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THE LYNCHING OF THE IMPIOUS: *Violence, Politics, and Religion in Postrevolutionary Mexico (1930s–1950s)*

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the impact that religion had on the act of lynching and its legitimation in postrevolutionary Mexico. Basing its argument on the examination of several cases of lynching that took place after the religiously motivated Cristero War had ended, the article argues that the profanation of religious objects and precincts revered by Catholics, the propagation of conservative and reactionary ideologies among Catholic believers, and parish priests' implicit or explicit endorsement of belligerent forms of Catholic activism all contributed to the perpetuation of lynching from the 1930s through the 1950s. Taking together, these three factors point at the relationship between violence and the material, symbolic, and political dimensions of Catholics' religious experience in postrevolutionary Mexico. The fact that lynching continued well into the 1940s and 1950s, when Mexican authorities and the Catholic hierarchy reached a closer, even collaborative relationship, shows the modus vivendi between state and Church did not bring an end to religious violence in Mexico. This continuity in lynching also illuminates the centrality that popular – as opposed to official or institutional - strands of Catholicism had in construing the use of violence as a legitimate means to defend religious beliefs and symbols, and protect the social and political orders associated with Catholic religion at the local level. Victims of religiously motivated lynchings included blasphemous and anticlerical individuals, people that endorsed socialist and communist ideas, as well as people that professed Protestant beliefs and practices.

KEYWORDS: Lynching, religion, Mexico, Catholicism, anticlericalism

On the night of November 11, 1934, dozens of villagers lynched widow Micaela Ortega in the town of Acajete, in Puebla.[1] A 58-year-old woman, Micaela was known for her socialist ideas as well as for being a Spiritist healer. According to testimonies collected by inspector Fernando A. Rodríguez, villagers resented Micaela's politics and anticlericalism. She had threatened neighbors with turning the church into a library, and with burning the church's image of "Jesus the Father." She was also a close friend of Moisés

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1. Inspector Fernando A. Rodríguez, Informe dirigido al C. Jefe de la Sección III, Archivo General de la Nación [hereafter AGN], Departamento de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales [hereafter DGIPS], Caja 70, exp. 11.

Juárez, an *agrarista* peasant who had allegedly stolen the harvest that belonged to indigenous communal lands and whose house was set on fire just moments before Micaela's lynching.

The autopsy revealed conspicuous cruelty on the part of Micaela's perpetrators. Clothed in a white dress with red flowers, a necklace made of coral, and white underwear that was now torn and burned, her body showed clear signs of torture. Her face presented several bruises and cuts made close to her ears with knives and machetes, her thorax and gluteus had been burned with pieces of hot iron, and her left leg had been broken with clubs. Micaela's children, Rafael and Enedina Castillo, recounted the event. Just minutes before the lynching, they heard the town's church bells ringing, as well as people shouting "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" and "¡Muera el socialismo!" and "¡Muera la espiritista Doña Micaela!" Enedina, who was also assaulted that night, further stated that among those who participated in the lynching was mayor Pedro Loranca Rosas, an alleged Cristero who was sent to the Islas Marías prison after the incident.

Despite its overt cruelty, the lynching of Micaela Ortega was not an isolated event. From 1934 to 1938, approximately 100 socialist teachers were hanged, mutilated, and tortured, all in the context of the so-called Segunda Cristiada.[2] Perpetrators were armed groups of vigilantes and lynch mobs.[3] Violence against socialist teachers constituted a reaction to the anticlerical and pro-agrarian undertones of the government's official campaign to secularize and modernize the countryside through public schooling.[4] Parallel was an effort to drive out Protestants.[5] During the 1940s dozens of Protestants were expelled from their communities, had their homes and churches burned, and were either threatened or actually lynched by groups of Catholics throughout Mexico's central and southern states.[6] Furthermore, throughout the period from the

2. The Second Cristiada or "La Segunda" (c. 1934-38) is considered a sequel of the Cristero War (1926-29).

3. Attacks against maestros were most prominent in Puebla, Michoacán, Jalisco, Querétaro, Veracruz, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Morelos, and Chiapas.

4. Socialist education was an ambitious and multilayered national policy aimed at modernizing and integrating rural and indigenous communities through the promotion of a secular, rational, and productive model of citizenry. Because socialist teachers were meant to promote the agrarian reform and undermine the influence of the Catholic Church, their presence was seen as intrusive and threatening to communities' status quo. See Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997); David L. Raby, "Los maestros rurales y los conflictos sociales en México (1931–1940)," *Historia Mexicana* 18:2 (October-December 1968): 216–225; and Salvador Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle: El Tallarín and the Revival of Zapatismo in Morelos, 1934–1938," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46:3 (2014): 486–487.

5. For this article, I use the term "Protestant" to refer to all non-Catholic Christian denominations, including Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Lutherans, and Mormons.

6. These states included Puebla, Estado de México, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Guerrero, and Chiapas. See Deyssy Jael de la Luz García, "Ciudadanía, representación, y participación cívico-política de los evangélicos mexicanos," *Revista de El Colegio de San Luis* 24-25 (September 2006-April 2007): 9–46.

1930s to the 1950s rioters and lynch mobs attacked dozens of individuals who were accused of desecrating Catholic churches and religious symbols in several cities and towns, also in the southern and central states of Mexico.[7]

All of these expressions of violence took place after the religiously motivated Cristero War had formally ended.[8] Moreover, these forms of religious violence occurred in two phases, the 1930s and the 1940s and 1950s, each phase marking a distinct moment in the history of Church-state relationships. Whereas the 1930s were for the most part characterized by recurrent frictions between state and Church, the 1940s and 1950s were the height of the close, even collaborative, relationship that emerged between the upper ranks of the Catholic hierarchy and postrevolutionary government officials. The persistence of lynchings driven by religion across these periods shows that the modus vivendi reached between the state and the Church did not bring an end to religiously motivated forms of collective violence. Furthermore, it sheds light on the importance that popular strands of Catholicism had in legitimating these acts of violence.[9]

This article examines the impact that religion had on the organization and legitimation of lynching in postrevolutionary Mexico. Although the article centers on lynchings connected with religion, lynchings were certainly not circumscribed to religious motivations in postrevolutionary Mexico. Political conflicts, witchcraft accusations, and criminal transgressions such as robberies, homicides, and kidnappings were also provocations of mob violence. Furthermore, feelings of distrust towards state authorities – from federal teachers to tax collectors and police officers – were also a central driver of mob violence.[10] In this sense, lynchings constituted a form of popular justice that

7. Cases were reported in these states: Puebla, Michoacán, Estado de México, Veracruz, and Guanajuato, and in Mexico City.

8. The Cristero War was triggered by the anticlerical measures promoted by president Plutarco Elías Calles. The conflict involved violent confrontations among peasants with opposing views about the place religion should hold in the social, political, and economic organization of their communities. See Jean Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People between State and Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 92–110; and Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7–9.

9. I use the term "popular" to refer those religious practices and beliefs observed by lay members of the Catholic Church that were not necessarily sanctioned by the church's official hierarchy. Some examples include the devotion of saints not endorsed by the Catholic Church, syncretic practices such as healing with herbs or consumption of alcohol during religious festivals, and, of particular relevance for this study, the use of violence in the name of religion. I am aware that the divide between popular and official might lead to an understanding of religion as a two-tiered system that defines the first as superstitious and emotional and the latter as true and rational. My use of the terms "popular" versus "official" or "institutional," however, is meant to be descriptive rather than normative. For a critique of the two-tiered approach, see Paul Vanderwood, "Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* (Summer 2000)16:2, 411–421, doi: 10.2307/1052206; Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity*, 6–11. For a discussion of the porous relationship between popular and institutional forms of religion in Latin America, see John Lynch, *New Worlds: A Religious History of Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 172–174.

10. Clearly, lynchings are not an exclusively "Mexican" phenomenon, but in the Mexican context, during the postrevolutionary period as well as in the present, they are informed by a particular sense of distrust toward authorities'

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served to articulate feelings of discontent and anger toward conduct considered offensive or immoral.

