Voices of the North American Revolution:

The Transnational Influence of Mexico’s Crisis between Church and State, 1925-1928
In the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, while most of the world was pre-occupied with political tensions in Europe and the outbreak of the First World War, Mexican citizens were embroiled in a series of civil wars. As with most civil wars, Mexico’s were deeply psychological conflicts, from which formerly latent tensions emerged as prominent public concerns. The dissonance between church and state in Mexico was one of the greatest of these. In the midst of that conflict, a revised constitution was implemented by the executive authority of newly elected president, Venustiano Carranza, in 1917. Although he was betrayed and assassinated by former allies in 1920, the constitution he legitimized remained, in its entirety, the supreme law of the land. Over time, it came to be held as the legal embodiment of what many intellectuals had already been calling Mexico’s Revolution.¹

La Revolución is an archetype that remains embedded in Mexican culture and politics to the present day, and whether one understands it to be perpetual or long deceased, Mexican Nationality and Revolution remain “consubstantial”.² The conflation of those two ideas dates back to 1920, but it should be clearly understood that, at the time of its inception, it was an argument and an assertion, not a foregone conclusion. Nevertheless, by asserting that the 1917 constitution was the legal incarnation of the Revolution, the intellectual supporters of the new 1920 government made any challenge to the constitution’s precepts fundamentally “counter-revolutionary” and, consequently, a challenge to the unity and stability of the Mexican Nation. Those were precisely the accusations that were leveled at the Catholic Church in the early 1920s.³

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² Benjamin, La Revolución, 165.
³ Ibid., 149, 157.
Just four of the constitution’s one hundred and thirty-six articles launched Catholic clerics and laymen alike into vocal protest of its underlying premises. The provisions of articles 3, 5, 27, and 130 were directed at the function of religious institutions in general, but, in practice: primarily the Catholic Church. These articles stripped the Church as an institution of its legal existence, independence from the state, and ability to operate private religious schools. They also forbade Mexican monastics and clergy from participating in any aspect of the democratic process, whether that be running for political office or casting a vote in national or local elections.⁴

In the United States, President Woodrow Wilson’s previous efforts to establish American democratic ideals as a foundation for international relations made it nearly impossible for Americans to ignore allegations of violent suppression of the free exercise of religion within the borders of their southern neighbor. “Persistent” American observers of the brewing crisis were quick to align their own conceptualizations of events with those held by one or another of Mexico’s many philosophical factions.⁵ This brought Americans into the process of Revolutionary myth-making that was well under way in Mexico. Americans identified the pressing social, cultural, and political conflicts of their own nation in Mexico’s constitution and, consequently, invested themselves in the course of the Revolution. The conflict between Church and state cut a particularly “wide swath through American society”.⁶ This was a far more personal point of concern for Americans in that its violent discourse wrestled with the subject of the very first of the Bill of Rights’ guarantees at a time when its legal implications were being re-negotiated. That was just

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⁴ David C. Bailey, ¡Viva Cristo Rey! The Cristero Rebellion and the Church-State Conflict in Mexico (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), chap. 1.
one of the reasons why one of the most influential Catholic voices at this time—a Jesuit priest and scholar named Wilfrid Parsons—asserted in 1936 that “Mexico, more than Russia, more than Spain, is a proving ground for human destiny”.  

Up to now, there have been relatively few scholarly forays into the topic of American perceptions of Mexico during this time of crisis. Many of these, however, have fundamentally erred in operating from one, if not two, faulty premises which are, quite frankly, inconsistent with available sources. The first has overextended the function of the overt political relationship between the two nations in their cultural and intellectual exchanges. It has been suggested that because the United States government “exercised an informal imperialism, using military intervention, threats of military intervention, diplomatic pressure, and economic clout to influence and at times to manipulate events in Mexico,” that the current of intangible influence flowed just as unilaterally. The “imperialism paradigm,” in general, “is so structured as to select out mainly those factors that promote or retard… ‘revolution,’ which, in turn, is assumed to be the essential precondition for ‘progress,’ ‘development,’ and ‘modernity.’” In this particular case, it has tempted scholars to “predefine the importance” of the United States in Mexican history and, simultaneously, to acquire a stake in Mexico’s Revolutionary teleology. It disregards the similitude Americans drew between their own circumstances and those in Mexico, expressing solidarity with one or another faction of their Mexican brethren. In doing so, this construction

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rejects outright any possibility for a current of influence originating in Mexico, or, at the very least, a far more equal exchange than the imperial model allows for.

