

The Cristero Collective Imagination¹

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It seems like a law of nature that all wars spawn their own literature, which turn the heroes and caudillos that led them into myths. The Cristera War (1926-1929), however, created something more important: a mythology of those fallen in battle whom the popular collective imagination based on faith and Catholicism rapidly turned into martyrs of the crusade. Cristera literature created its own myths, its own vision of the history of Mexico and has built upon the ruins of war its own apostles and martyrs, its victims and villains. Undoubtedly, it has filled many spaces in Mexico's cultural life in the recent and more distant past, and it continues to do so at this century's end.

All revolutions are based on the principle of cleansing their programs and objectives of the past and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) was no exception: one of its first actions was to try to shake off all vestiges of the country's history and eliminate the influence of the Catholic Church from Mexico's moral and social geography. The revolutionaries retained the nineteenth-century Liberal ideal of creating a new Man, free from religious ties, a goal that had sim-

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ply been postponed. José Vasconcelos, one of the intellectuals who maintained a close relationship with the revolutionaries from the very beginning, thought, "Liberalism had been the best period," because of its egalitarianism and progressivism.

The eternal dispute between the church and the state was at its most critical in the nineteenth century, but the Liberals, enemies of religion by definition, were simultaneously indulgent of the ecclesiastic hierarchy. Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (1834-1893), after a skeptical and anticlerical youth, was reconciled as an adult to Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint. He saw in the virgin the unequivocal sign of national unity; for him, the worship due her was a symbol of Mexican nationality. The Liberal project was ardently defended by the cau-

dillos of the Mexican Revolution, particularly Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, who did not perceive the difference between that nineteenth-century project and their own. As writer Héctor Aguilar Camín says,

The Liberals dreamed of a modern republic, productive and industrious, made up of illustrated small property owners in a land for the most part adverse to the notions of accumulation and progress. And a democratic political system, with balance of powers and active citizens, for a community that was emerging from 300 years of a patrimonial regime based on prerogative and privilege.²

From 1914 to 1926, this modernizing project clashed with the real Mexico, Catholic and peasant, clinging desperately to its fiestas and celebrations, who did not want to separate from their only mother, the land, that had seen them be born and grow. The caudillos of the North did not want or were unable to understand this "old" Mexico that to them was unknown, distant. They saw it as an ecclesiastic holdout that should be destroyed. They raised their voices, their laws and their reasoning, and they fired their weapons against faith and the church in the central-western re-

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gion of Mexico, where Catholicism was the strongest. The religious war known as the *Cristiada* had begun, leaving in its wake, like all people's armed uprisings, its novels, stories, songs (*corridos*), tales and memories.

II

A review of Mexican history brings to light the idea that the *Cristera* War had many causes: the revolutionaries' anticlerical ideology, the errors of the Catholic Church, the vulnerability of a religious people to the church hierarchs' dispositions. But these circumstances do not seem to explain the origins of an armed conflict that went beyond the social and political sphere and became part of the popular collective imagination, its roots, faith and tradition. From the sixteenth century on, the Catholic Church was more than a religious proposal; it was the basis for the founding of New Spain's main institutions since it played the roles of school and university, center of all culture and the arts and political and ideological movement that made stable social organization possible.

Spain was in decline—under Carlos II it seemed hollow—while New Spain rediscovered culture and art. The indigenous, orphaned as they were since the banishment of their gods, found in Our Lady of Guadalupe-Tonantzin a substitute capable of filling the void in their faith and religion. For them, the question would always be the same: What are the Mexicans' real gods? The old deities or Christ? The now classic Chamula character Juan Pérez Jolote from one of the most representative of Mexican *criollista*

novels points the way to an approximation of an answer:

This one that is "encajonado" (in a box) is Our Lord Saint Emmanuel; he is also named Saint Salvador, or Our Lord San Mathew; he is the one who watches over people and children. He is the one you have to ask to



Cristera little girls from Jalisco, 1930.

watch over you at home, on the roads, on the land. This other who is on the cross is also Our Lord Saint Mathew; he is teaching, showing how to die on the cross, to teach us respect....Before Saint Emmanuel was born, the Sun was cold just like the Moon. The Sun began to warm up when the Christ Child was born, the son of the Virgin, Our Lord Saint Salvador.³

The superimposition of Christian gods and gods from the Aztec firmament is clear. Sincretism is not simply a phenomenon typical of a certain period, but something more basic, and the indigenous consciousness, the Mexican consciousness, incorporated it over the centuries.