The article is based on the examination of archival materials and several cases of lynching reported by the press. Newspaper accounts on lynchings were mostly sensationalistic and tended to contrast the "barbarity" of mobs to the "civilizing" forces of the modern and secular postrevolutionary state. Moreover, reports on mob violence driven by Catholic beliefs were usually portrayed as an expression of the fanaticism and ignorance of the perpetrators. This was the case with pro-government and mainstream newspapers such as *El Nacional*, *Excélsior,* and *El Universal*, as well as with newspapers centered on crime news, like *La Prensa*. To give credence to the feelings of frustration, anger, and distrust driving lynchings, it was necessary for me to both recognize these biases and go beyond them, as well as to read these and other sources against the rich secondary literature that exists on the subject of Catholic religion and Catholics' contentious relationship with the Mexican state.[11]

The article's main argument is that the profanation of religious objects and precincts revered by Catholics, the propagation of conservative and reactionary ideologies among Catholics, and parish priests' implicit or explicit endorsement of belligerent forms of Catholic activism all contributed to the perpetuation of lynching between the 1930s and the 1950s. These three factors, so the paper argues, need to be situated against both the backdrop of Mexico's contentious Church-state relationship and the material, symbolic, and political dimensions of Catholics' religious experience.

For the purpose of this article, I will define religion, particularly the Roman Catholic religion, as a set of practices, beliefs, and institutions that are connected to material and political concerns as well as spiritual ones.[12] In other

capacity or willingness to provide justice. See Alan Knight, "Habitus and Homicide: Political Culture in Revolutionary Mexico," in *Citizens of the Pyramid: Essays on Mexican Political Culture*, Wil G. Pansters, ed. (Amsterdam: Thela, 1997), 107–129; Pablo Piccato, *A History of Infamy: Crime, Truth, and Justice in Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); and Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, "Lynching and the Politics of State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Puebla (1930s–50s)," *Journal of Latin American Studies* (February 13, 2019): 1-26, doi:10.1017/S0022216X18001104

11. For a discussion of the politics and logics of representation informing the press's accounts of violence and crime during this period, see Piccato, *A History of Infamy*; and Paul Gillingham, Michael Lettieri, and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Journalism, Satire, and Censorship in Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019).

12. There are two main reasons for my focus on Catholic religion in this article. First, the evidence I collected suggests that Catholic groups and individuals, by and large, were the main perpetrators of religious violence in postrevolutionary Mexico. Second, Catholic religion had and continues to have a predominant presence in Mexico. During the period from the 1930s through the 1950s, 98 percent of Mexicans identified as Catholics. See Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI), *La diversidad religiosa en México. XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda 2000* (Aguascalientes: INEGI, 2005), 3–5.

words, I will understand religion as a field that involves both otherworldly and mundane questions.[13] The spiritual realm includes belief in the holy and transcendental and the observation of religious rites, as well as the reverence of images associated with the sacred. Conversely, the realm of the material and political involves the power and influence of priests within given communities, the intricate connections between priests and public officials (particularly mayors), and the relationship between lay members of the Catholic Church and the interests of economic and political elites at the local level.

An understanding of religion that accounts for both the spiritual and material dimensions of the religious experience is particularly pertinent for the period under study. The Cristero War had revealed the contentious character of the secular and anticlerical undercurrents of the postrevolutionary project. It had furthermore revealed the deep influence that Catholicism had on the social and political makeup of communities throughout Mexico, as well as the extent to which attacks on religion could result in political mobilization, organized dissent, and even armed resistance. The decades that followed the Cristero War would only further illuminate how deeply the Catholic religion was embedded in the sociopolitical structure of communities.[14]

In addition to the material and symbolic dimensions of religion, it is important to recognize the fault lines between popular and institutional strands of Catholicism, as well as between different members of the clergy. Multiple divisions cut across Mexico's Catholic Church, including different approaches to the ways in which the Church ought to relate to both the state and to those elements that opposed the influence of Catholicism.[15] These divisions involved bitter disagreements between the clergy and lay groups and organizations, as well as significant frictions among members of the Catholic hierarchy itself, including prelates and diocesan priests. The 1929 accords that put an end to the Cristero

13. This understanding of religion builds on the works of sociologists Émile Durkheim and Pierre Bourdieu. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim defines religion as a set of practices, beliefs, and rituals that concern the realm of the sacred. In his words: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them." Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46. For Bourdieu, the religious field concerns the formation of a relatively autonomous sphere "characterized by the production, reproduction, and diffusion of religious goods." In Bourdieu's view, this field is not entirely separated from the realm of the political but rather has a tendency to support an "essentially conservative" worldview. See Erwan Dianteill, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Religion: A Central and Peripheral Concern," *Theory and Society* 32 (2003): 537; and Pierre Bourdieu, "Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field," *Sociological Theory* 12:1 (1994): 1–18.

14. The notion of community is used to refer to both urban neighborhoods and rural localities, wherein personal and face-to-face interactions occur with relative regularity. Far from being homogeneous entities, communities are internally fragmented along divisions motivated by religious affiliation, political ideologies, and levels of wealth. As a communal or collectively sanctioned form of violence, lynching can thus be seen as an instrument by which the boundaries of a given community are both imagined and enforced.

15. Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

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War were themselves a source of discord among the clergy. Radical members of the clergy and the laity felt betrayed by the episcopate's willingness to negotiate with authorities who had consistently attacked their faith and disrespected their worldviews. Divisions within the Catholic Church would become even more evident during the following decades, as the higher ranks of the Church decided to distance themselves—at least officially—from the actions of those who opted to take up arms or use violent means in the name of religion.[16]

As the examples I present in this article show, and in clear contrast to the Church's official position, lay Catholics did endorse the use of violence, including lynching, as a means to defend the moral and material integrity of their communities. Moreover, parish priests would play a relevant role in legitimating lynching through their actions and omissions, particularly so in light of the spiritual and moral weight they had within communal life. That is not to say that the higher ranks of the Church were entirely opposed to the violence that was being waged in the name of religion. Despite condemning the use of violence, bishops' use of belligerent and intransigent language, as when referring to the threat posed by socialism and Protestantism, did little to stop the violence against so-called infidels. Instead, it provided ideological grounds for its legitimation.[17] The influence of their words and opinions was, however, ultimately mediated by the role of local priests, as well as by lay men and women who appropriated and deployed the Church's official position to justify their actions.

Rather than arguing for a cause-and-effect relationship between lynching and religion, I am interested in understanding the ways in which the religious experience

16. The Catholic Church's position regarding the use of violence is nuanced and historically contingent and does not always involve an outright rejection of force. From a theological point of view, the principle of "just war" has served to justify violence, either to defend religion or to spread the "true faith" via intimidation and terror (such as during the Spanish missionary wars). In Mexico's postrevolutionary period specifically, the government's attack on religion and on what the Church regarded as Catholics' "natural rights" to educate their children and to own private property contributed to legitimating religious violence. Still, the Catholic Church hierarchy became more critical of armed forms of resistance during the Second Cristiada than it had been during the Cristero War. This shift was probably based on lessons learned, including the difficulty of controlling the actions of vigilantes and other violent entrepreneurs. On the relationship between violence and religion from a philosophical and theological point of view, see Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000); William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*: *Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: W. W.Norton, 1979); and David M. Lantigua, "The Freedom of the Gospel: Aquinas, Subversive Natural Law, and the Spanish Wars of Religion," *Modern Theology* 31:2 (April 2005): 312–337. On religion and violence in Mexico, see Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation,* 25–27; Blancarte, *Historia de la iglesia católica en México,* 33; Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos:* la Acción Católica Mexicana y La Unión Nacional De Estudiantes Católicos, 1929-1958 (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008), 90; Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity*; and Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle," 474.

17. For instance, in his pastoral letter published on April 12, 1936, archbishop José Garibi Rivera condemned socialist education as a source of immorality and danger, to be resisted by faithful Catholics. Even more belligerent was the 1944 pastoral letter written by Luis María Martínez, then archbishop of Mexico, in which he openly called upon Catholics to fight the foreign and pervasive influence of Protestantism.

contributed to shaping both the legitimacy and the occurrence of lynching. To do so, I look at several interrelated dynamics that characterized the exercise of Catholic religion in postrevolutionary Mexico. The first refers to the importance that religious images, artifacts, and spaces had for Catholics' spiritual and ritualistic experience of religion, both at the individual and community level.[18] Bestowed as they were with sacred meaning, the defense of these religious symbols by laymen and clergy alike would acquire a particularly belligerent character during the period under study, when representatives of the government and anticlerical groups sponsored by postrevolutionary politicos openly engaged in acts of iconoclasm.

