

*The growing number of Protestant denominations and their converts combined with constitutional changes granting legal rights to all churches have permanently altered traditional Roman Catholic religious dominance of Mexican society.*

#### **An interplay of contradictions**

Instead of Emile Durkheim's hypothesis that the fundamental principle in relations between society and religion is a reciprocal harmonious incompatibility, today's preference is to consider them dialectic realities. A dialectic that is a component of both, considered separately, and also a determining factor in relations between them.

Therefore, historically and sociologically speaking, no religion exists in total "innocence" in society. A never ending dialectic between the functional and the dysfunctional is involved.

According to P. Bourdieu, the religious sphere is "generated" as a specific social realm different from the rest, due to a concentration of sacred power in an elite. Religion thus becomes part of the social dialectic. That is why, for example, the ideological justification of the Aztec's sacred mission guided by Huitzilopochtli, both legitimized their power over the other tribes while committing the members of those tribes to the role of sacrificial offerings.

The same religion that was functional for the dominant power was dysfunctional in the lives of the dominated. Surely those men would have preferred to die while hunting rather than during the solemnity of an Aztec ceremony. But their hearts

were needed for Huitzilopochtli to stay alive and for the Aztecs to stay in power.

However, in the same manner that Tula and Quetzalcóatl lost legitimacy to the new emerging power of Huitzilopochtli and the Mexica, the latter were displaced by the "returning Quetzalcóatl", who turned out to be the Christian God brought by the Spaniards. And so the conqueror's



Patricia Andjjs.

*Mexican society is generally religious and primarily Catholic.*

# **A religious reconfiguring of Mexican society**

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## Changes in State-Church relations

### Some historical considerations

The Church lost wealth and material resources during the Reform era (1855-1876), but benefitted from the loss by distancing itself from economic matters while concentrating on spiritual affairs, and not necessarily being impoverished by expropriatory measures.

Furthermore, the Church's confrontation with the state enabled it to dissociate itself from the successes as well as the failures and downfall of the Díaz regime. Similarly, its defeat in the armed *Cristero* insurrection (1926-1929) distanced it from the fluctuations of the state and its changing regimes.

The state achieved its historic goals by enforcing the religious restrictions laid down in the Laws of Reform and the Constitution of 1917. It could not accept the presence of an entity more powerful than itself within its own territory.

After witnessing the post-Franco Spanish Church's difficult transition, the Mexican Church has no intention of seeking official status. As an international institution, the Church has promoted activities that have gained it independence from the various states. Proof of this is the revision of the Spanish, Italian and Colombian concordats, to cite recent examples.

The Catholic Church is presently in strong competition with other very dynamic churches, also viewed by it as sects, that take away its parishioners. These are often the most active parishioners and those most involved in spiritual matters.

Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists arrived in the heat of the Reform era and the Revolution, along with groups of Pentecostals, Mormons, Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses who, though not convoked, were protected by freedom of worship.

Paradoxically, the state is uncertain with whom to negotiate where non-Catholic religious groups are concerned. It does not know who its interlocutors are although it is aware of their existence and explosive growth.

### The context of the reforms

The current Mexican state, now taking steps to introduce changes that imply class change and change in social groups affiliated to the state itself, cannot circumvent an institution capable of mobilizing 15 million people. Nor can it ignore a multiplicity of religious institutions, known as churches, that have millions of adepts, solid organization and responsible memberships.

### Preparing for change

Public opinion was shaken on December 1, 1988, when five appropriately attired prelates attended the change of administration. It was there that the president presented terms for the transformation of state-

God legitimized another method for oppressing the vanquished to benefit the victors.

It is an interminable interplay between religious legitimization of political power and political definition of religious institutions. Mexico is no exception. All of Latin America has, to some degree, gone through a long process of conquests and resistances involving men and gods.

All considered, few societies display the diverse modes that relations between society and religion

successively adopted in their social and economic formations in such an exemplary manner as the Mexican (at least from Tula to the present).

In modern Mexico, these relations are characterized by two constant features:

- The secular nature of the state.
- The Roman Catholic configuration of Mexican society and culture.

The Catholic Church is framed between the defining features of these two positions. The clergy were denied political presence by the secular nature

of the state; and this same clergy preserved their presence in society, and perhaps, their political pretensions, by virtue of Mexican society's Catholic composition.

### The changes

The 1980s marked an important change in the religious configuration of Mexican society, because it was during that decade that the country's Catholic uniformity was broken. Although Protestant presence in Mexico dates from the 19th century



Church relations: the separation of Church from state, lay education in public schools, and freedom of worship.