The second premise treats Mexico—the nation, its history, and its culture—as having been fundamentally alien to Americans. It asserts that American onlookers had no historical or cultural context in which to place or make sense of the Revolution as such—a single, coherent phenomenon. One scholar, borrowing intellectually from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, has suggested that American observers of the Mexican crisis suffered from a “‘conceptual confusion’ resulting from the absence of ‘usable models’ for explaining what went on.”

This point is defensible, but only in a very limited sense. In order to be analytically useful, it must recognize that Mexicans themselves were operating under the same confusion. Mexican intellectuals of every stripe were having to reconcile their own history and culture with their vision of La Revolución. This is because “the meaning of important and complex events is never self-evident; they are and have to be imagined, invented, and constructed, ‘within the framework of the image of reality valid at a particular moment.’”

Establishing the validity of the Revolutionary “reality”, was one of the principle goals of what President Calles, in 1934, called the “Psychological Revolution.” So, if Americans appear to have been at odds, imposing disparate philosophies onto events in Mexico, they were doing so in concert with their Mexican counterparts. Americans were consciously brought into that conversation by a contingent of Mexico’s intelligentsia—the self-styled voceros, or “voices”, of the Revolution. These voceros consisted of a loosely connected coterie of scholars, philosophers, writers, and speakers from across Mexico, and it was they who were the first to posit

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9 Britton, Revolution and Ideology, 12.
10 Benjamin, La Revolución, 37.
the Revolutionary monolith. There were many versions and interpretations of this myth, but they congealed out of necessity around the crisis between church and state. This is to say nothing of the voices of dissent, both religious and secular, to the new nationalism being created in both nations—a movement that Calles labeled, the “Reaction.”

The plight of the Church in Mexico came to the forefront of American Catholic concern as early as 1914. Prior to 1917, attacks on Catholic persons and property were sporadic and varied greatly by region. Local non-Catholic strong men and military leaders determined the functions of the Catholic Church within their sphere of influence, with many closing churches, seizing Church property, sending clerics into exile, harassing laypeople, and forbidding public worship of any kind. In this already precarious social and cultural environment, the ratification of the 1917 constitution “sanctioned and formalized” a de facto religious persecution. Writing from their exile in the United States, twelve Mexican bishops and archbishops issued a formal statement to the people of Mexico and all foreign governments, albeit in Spanish, protesting the aforementioned articles of the constitution. They asserted that the new constitution “injured the rights of the Church, of Mexican society, and of individual Catholics; it proclaimed ‘principles contrary to the truths taught by Jesus Christ.’” Nevertheless, the anticlerical provisions remained in the constitution through the duration of Carranza’s presidency and into the first term of his self-proclaimed successor, Álvaro Obregón, but with little federal enforcement. After four years of relative peace between Church and state, however, the relationship took a drastic turn for the worse

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13 Bailey, *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*., chap. 1, 2.
beginning in late 1924 with the ascension of Obregón’s revolutionary colleague, Plutarco Elías Calles, to the office of the presidency.14

