

## Article

# People Love Their Religion: Political Conflict on Religion in Early Independent Mexico

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**Abstract:** Global histories commonly attribute the secularization of the state exclusively to Europe. However, the church state conflict over these issues has been an important thread in much of Latin America. In Mexico, questions about the role of religion and the church in society became a major political conflict after independence. Best known for the Mexican case are the disputes over the constitution of 1857, which laid down the freedom of religion, and the Cristero Revolt in the 1920s. However, the history of struggles over secularization goes back further. In 1835, the First Republic ultimately failed, because of the massive protests against the anticlerical laws of the government. In the paper, this failure is understood as a genuine religious conflict over the question of the proper social and political order, in which large sections of the population were involved. Beginning with the anticlerical laws of 1833, political and religious reaction in Mexico often began with a *pronunciamiento* (a mixture of rebellion and petitioning the authorities) and evolved into conflicts over federalism vs. centralism.

**Keywords:** Mexico; political conflict; religion; social order; violence; 19th century



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“... amando los Pueblos su Religion sobre todos los bienes, atacandola los esponian a perder... su preciosa libertad.”<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

The nineteenth century, in many respects, was a century of fundamental changes (Hobsbawm 1996), whereas in some world regions, the importance of colonialism rose, for example in Africa and parts of Asia, in the Americas it ended at least in its formal terms. Independence from British, French, Spanish and Portuguese imperial powers in the Americas was intertwined with another important development the nineteenth century witnessed: the rise of nation states. Christopher A. Bayly called the nineteenth century the birth of a modern world, which began with political revolutions, was characterized by industrialization and the rise of states as well as by the growing importance of new theories as for example liberalism, rationalism and practices informed by these ideas (Bayly 2004). Liberalism and its characteristic emphasis on rational thinking influenced the view on religion and its importance in many countries and strengthened the goal of governments to secularize state and society. This was not only true in Europe, as Jürgen Osterhammel would have it, but also in the Americas, as for example, in Mexico (Osterhammel 2014). However, liberalism, and especially the separation of state and church, as understood and discussed in elite circles, was not the same as the secularization of society (Casanova 1994). Following independence, the world once known and what had been a basically uncontested social order came under attack in many aspects. The form of government and the question of who should participate in decision-making was contested as the role of the

<sup>1</sup> “The people love their religion above all other goods, the attacks [against the religion, S.H.] expose them to lose their freedom.” Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca (referred to henceforth as AGEO), Gobierno de los Distritos, Huajuapán, 1834, leg. 5, exp. 36: “El ayuntamiento de Huajuapán reproduce la solicitud que en 6 de febr. ultimo hizo, manifestando la opinión religiosa de los poblados que representa.”

Catholic Church and of religion in general in society. The two topics became intertwined in Mexico during the 1830s, when anticlerical laws by a liberal government were contested by a wide array of social actors. After independence, more people had become involved in politics and more topics entered public debate. The legal status, the rights, and the property of the institutional Catholic Church were one focus of conflict. Religion in general as an axis of private and public behavior also took center stage in political conflict, as many ordinary Mexicans saw government politics to be a threat to a way of life in which the Catholic religion played an important part by informing their identities and giving form and meaning to their daily routines.

In what follows, I will analyze how and why the laws on secularization of 1833 and 1834 brought a new element to political conflicts of the time, inciting a genuinely religious conflict, as it is defined by Rogers Brubaker: A “religiously informed political conflict . . . involves claims to substantively regulate public life in accordance with religious principles . . . ” (Brubaker 2015, p. 5). In order to understand the parameter of this conflict, it is necessary to go beyond the national level and take a close look at the regional and local levels. Furthermore, violence as an important aspect of what happened in the 1830s will be taken into account. As will be shown, violence had many aspects beyond the physical harm it inflicted. The threat of violence was present in many rumors and violence also occurred against material goods as symbolic acts against state institutions. Its presence in discourse and practices stirred up emotions and thereby influenced the conflict on the social order even more.

The first decades after Mexican independence are often described as a phase of instability and political chaos. There was indeed a long period of civil strife and violent conflict, but the impression of inconceivable chaos is only valid from a distance insofar, as it suggests that there was no reason for the instability. In fact, independence brought not only the end of colonial domination by Spain, but also triggered a political revolution that disrupted the existing order. As a result, political debates revolved around such fundamental issues as how society should look, who should have the right to participate in decision-making, and which civil and moral virtues were considered important. Beginning with the struggle between royalists and autonomists in 1808, political conflict over the next decades hinged on questions concerning the future of the body politic in its broadest sense. Among the issues at stake was the role the Catholic religion and the Church should play in society. However, the Church as an institution with its clerical members and religion as a set of beliefs and practices were not the same. Religion had an important impact on Mexicans, their political stance notwithstanding, and regulated much of their daily lives by providing meaning and shaping collective identities. Religious elements were also present in politics, especially in the symbolic communication, as for example, in the oath on the constitution, which in itself had a religious connotation (Hensel 2011). Religion and to be more specific Catholicism for many Mexicans were inextricably linked to a just and good social order. Even though the conflict over religion was intertwined with the struggles between liberals and conservatives and federalists versus centralists of the time, it was not the same, in the sense that it touched questions on society far deeper than the form of government or who held positions of power.

