

REVOLUTIONS IN MEXICAN CATHOLICISM

REFORM AND REVELATION IN OAXACA, 1887-1934



Edward
Wright-Rios

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FOR GINI, ELITO, AND SARITA

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 Moving the Faithful

When Matilde Narváez, a fervent Catholic in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, wrote to her prelate on February 8, 1934, she had reached the point of despair:

I beg you one more time to give me permission to go with the girl that talks to the Sacred Virgin at the Holy Grotto of Ixpantepec to see if we can communicate with his Majesty. I will tell him of our situation. In this region there is sickness, and we are threatened by earthquakes and other calamities; for these reasons I would like to go with the girl that talks to her so that she can tell us what to do. . . . Since I have faith in the Queen of Heaven that has come down there, forgive me for bothering you with this matter. . The calamities are approaching, and what greater grace than if the Divine Mother calms our situation?¹

Since the late nineteenth century, devout local women had looked to Narváez for leadership, and people throughout her community knew her as the Catholic school principal, a tireless church activist, and the confidant of priests. By the 1930s, however, her reputation, profession, and strong ties to the clergy lay in tatters. Her anguish is palpable in her fretful quest for miraculous help, and it appears magnified in her missive by her tremulous handwriting. When she put pen to

paper in February 1934, Narváez, or doña Matildita as she was known, faced strict ecclesiastical sanctions, and considerable local criticism. Under accusations of fomenting doctrinal error and misusing church funds, she found herself banned from taking the sacraments, which—according to Catholic teaching—jeopardized her salvation. Some fellow townspeople wondered if she had been duped by the devil or had simply gone insane. As her plea hints, the clergy had expressly banned consultations with “the girl that talks to the Sacred Virgin.” Despite these pressures, Narváez clung to her beliefs. What was going on in doña Matildita’s rural Oaxaca amidst sickness, earthquakes, catastrophes, and appearances of the Queen of Heaven?

It is a complicated story, but for the moment it will suffice it to say that Narváez’s life spanned a vibrant and at times difficult period for dutiful Mexican Catholics. First, she took part in the church’s late-nineteenth-century international resurgence, which was built, in large part, on the public labor and energetic activism of thousands of likeminded women. Second, she lived amidst the ongoing sociopolitical and religious ferment stoked by Mexico’s modernization and enflamed by revolutionary anticlericalism in the early twentieth century. Finally, in 1928 Narváez found herself in the thick of a local conflict among Catholics due to alleged Marian apparitions in her parish. The seer, a Chatino Indian² girl, possessed an uncanny knack for predicting destructive earthquakes. Furthermore, the visionary’s admonitions and troubling recent events appeared to echo legendary prophecies that foretold of religious persecutions, violent unrest, and the Catholic Church’s definitive triumph in Mexico thanks to pious female action.

When news of the Virgin’s appearance reached doña Matildita, she made a fateful and valiant decision. She not only embraced the girl’s visions and prophetic pronouncements as true divine miracles, but she seized a key leadership role in the developing apparition movement. Not long after rushing to observe the seer in action, she emerged as her spokeswoman, writing letters and even traveling for four days on foot to the state capital to present the case to ecclesiastical authorities. Closer to home, she took up the role of docent/teacher for the subsequent crush of pilgrims who yearned to behold the newly proclaimed Virgin of Ixpantepec. Perhaps motivated by a sense that a decisive juncture in the divine plan was at hand, this dedicated foot soldier of Catholic action and

trusted partner of priests stepped out from behind her pastor and church to lead in her own right. She hoped to convince the clergy to join her, but they initially responded with reluctance and eventually with a campaign to suppress her crusade. Nevertheless, she remained convinced that the Virgin Mary was reaching out to the faithful in her community.

This book is not just about Matilde Narváez; her struggles, rather, provide an entrée into crucial issues in Mexican history and push us to consider a spectrum of religious historical actors. On the broadest level, this woman's apparitionist gambit encourages us to reexamine our notions of Catholicism's complex and dynamic role in Mexican society, from the level of prelates to the most humble of pilgrims. Her life can teach us a great deal about religious women as intellectuals and leaders in public life, and offers us a rare glimpse into the emergence of a new Catholic devotion. In addition, Narváez leads us to ponder the Chatino Indian visionary's sociocultural milieu and gauge the interactions of indigenous Catholics and the broader church. Furthermore, understanding her predicament necessitates an examination of the village clergy in action. Doña Matildita's pastor—for decades her close ally, but ultimately a bitter opponent—emerged from Oaxaca's reformed seminary amidst the surge of Catholic activism in the 1890s and ministered effectively for nearly forty years in the region's indigenous hinterlands. He provides considerable insight into Mexico's Catholic resurgence, the clergy's approach to the native population, and grassroots efforts to sustain the church amidst social, political, and economic upheaval. Finally, Narváez, and nearly all of the actors discussed in this book, reveal a cross-section of Mexicans deploying their religious beliefs and reworking Catholicism amidst the unique challenges and opportunities of this historical period.

I had come to Oaxaca to examine the rich and accessible collection of the Archivo Histórico de la Arquidiócesis de Oaxaca (AHAO) and gain insights on Catholic activists' efforts, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to implement the church's newly elaborated social mission (frequently referred to as social Catholicism) among the region's parishes. I also expected to glimpse how Oaxacan communities responded to these endeavors and the often-discussed Catholic resurgence of the period. Anticipating that priests and laypersons inspired by revivalist rhetoric would have sought more intimate contact with common Catholics, I envisioned tracking the agents of modern Catholicism into Oaxaca's pre-

dominantly indigenous villages. I hoped that the documents generated by these actors would provide detailed evidence about the evolution of religious practices and popular ideologies during a period that witnessed Oaxaca's belated, patchwork implementation of liberal reforms, the expansion of commercial agriculture, the Mexican Revolution, and revolutionary state building.