Months later, a seminar was held in the National University's Law Department, on the participation of the clergy in politics. There, Monsignor Reynoso, Bishop of Cuernavaca, considered the Church's jurist, stated that the Church had been participating in a joint committee with government representatives for the past seven years to amend the Constitution.

Other churches expressed concern that they had not enjoyed the same treatment. The historically informed know, however, that the only reconciliation possible is between the Catholic Church and the state. The other churches arrived essentially as a state strategy to countervail the weight of the Catholic Church. They too met to define new ground rules and terms of interaction.

Liberal factions were kept waiting; these were the historical heirs of the organizations that implemented the Reform and wrote part of the Constitution of 1917. Today they find outlets for expression in the realm of Freemasonry, whose varying tendencies have also progressively accepted the new ground rules.

It is noteworthy that the main political parties had also expressed their support for a change in state-Church relations, to the point of even doing so before the fact.

An awkward subject remained to be discussed, the ever touchy question of money. It seems that the rules were laid down as follows: only funds needed for the maintenance of worship were allowed, there would be no claims for property expropriated by or donated to the state, and priests would be subject to taxation.

The achievement of a consensus does not, of course, imply the disavowal of positions or matters of principle. All factions maintain their differences and express them: the Catholic Church would like more space, but is willing to take what it has received; the anticlerical are unwilling to relinquish any space but know it is inevitable; the Protestant churches are intimidated by the new order and liberals are trying to rescue their principles.

The diverse churches and factions prepare to fight new battles. The Protestants are regrouping, bringing in Luis Palau to preach and fill football stadiums. Integrationist and fundamentalist groups grow stronger in all churches.

The two alternatives for the future are the secularization of Mexican society, which some sociologists claim to foresee, or the development of Algerian style integrationist movements, or both concurrently, depending on time and place. We are in a tunnel with a presently unknown exit.

Elio Masferrer Kan. *Revista Antropológica*, UNAM, No. 2, April-June 1992.

(clearly established by published studies of P. Bastián, R. Ruiz and C. Garma, among others), it was not a statistically significant presence until recently.

The present day growth in size and importance of non-Catholic Christian groups, particularly of Protestant sects and churches since 1950, has now made them a significant sociological factor.

Figures from the 1980 Population Census alarmed some groups, because they showed the highest percentage of

non-Catholic Christians in Mexico's history: 3.7% of the total population.

However, census figures indicated unequal distribution of that percentage, since the "borders" were clearly identified as key points for this progressive change. On the northern border the proportion was 7%, and on the southern border from 7 to 12 %.

More recent studies (1989) clearly show that this tendency has continued throughout the 1980s. For example, in a section of the city of Tapachula, Chiapas, of the 4,000 inhabitants

studied in 1989, non-Catholic churches reported 1,066 members (26.6 %).

In a study begun this year in Río Bravo, Tamualipas, we found more than 40 non-Catholic places of worship established in a population of approximately 65,000 inhabitants.

Obviously, Mexican society's religious makeup is shifting toward an increasingly accentuated plurality more in line with modern principles. While important groups in the Catholic hierarchy, with what looks like nostalgia for the Crusades, keep



relating the "assault by the sects" to a perverse international conspiracy, to primarily explain the phenomenon, the always more practical general public has learned to live with neighbors and even family members who go to other churches.

Understanding the phenomenon, however, is even more complicated and profound than the quantitative statistics suggest. These data require more qualitative analysis. In Río Bravo, for example, we found that the "sects" grew, but the Catholic Church, far from losing ground during the same period, grew from one to three parishes and that each one of them has posted increases in regular churchgoers.

What happened, it seems, was that they lost statistical Catholics registered by the census and gained actively affiliated Catholics. This is clearly confirmed by the improved quality of pastoral techniques.

On the other hand, the Philadelphia Evangelical Church, oldest non-Catholic denomination

with more than 100 years in Río Bravo, acknowledges that 70% of the present-day faithful came from Catholicism. Does this mean it is difficult to create generational tradition among the faithful in some of these churches?

being Catholic is an inseparable part of being Mexican makes it easy to disqualify all other denominations as "anti-Mexican".

The problem with this argument lies in its supposition that a people's identity begins with the arrival of

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“Mexican society and culture are strongly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church”

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However the information is interpreted, it is clear that we are confronted with a process of change, and any modification affecting profound levels of a cultural system provokes society's forces. In this case, change in the religious make-up of Mexican society has been related to supposed "natural Catholic identity" that is being threatened. Granting that

Catholicism, which is historically untrue and sociologically detestable.