As the statement of the *ayuntamiento* (town council) of Huajuapán, a small town in the southern province of Oaxaca, shows, religion constituted an important parameter in people’s lives. According to Ben Smith, this was not the case in all Mexican regions but especially in those communities he calls adherents to “provincial conservatism,” and even though he warns about identifying these positions in any fixed way with contemporary conservatism and liberalism, he links conservatism with the support of Catholicism (Smith 2012). Other scholars reject a clear-cut distinction between conservative and liberal political positions. With respect to the liberal Church reforms in 1833, 1859 and 1864, Galeana De Valadés (2005) emphasizes that it was not religion itself liberals wanted to attack, but rather the influence the Church exercised as an institution on political affairs. In this sense, the reforms were not so much antireligious as anticlerical. In what follows, I argue that

although the distinction made by Galeana might be applied to the conflict arising in 1833 over anticlerical laws issued by the government under acting president Valentín Gómez Fariás if seen from above, nonetheless many Mexicans interpreted these laws as a threat to the Catholic religion, their faith, and saw the social order under attack.

In any case, the first decades after Mexican independence were per se conflicting in many ways. In the 1830s, religion would add to the stakes at issue and gained importance even in debates over the form of government, and contributed to the end of the First Federal Republic in 1835. Many Mexicans had lost their faith in a more than metaphorical way in the federation, because it could not create and maintain a social order that guaranteed stability, prosperity and a life in accordance with moral virtues. For these reasons, analysis of the religious factor adds to the discussion on the failure of federalism in 1835, even though the conflict between federalists and centralists is not the focus (Vázquez 2012). The present research also contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of religion in Mexican history. Although religion for a long time did not figure as an important issue to understand Mexico's national past, this has changed during recent decades. The work of Brian Connaughton contributes substantially to this trend. His work sheds light on how politics and religion were inseparably linked even after independence and elaborates on the role of clerics in early national politics. Parish priests continued to interfere in politics and influenced the public discourse (Connaughton 1999, 2010). Members of the group took opposed stances and played different roles in political conflicts of the era. On the one hand, they supported liberal or conservative positions; on the other, they acted as mediators between local populations and politicians and sometimes were the target of public discontent, especially in pueblos (Connaughton 2008). Some historians discuss the influence that clerics had in politics and others focus on bishops in particular (García Ugarte 2010).

Earlier historical studies on religion and politics in Mexico looked at their topic under the perspective of modernization theory, analyzing state efforts of secularization and often focusing in particular on the several laws of the Reforma between 1855 and 1863, with special emphasis on the Constitution of 1857 rather than on the early nineteenth century (Bastian 1998; Blancarte 2013). Or, they made the effort in the first place to clarify the relationship between state and church after independence with its central problems (Staples 1976). The relation of political violence and religion is seldom explicitly treated for the early national period. Herrejón Peredo (1998) analyzes violent rhetoric in religious discourse, but his analysis ends before independence, even though he suggests that the legitimization of violence in defense of faith did have a long-lasting impact. Anne Staples, for her part, looks into the role of clerics in political conflicts and of parish priests in *pronunciamientos*, a mixture of rebellion and petitioning the authorities.<sup>2</sup> She warns to depict them as a collective actor, because in fact, political positions taken by priests were very diverse (Staples 2012). When it came to the fear that Mexico might lose its religion, however, most priests probably acted quite similarly, stirring up that fear in order to prevent an impact of anticlerical laws (Staples 2009).

To show the importance of religion in politics in the years 1833–1835 and discuss the role violence played in these struggles, I will analyze the *pronunciamientos* of these years that directly addressed religious grievances and refer to a crisis in the social order. Of special interest will be the question of how religion figured as a reason for threatened upheaval and which role violence played in the argument. The importance of physical violence has, in the political conflicts of the First Republic on the one hand, long been taken for granted in most studies of these years, because of the large number of rebellions and *pronunciamientos*. Will Fowler, on the other hand, contends that actual violence was less ubiquitous than usually suggested, at least when it comes to civilian participation in violent acts. According to Fowler, conflicts of national importance which involved civil violence were those in the federalist revolt and the subsequent civil war of 1832 and 1854/55, the

<sup>2</sup> For further explanation see below.

liberal rebellion against Antonio López de Santa Anna's dictatorship. All others involved only military and militia units and, in many of the conflicts, physical violence was only a threat, but did not take place (Fowler 2000). Except the revolt of 1832, Anna (1998) only saw four other violent rebellions (Zacatecas 1835, Texas 1836, Tamaulipas 1839, Yucatán 1843). Nevertheless, how the population perceived the presence or absence of violence was certainly not as structured as historical writing can make it appear to be. Whether a conflict was of national reach or had only a regional or local impact, in all likelihood was not as meaningful to the people who witnessed violent acts as it may appear in historical analysis. In any event, physical violence among the army and the militia of course affected the civil population as well. Families were affected when men were drawn to the militia or soldiers were wounded or died in fighting. In addition, contemporaries could not know in advance the outcome and scope the struggles would take and hence might have felt anxieties. Rumors of violence often circulated widely in these years. Finally, death or physical harm of the victim was only one possible result of violence, but there were many more, such as, for example, in the expulsion of Spaniards or political enemies. Violence against material goods (property, buildings) also needs to be considered because of its symbolic dimension. Violence has effects on society that go beyond individual physical harm. These acts of violence often were not considered as important on a national level, but on the local level, they conveyed rage against the government and thereby questioned its legitimacy as well as they could stir up fear. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the impact of violence, not only by counting human deaths on the national level, but by analyzing the meaning of these minor violent acts on the local level.