I was not disappointed, but as is often the case, the motivations and actions of historical actors diverge from what we imagine them to be in preliminary research. As I pondered letters and reports concerning apparitions, shrines, and sacred images, I began to understand that the ground upon which the agents of the resurgent church and ordinary Mexicans met was their common interest in the founding, fueling, and managing devotions. If archdiocesan documents are any guide, outside of Oaxaca City the pet topics of the period's Catholic intellectuals—such as just wages, workers' circles, cross-class Christian harmony, and the shortcomings of liberal capitalist development—inspired minimal local debate. Neither newly minted priests steeped in the era's revivalism and the Catholic analysis of the "social question" nor the region's peasants and townspeople seemed preoccupied with these issues. Instead, in one pueblo after another, and from village priests to the prelate, the dynamics of cooperation and conflict often played out around the marshalling people and resources beneath the banner of sacred figures and their cults. The devotions that sparked the most impassioned activity were those enjoying either long-standing or recently acquired reputations for miraculous intercession. Almost exclusively linked to representations of the Virgin Mary or Christ, the perceived powers of these images stirred individuals from beyond the communities that "cared" for them to journey to their shrines. Thus I abandoned the effort to locate social Catholic firebrands in the field and instead tracked three unique programs/movements from the 1880s to the 1930s, which sought to spiritually and physically move *la feligresía* (the faithful).

From the center of the archdiocese, I examine the policies of Archbishop Eulogio Gillow's pastorate (1887–1922). I focus on his efforts to survey his flock's religious traditions through frequent pastoral visits, correspondence with priests, and an ambitious all-parish questionnaire, as well as his attempts to reform popular religiosity. This energetic prelate targeted practice more than belief. Above all, he sought to change

the rhythm, feel, and structure of Oaxacan religiosity, from a primarily community-based festival system to an archdiocesan-centered network of devotional associations that emphasized frequent sacramental observance, devotions closely associated with Rome, and periodic pilgrimage to select images under clerical control. Gillow envisioned a recovery of the church's central role in public life and a generalizing of new European modes of pious expression. In Oaxaca City he facilitated the establishment of institutions associated with social Catholicism—such as the *Círculo Católico de Trabajadores* (Catholic Workers' Circle), various international lay associations, and a combative Catholic newspaper—but he did not approach the majority of the faithful with the church's new social ideology. Instead, he sought to bind Oaxacans to the church by cultivating the social and emotional bonds that emerged from group spiritual exercises, coordinated pilgrimages, and the cult of miraculous images. The archbishop and his priests adopted a practical approach to their ministry, selecting certain devotional traditions that already functioned with minimal clerical oversight, instead of attempting jarring changes that were sure to face resistance. In essence, they grafted their reform program on to local religious practices that at times clashed with their centralizing goals, hoping that they could simultaneously stimulate and harness the region's pious energies, and ultimately lead local Catholics in directions more to their liking. Gillow chose to raise the coronation of a particular Oaxacan image as the standard of his religious reform campaign.

As Matilde Narváez demonstrates, Oaxaca's clergymen were not the only social actors seeking to mobilize individuals and groups with miraculous devotions. Two powerful, but heretofore unstudied, female-led indigenous apparition movements emerged from opposite fringes of the archdiocese: one during the heyday of Gillow's religious modernization program in 1911, and the other amidst the echoes of his endeavors and the difficult tenure of his successor in the late 1920s. These movements not only attracted scores of devotees and exposed the glaring limitations of the church's efforts to shape popular piety; they also reveal the crucial roles played by religious women and locally inspired devotions in the refashioning of Catholicism in modern Mexico. The first of these movements took shape around the revelations of a Nahuatl woman who reputedly communicated with an image of Christ in Tlaxcoyalco, Puebla (a

village which at the time was within the Oaxacan archdiocese). It endures to this day as one of many regional Lenten pilgrimage festivals celebrating various images of Christ. The latter, centered on Narváez's Virgin of Ixpantepec, emerged from Oaxaca's Chatino Indian heartland in the mountains above the Pacific Coast. In both cases, the female leaders and their supporters clashed with the clergy but refused to relinquish their claims to legitimately interpret and lead their respective devotions. Likewise, they insisted that their spiritual experiences constituted authentic miracles worthy of the church's recognition. It is from their writings, priestly correspondence, the commentary of eyewitnesses, and oral history that these events emerge from the shadows of historical inquiry.

This coming together of high churchmen, village priests, and devout lay persons around Oaxacan devotionism provides the foundations of this regional history of Mexican Catholicism. In a recent symposium addressing the legacy of Catholic social thought in Mexico, José Andrés-Gallego urged scholars to seize the opportunity to "remake the history of Mexican Catholicism itself (as a complex organization and as a way of life), divorcing it once and for all from the fetters that still reduce it to a history of relations between the Church and state."³ Despite the fact that the analysis presented here has been greatly influenced by works on church-state conflict, it is in this spirit of transition that the present study emerges. This book is also born of the recent turn in Mexican history focusing our attention on the complex historical processes of sociocultural change that incorporated participants from across the social and ethno-cultural spectrum.