The second dynamic has to do with the Catholic Church's promotion, carried out by both official and folk members, of a conservative and reactionary ideology that rejected the influence of religious creeds and progressive ideologies considered foreign and threatening to the stability and internal cohesion of the community and the nation. This ideology would provide the basis for rationalizing the lynching of communists, socialist, and Protestants, as a means to defend both the community and the motherland against strange and dangerous elements.

The third dynamic of the religious experience in relation to lynching is the role that parish priests had in the spiritual, social, and political makeup of communities. Local priests blessed the newborn and officiated at death, organized the town festivals, formed alliances with the economic and political elites, and delineated the moral contours of the community by establishing what were considered acceptable or unacceptable forms of behavior. As such, their actions and omissions were central in shaping Catholics' predispositions toward violence.

I will develop my argument in three sections, each of which will focus primarily on one of the three different manifestations of religious violence mentioned earlier: the lynching of impious individuals accused of desecrating religious images or spaces, collective attacks against socialist teachers, and assaults on Protestants by lynch mobs and rioters. The cases discussed in each section will be presented, to the extent possible, in chronological order.

A War of Symbols to Justify the Lynching of the Blasphemous

On June 16, 1931, a group of worshippers lynched León J. Musthe outside a small church located in the town of Santa Ana Maya, in Michoacán. Musthe, a

18. For folk Catholicism in particular, the veneration of religious images, including those of patron saints, is a central aspect of religious rites as well as community celebrations and festivals.

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Dutch national who was initially described by the press as either Russian or German, had ignited the sentiments of churchgoers when he started shouting offenses against Catholic religion and in defense of Communism.[19] The worshippers who were praying inside the church asked Musthe to stop his anti-religious diatribe. The town's priest, Agustín Parra, joined his congregation and reprimanded the man for his provocative actions. Instead of discontinuing his incendiary speech, Musthe threatened the priest with what appeared to be a gun. In that moment, a crowd of worshippers, including a group of young devoted women, surrounded Musthe and started to beat him.

The man died in the hands of the lynch mob before the police could intervene. The priest Parra, together with four young Catholic women, were taken to the Morelia penitentiary, where they were to remain while an investigation established who had been responsible for the lynching. Interviewed by the press, the priest stated that he had been taken inside the church by a group of churchgoers who were trying to defend him against Musthe and that he was "absolutely unaware" of what his flock had done afterward.

The lynching of Musthe in Michoacán, home state of Lázaro Cárdenas and one of the hotbeds of the Cristero War, illustrates the violent reactions that blasphemous individuals and their deeds could precipitate among Catholic devotees.[20] Although press accounts might make these and other incidents seem sudden and irrational, an analysis of several cases that took place under similar circumstances in postrevolutionary Mexico allows us to situate their occurrence in a context characterized by revolutionary anticlericalism and by Catholics' fierce defense of their religious beliefs and practices.

Anticlericalism was a key aspect of nineteenth-century liberalism and its efforts to modernize society.[21] Although it receded temporarily under Porfirio Diaz's rule (1884–1911), it returned in full and with greater atheistic undertones during the postrevolutionary years. Anticlericalism provided a means to undermine the

19. A number of newspapers, including the government's mouthpiece *El Nacional* and the *New York Times* reported the incident. "Cura de Santa Ana Maya, Michoacán, y cuatro señoritas están en la penitenciaria de Morelia," *El Porvenir,* June 18, 1931; "Crímenes de la intolerancia religiosa," *El Nacional*, July 5, 1931; "Alemán linchado," *La Prensa,* June 17, 1931; "Era holandés el comunista que fue linchado," *La Prensa*, June 18, 1931; "German Red Reported Lynched in Mexico," *New York Times*, June 17, 1931.

20. It is important to recall here that there were important local variations within the state of Michoacán in terms of levels of religious devotion and clericalism. Whereas towns located in the Bajío (such as Santa Ana Maya where the lynching of Musthe took place) were more prone to religious militancy and strong forms of clericalism, those located in Tierra Caliente tended to be more secular. See Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity,* 106–107; and Roderic A. Camp, *Cruce de espadas. Política y religión en México* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1998), 275–278.

21. Liberal anticlericalism was not necessarily informed by anti-religious sentiments. As argued by Pamela Voekel, many Mexican liberal thinkers were actually religious men who believed that religion itself should be be "enlightened," that, is, based on reason and individual self-restraint as opposed to fanaticism or corporate prerogatives. Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 9–10, 155–160.

influence exercised by the Catholic Church and created the conditions for establishing a new "civil religion" based on reason, individual autonomy, and socialist values.[22] Moreover, some political elites adopted iconoclastic action as part of their mission to de-fanaticize. Iconoclasm was common among military commanders during the Mexican Revolution and iconoclastic acts continued to be performed during the 1920s and 1930s. By burning and destroying religious symbols and desecrating churches, postrevolutionary politicos sought not only to assault the political and economic power of religion, but also to "strike at the heart of religion's symbolic structure."[23]

The enduring authority of the Catholic Church and the strong presence of popular religiosity in rural and urban communities alike meant that these policies faced substantial opposition and resistance. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and with less frequency during the 1950s, rumors and accusations regarding the potential expulsion of priests, the closing of churches, and the robbery or destruction of religious images prompted riots, lynchings, and other forms of collective violence in different localities of central Mexico.

Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency (1934-40) promoted a more conciliatory approach to the religious question. Yet, the persistence of anticlericalism at the regional level, together with Catholics' past encounters with revolutionary Jacobins, continued to contribute to the perpetuation of religiously motivated violence.[24] This is not to suggest that all of those who engaged in blasphemous or iconoclastic forms of behavior were Jacobins or anticlerical ideologues. People accused of stealing religious images, in particular, acted more like small-time thieves than anticlerical revolutionaries, yet their doings were equally offensive to the religious crowd. For instance, in contrast to Musthe, whose verbal attacks on religion were informed by communism, the motivations of Fructosa Concha, a man who stole several religious images from a church in Tlaxcala

22. Matthew Butler, "Sotanas Rojinegras: Catholic Anticlericalism and Mexico's Revolutionary Schism," *The Americas* 65:4 (April 2009): 535–558.

23. Adrian Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 12. See also José Alberto Moreno Chávez, "Quemando santos para iluminar conciencias. Desfanatización y resistencia al proyecto cultural garridista, 1924–1935," *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* 42 (July-December 2011): 41; Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire. Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 129; Ben Fallaw, "Varieties of Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Anticlericalism, Radicalism, Iconoclasm, and Otherwise, 1914–1935," *The Americas* 65:4 (April 2009): 485–486; Alan Knight, "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910–1940," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 74:3 (August 1994): 393–444.

24. An important precedent for understanding the defensive and belligerent position of the Catholic Church during this period is the Mexican Catholic schism of 1925 and the particular variant of anticlericalism it unleashed. Promoted by Catholic revolutionaries and Roman liberal clergy, the Mexican Catholic Apostolic Church (ICAM) was founded in order to fight the corruption and vices of Roman Catholicism and to develop instead an autonomous, nationalist, and revolutionary Mexican Catholicism. On this, see Butler, "Sotanas Rojinegras: Catholic Anticlericalism and Mexico's Revolutionary Schism."

were economic in nature.[25] Concha stole religious images made of gold and precious stones in April 1933 and was taken to prison after confessing to his crimes. Considering the punishment insufficient to meet his wrongdoing, a mob broke into the penitentiary a month later, dragged Concha out of the building, and lynched him. His corpse was left hanging from a tree in the middle of the town plaza.

The lynching of Fructosa Concha demonstrates that sacrilegious robberies, even when not overtly political in intent, could provoke the inflamed reaction of Catholic mobs. The story of Jacinto B. Saldaña, a man accused of trying to steal a religious image from the temple of San Miguel Nonoalco, in Mexico City, resembles that of Concha.[26] In this case, however, the victim turned out to be innocent. After spending an unusually long time inside of the church, Saldaña became the object of a rumor that claimed he was there to commit a robbery. Although they had no evidence to confirm that this was the case, a group of worshippers dragged Saldaña out of the church with the intention of lynching him. Later on, they decided to throw him into a nearby river, from where he was rescued by a Red Cross ambulance.