Acts of violence, especially in political conflicts, also have a communicative component that is intended to convey a message to those who are not directly involved in the act of violence (Tilly 2003). The implied message very likely stirred up emotions and thus influenced people's ways of looking at the world in which they lived. The role of emotions in the early national period has not yet been paid much attention in the historiography of the period, but Anne Staples provides insights into the fear of a non-religious society that was propagated by members of the high clergy in the 1830s and 1840s (Staples 2009). When it came to anticlerical politics in 1833, the perception of Mexicans about the future of the social order played an important role on how they acted. These perceptions will be a focus of the present analysis.

## 2. Political Conflict and Violence in the Era of Independence until the 1830s

Only a decade after the declaration of independence in 1821, which was finally achieved after eleven years of heavy civil war with the Plan de Iguala, the country had already seen two different systems of government (empire and federal republic) and various presidents who had come to office by non-constitutional means. Politics were conflict-ridden and political violence played an important role in the years of the First Republic (1824–1835). From the inception of the war of independence in 1810 through the 1830s, Mexico had few extended periods of public tranquility. Political violence was almost always around the corner. Historian Juan Ortiz Escamilla saw a new political culture emerging from the war of independence, when the use of arms in political conflict became a common feature (Ortiz Escamilla 1997, p. 17). Religion not only played a role in the war of independence, because the priests Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos led the movement, and many other clerics took sides in the conflict, by either supporting independence or fighting against it. Religion was also important because rebels and royalists alike used religious symbols and references to religion in their propaganda to legitimize their cause.<sup>3</sup> As Van Young shows, the participants in the struggle did not just defend economic interests as village lands. He writes that “what was at stake was the defense or re-equilibration . . .

<sup>3</sup> There is an ongoing discussion on the importance clerics had as leaders in the struggle for independence. See the discussion in (Ibarra and Cisneros 2007). On the use of religious symbols during the war see (Taylor 1986, 1994). Sánchez Silva (1998, p. 136) shows that this use of religious images was continued during rebellions after independence in Oaxaca.

of a moral universe, of a cohesive system of ideas for explaining authority, legitimacy, and ethnic identity, and for mapping meanings onto social relationships.” (Van Young 2001) Van Young’s interpretation of the war of independence is also valid for the first decades of the national period; and Catholic religion, without any doubt, was an integral part of that moral universe to be re-equilibrated after considerable changes in the social order had turned upside down many certainties on the social order (Taylor 1996).

Since 1808, the question of who should decide the fate of New Spain and since 1821 of the independent nation was crucial and national sovereignty was an important topic in political discourse. According to the concepts circulating at the time, the nation was constituted by its citizens but these citizens were understood to be already responsible in the *pueblos*, cities, towns, and villages, led by a political body, the *ayuntamiento constitucional*, the constitutional town council.<sup>4</sup> This corporate concept of the body politic remained essential after independence and in connection with the ideas on national sovereignty it brought about new forms of political participation: the *pronunciamiento* (Guerra 2000). This hybrid practice, which sometimes was more a petition and sometimes the start of a rebellion or the threat thereof, became “the way of doing politics in nineteenth-century Mexico.” (Fowler 2016) Independence had been achieved by a *pronunciamiento*, and also the establishment of the federal republic, as well as other issues negotiated via *pronunciamientos* in the 1820s. At the beginning of the 1830s, the number of *pronunciamientos* rose, especially with those fighting against the government under Antonio Bustamante and in favor of federalism in 1832. Whereas most of the times, *pronunciamientos* did not result in major violent confrontations on the national level, 1832 was a year of civil war with more than 2000 casualties among the soldiers (Fowler 2000).

The years from independence to the 1830s witnessed political conflict, not only in national politics, but also on the regional and local level, where it was a time of growing discord and strife. Within the regions, conflicts had various sources. In more rural areas, land conflicts led to the outbreak of violence (Meyer 1973; Reina 1984). Many scholars also see local conflicts as peasant revolts or disputes over elections to constitutional town councils in the context of the contested state-building process (Guardino 1996, 2005; Mallon 1995). Thus, in many regions, public security was more or less constantly threatened. In the Mixteca in Oaxaca, for example, many disturbances occurred since 1830 and the governor declared the whole region in rebellion in 1833. That situation was further complicated by a famine (Pastor 1987). Since 1825, war against various indigenous groups has raged in the north (Hu-Dehart 2016). Public safety was further threatened by the growing number of bandits who besieged the roads and made the area between Veracruz and Mexico City unsafe. Around 1830, bandits plundered the rich sugar plantations in the valley of Cuernavaca. Bandits also operated in the north of the country, attacking mining cities or convoys (Lynch 1992). In addition, the population suffered from lootings by the armed forces not paid by the national or provincial governments due to empty state coffers.<sup>5</sup>