The trick to conveying the multifaceted nature of religion in any society is delineating and shifting back and forth between different horizons of abstraction while tracing the articulations between various spheres of action. In this case, the challenge is to bring together the international, national, and provincial arenas of institutional agency and the intimate local settings of religious practice and transformation. Thus, although I break from the previous emphasis on large-scale institutional conflict, I nevertheless keep those struggles in the picture while elucidating the actions and understandings of individuals far from centers of power. The goal is to place events in Oaxacan localities within the context of events in Mexico and the Catholic world where they belong.

Scholars of various disciplines have pondered the history of relations

between nation-states and populations, as well as the processes of culture change, conflict, and negotiation that accompany state formation. Insightful studies have schooled us in the way subalterns think, and the way that states “see.”⁴ This study contemplates a different relationship—the relationship between the Catholic Church and communities of believers. Like a state, ecclesiastical authorities tirelessly voice their dogmas and dictates, but assume a more flexible stance when faced with specific issues in communities. The church, however, concerns itself with the intricate rhythms of religious practice and intimate feelings associated with religious faith and personal devotion. This study, then, ponders this institution’s role as a body relentlessly seeking to define cultural meanings, identities, beliefs, and even the cadence of life. It also traces how Catholicism endures in Mexico without centralized funding, with a relatively small number of clerics, and amidst a diversity of indigenous cultures. In a sense, I knit together the worlds of Archbishop Gillow with those of the devotees of Ixpantepec’s Virgin and Tlacoaxcalco’s Christ.

This approach may unsettle some scholars of Mesoamerican native peoples, but the writing of a more comprehensive Mexican cultural history requires the inclusion of postconquest indigenous religious cultures as part of Mexican Catholicism. Clerics may have qualified their Indian parishioners as superstitious, stubborn, and ignorant, but they never denied that they remained Catholic. Indian groups may have challenged ecclesiastical authority and maintained religious beliefs and practices without much concern for their orthodoxy or origins, but they repeatedly proclaimed themselves subjects of “Our Holy Mother Church.” The evidence cited here does not support the notion that popular religion in the Archdiocese of Oaxaca exists in a perpetual standoff with the institutional church or flares up as a straightforward expression of protest by marginal groups. Instead, it reveals ongoing processes of interaction and negotiation *within* the church.

Aside from addressing the complex issues of religion in Mexico’s cultural history, this book examines events that took place before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution. Undoubtedly, some readers will feel that this important political upheaval receives short shrift. Indeed, this book deliberately implies a gentle revisionism of the “revolutionary period,” placing the famous conflict in the background while emphasizing the religious events and ideas that preoccupied the historical actors at the

center of this study. Doing so, of course, suggests that the political struggles were not the foremost concern of many Oaxacans or, presumably, other Mexicans. It is nothing new to suggest that there was no uniform Mexican experience of this period or to question the allegedly transformative nature of the famous conflict. This is not to say that national politics did not impact individual lives in Oaxaca; to the extent that they did, however, they tended to arrive filtered through regional factionalism and local contingency. The objective here is to privilege the concerns and actions of religious actors. I invoke “the revolution” to draw attention to other “revolutions” which, until now, have not inspired significant scholarly attention. This book explores revolutions in *Mexican Catholicism* in the hope that understanding the efforts of indigenous seers, lay organizers, and activist clergymen to infuse their lives with spiritual significance and invigorate Catholicism will allow us to color in some of the grey areas of Mexican experience.

FROM LOURDES TO TLACOXCALCO

The protracted nineteenth century (1789–1914 or even 1770–1930) proved a challenging and transformative period throughout Catholic Europe and Latin America. In many countries, the ascendancy of nationalism, liberal democracy, secularism, and industrial capitalism reshaped societies and social identities and thus shifted the foundations undergirding the church. Peasants moved to cities and other centers of expanding capitalist production and became wage laborers, middle-class populations expanded and gained political clout, and a new entrepreneurial class became fantastically wealthy. Advances in science undermined doctrine, while population growth and the inequities of rapid capitalist development fueled squalor, providing propitious conditions for innovative social ideologies that questioned the value of religious institutions. In some cases they raised the banner of unabashed atheism. The uneven nature of change also produced marked regional disparities; some areas boomed and went through extensive, swift transformation, whereas others experienced marginalization. Naturally, the distribution of power within increasingly centralized nation-states often matched these discrepancies. Amidst these mounting tensions, notions of nationality and class threatened to undo longstanding Catholic identities, lay deference, and devout

commitment. Moreover, as secularist governments gained confidence, the church faced emboldened reformers pursuing religious toleration, expropriations of ecclesiastical wealth, and complete church-state separation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Catholic Church—long the partner of monarchical regimes—found its dogmas doubted, its finances destabilized, and its political flank exposed. The clergy's influence among political and economic elites had steadily eroded, and some feared that even popular groups would abandon the church in the wake of expanding anticlerical social movements.⁵

Predictions of religion's inexorable decline never materialized, but the Catholic priesthood and its supporters experienced the period as a troubling, sinister time. It was not uncommon for clergymen to frame the complex difficulties besetting the church and traditional social structures as a diabolical plot. At times the confrontations between Catholics and anticlerical secularists became violent and deadly. What proved remarkable was the array of strategies that Catholics deployed to sustain their faith and, by the late nineteenth century, regain their footing. These responses included reactionary intransigence, thorough institutional reform, novel engagements of secular culture, and a reemphasis on miraculous experience. In actuality, many individuals and groups employed all of these approaches to some degree. Pope Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* and his declaration of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869–70) represent the vocal refusal to make any accommodation to sociopolitical and cultural change. The pope based his stance on assertions of the church's divine, incorruptible character, and a strident critique of efforts to alter the celestially ordained social order. However, despite shrill proclamations of inflexibility, these extensive ecclesiastical reforms, new currents of social thought, and a rethinking of the devout individual's role in society amounted to a creative adjustment to the new state of affairs. The church's simultaneous celebration of new apparitions, visionaries, and prophecies was not simply a desperate reactionary ploy. As new social movements engaged popular socioeconomic discontent, the church spoke to abiding notions of divine agency in human affairs and hopeful expectations of miraculous assistance.