As suggested by this and other cases, the circulation of rumors regarding alleged assaults on religious images, spaces, and authorities played a key role in the precipitation of lynchings. According to social scientist James Scott, rumors thrive most in moments in which people experience situations of distress in the face of events that impact their vital interests.[27] In the case of Saldaña, the rumor precipitating his lynching was based on the fact that people had indeed stolen objects from the church many times before. A more basic source of anxiety, however, had to do with the continuing assault on religious symbols that Catholics experienced during this period.

This context, together with the centrality that religious images and spaces had for Catholics' experience of the sacred, contributed to the willingness to believe in the veracity of these rumors, as well as to the belligerent reactions that ensued. For instance, in May 1936, a riot took place in the temple of San Miguel Nonoalco, the same church wherein Saldaña was nearly lynched.[28] This time, rioters surrounded the church after learning by word of mouth that the

25. "El linchamiento ocurrido en Tetla," *El Nacional*, May 17, 1933; *Periódico Oficial del Estado de Tlaxcala,* September 10, 1933.

26. "Iban a linchar a un supuesto rata sacrílego," *La Prensa,* October 18, 1930.

27. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 144–145.

28. "Una falsa versión originó un tumulto al ser sacadas las imágenes de un templo," *Excélsior,* May 7, 1936. A similar case was reported the previous year, also in Mexico City. See "Dos detenidos en la iglesia de Santa María," *Excélsior*, November 13, 1935.

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government was planning on removing the church's religious images in order to burn them. The crowd threatened public official Alfaro Vázquez, who had been commissioned to take the images. Vázquez tried in vain to calm the crowd by explaining that the images were indeed being removed—not to be burned as Catholics feared, but rather to be taken to the Museum of Religious Arts where they would be preserved and exhibited. The police had to intervene to disband the rioters.

Despite references in the press to some of these incidents as expressions of ignorance or "religious fanaticism," assaults on religious symbols were indeed part of a systematic campaign that sought to create a new model of citizenry, freed from the "backward" influence of Catholic religion.[29] Although not all postrevolutionary politicos embraced iconoclasm, the visibility and impact of those who did support it made iconoclasm a salient feature of the postrevolutionary period.

Among those revolutionaries who did embrace iconoclasm, and this with a particular ferocity, was Tabasco governor and strongman Tomás Garrido Canabal (1919-34). Convinced of the need to create a new society based on reason and science, Garrido Canabal promoted an aggressive strand of anticlericalism that involved the systematic use of iconoclasm as a means to "educate" and "de-fanaticize" people. Central to his de-fanaticization efforts was the formation of Bloques Juveniles Revolucionarios, also known as Camisas Rojas (Red Shirts). Comprised of young male and female anticlericals, the Red Shirts orchestrated acts of provocation and religious defilement, including the destruction and burning of religious images and statues. When Garrido Canabal was appointed minister of agriculture during the first year of Cárdenas' presidency, the Red Shirts started a campaign aimed at bringing Tabasco's "exemplary model" of anticlericalism to the capital, and eventually to the whole country.[30] It was in the context of this campaign to step up the presence of anticlericalism that the riot in Coyoacán and the ensuing lynching of Ernesto Malda took place.

On the morning of Sunday, December 30, 1934, about 60 Red Shirts gathered in front of the San Juan Bautista church in the Coyoacán neighborhood of Mexico City.[31] The young radicals had arrived from Tabasco a few weeks before and

29. Adrian Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico: The De-Christianization Campaigns, 1929–1940," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13:1 (Winter 1997): 87–120.

30. Alan M. Kishner, "Tomas Garrido Canabal and the Mexican Red Shirt Movement," (PhD diss.: New York University, 1970), 102.

31. "Zafarrancho en la Villa de Coyoacán," *El Nacional*, December 31, 1934; "Responsables de crímenes en Coyoacán," *El Porvenir*, January 4, 1935; "Mexico Holds 40 for Killing of Five at Church," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 4, 1935; "War on Red Shirts in Mexico Follows Catholic Slayings," *Washington Post*, January 2, 1935;

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had been organizing anti-religious demonstrations, every Sunday. That Sunday was no different. While worshippers listened to their morning mass, the Red Shirts gathered outside the church, planted a red and black flag in the churchyard, and started their vociferous attack on religion. Official newspapers reported that the worshippers confronted the Red Shirts as they came out of the mass, incited by the priest and enraged by the inflammatory speech of the young iconoclasts.[32] Regardless of who started the clash, the fact that five Catholics, one woman and four men, were shot and killed by the Red Shirts makes clear that the young radicals were certainly no mere passive agents in the event that unfolded.

Following the death of the five Catholics, tensions escalated further. The young instigators rushed to the Coyoacán delegation, just across from the church, while a large group of Catholics rioted outside the building and demanded that authorities arrest the Red Shirts. Ernesto Malda arrived at the scene in the midst of this mayhem. A young man in his early twenties, Malda had joined the Red Shirts, together with a number of Mexico City residents who were persuaded by the organization's mission.[33] Arriving late at the Red Shirts' gathering, he was immediately spotted by the infuriated crowd, as he was wearing the typical uniform of the group, red shirts and black pants. After being dragged by the mob in the direction of the church, Malda was beaten to death with fists, knives, and stones. The police arrested 62 Red Shirts in connection with the killing of the five Catholics, while three men were held in connection to the lynching of Malda.[34]

The lynching of Malda drew the condemnation of official newspapers and government supporters. A representative article published by the government mouthpiece *El Nacional* on January 3, 1935, explained the lynching of Malda as part of a systematic campaign promoted by the highest ranks of the Catholic Church to "oppose in a violent way the implementation of socialist education, the economic liberation of the worker, and the defanatization of the masses."[35] A related article reinforced the notion that the clergy was responsible for a systematic campaign against the government, which included the tactical use of lynching on behalf of the "ignorant multitude," and against the socialist and collectivist ideas promoted by the state.[36]

"Churchgoers Shot In Clash With Reds at Mexico Suburb," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 31, 1934; "62 Reds Are Held in Mexican Killing," *New York Times,* January 1, 1935.

32. "Zafarrancho en la Villa de Coyoacán," *El Nacional,* December 31, 1934.
33. Kirshner, "Tomas Garrido Canabal and the Mexican Red Shirt Movement," 105.
34. "62 Reds Are Held in Mexican Killing," *New York Times,* January 1, 1935.
35. "Sistemática violencia," *El Nacional*, January 3, 1935.
36. "El linchamiento, táctica de lucha de los fanáticos," *El Nacional*, January 7, 1935.

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These and other newspaper articles framed the lynchings as both expressions of the backwardness and religious fanaticism of people and outcomes of a master plan orchestrated by the higher ranks of the clergy. The true influence of the clergy in the organization of lynching was, however, more nuanced and was certainly not part of a top-down strategy carefully crafted by the higher ranks of the Catholic Church. Although the antagonistic position promoted by bishops provided an important basis for legitimating the use of violence in the name of religion, the influence of the Church was most clearly manifested in the behavior of local priests who, through their discourse and actions, ignited the sentiments of churchgoers. More so, the influence of the clergy in the legitimation of lynching was mediated by ordinary members of the Catholic Church, whose popular reinterpretations of Catholic beliefs sanctioned the rightfulness of violence as a means to defend religion.

The lynching of Micaela Ortega in November 1934, narrated at the start of this article, illuminates the complexities of the clergy's influence in the organization of mob violence. The lynching prompted an investigation by the federal government to determine the degree to which local priest Federico Osorio y Corona bore responsibility for the killing of Micaela.[37] According to neighbors interviewed by federal inspector Fernando A. Rodríguez, the priest had warned his flock about the laws promoted by the government and about the possibility of the church being closed down as a result of those laws. The priest had also made reference to Micaela's political inclinations and had repeatedly told churchgoers that if they were not happy with him he would leave the town.