In 1833, Mexico was struck by a cholera epidemic that further complicated the situation (Contreras Sánchez and Alcalá Ferráez 2014; Oliver 2018). The disease claimed 10,000 victims in the capital alone, and many more in the rest of the country (Costeloe 1975). The epidemic was used by the clergy to denounce the situation of Mexican society as a whole. Various pamphlets claimed that the government was to blame for the epidemic, and apparently, the clergy took the disease as an opportunity to preach from the pulpit against the anticlerical laws (Costeloe 1975). In a printed pamphlet, the bishop of Puebla, one of the few bishops in the whole country, Pablo Vázquez, considered the general decline in morals and customs as the reason for the epidemic threatening the country. According to Vázquez, even women read heretical texts and too much alcohol was served

<sup>4</sup> On the corporate conceptualization of the nation see (Guerra 1995). For the importance of the *ayuntamientos constitucionales* as political actors see (Ortiz Escamilla and Serrano Ortega 2007). Ducey analyzes how villages tried to shape national politics after independence (Ducey 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Archivo General de la Nación (in the following AGN), Gobernación sin sección, caja 417, exp. 22. Tabasco. Acta levantada por los vecinos de Huimanguillo con motivo de los abusos y arbitrariedades de las autoridades de ese cantón.



at festivities. However, above all, the “males públicos,” public evils, were to blame for the situation. These evils, according to Vázquez, were exemplified in newspapers criticizing the fundamental teachings of the Church and the bishop, which made them responsible for the decline of morals (Vázquez 1833). As Vázquez saw it, the decline of customs had brought God’s punishment in the form of cholera to Mexico. Furthermore, Vázquez complained that the victims of the illness lacked spiritual support in the moment of death, due to the lack of priests. Donald F. Stevens contends that Vázquez did not use cholera as a vehicle to act against the anticlerical politics of the government, but rather tried to influence the moral behavior of ordinary people (Stevens 1999, pp. 87–101). It is true that Vázquez did not mention the laws, though his pastoral was quite possibly published before they had even been discussed in Congress. As shown, he did clearly connect politics and epidemic to the situation of religion and of the Church when he cited public debate and especially those newspapers that advocated religious freedom as impious and as one of the reasons for divine punishment.

### 3. The Anticlerical Laws, *pronunciamientos* and Violence, 1833–1834

Until 1833, religion was of course not absent from politics, but it had not yet taken center stage. A quantitative analysis of *pronunciamientos* makes this clear. The database of *pronunciamientos* organized by Will Fowler at St. Andrews University counts 523 such *pronunciamientos* in the years 1821–1835, with a peak of 260 in 1834.<sup>6</sup> Although the term “religion” was mentioned in only six of them during the whole decade of the 1820s, in 1834, 134 or 50% of the *pronunciamientos* referred to religion.<sup>7</sup> Others, not included in the 134, adhered to *pronunciamientos* in defense of religion, but did not include the term itself.<sup>8</sup> Thus, at the end of the First Republic, religion had become a hotly debated issue on the national level. In 1834, many of the 134 *pronunciamientos* in defense of Catholic religion adhered to the Plan de Cuernavaca from 25 May.<sup>9</sup> A great majority of these *pronunciamientos* were declared by *ayuntamientos* often in conjunction with the citizens of the respective town or village (87), militia units followed with 16 *pronunciamientos* and the same number holds true for *ayuntamientos* and military or militia units together. The last 15 *pronunciamientos* were declared by groups of citizens, corporations on the regional level or others.<sup>10</sup> That is, even though the armed forces are often seen as a major agent in the cycle of *pronunciamientos* of 1833–1834 because Congress tried to abolish not only the ecclesiastical but also the military *fuero*, a privilege allowing the armed forces to have a special jurisdiction, as had the clergy with the ecclesiastical *fuero*, the great majority of *pronunciamientos* in 1834 were not initiated by the army. Military or militia units were often involved, however. For 1835, the database is not as reliable because it does not include 72 *pronunciamientos* of that year, to be found in just one volume of the fondo “Historia” in the National Mexican Archive.<sup>11</sup> This omission is not only numerically important. I argue instead that the *pronunciamientos* in favor of a change of the federal republic to a centralist system have to be seen in the context of the cycle of *pronunciamientos* starting in 1833.

Religion rose to a central issue in political disputes because the new national Congress of 1833, which was dominated by radical liberals, enacted several anticlerical laws, thus

<sup>6</sup> *The Pronunciamento in Mexico, 1821–1876*, URL: <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/pronunciamientos/> (last access 28 November 2020).

<sup>7</sup> This calculation does not include those *pronunciamientos* that adhered to another one including religion as an important reason to pronounce, without elaborating by themselves on the grievances and demands. The database does not include all *pronunciamientos* of 1834. For example, the one of Huajuapán cited at the beginning is not included. Nevertheless, the sample is sufficiently large to show the importance of religion as an issue at stake.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the *pronunciamientos* of Tenancingo on 31 May, Tecualoya, 1 June, Teotihuacan, 3 June, or Jiutepec, 5 June. In (Vázquez 1987, pp. 226, 234, 244, 251).

<sup>9</sup> For a systematic definition of different types of *pronunciamientos* see (Fowler 2016, pp. 1–36).