Together, these processes, and the concomitant surge in grassroots Catholic action, constituted a fight-fire-with-fire reaction to the challenge of modernity. The extent and breadth of reform was astounding.

Addressing concerns about priestly moral failings and basic competence, Rome pushed to improve clerical education, professionalize the priesthood, rationalize ecclesiastical administration, and instill hierarchical discipline. Responding to fears of apostasy, the Vatican promoted the reorganization of the laity in priest-led, centrally controlled organizations. In the public sphere, the church exploited social tensions engendered by liberal development. Catholic leaders spoke to conservative elites' fears of ascendant socialism and in so doing found new sources of patronage. Among middle sectors and the up-and-coming skilled working class, it raised the banner of Christian social justice and responsibility—or as they called it, “Catholic action”—inspiring a great number of laypersons to dedicate themselves to church-sponsored charities, mutual aid, and education. A whole new array of Catholic schools, religious orders committed to social work, and lay associations emerged to coordinate these efforts. In many ways, they served as a religious counterpoint to evolving networks of modern secular organizations. Furthermore, Catholic intellectuals denounced expanding socioeconomic disparities, entrepreneurial greed, conspicuous consumption, and elite contempt for the poor. Leo XIII enshrined this critique in his famous encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891), addressing the right of workers to seek fair wages and gain a voice in politics. In addition, the pontiff laid the blame for rising social unrest at the feet of liberal governance and unrestrained capitalism.⁶ The church then broadcast this message through a recently created network of Catholic newspapers. Thus the church—through its new focus on social welfare, the establishment of institutions for lay social action, and its opening to popular piety—reached out to groups marginalized by modern development.

According to the historian David Blackbourn, the church's nineteenth-century transformation must be understood as a “thoroughly modern success story.”⁷ The institutional church became a more efficient, organized body and effectively took up the evolving game of mass politics. Throngs of Catholics took part in shaping a modernized religious culture: they embraced various strains of Catholic nationalism, they responded to new campaigns to market shrines, they filled chartered pilgrimage trains and fueled a booming religious tourism industry, they supplied a surging demand for mass-produced religious images, and they internalized increasingly individualistic notions of pious self-actualization.⁸ Catholic

activists went to great lengths to coordinate public religious expression, with considerable success. In their great numbers and orderly fervor, the energized laity demonstrated resurgent Catholic sociopolitical power to all observers. Apparition movements in such disparate places as Lourdes and Ixpantepec, however, revealed that Catholicism's modern renovation also enshrined important dissonances—namely, enchantment remained.

CATHOLICISM IN MEXICO

Although Catholics on both sides of the Atlantic faced some similar struggles, we should not overstate the congruence between Western Europe and postcolonial Mexico. Europe has no parallel for the religious complexities that emerged from Mexico's twin legacies of Mesoamerican indigenous civilization and colonial domination. Efforts to describe indigenous beliefs and practices and evaluate missionary methods began with the writings of the sixteenth-century mendicant orders seeking to effect Christian cultural transformation. Since then, generations of scholars have scrutinized these works and scoured archives in hopes of reconstructing the mechanics of evangelization. Three currents of interpretation mark the study of religious change in Mexico: Christian transformation, "pagan" resistance, and syncretism.⁹ The first school embraces the claims of missionary chroniclers, who asserted that Mexico's Indians underwent a true religious conversion.¹⁰ The essentially Eurocentric depiction of a successful subjugation of the indigenous soul on the heels of military conquest has invited repeated critique over the years. The antithesis of Christian transformation resides in the pagan resistance school. Rooted in the nationalist indigenista glory days of the 1920s and 1930s, this interpretation holds that Mexico's Indians preserved their core religious traditions while affecting the outward expression of Christianity.¹¹ A third way alleging syncretism maintains that indigenous responses to Catholic evangelization resulted in a blended religion. Emerging in its classic form in anthropological studies from the late 1950s and early 1960s, this model of religious change proposed that a stable synthesis of religious traditions was achieved by the mid-seventeenth century.¹² Currently, most scholars agree that a combination of beliefs and practices epitomized the colonial period; however, they chafe at syncretism's imprecise application.¹³



Map 1 Mexico, Oaxaca, Ixpantepec, and Tlaxcohalco

Many prefer the concept of “hybridity.” The shift in terminology suggests creative, ongoing processes of culture change and mixture resulting in new, internally coherent ideologies rather than a gelled jumble of traits from distinct cultural stockpiles. It is not, however, a congenial phenomenon. Hybridity, its adherents argue, emerges when customs and beliefs are brought together in ways that undermine previous understandings. In a place like colonial Mexico, the practices and objects associated with the European and Mesoamerican cultures took on new meanings in charged colonial contexts. The individuals making their way in these societies altered the signification of various practices, or reworked them altogether, while coping with oppressive conditions. What we perceive as hybrid cultures at a given historical juncture, then, represent uneasy, conditional mixes fraught by the establishment and perpetuation of colonial hegemony.¹⁴ In sum, for proponents of hybridity, mixing does not just happen. Processes of domination and resistance stir the cauldron of mixture and supply the “heat” beneath colonial culture change.