Whether in the independence movement (1810-1824), the Wars of the Reform (1857-1867) or the august peace of Don Porfirio Díaz (1875-1909), sincretism is a reality in the image the indigenous had of religion and God. The Mexican Revolution attempted to destroy the religious will of the people, going to dangerous extremes after 1914, when the political "war" against the cassocks began. The *Cristiada* is intertwined with Christian and Aztec mythology, which is why it evokes the sixteenth century, the period when the Gospel was spread in Mexico, when the missionaries found fertile ground for building their utopia:⁴ the dream of a perfect Christianity, as was attempted in the Middle Ages according to the proposal of Joaquín de Fiore (1130-1202). The sixteenth-century missionaries initiated the formation of religious consciousness in Mexico; but from the beginning the disparity between the new religion and that of the subjected people, the Aztecs, was apparent. No missionary accepted the Aztec religion as similar in its rites and sacraments to Christianity. Quite to the contrary, they considered it a manifestation of the Devil. The idea persisted that Mexicans were beings governed morally and spiritually by Satan, prisoners of the darkness who had to be brought into the light of Christianity and the Catholic Church.

III

Plutarco Elías Calles and Alvaro Obregón were frankly hostile toward the Catholic Church. The immediate cause was their ideology and the changes they wanted to impose on the country. This was not by

chance; it was due, in part, to the project of the Revolution: a movement to reconquer the past and assimilate it. As Octavio Paz says, “And that will to return, fruit of solitude and desperation, is one of the phases of that dialectic of solitude and communion, of reuniting and separation, that seem to preside over our entire history.”⁵ In ideological terms, the revolution is in the nature of a redemption; it is a time for dressing the moral and religious wounds opened during the colonial period, a dark time for the soul of Mexicans. It brought with it, therefore, a sense of internal, spiritual reunification that spread through the masses and revived them from a history considered an offense.

But this does not mean that all the revolutionaries were anticlerical. Zapata did not persecute the Catholic Church in his area of influence, the South of Mexico. In the state of Morelos, the churches remained open; mass was said, confessions heard, baptisms and weddings held as usual. The Zapatistas, whose revolution was a fervent desire for the land, a return to their origins, were Catholics. Nothing explains this deep-rooted feeling like the first sentence of *Zapata y la revolución mexicana* (Zapata and the Mexican Revolution), “This is a book about peasants who did not want to change and, so, made a revolution.”⁶ Other revolutionary groups led by Venustiano Carranza became wary of them when they entered Mexico City wearing scapulars around their necks and allowed the cathedral bells to be rung. Villa was not particularly anticlerical either; he accepted Catholics in his ranks, as is clearly the case of Villista General



A group of Cristero Huicholes from Nayarit.

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Delgadillo's secretary in 1914, Anacleto González Flores, later a leader of the *Cristiada* in Jalisco. Madero gave total freedom to the Catholic Church, but when he was assassinated by the traitor Victoriano Huerta in 1913, it became expeditious to be wary of the church hierarchy.

In the years 1913-1914, the constitutionalists took over church buildings and property, persecuted priests, particularly foreign ones, and took religious and nuns prisoner. Ezequiel Mendoza Barragán, a rancher in Coalcomán, Michoacán, would remember this as a banning of Catholic rites and worship if the church “did not submit to the whim of the government of the Antichrist.”⁷ Popular imagination had to have seen in these revolutionary actions from the North not a Jacobin civilizing project that wanted to imitate the development and progress in the United States, but a sacrilege, the annunciation of the Apocalypse.

The literature that emerged from the bloody battleground of the Cristeros is the paradoxical result of this history. More like a wheel of fortune than the will of the men who made it, it is the history of a crisis and doubt: that of twentieth-century Man without his God. Like the synthesis of Mexico's recent and distant past and expression of its paradoxes, the

Cristera War became a legend, full of strange components, that a few writers who saw in it a narrative subject worthy of being told drew close to. It was a multifaceted conflict, as we have seen, but at its center pulsed the confrontation between the Catholic Church and Liberal thinking, the dramatization of the most polemical myths in Mexican history, of its memory and its symbols. ■■■

NOTES

¹ This article is part of a research work *La Cristiada en su literatura, 1928-1992*, that will be published by Cal y Arena publishing house.

² Héctor Aguilar Camín, “Los jefes sonorenses de la revolución mexicana,” *Saldo de la revolución. Cultura y política de México, 1910-1980* (Mexico City: Nueva Imagen, 1982), p. 16.

³ Ricardo Pozas, *Juan Pérez Jolote. Autobiografía de un tzotzil* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965).

⁴ This utopia corresponding to the Renaissance has been lucidly analyzed by Alfonso Reyes in his *Visión de Anáhuac y otros ensayos* (Mexico City: SEP-Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983) and by Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978).

⁵ Octavio Paz, op. cit., pp. 178-179.

⁶ John Womack, *Zapata y la Revolución Mexicana*, Francisco González Aramburo, trad. (Mexico City: SEP/Siglo XXI Editores, 1985).

⁷ Ezequiel Mendoza Barragán, *Testimonio cristero. Memorias del autor*, introduction by Jean Meyer (Mexico City: Jus, 1990), p. 16.