<sup>10</sup> Vázquez also contends that most *pronunciamientos* adhering to the Plan de Cuernavaca were declared by civil authorities, mainly on the local level. (Vázquez 1989, p. 225).

<sup>11</sup> The database lists 91 *pronunciamientos* for 1835. In AGN, Historia 561, 72 can be found with the respective *acta* included, other *pronunciamientos* are listed in the correspondence to be found in this volume, but without the *acta*.

pushing religion to the forefront of the conflicts. Under the auspices of Vice-President Valentín Gómez Farías, congress started to discuss and adopt a series of anticlerical laws in May 1833, several more followed over the year until April 1834. The first one established the national right of patronage, or control over the nomination of bishops and parish priests. This issue had influenced the relations between the Mexican state and the Holy See since independence, and because it was not resolved, Mexico was left without any bishop in 1829 until 1831. The pending question of the patronage notwithstanding, from 1830 onwards, the Mexican government negotiated the appointment of some bishops, but in 1835, five out of ten dioceses were still vacant (Staples 1976). In many parishes, priests were also lacking. Therefore, in December 1833, the government issued a decree to fill this gap. This law was particularly controversial (Vázquez 1989). Other laws concerned the possessions and income of the Church and religious orders. The compulsory tithe was prohibited and religious orders were expropriated. Furthermore, various members of the Cathedral chapter of Mexico City and all Spanish clerics were included in the so-called *ley del caso* and consequently expelled from the country (García Ugarte 2010).

Resistance to the anticlerical laws came from different social groups. In much historiography, it is linked to conservatism and of course the Church, but also the army, because both corporations saw their privileges threatened. Nevertheless, Josefina Vázquez does not consider the Church to have been an important agent in the movement of Cuernavaca. In her view, centralists and particularly the president Santa Anna, who used religion for his political purposes to change the form of government, were responsible for this *pronunciamiento* cycle (Vázquez 1989). In my opinion, the movement in defense of the Catholic religion was supported by a much broader part of the population. For many Mexicans, religion guaranteed security and order in everyday life, which was repeatedly disrupted by political instability and economic strife. Therefore, many Mexicans were convinced that the laws posed a threat to social order. Resistance to the anticlerical measures spanned a wide spectrum of social and regional groups. *Pronunciamentos* against the legislative measures occurred in all states, but they were not the only way in which people tried to engage in politics.<sup>12</sup>

During the conflict, the federal system and the problem of constant disorder became intertwined. After the publication of the first laws in 1833, opposition to these measures was quick to emerge. In Morelia, Michoacán, the head of the garrison, Ignacio Escalada, launched a *pronunciamiento* against the end of military and ecclesiastical privileges.<sup>13</sup> Two more *pronunciamentos* followed in early June in Tlalpan in the state of Mexico and in Huejotzingo, Puebla, also defending religion. However, whereas the first one was named after its author General Gabriel Durán, concentrated on the withdrawal of the anticlerical laws, the second one declared by General Mariano Arista also called for a dictatorship under Santa Anna.<sup>14</sup> Santa Anna, taken hostage by the *pronunciados*, was able to flee, and during the following months, he led the fight against the rebels.<sup>15</sup>

These events caused concern about possible unrest in other regions as well. From Oaxaca, the governor reported political distortions in early June due to the laws and had 200 troops activated in Huajuapán and at the border with Puebla, respectively.<sup>16</sup> In this state, a conflict evolved between political and Church authorities. The governor accused various parish priests of being responsible for the publication and distribution of inflammatory pamphlets. According to the governor, these priests were guilty of calling on

<sup>12</sup> Vázquez gives a total of 275 *pronunciamentos* adhering to the Plan of Cuernavaca, that is from 25 May 1834, onwards. Half of these according to Vázquez were declared in the states of Mexico and Puebla. These states were geographically large and ranged among the most densely populated states. (Vázquez 1989, p. 226). Of course, Vázquez can hardly give the archival location of these 275 *pronunciamentos*, but unfortunately it remains unclear how exactly they were counted and classified. Neither in the *Planes de la nación mexicana* nor in the database can 275 *pronunciamentos de adhesión* be traced for the Plan of Cuernavaca.

<sup>13</sup> See the Plan de Escalada, 16 May 1833. (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, p. 178).

<sup>14</sup> See (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, pp. 182–85).

<sup>15</sup> On the complicated events evolving in 1833 and the unclear part Santa Anna played in these *pronunciamentos* see (Costeloe 1975, pp. 389–91).

<sup>16</sup> “Prevención para que los eclesiásticos de Oajaca no se metan en asuntos políticos”. AGN, Gobernación sin sección caja 360, exp. 8.

the population to fight to death against the laws. The capitular vicar of Oaxaca, Juan José Guerra y Larrea, answered to the accusations, denying first that any priest had organized a junta, reprinted and circulated pamphlets, or incited rebellion from the pulpit. Before formulating his statement, he had asked Luis Castellanos, another member of the high clergy in Oaxaca, to inform him on the matter. In his statement, Castellanos used very harsh language, speaking of hostilities and heresies prevailing in some periodicals and in politics, calling those responsible “*perversos*” (perverted). Even though he admitted to two cases where priests had published pamphlets and interfered in political debate, he denied any wrongdoing by the clergy whom Castellanos saw as the last wall, protecting the religion in a situation of two existing systems, the federal one which was not under attack and the “impious” one, which the Church rightfully resisted.<sup>17</sup> This makes it clear that, at this early point in mid-1833, the political system and religion were tied together in public debate. In defense of the Church, the clergy referred positively to the constitution, which had declared the Catholic faith as the only valid one. Over the year 1833, this reference to the constitution as legitimization of action against the government was echoed in many regions.