Recent literature on religious change often revolves around a matrix-type debate. Scholars generally shun the notion that Christianity replaced preconquest traditions, and they doubt that indigenous religions endured unsullied by European ideas. Still open to debate, however, is the degree to which religious beliefs during various periods, and among particular groups, evince Christian or indigenous ideological formations.¹⁵ A fortuitous outgrowth of this debate has been the careful examination of how indigenous historical actors practiced religion.¹⁶ This trend has given us a sensitive picture of how Mesoamerican native peoples grew to consider themselves Christians, but often preserved independent cultural conceptions of how humans approached the divine.¹⁷

For most scholars, neither resistance nor conversion accurately describes the gradual process of interaction and transculturation. Incrementally increasing contact between Spanish, mestizo, and indigenous individuals over the intervening centuries served as the motor of transformation. Quite simply, the number of Hispanized individuals in close contact with the Mesoamerican native population probably determined the breadth and depth of culture change. Although there are considerable regional variations, the first few decades after the conquest reveal only slight alterations in indigenous thought and culture, followed by approximately a century of considerable change within enduring indigenous social, cultural, and political structures. From the eighteenth century to the present, the increasing percentage of Spanish speakers relative to monolingual Indians, along with expanding bilingualism, provided the foundations for much more profound changes.¹⁸

The intertwining of spiritual, economic, and political concerns in colonial administration has allowed historians to craft rich studies of religious culture. To date we have been less successful in our examinations of the same issues in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in large part because the period's political conflicts permeated and clouded analysis, although scholars are busily filling the gaps. Mexico's postindependence church-state conflict has dominated two centuries of historical analysis and produced oppositional lines of interpretation maintained by generations of scholars.¹⁹ Asserting that Hispanic Catholicism forms the eternal bulwark of Mexico's cultural and social stability, conservative scholars rejected secularization and liberalism as destabilizing foreign ideologies forced upon the Mexican people. They underscored the importance of

maintaining the structures of order and authority inherited from Spain, and interpreted nineteenth-century unrest as the inevitable by-product of their arriviste opponents' foolhardy undermining of the nation's core traditions. Liberal scholars portrayed Catholicism as a colonial holdover retarding Mexico's advancement. The clergy and their conservative allies, they argued, simply sought to perpetuate their privileged colonial status and repeatedly acted with disregard for the nation's welfare. In short, liberal scholars tarred the church as antinational and framed liberalism in terms of eradicating the vestiges of foreign domination.²⁰ Mexican realities, of course, were much more complex than either side cared to admit.

The kernel of debate resides in Mexico's heritage of corporatism, in which the Spanish crown took pains to control and protect the most influential corporate entity—the Catholic Church. It was an extraordinarily complex enterprise, maintaining infrastructure, naming candidates to religious posts, overseeing educational and charitable institutions, supervising revenue collection, policing priestly discipline, and reviewing internal affairs. Naturally, the state also excluded other religions from the Americas. Of course, the degree of effective control and oversight was at times questionable, but in law and public discourse the crown's authority remained paramount, and the clergy's complete loyalty anticipated. Colonial church-state relations could be quite acrimonious, particularly when eighteenth-century functionaries moved to curtail the wealth and influence of religious orders, and late-colonial penury drove crown administrators to requisition church assets. Despite grumblings, however, few Spaniards or colonial subjects questioned the premise of state patronage.²¹

Independence in 1821, however, opened the door to deliberation, although the presumption of essentially corporatist relations proved remarkably stable. In the early republican period, deliberations centered on whether the new government inherited the crown's authority over the church or political independence freed the church from state control. Those supporting the latter position argued that patronage rights could only be gained by a new papal decree. Most politicians advocated some degree of compromise, but some states, citing federalist principals, asserted patronage rights within their jurisdictions. By refusing to recognize Mexican sovereignty until the late 1830s, the Vatican exacerbated

disputes. For the most part, though, Catholicism's stature as the nation's officially established, exclusive religion remained uncontroversial.

Staunchly secular liberalism took root very gradually in Mexico, evolving from moderate Spanish antecedents and drawing on North American and English models.²² Church wealth proved to be among the most contentious issues. Over time, liberals pushed for limiting the Catholic financial resources, claiming that the extensive land holdings of religious corporations blocked broader property ownership (and by extension democratic values) and thus stifled modern development. They criticized collective asset holding in general, including indigenous village landownership, because it theoretically kept factors of production out of market circulation. Liberals also maintained that church lending practices—religious institutions functioned as the *de facto* colonial banking sector—served only to sustain bloated clerical institutions and excessive ceremonial pomp. They also complained about high clerical fees, tithing, and what they viewed as the wasteful, disorderly ethos of popular piety. In addition, in the name of universal equality they advocated abolishing corporate legal privileges and reducing the influence of the clergy in general.

Mexican liberalism, however, took shape as a highly heterogeneous movement. Radicals, or "*puros*" (i.e., pure liberals), as they were called, sought to alter society by uprooting colonial social, cultural, and economic traditions. Moderate liberals developed a measured constitutionalist approach, arguing that progressive legislation could bring about the transition to a more modern society over time. Many moderates from the 1820s through the 1840s sought compromise and served in conservative regimes; hence, they became tainted collaborators in the estimation of the *puros*. Mexican liberalism developed popular variants as well. Rooted in the quest for local self-governance, and thus drawn to representative democracy and liberal egalitarianism, some communities and rural areas emerged as key nodes of liberal support. During some of the most intense periods of civil war they became safe havens for liberal armies, and the militias formed in these regions proved indispensable in national struggles. But in general, they fought for municipal-level autonomy and control of local resources. Often, they had little interest in attacking the church. Many popular liberals, needless to say, were observant Catholics.