Another big change in the process we have been analyzing took place recently and may have significantly marked the 90s: this was the recognition of legal status for churches and the corresponding constitutional changes that made it possible.

*Popular Spanish Catholicism and indigenous beliefs developed over centuries into popular mestizo Catholicism.*







Marco A. Cruz / Imagenlatina.

*The Catholic Church is presently in strong competition with other very dynamic churches.*

This change benefits both the state and the churches, above all the Catholic Church, in view of its still predominant presence in Mexican society. It remains to be seen if religion—always more important than churches—will benefit as much as the institutions representing it, and if society can achieve results similar to the state's.

In any event, it is always beneficial and healthy that society's powers and institutions be realistically recognized and that they accept each other as interlocutors.

With these changes in Article 130 of the Constitution, Mexico does itself justice and settles a debt to the past, because, as President Salinas pointed out in his Third State of the Nation Report, the Mexican people "do not

want to live in pretense or equivocal complicity." Churches are now legally recognized.

#### **Pending challenges**

This new religious situation in Mexico inevitably poses several challenges to

religion is private and individual nature. Thus, the idea is to remove religions from public life and preserve the professional and secular character of politics.

Modern political rationale demanded the removal of religion from public affairs and the separation of the state from religious tutelage or intervention in the political conduct of the modern state. This same modern and liberal political rationale, based on tolerance, liberty, pluralism and the recognition of personal and organizational rights, carries with it a necessary acceptance and respect for all of society's members.

Every religion has an implied ethos and world view, a definite concept of the cosmos, man, society and history. In religions of prophetic origin, Christianity among them, the interaction of these elements with the civil society in which religion acts—at least on a long-term basis—is particularly intense.

This means that in Christianity there is an "incurable" political component that makes its total relegation to the private sphere impossible. In other words, pacts could be made with this religion's official representatives on many issues, but it does not mean that forces representing a "Christian utopia" will remain silent on topics like human rights, the distribution of wealth, political liberties, ethnic rights, land tenure and so on.

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### *“Recent constitutional changes granted legal political status to churches”*

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future social congress. They arise as much from the unique period of modernization through which Mexico is living as from global opportunities.

One of the fundamental postulates of a "modern" mentality regarding

During the Colonial era, the king of Spain's patronage of the Church and the legitimization granted by official theology to the Crown's policies did not eliminate tensions between missionaries and



## Society and changes in religious legislation

**M**exican society is generally religious and primarily Catholic, as a consequence of the country's social evolution throughout several well defined periods of its history.

In pre-Conquest Mesoamerican societies, religion as the prevailing ideology formalized the explanation of the cosmos and dictated the rules of society. The individual was predestined in his everyday life and committed to the community, its leaders and its gods; thus, his behavior preserved the cosmic balance for the benefit of all.

The Spanish Conquest crushed Mesoamerican cultures. Part of traditional indigenous organization was maintained in the interest of political control by establishing the *Republic of Indians* which guaranteed tribute as well as forced labor.

Ecclesiastical organization, in the hands of the various religious orders in New Spain, carried out the conversion to which the Spanish Crown was committed, imposing Catholicism as the official religion.

Even so, the indigenous population remained true to its world view in the domestic sphere and sometimes at the community level, where its traditional priestly healers were severely persecuted. The Black population brought other religious ideas to New Spain which, combined with popular Spanish Catholicism and indigenous beliefs, developed over centuries into popular mestizo Catholicism.

Throughout history, the church as an institution has been forced to change in order to adapt to diverse political realities. As the ideological organ of the state, empowered to regulate and punish society, it sometimes dominated kings as well as peoples, but there were times when it was forced to negotiate its control over the populace.

The church acquired great power in New Spain. As a capitalist institution it controlled vast and numerous properties, accumulating enormous capital in the process. Besides controlling education it oversaw the reproduction of Catholic cultural patterns, maintaining a firm grip on the popular conscience.

The Laws of Reform redefined the Church's social functions and its relation with the state. They are clearly expressed in the Constitution of 1917. Nevertheless, the Church and its ministers maintained their dominance over believing Catholics. Constitutional restrictions forbidding the Church from political activity were ignored in defense of both its spiritual and material interests, as happened during the armed Catholic insurrection known as the *Cristiada* (1926-1929).

Even today the Church is intransigent and loath to change, witness its rejection and repression of priests who follow the Theology of Liberation. With this attitude, will it respect the limits still applicable to it in the Mexican Constitution? With the changes in Article 130, how can we make sure the Church will not try to regain control over the masses and manipulate them politically in pursuit of its leaders' interests? Does not the right of the clergy to vote carry with it the risk of moral pressure on the vote of the faithful as it does with other political and trade union leaders?