In Oaxaca, the reason for the governor to have raised the alarm with troops in Huajuapán may be found in the political situation there. Huajuapán was a district town of the Mixteca Baja, a region that witnessed many local armed conflicts in 1833. In February 1834, the town council of Huajuapán sent a petition to the Congress of Oaxaca asking the national Congress to repress the license of journalists who, without consideration of the fundamental charter, proclaimed religious tolerance in almost all their writings, something Mexicans did not support. This petition was reiterated twice. First in May, when according to the council all their fears had been realized and Congress had passed many laws against the Church and religion, creating a fundamental crisis. Therefore, the *ayuntamiento* adhered to the *pronunciamiento* of Puebla.<sup>18</sup> In June, Huajuapán came back to its petition a second time and lamented that it had not received any attention from the state authorities. Instead, the governor of Oaxaca had called the actions in Huajuapán illegitimate. Now, the *ayuntamiento* allied itself with the Plan de Cuernavaca taking up arms.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the *ayuntamiento* had, on the same matter, first petitioned the state government, then adhered to a *pronunciamiento* and finally to another one, this last time declaring to take up arms. This threat of violence strongly suggests that Huajuapán distrusted the state government, because the capital had also adhered to the *pronunciamiento* of Puebla, and as a result, the defense of religion was supported by both.<sup>20</sup>

In Puebla, several units of the armed forces launched a *pronunciamiento* on 11 May 1834, with two main objectives: defend the Catholic religion and the federal system of government.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, it stated the adherence to a *pronunciamiento* of Orizaba. The *acta*<sup>22</sup> of the latter *pronunciamiento* to my knowledge has not yet been found, but correspondence on the occurrences in Orizaba in April 1834 tells a story of a spontaneous and violent rebellion.<sup>23</sup> When the law passed by the Congress of Veracruz to dissolve religious orders became known in public, in Orizaba, some men gathered in front of the convent, where the civil militia was stationed with 200 men, to protect the *jefe político* and the two mayors of the city. The men called for support by ringing the bells of a nearby church. A large crowd gathered and demanded action against the “enemies of religion,” including the

<sup>17</sup> “Prevención,” AGN, Gobernación sin sección, caja 360, exp. 8.

<sup>18</sup> AGEO, Gobierno de los Distritos, Huajuapán, 1834, leg. 5, exp. 36.

<sup>19</sup> AGN, Gobernación sin sección, caja 410, exp. 12.

<sup>20</sup> See the *pronunciamiento* of the garrison of Oaxaca and the declaration of the Congress of Oaxaca not to decree freedom of religion in the state. AGN, Gobernación sin sección, caja 410, exp. 12.

<sup>21</sup> (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, p. 210). The same *pronunciamiento* is listed a second time without a date on p. 449.

<sup>22</sup> An *acta* was the written statement on the reasons why the involved actors thought it necessary to publicly declare their stance with respect to a political conflict. The *acta* was used to find support, sometimes printed and often sent out, not only to other cities and towns, but also to political authorities.

<sup>23</sup> The following is based on the correspondence in AGN, Gobernación sin sección, caja 410, exp. 3.



resignation of local authorities. When these complied through the mediation of *teniente coronel* Bringas, and the militias surrendered their weapons, further violence was prevented, leaving eight men dead and several injured. The insurgents, whose numbers had grown to several thousand overnight, then decided to move to Cordoba. What had happened in Orizaba was repeated in Córdoba on 24 April. According to the account of a citizen who preferred not to sign his letter, 300 “miserables, young men and women”<sup>24</sup> led by a monk had gathered and shouted “death” to Congress and the Jacobins and “vivas” to Canalizo, Bravo, Santa Anna and the *escoceses*.<sup>25</sup> They had trampled on the law passed by the Congress of Veracruz and asked for a change of the authorities. When the *ayuntamiento* came together, word of a *pronunciamiento* spread in the city.

As mentioned above, Fowler (Fowler 2000) contends that most of the *pronunciamientos* with national impact, the Plan de Cuernavaca among them, did not involve civil society in any fighting. While this might be true on the regional and national level and especially when it comes to the involvement of regular troops, the events described suggest that violence was significant on the local level. It did not necessarily cause deaths, but in many towns and cities, “disorder was the order of the day,” as Paul Vanderwood put it for another context (Vanderwood 1992). These minor violent events were by no means always directed against people, but also symbolically against things, such as trampling a legal text underfoot, and most likely increased the credibility of descriptions as those in the preambles of many *pronunciamientos* in 1833, 1834 and 1835. The Plan of Cuernavaca started declaring:

“The Mexican Republic has been submerged in the most frightening chaos of confusion and disorder to which it has been subjected by the violent measures with which the legislative bodies have filled this period with blood and tears, deploying the attacks of an absolute demagoguery on the destruction of the fundamental charter that has cost so many sacrifices.”<sup>26</sup>