For some of them, sustaining local religious practice was part of self-government.²³ Toward the end of the nineteenth century, another group would lay claim to the mantle of liberalism with yet another perspective—the capitalist elite. In some ways the mirror image of popular liberals, Mexico's emerging entrepreneurial class embraced notions of free-market modernization and supported a strong, essentially undemocratic, state to maintain order and attract investment. This group ultimately incorporated many conservatives and proved more amenable to the church. Perhaps nothing characterizes the heterodoxy of Mexican liberalism more than the fact that the nation's economic elite of the 1890s began to refer to themselves as “liberal-conservatives.”

That stance would have been unthinkable in the 1850s and 1860s. Before mid-century, *puros* provided inflammatory criticism of conservatives and the church, but never held power long enough to implement lasting reform. Over time, however, foreign intervention and incessant uprisings led to increasing polarization. By the 1850s, a new generation of committed radical liberals came to the fore, and the colonial compact, which ensconced the state's right to control, and its duty to protect, the church, disintegrated. Amidst civil war and conservative collusion with French imperialists, the debate devolved into a struggle to exert absolute control over the nation and the church. Issues of patronage fell by the wayside.²⁴ Liberals now asserted that the church had to be definitively humbled, lest it continue to compromise national sovereignty and bank-roll conservative insurrection.

Reformers took their first strong steps following the Ayutla Revolt (1854–55). Over the next few years, the new liberal government passed a series of laws collectively known as the “reform laws” and promulgated the 1857 constitution. In concert they abolished corporate legal privileges and decreed the forced sale of all ecclesiastical properties (although the church was allowed to keep the proceeds). Although the new constitution mentioned religious tolerance, it also made vague statements about the protected status of Catholicism. Still leaning on colonial precedent, however, it stipulated that the federal government enjoyed oversight in matters of religious practice and clerical discipline, in addition to the right to make church appointments. Thus although the document fell short of complete radical reform, it made it abundantly clear that the state demanded supremacy over the church. The clergy, and many Mexicans,

however, found it too extreme, and The War of the Reform (1858–61) ensued. Amidst the brutal rancor of hostilities, liberal leaders turned to more radical measures. First they decreed the outright expropriation of all church property, a ban on future property transfers to ecclesiastical institutions, and the suppression of male religious orders. Subsequently they declared marriage a strictly civil contract and assumed responsibility for the official registry of births, marriages, and deaths. New regulations also reduced the number of religious holidays, barred civil authorities from taking part in religious ceremonies, and sanctioned priests for wearing clerical garb in public. Ultimately, legislation prohibited public religious services without special civil dispensation and suppressed female religious orders.

Liberals emerged victorious, but the conflict proved especially destructive and set the stage for foreign invasion. Mexico's resultant poverty and suspension of loan payments provided Napoleon III a pretext for invading and setting up a puppet monarchy. Tragically, imperialism gave civil war new life, but by 1867 the liberals had gained definitive victory. Not surprisingly, liberal triumph gave birth to a historiography. A few decades afterward, liberal historian Justo Sierra christened the Reform the "second emancipation": the first, *La Independencia*, achieved national sovereignty, while *La Reforma*, he declared, belatedly established Mexico's cultural autonomy.²⁵ Liberalism's leading figures and its laws also conquered the pantheon of Mexican nationalism, and for a century historical analysis often seemed a prisoner of liberal patriotism.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that social historians brought forth a more objective interpretation of the Catholic Church and the liberal-conservative conflict.²⁶ They revealed that the church had not been as wealthy as liberals claimed, and generally managed its assets well while providing easy credit. In addition, the chaotic privatization of church properties failed to improve state finances significantly or produce a nation of small property holders. Liberal and conservative armies consumed the lion's share of ecclesiastical wealth, while speculators were the chief beneficiaries of expropriation. Furthermore, the cycles of implementation, repeal, and reimplementaion of anticlerical reform that accompanied back-and-forth regime changes caused decades of legal chaos with respect to property rights. This scholarship also shows that radical liberals proved doctrinaire and impractical. In essence, they dismantled

colonial intuitions without considering the impact on society. Their critique of the church's role in the economy assumed the emergence of an alternative modern financial system, yet the foundations for this simply did not exist. They also suppressed religious charities, orphanages, and hospitals without contemplating their replacement. In sum, liberal reform achieved state supremacy over the church, but the nation was arguably more battered than bettered.