Despite these facts, the inspector did not believe the priest was responsible for the lynching of Micaela. This is remarkable, considering that the inspector was a government official who had explicitly been asked to investigate the potential responsibility of the priest in the lynching. Instead, the inspector echoed the opinion of most villagers, including family members of the deceased, who identified Moisés Juárez as the person who had stirred the sentiments of villagers. As stated in the opening paragraphs, Moisés was an *agrarista* who had allegedly stolen the harvest of communal lands and was a close friend of Micaela. The day of Micaela's lynching, Moisés had called a group of villagers "*indios cristeros*" and, in the company of two soldiers, had threatened them with closing down the church. The villagers, who already resented Moisés, decided to punish him for these offenses and walked to his house with the intention of lynching him. When they did not find Moisés, they set his house on fire. While some villagers watched Moisés' house burning, others started to walk toward

37. Inspector Fernando A. Rodríguez, informe dirigido al C. Jefe de la Sección III, AGN, DGIPS, Caja 70, exp. 11.

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Micaela's home. So it was her close relationship with a loathed agrarista such as Moisés, and the fact that she had also threatened villagers with closing down the church and even with burning the image of Jesus the Father, that made Micaela a target of the religious crowd.

As this account of the event suggests, the influence of the priest alone cannot explain the lynching of Micaela. Villagers' defense of religious symbols as well as intra-community conflicts over land and resources were also crucial in the precipitation of the lynching. More so, even if the priest's opinions about Micaela's socialist ideas or the government's anticlerical policies influenced the temper of the crowd, we cannot rule out the genuinely affective experience of distress and anger that threats against religion provoked among Catholics. Catholics experienced religion through their participation in community festivals, rituals, and the veneration of religious images, including local patron saints. In this sense, Catholicism was intimately linked to communities' identity and shared values. In defending their religious symbols and traditions thus, Catholics were not simply defending a set of abstract or universal dogmas—they were defending the moral and religious integrity of their communities.

To acknowledge that the influence of the clergy in the organization of lynchings was more nuanced does not mean, however, that such influence was not relevant. Parish priests, in particular, were considered a central source of local authority and their presence was regarded as an essential component of the spiritual well-being of communities. They acted as a moral compass that contributed to delineating the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, norms, and ideologies. Their religious authority, particularly in small towns, often blended with political influence as priests developed close relationships with landed elites and civil authorities.[38] Aware of the weight that priests had at the local level, teachers, workers, and agrarista peasants complained, time and again, about the priests' ability to agitate worshippers. The next section will consider these factors in the context of the explosive responses that socialist education encountered in several communities of Mexico.

IN THE NAME OF CHRIST: THE LYNCHING OF SOCIALIST TEACHERS

In July 1934, the *jefe máximo* Plutarco Elías Calles announced the beginning of a new era of the revolution, one in which revolutionary ideas would enter the consciousness of children and youth in order to fight the detrimental

38. Knight, "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State," 416.

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influence of conservative and clerical elements.[39] The main battlefield for this new front of radical transformation would be education. Within months of this announcement, Article 3 of the Mexican constitution was amended, establishing public education as a socialist endeavor and defining its core mission: to "fight fanaticism and prejudices."[40]

To the Catholic Church, the dangers presented by this new model of education were evident. The socialist education envisioned by the state was informed by an overt anticlerical and anti-religious ideology, and it threatened two of the Church's most valued natural rights: the right of parents to provide a religious education to their children and the right to private property.[41] Entrusted to rural teachers, the promotion of agrarian reform directly challenged the right to private property enshrined by Catholics.[42] More so, the agrarian reform altered communities' status quo and antagonized peasants, landlords, and priests who regarded this reform as an unwelcome intrusion on behalf of the federal state.

Equally problematic in the eyes of Catholics was the role that socialist teachers played in the de-fanatization campaigns promoted by the government. Teachers denounced the "seditious" activities of priests, petitioned for their removal or expulsion, contributed to the closing of churches, and organized patriotic festivals and cultural activities that were meant to eclipse religious celebrations.[43] Although teachers did not homogenously embrace radical forms of anticlericalism, and many actually preferred to avoid an all-out confrontation with the Church, their image as official representatives of an anticlerical state, together with the iconoclastic actions of a few Jacobin teachers, made them vulnerable to the hostility of Catholic mobs. Furthermore, teachers' promotion of co-education and sexual instruction triggered moral anxieties among Catholic parents, who in turn accused male and female teachers of trying to pervert their children.[44]

Acts of iconoclasm left a particularly deep impression among Catholics who witnessed teachers and their young pupils destroy crosses, set images of the

39. Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia Católica en México 1929–1982* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Colegio Mexiquense, 1992), 32; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution,* 34–35.

40. *Diario Oficial*, December 13, 1934, quoted in David L. Raby and Martha Donís, "Ideología y construcción del Estado: la función política de la educación rural en México: 1921–1935," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 51:2 (April-June 1989): 318.

41. Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation*, 19.

42. Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle," 487.

43. Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico," 112; Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*.

44. Mary Kay Vughan refers to rumors circulating among parents about teachers asking children to undress in front of one another as part of their "sex education" lessons. See Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution,* 33–34, 90, 122; and Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 101–102.

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Virgin on fire, mutilate images of patron saints, and vandalize churches.[45] In San Juan de Gracia, Michoacán, for instance, the *maestro rural* used the church as a kitchen, a toilet, and even a chicken coop. Ildefonso Vega, in charge of the parish, reported that the church was vandalized, with damages including "two Virgins without heads, a Christ without head, a Sacred Heart without a head, and the body of the local patron saint, San José, with only his feet [left in place]."[46] He added that these abuses could "result in great disorders," given the discontent they generated among villagers. Indeed, in some cases, these impious acts did carry great consequences. In a small town in the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the northwestern state of Durango, two teachers who asked their students to deny the existence of God and to make other heretical pronouncements in the classroom were found dead in the town's main plaza.[47] The female teacher asked students to greet her by saying "There is no God," while the male teacher told students that he "urinated on God." Sometime later, the woman was found naked, raped, and with her breasts mutilated.[48] The male teacher was found castrated, with the urinary meatus cut. On his body, the perpetrators left a note that, in poor spelling, said, "So you do not go around peeing on God."

The maiming of socialist teachers as a means to retaliate for their assault on Catholic symbols and practices deserves attention. Catholic mobs and groups of vigilantes responded to teachers' defilement of religious symbols and practices not only by threatening them with violence or by physically assaulting them, but also by mutilating and marking their bodies. On November 15, 1935, for instance, three teachers were killed in different towns of the municipality of Teziutlán, in the Sierra Norte of Puebla by a group of vigilantes under the command of Clemente Mendoza.[49] One of the teachers, Carlos Pastrana, had

45. Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*; Fallaw, "Varieties of Mexican Anticlericalism;"

46. Trámite queja del C. Ildefonso Vega, April 9, 1938, AGN, Dirección General de Gobierno, Caja 56, exp. 13, fol.1.

47. Simón Villanueva Villanueva, "El maestro rural en la educación," in Secretaria de Educación Pública, *Los maestros y la cultura nacional, Serie Testimonios 1920–1952,* vol. 1, Norte (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares/SEP, 1987), 185. The same case is narrated by Bantjes in "Idolatry and Iconoclasm," 116.

48. There is a gendered dimension to this and other acts of violence perpetrated against female teachers. Female teachers were subjected to sexual forms of violence, most commonly rape, by armed groups of vigilantes who opposed the socialist education program. Although I cannot provide here a closer examination of this specific form of violence, extant literature suggests that the rape of female teachers signaled perpetrators' intention to punish these women *qua* women, that is, as women who had transgressed prevalent notions of domesticity and sexual submissiveness. See for instance Mary Kay Vaughan, "Women School Teachers in the Mexican Revolution: The Story of Reyna's Braids," *Journal of Women's History* 2:1 (1990): 153; and Oresta López, "Women Teachers of Postrevolutionary Mexico: Feminization and Everyday Resistance," *Paedagogica Historica* 49:1 (2013): 56–69. For a discussion of the values of femininity, domesticity, and motherhood, which were defended but also challenged by Catholic activists and militants, see Sister Barbara Miller, "The Role of Women in the Mexican Cristero Rebellion: Las Señoras y Las Religiosas," *The* Americas 74:1 (2017): 303–323; and Omayda Naranjo Tamayo, "Pensativa de Jesús Goytortúa Santos: imagen y representación de la mujer mexicana en la novela de tema cristero," *Relaciones* 123:31 (2010): 59–83.

49. Clemente Mendoza was a well-known vigilante leader, a veteran of the Cristero Rebellion who also participated in the Second Cristiada. He was particularly active in Puebla and Veracruz.