A *pronunciamiento* of adherence launched in Teotitlán explained:

“A torrent of evils and misfortunes that occurred in recent times has reduced the Mexican nation to the most unhappy and miserable state ever seen since the memorable day of the conquest when, fortunately, convinced of reason, it embraced the holy law of the Crucified which the nation today justly and properly wants and seeks to keep without any mixture and which it received from its ancient fathers: Neither the cruel despotism of the kings of ancient Spain who dominated it for three centuries, nor the arbitrariness of the rulers who have preceded it since the year eight hundred and twenty-one, dared to pass that diabolical multitude of offences, damages and harm that the present legislatures have caused to the unhappy fatherland with the violent measures they took beyond the orbit of their powers, disrupting in all its parts the great fundamental charter. . . . All these scandalous attacks in which are inscribed dire consequences against the holy religion and beloved fatherland, have not been able to see without grief the religious people of Teotitlán.”<sup>27</sup>

The emphasis on their religiosity by the inhabitants of Teotitlán is most interesting. For them, as for many Mexicans in the cities and villages, religion was a main component of their identity. This local identity, furthermore, was closely linked to the national identity

<sup>24</sup> The original reads “leperos, muchachos y mugeres.” AGN, Gobernación sin sección, caja 410, exp. 3.

<sup>25</sup> General Valentín Canalizo had supported Mariano Arista’s *pronunciamiento* for religion and dictatorship in 1833 with a *pronunciamiento* in Oaxaca and had again launched a *pronunciamiento* against the anticlerical laws in February 1834. Nicolás Bravo had pronounced at the end of 1833 and proposed to pacify the country by establishing a new congress which was to decide on the future. Even though Santa Anna was president at time, he was not held responsible for the anticlerical politics which congress had decided upon when he had left the official duties to the Vice-President Gómez Fariás. Finally, the *escoceses* were the more conservative Masonic lodge at the time. It is surprising that they were included in the viva shouts, as the Masonic lodges were criticized at the time by many for being responsible for much of the discontent.

<sup>26</sup> Acta del Pronunciamiento de Cuernavaca, 25 May 1834. In (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, p. 214). *Pronunciamientos* frequently referred to the constitution trying to legitimize their protest. See (Fowler 2010, p. 97).

<sup>27</sup> (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, p. 235).

when the Catholic character of the nation, as was stipulated in the constitution, was referred to. In the district of Coronaco, the ayuntamientos of the head town and of the surrounding villages came together with those working the land (labradores) and the citizens of the municipality, in order to adhere to the Plan of Cuernavaca. As for the reasons, the *acta* stated that legislators had disregarded the social pact.<sup>28</sup> The *pronunciamiento* of Toluca, for example, saw the goal of all the measures by national and state congresses alike in taking away the people's Catholic faith.<sup>29</sup> In Salamanca, Guanajuato, the town denounced the extradition of the bishop of Michoacán (Guanajuato belonged to the diocese of Michoacán) and explained:

"If the divergence of opinions was on purely state matters, it [the pueblo of Salamanca] would maintain an inalterable tranquility, because such has been the behavior of this pueblo in the various debates that have followed one another in the vicissitudes produced by the new order of things, which brought about the national independence, not precisely by apathy, but by the inferiority of our knowledge; but this time we are afraid, that if the illustrious bishops, in agreement with the one of Morelia, prefer the expatriation to fulfilling their responsibilities as the sovereign decree demands the Mexican Church we will be left a second time without these first ministers: and supposing that the lower clergy was divided in opinions, not for this reason would the spirits rest, rather we are afraid that in this case the fatal door of discord would open between brothers, who are united by the bonds of society and religion."<sup>30</sup>

Through 1833 and 1834, the association of religion and good government evolved into a conflict over the federal system that finally led to its abrogation in October 1835 after another cycle of *pronunciamientos*, of which the ones of Orizaba and Toluca were of considerable significance.<sup>31</sup> Orizaba called for the change of the constitution on 19 May 1835. The *acta* prominently criticized the politics that aimed to destroy religion and public morals. Toluca declared itself in favor of a centralist system ten days later and emphasized that the new constitution should maintain the Roman Catholic religion as the only one in the country.<sup>32</sup> The change to a central system has long been interpreted as a conservative turn in Mexico's political history and this is certainly correct when we look only at the top of the body politic (Anna 1998; Costeloe 1975). Nevertheless, behind this change lay the pre-occupation of many Mexicans about their religion and the violence they had suffered since independence. Many *pronunciamientos* following those of Orizaba and Toluca specifically mentioned these grievances. Villa de Mier, Tamaulipas, for example, pronounced on June 20 in favor of a centralist form of government because, "civil wars, taxes of all classes, and crimes committed in the name of liberty" had made life difficult.<sup>33</sup> However, these demands were not unanimous and many also mentioned liberal ideals. Many pueblos pronounced in order to protect the Catholic religion but they also wanted to preserve the separation of powers, especially mentioning that civil and military powers should not be in one hand, and supporting the freedom of the press.<sup>34</sup> Others declared in favor of a "popular, representative and central system."<sup>35</sup>

In Ometepe, Puebla, the *pronunciamiento* in favor of the change to a central government system made use of the explanation given in Teotitlán a year earlier and stated:

"A torrent of evils and misfortunes that occurred in recent times have reduced the Nation to nullity, have made it weak and unconscious of itself, as it was never seen since the memorable day of the conquest," and went on to refer to the conquest and the colonial

<sup>28</sup> (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, p. 247).