The American response to President Calles’ aggressive anticlerical campaign was, as has been said, far from uniform. American intellectuals and activists were polarized by the “Mexican Question”—a popular term in the 1920s for the international debate over the relationship between Church and state. Where challenges to the place of religion in national identity were articulated openly and clearly in Mexico, challenges to the religious underpinnings of law and national identity were equally profound in the United States, but more piecemeal and less direct. Following the conclusion of the 1925 John Scopes Trial, many American writers, whether they supported the ruling or not, articulated the sense of mounting tension between church and state in the United States. Scopes’ indictment in May 1925 followed just two months after a Guadalajara newspaper announced to the world that “religious persecution was underway throughout Mexico.”15 In the midst of the trial, it appeared to some commentators that defense counsel, Clarence Darrow had, like many of Mexico’s voceros, taken up the fight for “freedom of thought and emancipation from superstition.” In fact, “many [were] looking to Darrow as the champion of a movement aiming at the weakening and ultimately the overthrow of Christianity in [the United States].” But even Christian groups lacked a unified interest. American Catholic commentators, for example, saw a win for William Jennings Bryan and the prosecution as equally undesirable, due to the fact that their intellectual supporters were aiming at “union of the State with a certain set of churches.”16

15 Bailey, ¡Viva Cristo Rey!, chap. 3.
The Scopes Trial was just one indication of a larger revolutionary movement afoot in the United States. The perceived fountainhead of that revolution, even for religious groups, was not the Soviet Union, however. It was Mexico. Wilfrid Parsons, Editor-in-Chief of *America* Magazine, noted in his 1952 review of the “Social Thought of the American [Catholic] Hierarchy” since 1919 that “Communism is mentioned only three times in a volume of 402 pages, and Soviet Russia, twice.”\(^1\) The Pope himself appeared to have been pre-occupied with the religious crisis as it was developing in Mexico more than anywhere else. Of Pius XI’s thirty-four encyclicals, only five were dedicated to crises within specific nations, and of those five, three have Mexico as their explicit subject; one of those three was the only encyclical in the entire collection to be published in a language other than Latin. That language was Spanish.

Observing the trepidation in the United States, some Mexican *voceros* looked to engage Americans and assuage their fears about the radical changes occurring in Mexico. One such man opened this conversation with a simple proposal: “Is there religious persecution in Mexico?” That question, posed in an August 1926 eponymous pamphlet, was put forward in English by Mexican professor of history, Gonzalo Báez-Camargo, of Puebla, Mexico, and published in New York City. In Mexico, on the day of the pamphlet’s publication, church doors were found closed and public worship suspended throughout the nation. Just two days later, four-hundred Mexican faithful, armed with rifles, barricaded themselves inside the Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe Church in Guadalajara, Jalisco and opened fire on a unit of Mexican Federal troops that had come to seize the premises. That day, August 3, 1926, marked the informal beginning of the First Cristero War—

\(^1\) Ibid., 113; Wilfrid Parsons, “Social Thought of the American Hierarchy,” Pamphlet (St. Louis, May 21, 1952), 20, Box: 12 Fold: 17, Rev. Wilfrid Parsons, SJ Papers, Lauinger Library, Georgetown University.
an armed rebellion on the part of a segment of the Roman Catholic population of Western Mexico in opposition to the Mexican Federal Government’s enforcement of the anticlerical provisions of the Constitution.18

Despite these events, Báez-Camargo’s response to the question of religious persecution in Mexico was an unequivocal “no”; and he was not alone. His rejection of the claim rested on the assertion that the Catholic Church had a history of subverting democracy, fomenting counter-revolution, and undermining law and order. In essence, the legitimacy of the persecution at that time rested on how one evaluated the troubled history between church and state in Mexico. Báez-Camargo summarized his historical premise when he wrote that “the clergy of Mexico has never resigned itself to the exercise of a merely religious or moral power. At all times it has coveted the domination of national politics and control of the Government”.19 For him, the heavy-handedness of the Federal Government in imposing the authority of those four articles of the constitution on the Catholic Church was merely intended to “prevent the [Catholic] clergy from making religion a political warfare against [Mexican] Liberal institutions”.20 Catholics in the United States and Mexico, as well as the pope, denied that the Church had any vested interest in civil governance. Nevertheless, Pius XI made the Catholic position clear in a 1922 encyclical, saying that the stability and legitimacy of civil governments rested in the recognition of the sovereignty of the Church in moral matters. He wrote that,

There exists an institution able to safeguard the sanctity of the law of nations. This institution is a part of every nation; at the same time it is above all nations. She enjoys, too, the highest authority, the fullness of the teaching power of the Apostles. Such an institution is the Church of Christ.