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his head practically dismembered with a machete blow. The other two, Carlos Sayago and Librado Labastida, were shot and their bodies left outside of the school where they had imparted socialist education. Days later, a group of armed men assailed two sisters, Micaela and Enriqueta Palacios, for imparting socialist education in San Martín Hidalgo, Jalisco. The group cut the teachers' ears and also assaulted their father, who was with them at the moment of the attack.[50] The same month, another female teacher was mutilated using machetes, this time in Jalacingo, Veracruz.[51] In April 1936, in Tlapacoyan, also in Veracruz, around 70 armed men carrying a flag with the motto "Viva Cristo Rey" burned teacher Carlos Toledano alive and cut the ears of teacher Pablo Jiménez.[52]

The mutilation of ears was salient among the forms of violence used against teachers, as were hangings and, to a lesser extent, burnings. One of the most famous vigilantes who participated in the Segunda Cristiada, Odilón Vega, was even known as "*el desorejador de maestros*" (something like the teachers' ear cropper), in clear reference to this form of violence. The maiming of opponents, including cutting off their ears, was common during the Mexican Revolution, and it is thus probable that the use of this technique of torture against teachers made direct reference to this experience.[53] At a more symbolic level, the cutting off of ears can be interpreted as a way to denounce the government's deafness toward those who opposed socialist education, or as a means of marking the teachers' bodies to send a message to a broader audience. For instance, a picture of sisters Micaela and Enriqueta Palacios wearing heavy bandages around their heads, published in the newspaper *Excélsior*, sent a clear message regarding the potential costs of imparting socialist education.[54]

Although the cutting off of ears was more closely linked to groups of vigilantes than to lynch mobs, the lynchings of teachers also involved the use of torture, as well as the exposure of teachers' corpses in public spaces. In March 1935, for instance, 19-year-old teacher David Moreno Herrera was lynched in Aguascalientes. After forcing him out of his house, the lynch mob proceeded to torture him and then hanged him from a tree.[55] A few months later, a

50. "Maestros socialistas sin orejas. Se las cortó un núcleo de gente alzada" *Excélsior*, November 19, 1935; "Fue horriblemente mutilada una Srita. Profesora," *El Universal*, November 19th, 1935.

51. "Otra maestra que ha sido asesinada," *Excélsior,* November 23, 1935.

52. "Fue quemado maestro rural y otro más fue vilmente mutilado," *Excélsior*, April 21, 1936.

53. For example, the prominent *segundero* Enrique Rodríguez, alias El Tallarín, was a former Zapatista militant and had thus probably been exposed to this form of violence. For more on El Tallarín, see Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle."

54. The picture was taken when the two teachers visited Mexico City in order to demand justice and protection from president Lázaro Cárdenas. "Llegan las maestras a quienes les cortaron los alzados las orejas" *Excélsior,* November 24, 1935.

55. "Mexicans Hang Teacher," *New York Times*, March 27, 1935.

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teacher was tortured and tied to a rock in the municipality of Zacatlán; the perpetrators had also hanged the mayor and the president of the agricultural commission in protest against socialist education.[56] And, in Tlaltenango, Zacatecas, teachers Saúl Maldonado and Guillermo Suro were hanged from a tree after being brutally attacked and forced to pray by their assailants.[57]

As implied by these cases, teachers were victimized by both armed groups of vigilantes and more spontaneous lynch mobs. Reflecting on this dynamic, historian Ben Fallaw has suggested that attacks against the maestros could be categorized as offensive and defensive attacks, with the former consisting of well-planned attacks perpetrated by vigilantes who were sponsored by landowners, and the second involving more impulsive communal reactions to teachers' anticlericalism.[58] However, particularly in those cases where the violence perpetrated by vigilantes reflected the sentiments of villagers, the line between "top-down" and "bottom-up" attacks is not easily drawn.[59] The following examples will further explore the blurred lines between vigilante killings and the lynch mob.

On March 2, 1938, newspapers reported that a group of vigilantes under the command of Enrique Rodríguez, alias "El Tallarín," had assassinated teacher José Ramírez Martínez and two local officials in the municipality of Tochimilco, in Puebla.[60] Maximino Ávila Camacho, then governor of Puebla, sent a letter to the Minister of the Interior explaining that an investigation conducted by local authorities had established that El Tallarín had indeed provoked the attack.[61] He further explained that, contrary to rumors, villagers had not participated in the killing of the maestro; indeed, they had consistently demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with federal authorities. However, a letter addressed to the president on behalf of the local teachers' union provided an alternative explanation.[62] In that letter, Jesús A. Ceja explained that although El Tallarín had allegedly shot the teacher and then demanded villagers

56. "Mayor Hanged in Mexico," *New York Times*, June 2, 1935.

57. Secretaría de Educación Pública, *El Maestro Rural* 6:4 (February 15, 1935), quoted in David L. Raby, *Educación y revolución social en México* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1974), 159–160.

58. Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation,* 120.

59. There are certainly offensive forms of vigilantism that can hardly been seen as bottom-up or popular. The infamous *guardias blancas*, for instance, were usually hired by local landowners to intimidate and directly attack agrarista peasants. See Alan Knight, "War, Violence and Homicide in Modern Mexico," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 32:1 (March 2013): 40–41.

60. "Otros asesinatos de la banda que manda el criminal Tallarin cometidos anteayer," *La Opinión*, March 2,1938.

61. Informando sobre el atentado en que perdieron la vida el professor rural federal y los regidores del Ayto. de Tochimilco, letter to the Minister of the Interior signed by Gov. Maximino Ávila Camacho, AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública, Serie Asesinatos, Caja 55, 2/012.2 (18), exp. 28.

62. Se protesta enérgicamente por el asesinato del compañero Prof. José Ramírez Martínez, Maestro del Estado de Puebla, letter to the president signed by Jesus Ceja, AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública, Serie Asesinatos, Caja 55, 2/012.2 (18), exp. 30.

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hang his corpse from a tree only after he had died, the autopsy revealed the victim had died from asphyxia and not from gunshot wounds. This, together with villagers' contradictory accounts of the events, made Ceja conclude that villagers had played a more active and complicit role in the teacher's killing than they would say. In other words, Ceja hinted that it was probably villagers themselves who had hanged Ramírez Martínez, of their own will.

The popular support that vigilantes enjoyed within certain communities further complicates the distinction between the motivations and actions of vigilantes and lynch mobs. The case of the three teachers that were assassinated in Teziutlán, Puebla in November 1935 exemplifies this. As already stated, the teachers Carlos Sayago, Carlos Pastrana, and Librado Labastida were killed by a group of vigilantes under the command of Clemente Mendoza. The investigation that followed the attack made a revealing conclusion: while it was true that the vigilantes were responsible for the murder of the three teachers, it was also true that villagers had never welcomed the teachers and that the community thus had probably approved of their assassination.[63]

According to the report sent to the federal government, children's attendance had decreased in the months preceding the attack. Moreover, parents had started a campaign with the support of the clergy and the Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa (LNDLR) to denounce the immoral character of socialist education. Carlos Sayago's sister declared that the parish priest of Teziutlán had warned her, days before the assassination, that teachers had become "too anticlerical." Teacher Carlos Pastrana, for his part, had organized a dance in August that year to boycott a simultaneous Catholic celebration in the town of Ixteopan. As a result, one of the villagers had come to his house and, armed with a machete, had threatened to kill him. Similarly, teacher Librado Labastida had received various death threats from villagers who shouted at him "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" every time they saw him passing by. In sum, the actions of Mendoza coincided with the animosity of villagers toward anticlerical teachers.

As this and other cases reveal, local priests contributed to shaping villagers' perceptions of socialist education. They were thus instrumental for the moral legitimization of those who decided to resist it through violent means.[64] Aware

63. Report addressed to the Jefe de la Oficina de Información Política y Social, "Rinde informes de la investigación practicada en la Zona de Teziutlán, Puebla," AGN, DGIPS, Caja 71, exp. 2; "Tres maestros más fueron asesinados en el edo. de Puebla," *Excélsior*, November 17, 1935.

64. Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation,* 120. This is not to say that religiously motivated lynchings required the leadership of priests. As mentioned earlier in relationship to the lynching of Micaela Ortega, intra-village conflicts and political vendettas— beyond the priest's influence— could also inform mob killings perpetrated by Catholics. Furthermore, in various cases, Catholic women, often referred to as *beatas* or "fanatics," had a central role in the rumors leading to lynching and in some cases even in the execution of the lynching itself. In other words, Catholic

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of their influence, teachers, workers, and education inspectors denounced the activities of parish priests, sending letters and examples of "religious propaganda" to federal authorities. Referring to the killing of the three maestros in Puebla, the Unión Nacional de Maestros Federales (National Union of Federal Teachers) denounced the antisocialist propaganda promoted by "the fanatical clergy."[65] Included as an example of such propaganda was a copy of the publication *Rayo de Sol*, which referred to socialist education as an ideology that undermined Catholic morality and a "plague" that promoted perverse and irreligious ideas. Similarly, in a letter to president Cárdenas, socialist worker José Parra denounced the seditious activities of a local priest in Guadalajara, Jalisco.[66] Parra claimed that in a meeting in February 1935, inside of the temple of San Sebastián de Analco, the priest had told churchgoers that it was their duty to defend the integrity of their faith, even if this meant sacrificing their lives. In reference to the precarious situation faced by teachers in Tonalá, Jalisco, teacher Luis N. Rodríguez asserted that priests had threatened parents with excommunion if they sent their children to school, and complained about "*una chusma de viejas beatas*" (a rabble of pious old women) who had stoned a group of female teachers in front of the school.[67]

Violence against socialist teachers, including lynchings, declined considerably after the year 1938.[68] The resistance that socialist education had encountered at the local level contributed to the government's decision to moderate its antireligious and anticlerical aspects.[69] As a result of this shift, the vulnerability of teachers, as well as communities' perception of them as individuals who threatened their exercise of religion, receded significantly. The following years

female devotees could provide the leadership for the organization of lynchings. Kathleen M. McIntyre offers a detailed account of the lynching of pastor Samuel Juárez García and five other Evangelicals by a group of Catholics on October 5, 1935, in Tlacochahuaya, Oaxaca. In testimonies collected by the author, villagers narrated how, after being shot, a Catholic woman smashed Juárez García's head with a *metate* (a grinding stone) until his brains gushed out. See Kathleen M. McIntyre, "All of Their Customs are Daughters of Their Religion": Baptists in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1920s-Present," *Gender & History* 25:3 (2013): 487–488. See also reference to the group of "*viejas beatas*" who stoned a group of female teachers in Tonalá, Jalisco, (mentioned earlier in the article); or the attempted lynching of Melquiades Lezama allegedly orchestrated by female devotee Josefina de Trujillo. Also, the lynching of a veterinary doctor and members of the military escort that accompanied him in Senguio, Michoacán, on September of 1947, was led by Teodora Medina Guijosa, a "Sinarquista fanatic." Memorandum written by inspectors Clodomiro Morales Camacho and Ríos Thivol addressed to Lamberto Ortega Peregrina, Jefe del Departamento de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, September 4, 1947, AGN, DGIPS, Caja 84, exp. 1.

65. Letter addressed to president Cárdenas and signed by Juan Efraín González on behalf of the Unión de Maestros Federales of the 11th Zone, November 17, 1935, AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública, Serie Asesinatos, Caja 53, exp. 62.

66. Letter addressed to President Cárdenas and signed by José Parra, October 14, 1935, AGN, Dirección General de Gobierno, Serie Asesinatos, 2. 340/11 10515, exp. 13.

67. Letter addressed to the Minister of the Interior and signed by teacher Luis N. Rodríguez, May 20, 1938, AGN, Dirección General de Gobierno, Serie Asesinatos, 2. 340/11 10515, exp. 13.

68. Raby, "Los maestros rurales y los conflictos sociales en México (1931–1940)," 216–225.

69. Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm," 119.

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witnessed a significant shift in the relationship between state and Church. Although this shift began under the Cárdenas' presidency, it was with the arrival of president Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-46) that the state's relationship to the Catholic Church became not only less antagonistic, but increasingly harmonious and even collaborative. However, this détente did not put an end to lynchings driven by Catholic religion. Although lynchings against teachers declined, Protestants would become the target of attacks organized in the name of religion and the defense of the nation. Furthermore, lynchings against sacrilegious thieves continued to occur throughout the 1940s, reflecting the persistence of Catholics' belligerent attitudes toward those that violated religious symbols. The next section will bring to the fore the perils that Protestants faced during this period.

FIGHTING THE INFERNAL SERPENT: LYNCHING PROTESTANTS

On April 16, 1944, in the town of Santa María Techachalco, Puebla, a crowd of approximately 50 people assaulted a group of Evangelical worshipers, armed with clubs, stones, and pistols. Shouting "¡Mueran los prontestantes!" and "¡*Arriba el sinarquismo*!" the crowd injured several worshipers, who had to be taken to the municipal hospital. Reporting on the incident, a newspaper reported that days before this attack, a group of *sinarquistas* had taken a national flag to the town's Catholic priest to have it blessed.[70] The federal deputy Salvador Ochoa Rentería declared that this was yet another case that illustrated the abuses of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, an ultra-nationalist organization founded in 1937 whose aim was to defend both Catholicism and the motherland against the alleged threats of Protestantism and communism.[71] The following month, in the towns of Guadalupe Victoria and La Gloria, two municipalities on the border dividing the states of Puebla and Veracruz, a group of Catholics burned down the houses of 12 Evangelical families. The attack was perpetrated in retaliation for the iconoclasm of Evangelicals who, after burying a member of their congregation, destroyed the crosses of the municipal cemetery.[72]

From 1944 to the end of the 1950s, dozens of Protestants fell victim to Catholic rioters and lynch mobs in different states of central and southern

70. "Templo protestante atacado por exaltados," *La Prensa*, April 21, 1944. The use of the national flag by Sinarquistas signaled their appropriation of national symbols and their deployment of a nationalist ideology.

71. The Unión Nacional Sinarquista was characterized by the use of aggressive and even militaristic strategies. Although the Catholic Church considered it part of its strategy to regain "social authority in the wake of leftist revolutions" the Church lacked control over the Unión actions and did not officially approve of its use of violence. Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation,* 145; Blancarte, *Historia de la iglesia católica en México*, 85.

72. De la Luz García documents this case in "Ciudadanía, representación y cívico-política," 21–22.

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Mexico.[73] Echoing the dynamics of violence against socialist teachers during the 1930s, attacks against Protestants were perpetrated by both spontaneous mobs and armed groups of vigilantes, in this case, members of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista. Attacks against Protestants, together with the seeming impunity that followed them, need to be understood against the backdrop of the conservative politics brought about by the Ávila Camacho presidency and of the new relationship that was forged between state and Church during this period.[74]

From the moment he was elected president, Manuel Ávila Camacho made clear that the days of anticlericalism and state-sponsored socialism were over. He openly expressed his Catholic faith and eliminated the constitutional clause that characterized the content of Mexico's public education as socialist.[75] The new president also distanced himself from the progressive politics promoted in the 1930s, including agrarian reform.[76] Instead, he promoted a message of unity, reconciliation, and discipline based on an anticommunist, nationalistic, and conservative ideology. Ávila Camacho, together with a new generation of postrevolutionary politicos, laid out the basis for a new era of ideological alignment between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church had also changed during these years. From the mid 1930s onward, the higher ranks of the clergy adopted a critical stance toward those who defended religion through the use of arms. Conversely, the Church supported the pacific and civil mobilization of Catholic lay members under the

73. Cases were reported in prior years, but with lesser frequency. For instance, in the 1920s, the *New York Times* reported two unverified cases of lynchings involving Protestant ministers. The first, in San Juan Tepescolula, Oaxaca, was allegedly perpetrated against two Mexican Protestant ministers; the second was directed against an American Protestant minister in Irapuato, Guanajuato. "Report 2 Preachers Lynched in Mexico," *New York Times*, February 7, 1923; and "Report American Lynch," *New York Times*, August 3, 1926. To these cases one might add the aforementioned lynching of pastor Samuel Juárez García in 1935 in Tlacochahuaya, Oaxaca. The case is examined in Kathleen M. McIntyre's "All of Their Customs Are Daughters of Their Religion," 487–488.