It is one thing to write laws, and it is an entirely different proposition to alter societies' long-established rhythms and lifeways. To the outsider it still appears bewildering: deeply Catholic Mexico adopted a secularist magna carta. Smoothing over the disjuncture between the modern nation on paper and traditional forms of authority proved to be the central genius of Porfirio Díaz after he seized power in 1876. Díaz dominated the nation for twenty-five years, manipulating politics from atop a pyramid of regional strongmen and a new class of entrepreneurs. The system worked for two main reasons: first, sustained international economic expansion resulting in abundant foreign credit buoyed the regime; second, Díaz allowed elites to run their respective regions as long as they maintained stability, embraced the regime's export-driven development model, and expressed an unequivocal allegiance to Díaz. Compliance with the constitution was of lesser importance. Likewise, the president made an unofficial pact with the church hierarchy. Essentially, Díaz and key prelates fashioned a church-state *modus vivendi*. Church leaders quietly supported the president and refrained from criticizing the government or openly engaging in politics. In turn, the administration largely ignored federal-level enforcement of the constitution's anticlerical provisions. The laws remained on the books, but by and large Díaz granted Catholics enough space to restore church finances and institutional foundations, and gradually reassert themselves in public discourse.²⁷

This overview of church-state relations in nineteenth-century Mexico has thus far remained at the level of national politics, but scholars rarely tire of stressing the idiosyncratic regional experience of the nation's past. This is especially true in church-related issues, since each ecclesiastical province negotiated their relations with a variety of state-level institutions and officials. In addition, as Oaxacan evidence demonstrates, each village clergymen had to engage in local micro-diplomacy, and priest-parishioner interaction represents the locus of most individuals' interface

with *la Iglesia*. Nonetheless, President Díaz, a native of Oaxaca, paid close attention to his home state, and Archbishop Eulogio Gillow emerged as one of his important prelate collaborators. The president and key prelates modeled the stand-down in tensions, rather than codifying it. Doctrinaire liberals fumed, but in many states such as Oaxaca, extreme anticlericalism and measures to dampen public religiosity enjoyed only limited support. Rapprochement at the top signaled to locals that they could overlook certain statutes. The arrangements varied. In some communities, public school teachers still taught Catholic doctrine in league with the priests, and public officials openly took part in religious events. In others, officials enforced laws limiting public piety. The restrictions on religious expression often occasioned intense acrimony. For many Mexicans, celebrating feasts like Holy Week without public ceremonies, such as reenactments of the Passion, proved unacceptable. In localities where officials deemed these traditions a threat to their authority, many Catholics preferred to suffer sanctions, usually fines, rather than desist. Again, the key was often the exercise of tact and flexibility among priests, prominent Catholics, and civil authorities. Good personal relationships between these figures often smoothed tensions in many communities. By the end of the Porfirian period, nevertheless, large public religious festivals had become quite common again in many cities and towns.²⁸ This was clearly the case for Oaxaca City and villages like Tlaxcoyalco and Ixpantepec.

The Mexican Revolution, particularly after 1915, brought a rekindling of church-state hostility. The insecure revolutionary state, which proclaimed its ties to radical liberalism, bristled at the church's perceived disrespect for civil authority. It did not help that members of the high clergy collaborated with the counterrevolutionary Huerta regime in 1913 and 1914. Inspired by its 1857 predecessor, the 1917 constitution's framers reaffirmed reform-era prohibitions and infused the new charter with a still-more punitive spirit. New provisions gave civil authorities the right to determine the number of clergymen working in their jurisdiction, stipulated that all priests be Mexican and abstain from political speech (public or private), and declared the political disenfranchisement of all clerics. Furthermore, the new constitution deprived the church of a distinct juridical identity, and therefore it had no official standing from which to lodge appeals or contest acts of enforcement and unofficial harassment.²⁹

Needless to say, the 1917 constitution angered Catholics, but again regional and local arrangements varied considerably. Neither the Carranza administration (1917–20) nor the Obregón government (1920–24), emphasized strict enforcement of the contentious provisions. Where revolutionary governors sought to implement laws fully, tensions mounted and Catholics complained of persecution. In some states, like Jalisco, well-organized Catholics employed protest tactics to force officials to back down.³⁰ In the mid-1920s, however, President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–28) moved to fully enforce the constitution's anticlerical provisions, and sparked a full-blown peasant rebellion in the nation's center-west. Oaxaca, as we will see, never experienced this level of hostilities, but local Catholics worked to dull the impact of the offending laws. The religious overtones of the conflict gave unrest its intense rancor, but more was at stake. Calles's offensive against the church coincided with the revolutionary government's energetic effort to create a rural political clientele and thus extend its effective reach in regions distant from the capital, through state-directed agrarian and educational transformation.³¹

Essentially, the president pressed a bundle of aggressive top-down reforms that simultaneously threatened to erode local power arrangements and cultural traditions in certain regions. This struck many Mexicans as an outrageous imposition of state power. For his part, Calles judged the population backward and fanatically superstitious, and expressed a determination to root out these ills and the institutions that harbored them. In protest, the church suspended public religious worship throughout the nation on July 31, 1926, but avoided endorsing the incipient rebellion. The government, deploying federal troops and local auxiliaries, launched a fierce military campaign against insurgent communities. The peasant rebels achieved a stalemate of sorts, controlling some remote areas but never seriously destabilizing the revolutionary state. The Cristero Revolt, as it became known, festered until 1929, when the ecclesiastical hierarchy agreed to lift the suspension of religious services, and the government relented on the enforcement of the most offensive laws. In many locales, however, an unofficial dirty war endured, and a second wave of risings erupted briefly in the mid-1930s. It was not until the 1940s, when President Manuel Ávila Camacho signaled his determination to abandon state anticlericalism, that the conflict over Catholicism in public life began to lose intensity.