20 Ibid., 12.
Báez-Camargo and other *voceros* asserted that rather than being an affront to American values, the Mexican government, in its dealings with the Catholic Church, was actually pursuing them. Mexico, he said,

>[I]s on the road to progress, welfare and democracy. If a political party or religious corporation tries to block the road, let the world know that it will be crushed under the triumphant chariot of progress, not on account of religious belief of any kind but because of its stubborn resistance to prosperity and democracy.\(^{21}\)

That aggressively confident statement, the conclusion to his treatise, was an affirmation to his American audience of the two nations’ shared vision.\(^{22}\)

Many responses to statements like Báez-Camargo’s offered “facts” of the persecution, attempting to rebut the author’s denial with hard evidence of the Mexican constitution’s anticlerical provisions, seizure of church property, and the executions of priests and bishops. One such spokesman was William F. Montavon, director of the legal department for the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC). Montavon either wrote or sponsored no less than six pamphlets in the United States throughout 1926, detailing these “facts” of state persecution in Mexico. One of the most notable of these was a pamphlet by William D. Guthrie, a Catholic, but also president of the Bar Association of New York. His piece, titled “Church and State in Mexico,” defended the positive influence of the Catholic Church in Mexico, past and present. That pamphlet inspired a letter of criticism from fellow attorney, Charles C. Marshall, printed in the December 5, 1926 issue of the New York Times. Later circulated as a pamphlet, Marshall’s criticisms were

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{22}\) Wilfrid Parsons to Richard Reid, March 7, 1929, Box: 5 Fold: 18, Rev. Wilfrid Parsons, SJ Papers, Lauinger Library, Georgetown University; Pius XI, “Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio: On the Peace of Christ in His Kingdom,” Encyclical, (December 23, 1922), sec. 65, http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11ARCAN.HTM.
aimed directly at what he considered to be the incompatibility of Roman Catholic teaching with the “peace and safety of states.” In his concluding remark, he suggested that his readers turn their “attention to the records of history replete with instances of civil conflict and social derangement arising from the attempted exercise of papal jurisdiction over the civil allegiance of citizens.”

Marshall’s letter articulated the opinion of many Americans who supported the policies of the Mexican Federal Government and rallied their voices.

The American “Religious Question” announced itself in an election. The 1928 presidential election, to be exact. On November 6th, Americans voters were offered the choice between the Quaker Republican, Herbert Hoover, and Democratic candidate, the decidedly Catholic, Irish-Italian governor of New York, Al Smith. The outcome was a clear loss for Smith. This was due, in no small part, to the work of a familiar name from the Mexican church-state debate—a Mr. Charles C. Marshall. Marshall published an open letter to Smith in the April 1927 issue of the Atlantic Monthly, just four months after publishing his response to William Guthrie. The letter consisted of many of the same criticisms he had leveled at Guthrie, but with the references to Mexico subtracted. He suggested to Smith, that “there is a note of doubt…as to certain conceptions which your fellow citizens attribute to you as a loyal and conscientious Roman Catholic, which in their minds are irreconcilable with that Constitution which as President you must support and defend.” As Báez-Camargo and other voceros had said in regards to the situation in Mexico, Marshall suggested that the Catholic Church ought to be more strictly managed by civil governments. He wrote that of the “variety of religious beliefs and ethical systems [in the United States]…none of these presents a more definite philosophy or makes a more positive demand upon

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the attention and reason of mankind than [the Catholic Church], which recently at Chicago, in the
greatest demonstration that the world has ever seen, declared her presence and her power in
American life.”

All of the aforementioned examples account for a very small portion of the evidence
available for the social influence emanating from Mexico’s church and state crisis across the North
American Continent. It is the hope of this researcher that the case made here, if nothing else, will
have provided sufficient reason for later scholarship not to assume the primacy of the United States
in North American social and cultural affairs.

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