With these questions in mind, we should consider an important factor that may lie at the root of these changes.

As we have seen, Mexico is predominantly Catholic. The changes in Article 130 may insure the defense and cohesion of Mexican culture in the face of US Protestantism by making it possible to counteract the proselytism of diverse Protestant churches whose adepts increase daily. This may derail or delay cultural integration while economic integration seems inevitable.

If this is not the case, we must assume that in their unremitting struggle for power, Church and state have once again achieved an accommodation of sorts to submerge the populace in a religious catharsis that will forestall or mitigate social movements, hoping in this way to perpetuate the prevailing order, as they did during the three centuries of Spanish domination.



*encomenderos*, neither could they prevent Friar Bartolomé de las Casas from speaking out.

The numerous social movements inspired by Christian motivation in the Middle Ages, the first Protestant reform movements, the multiple denunciations of abuses suffered by indigenous inhabitants during the Colonial era, today's Liberation Theology movement, the death of Monsignor Romero and the more recent deaths in the Jesuit community

The fact that on many occasions and in many historical contexts Christianity's unrenounceable prophetic vocation has been momentarily silenced or co-opted by existing powers in no way means that it no longer exists. Among the lessons left by Western history is that the essence of Christianity unfailingly returns to reclaim its prerogatives. Modern states must realize that Christianity will never accept banishment to the private sphere.

“Throughout Mexican history, the conqueror's God legitimized oppression of the vanquished”

in El Salvador, are all clear testimonies that Christianity contains deeper and more long-lasting forces than the hierarchy itself.

No pact with the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church (or with those of any other Christian denomination) can presuppose their renunciation from participation in public affairs, because it is precisely at the public level of social, economic and political structures that the human quality of life is built or destroyed.

All this is reformulated from another complementary perspective in the context of the crisis of post-modernism. Although there are a variety of concepts of post-modernism, for us it means the phase that begins when contemporary man and his institutions perceive the disillusionment that modern rationality has caused by its unfulfilled promises.

The economic and political rationale that grew out of the 19th century has been unable to fulfill its

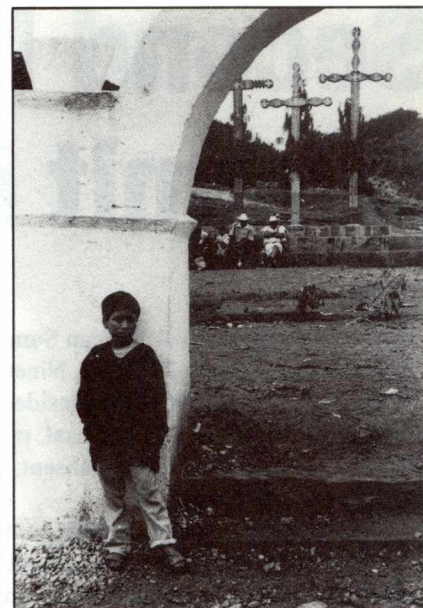
### Mexico establishes diplomatic relations with the Vatican

**T**he Mexican government and the Vatican formally announced the establishment of diplomatic relations on September 20, with a Mexican ambassador to be sent to the Vatican and an Apostolic Nuncio to come to Mexico City.

The Department of Foreign Affairs declared that the decision had been reached in accordance with the provisions of the Mexican Constitution which recognizes the legality of churches and other religious groups. It is also in the interest of establishing diplomatic relations with members of the international community committed to the preservation of peace and harmony among nations.

The step's immediate precedent was the designation of personal representatives by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Pope John Paul II on February 16, 1990.

Only 38 of the 157 members of the United Nations do not maintain diplomatic relations with the Vatican.



Marco A. Cruz / Imagenlatina.

*The Spanish conquest crushed Mesoamerican cultures.*

grand promise: unlimited progress and well-being for all mankind. Today we know this to be impossible, at least within the current world system.

We know that this modern rationale of Western culture has not only left its promise unfulfilled, but has fatally harmed the planet. The recent Earth Summit bore witness to the magnitude of the damage.

With the planet devastated and a growing and uncontrollable gap between poverty and wealth in the human family, the least that can be said is that the professional and secular management of policy and economy has failed.

This is not an invitation to return to an “enchanted” world, nor to flee to pre-modernity. It does mean taking note of flaws in a model whose narcissistic, ethnocentric and totalitarian imposition of its own paradigms locked it into “its own rationality,” causing it to overstep the limits of universal human rationality.

Under these conditions, it behooves the nations to respect the spaces where all social groups may express their proposals for a new utopia and a new struggle for world justice ❧