For the last decade or so, religious culture in Mexico has increasingly drawn scholarly attention. We have long assumed the great influence of the church during the colonial period, but recent scholarship has opened our eyes to the complexity of priest-parishioner relations and popular religious ideologies as well. For the postindependence period, efforts to explain the Cristero Revolt represent the field's most significant attempt to plumb these issues. Scholars describe a web of factors in this revolt, including internal ecclesiastical and revolutionary politics, urban Catholic mobilization, rural religiosity, regional power struggles, variable experiences of state formation, preexisting agrarian structure, and the expansion of capitalism.³² Other episodes of popular rebellion have also inspired important reexaminations of religion's role in Mexican history, particularly in the Wars of Independence (1810–21) and the Tomochic Rebellion (1891–92).³³ Several recent books explore the diverse impact of Catholic discourse and important religious figures throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁴ In addition, historians have shed considerable light on the intellectuals and prelates who shaped the Mexican interpretation of social Catholicism and Catholic political resurgence.³⁵ These studies chronicle the mostly urban and elite struggle to reestablish a Catholic social and political voice, and to fashion a coherent mission tailored to Mexico's modernizing, postcolonial society. Still, how nonelite communities of believers navigated the era's challenges and opportunities remains poorly understood, particularly in the case of the nation's native peoples.³⁶

The religious culture of indigenous Mexicans has long been the domain of anthropological scholarship. In a way, Mesoamerica became a mid-twentieth century case study for scholars interested in peasantries and "folk" societies.³⁷ Ethnographers debated the nature of indigenous social organization at length. The field, however, is still getting over its tendency to suppress cultural diversity in pursuit of broad explanatory models.³⁸ Of late, scholars have critiqued previous oversimplifications of the relationship between culture and social structure and the exaggeration of indigenous isolation and communal cohesion. Instead, they emphasize various levels of economic and sociocultural openness, as well as much more complex relationships between kin groups, households, and the community at large. They also underscore complex histories of internal social differentiation.³⁹

In these debates, the role of religion within the Mesoamerican indigenous community held a distinct prominence. For the most part, early studies focus on the function of civil-religious institutions (the *cargo* system), or explore cosmology and belief systems. For obvious reasons, both approaches are important here. Forging religious collectivities and organizing public ritual was a key arena of action among Oaxaca's reformist clergy and indigenous laity. Among the things that shaped the divergent fates of the apparition movements in Ixpantepec and Tlacoxtalco was the former's failure to institutionalize their devotion, and the latter's fashioning of a novel brotherhood that carved out a niche amidst older devotional sodalities. The *cargo* system in its classic conception is two ladders of ranked civil and religious offices/obligations (i.e. *cargos*). Civil *cargos* include positions like municipal president or constable; religious *cargos* are usually called *mayordomías*, due to the steward-like *mayordomo* role of individuals in charge of specific devotions and their feasts. Young men begin their public lives serving in the low-level posts and over time assume more important positions. Officeholding is unpaid, and individuals meet all the expenses of their post. Some men move through the entire hierarchy of offices and achieve the status of elder.⁴⁰ On the surface, the *cargo* system's functions appear clear—individuals take turns organizing religious practice and administering communal affairs. In addition, it bolsters an age-graded, patriarchal social order. Scholars have debated whether it serves primarily to redistribute wealth and limit internal conflict, legitimate preexisting status differences, leach community assets, or sustain an ethos of reciprocity through nonmarket exchange.⁴¹

These issues continue to reverberate in the field, but changing conceptual standards have sidelined them. First, the rejection of functionalist treatments of religion has made the debate sound off-key. Second, historians have shown that earlier works erred in assuming that the system represented a colonial adaptation sustained by present-day communities without taking into account the dynamic nature of devotional institutions. Finally, the *cargo* system's importance has diminished as indigenous groups have become more integrated into regional and national society.⁴² The current consensus is that the development of ladder-like, rotational structures and individual funding responsibilities emerged as a response to nineteenth-century reforms threatening collective assets and the coordination of religious ritual. As a result, scholars now view indige-

nous institutions as much more responsive to prevailing conditions. Indeed, Oaxacan evidence indicates that many communities' religious collectivities were in a state of creative flux, and that individual agency in specific localities proved crucial. Villages sometimes formed new sodalities, abandoned traditions, and appropriated new devotions emerging from Europe. At times they even rearranged hierarchies of devotional collectivities.⁴³

Since our understanding of indigenous culture has been tied to our attempts to characterize social organization, it follows that as models of the Mesoamerican community proved unsatisfactory, we have modified our approach to religion. The field evolved from the emphasis on identifiable behaviors and beliefs within specific groups, to Marxist-inspired critical theory emphasizing relationships of production and power inequalities. More recently researchers analyze Mesoamerican social organization in terms of cultural constructions with primarily symbolic boundaries and characteristics.⁴⁴ One of the more enlightening currents in Oaxacan ethnography stresses how people create and maintain relationships in order to accomplish goals; this analytical approach frames these processes as an outgrowth of communal engagement with the divine.⁴⁵ In essence, social actors within communities often understand the marshalling of resources and human energies as products of interactions with supernatural forces.⁴⁶ In some cases, ritual and religious innovation serve as means to manage tensions between more-egalitarian notions of communal identity and reciprocity on one level, and individualism and more-capitalist mores at the other. Among some groups apparitions are quite common, and individuals openly discuss them in utilitarian terms. Revelation, therefore, can be a resource for initiating change, creating contexts of collective endeavor, and reshaping identities to meet perceived needs. In social groups that embrace instrumental notions of the miraculous, the entire dynamic is part of a longstanding, yet fluid, covenantal relationship between human society and the sacred.⁴⁷

VISIONS OF MODERN CATHOLICISM

This study pivots on the conviction that indigenous apparition movements and reformism among the Oaxacan clergy represent engagements of modernity amidst Catholicism's nineteenth- and early-twentieth-