<sup>29</sup> The original says: "el fin de descotolizar al pueblo". (Vázquez 1987, vol. 2, p. 224).

<sup>30</sup> Manifestación del ayuntamiento de la villa de Salamanca, 8 May 1834. In (Vázquez 1987, vol. 3, p. 15).

<sup>31</sup> Fowler counts more than 400 between May and October 1835. (Fowler 2016, p. 173).

<sup>32</sup> (Vázquez 1987, vol. 3, pp. 17–19, 20–21).

<sup>33</sup> AGN, Historia, vol. 561.

<sup>34</sup> See several *pronunciamientos* in Tabasco, Nuevo Leon, Puebla. AGN, Historia, vol. 561.

<sup>35</sup> (Vázquez 1987, vol. 3, p. 57).

era. Coming to the reforms of 1833, it especially referred to “the decree of 24 October 1833, and the one that was sanctioned on the abolition of payment of tithes. All Mexicans have seen the bold invasion of personal security with that ingenuous law of ostracism, attacking the property of citizens, destroying the social pact, violating the most sacred rights of the country, heretically and shamelessly inculcating the Holy Religion that we profess . . . ”<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, whereas the payment of tithes had led to frequent petitions, legal disputes, and even rebellion, when pueblos thought that priests asked for too much during the colonial era, in the 1830s, its reduction to a voluntary payment of the faithful was seen as part of an intent to destroy the social pact, and for this reason, denounced in radical rhetoric. Several measures concerning Church property which were discussed and passed by Congress at the end of 1833 evolved around the problem of empty state coffers. Hence, the abolition of a forced contribution given to the Church, which in turn provided religious services to the community, probably was seen as just another attempt to raise the state income—taxes being another topic that had a long history of contestation between the population and authorities.<sup>37</sup>

The frequent use of violence in politics came under attack in 1835. Some of the *actas* referred to the violence of the past years; not only complaining about it, but also expressing its discontent with its use in political conflict. The *pronunciamiento* of Tepeji, Puebla, for example, stated that “the citizens had the right to representation under all circumstances. But it should not be accepted that they took up arms and rebelled against the authorities and caused disorder thereby.” In another one, the citizens of Cuetzalan, Puebla, did not believe that federalism was responsible for turmoil and violence, but they also doubted that the federal system was strong enough to resolve the problem.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

Religion was an important part of people’s lives in Mexico, as it was in other parts of the world in the nineteenth century. For many Mexicans, religion contributed to their collective identities and was present in their daily routines, as well as in politics. In the early national period, it also became a driving force of political struggles. This was true for the first time in the 1830s, when the government passed several anticlerical laws. Even though the intention might have been merely the separation of state and Catholic Church, many Mexicans conceived of these measures as a threat to their religiously informed way of life. As a result, in the early 1830s, a genuinely religious conflict concerning the social order was added to the many other already existing conflicts. It was not only stirred up by the clergy. Many ordinary Mexicans acted in defense of the religion that they considered a basis for their lives. In a time when political struggles often led to violence, this was also true for actions against the anticlerical laws. Many of these violent acts went beyond military fighting or physical harm to individuals. They symbolically conveyed meaning to the resistance against state measures. Furthermore, widespread critiques of the ubiquitous violence since independence were reinforced by concerns over religion. Critiques on the government system merged with religious matters, and many Mexicans became convinced that the federal system was unable to restore and maintain public order.

A dilemma soon became apparent in public discourse: On the one hand, religion was perceived as an essential pillar of the social order, but on the other, many critics of government policy used *pronunciamientos* to voice their dissent. This soon became a vicious circle, protesting disorder by threatening and engaging in violence if demands were not met. The process commonly began with turmoil on the local level. The perception of constant struggles gave many Mexicans the feeling that their world had turned upside down and made them lose faith in the federal system and demand a change in the form of government in 1835. However, the outlines of the new system they demanded were not always the same.

<sup>36</sup> AGN, Historia, vol. 561.

<sup>37</sup> For parish taxes in the 18th century see (Taylor 1996). For taxes in the early national period see (Serrano Ortega and Jáuregui 1998).

<sup>38</sup> AGN, Historia, vol. 561.

For example, there were several *pronunciamientos* in which, in addition to the determination of the Catholic religion as the only one accepted in Mexico, the separation of powers and freedom of the press were also mentioned as important requests. Therefore, it is at least questionable that all voices from rural areas in favor of maintaining the Catholic religion were expressions of a provincial conservatism. In an almost completely Catholic country, as was Mexico after three hundred years of colonial domination, it is perhaps not surprising that Catholicism had penetrated much of popular culture, politics and the perception of social order. Adopting José Casanova's concept of public religion, I would argue that religion had become public in early nineteenth-century Mexico, a country that had just changed from absolutist and for a short term constitutional monarchy to a republican regime (Casanova 1994). To equate the popular call for the preservation of religion with popular conservatism or even anti-modernism to my understanding should be questioned, and therefore, further research is necessary to better understand religion and the role it played in public life.

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