the suffering and loss they have endured
Conclusion

• In Mexico’s present-day context, Catholicism and religion more broadly has helped people to deal with the violence, suffering, and uncertainty they experience in their everyday lives

• The history of religious violence in Mexico suggests the relationship between religion and violence is not static and it is not predetermined

• A better understanding of Mexico’s historical trajectory – a country that has experienced combatant forms of Catholicism as well as civil forms of resistance and peace building - can shed light on the ways in which faith-based communities can contribute to identify and prevent religious violence, as well as work towards more peaceful societies
Selected references


Selected references


Thank you

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