74. The persecution of Protestants in other Latin American countries at the time, including Colombia and Brazil, suggests anti-Protestant violence was not limited to Mexico and its history of state-Church relationships. In Colombia, during the period of "La Violencia" (1940s -1950s), anticommunist Catholics sympathetic to the Conservative Party harassed, intimidated, and killed Protestants who were accused of supporting the Liberal Party. In Brazil, anti-Protestant violence was also present during the 1930s and 1940s, following Catholics' attempt to restore Catholicism as the national religion. In all three countries, violence against Protestants appears to have been underpinned by nationalist sentiments as well as by Catholics' anxieties regarding the increasing presence of Protestant religions. See Susanne Dailey, "Religious Aspects of Colombia's 'La Violencia': Explanations and Implications," *Journal of Church and State* 15:3 (1973): 381–405; Erika Helgen, "Anti-Protestant Violence and the Spiritual and Political Purification of the Brazilian Northeast, 1916–1945, " paper presented to the Latin American Studies Association, New York, May 2016; and Richard Millet, "The Protestant Role in Twentieth Century Latin American Church-State Relations," *Journal of Church and State* 15:3 (1973): 367–380.

75. It also enabled the re-opening of the Catholic schools that had been closed down under the previous postrevolutionary governments. Camp, *Cruce de espadas. Política y religión en México*, 48-9; Nicolás Dávila Peralta, *Las santas batallas. La derecha anticomunista en Puebla* (Puebla: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2003), 91–92.

76. Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, DE: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 89.

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umbrella of the Acción Católica Mexicana. This shift grew out of the lessons learned from the Cristero War regarding the costs of opting for a confrontational strategy vis-à-vis the state. It was further propelled by the existence of a new common ground with the Mexican state: the battle against communism and the defense of the motherland against foreign influences. In a letter published by national newspapers in 1943, Mexico's archbishop Luis María Mártinez affirmed this vision as he declared that the Church was willing to collaborate effectively with the government for "the good of the Patria" and for the unity of the nation.[77]

In addition to its battle against communism, the Church engaged in a parallel struggle against Protestantism. In his pastoral letter of October 1944, archbishop Martínez launched a crusade in defense of the Catholic faith and against the "infernal serpent of Protestantism."[78] He wrote that through their resources and propaganda, "Protestant sects" intended to take away Mexicans' "most valuable treasure, the Catholic faith that four centuries ago was brought to us by the Holy Virgin of Guadalupe."[79] This putative crusade singled out both Protestantism and communism as foreign and dangerous ideologies that had to be eliminated to secure the moral integrity of Catholic communities, all the while reiterating that Catholicism was the only authentic national religion.

Catholics took into their own hands archbishop Martínez's call to repel Protestants and their "dangerous" propaganda. In December 1944, for instance, a crowd assailed a group of Lutherans who were distributing flyers with information about their religious doctrine in a town close to Irapuato, in the state of Guanajuato. In addition to destroying their religious leaflets, the crowd attempted to lynch a member of the congregation.[80] Similarly, in May 1945, in Coyoacán, the same place where Red Shirt Ernesto Malda was lynched, three young men were threatened by a mob of Catholics in the neighborhood's main plaza. The young men were distributing religious leaflets and hanging some posters in the streets urging the Mexican people to renounce Catholicism.[81]

77. The letter was published on November 8, 1943, and it was meant to promote Catholics' support of the Mexican government's decision to participate in the Second World War. Quoted in Jean Meyer, "La Iglesia Católica en México 1929–1965," Documentos de Trabajo del CIDE 30 (May 2005), 22.

78. Deyssy Jael de la Luz García, "El pentecostalismo en México y su propuesta de experiencia religiosa e identidad nacional," *Revista Cultura y Religión* 3:2 (October 2009): 204.

79. Quoted in Laura Pérez Rosales, "Censura y control. La Campaña Nacionla de Moralización de los años cincuenta," *Historia y Grafía* 19:37 (July-December 2011): 93–94.

80. "Iba a ser linchado un propagandista protestante en Guanajuato," *La Prensa,* December 8, 1944.

81. "Iban a linchar a dos propagandistas protestantes en templo de Coyoacán," *La Prensa*, March 31, 1945.

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As these cases make clear, Catholics considered Protestants' dissemination of their religious beliefs offensive and potentially threatening. Although Catholicism continued to be Mexico's dominant religion, the marginal increase of non-Catholic faiths, together with the Church's official discourse regarding the increasing presence of Protestants in the country, heightened Catholics' animosities toward these religious minorities[82] Furthermore, Protestants had historically sided with political ideologies that were condemned by Catholicism, such as liberalism and socialism, both of which encouraged social change and the emancipation of the individual, as well as the elimination of the Catholic Church's corporate privileges.[83]

Equally important, Protestants refused to participate in Catholic festivals and rituals that were contrary to their beliefs.[84] Because Catholics considered festivals to be an integral part of communities' socioeconomic integration and political order, Protestants' refusal to participate was seen not only as an affront to Catholics' exercise of religion but also as a source of danger for the unity and stability of the community. Furthermore, Catholics' portrayal of Protestantism as a foreign, and more specifically American, religion made Protestants an easy target of the nationalistic and anti-US undercurrents embraced by higher ranks of the Catholic Church.[85] It also drew the attention of Catholic organizations such as the Sinarquistas.[86]

Emulating the religious persecution they had endured during previous decades at the hands of anticlerical revolutionaries, Catholics intimidated and harassed Protestant ministers. They also directed their attacks against entire families of

82. The percentage of Protestants in Mexico went from 0.4 percent in the year 1900 to 0.91 percent in 1940. De la Luz García, "El pentecontalismo en México," 205; INEGI, *La diversidad religiosa en México,* 5–8.

83. Jean-Pierre Bastian, "Protestants, Freemasons, and Spiritists: Non-Catholic Religious Sociabilities and Mexico's Revolutionary Movement, 1910–20," in *Faith and Impiety in Revolutionary Mexico*, Matthew Butler, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 83–85; Blancarte, *Historia de la iglesia católica en México*, 75; McIntyre, "All of Their Customs Are Daughters of Their Religion"; Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity,* 134–136.

84. This type of festivity usually involved the consumption of alcohol and the veneration of religious images.

85. Archbishop Luis María Martínez and other church representatives defended Hispanic Catholicism as the only true religion and associated the United States with the spurious and polluting influence of Protestantism. See Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos,* 202–205.

86. Sinarquistas rejected both capitalism and communism, and regarded the United States as an unequivocal symbol of the former. See Gastón García Cantú, *El pensamiento de la reacción Mexicana (la derecha). Historia documental. Tomo Tercero (1929–1940),* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1997), 145–153. Although not perpetrated in the name of religion, it is worth mentioning here the occurrence of at least two lynchings, one organized directly by Sinarquistas, that involved US veterinarians and livestock inspectors. These lynchings took place in the context of a series of popular protests against the killing and vaccination of cattle promoted by the Mexican-American Commission for the Eradication of Foot-and-Mouth Disease. See "Robert L. Proctor, Inspector de la Comisión México-Americana Contra la Aftosa, Asesinado de Forma Salvaje," *El Porvenir*, February 3, 1949; "Mexicans Kill American," *New York Times*, February 3, 1949; and "Cattle Vaccinators Attacked," *New York Times,* February 2, 1949. See also Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1920–1960,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 124–125; and John Ledbetter, "Fighting Food-and-Mouth Disease in Mexico: Popular Protest against Diplomatic Decisions," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 104:3 (2001): 405–406.

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Protestant believers, breaking into their temples, vandalizing their houses, and forcing them out of their communities. In March 1945, for example, approximately 200 Catholics, in the town of Cuerámaro, Guanajuato, broke into a Protestant temple and assaulted a group of Protestant worshippers, including a pregnant woman.[87] The incident was triggered by an inflammatory sermon pronounced by the town's Catholic priest against Protestants, just moments before the attack. Similarly, on May 27, 1945, in the town of Santiago Yeche in Estado de México, a group of Catholic neighbors raided the homes of nearly 20 Protestant families.[88] Among those targeted by the assault was the pastor Vicente Garita who, together with his brother in law, died after his house was set on fire.

Proclaiming their rights as Mexican citizens, Protestants asked federal authorities to intervene to protect their lives and guarantee their right to exercise their religion. As socialist teachers did before them, Protestants denounced local authorities for their incapacity or unwillingness to protect their lives and provide them with justice. In May 1945, in a letter addressed to president Ávila Camacho, Evangelicals from the town of Acatzingo, in Puebla, denounced an attack orchestrated by a group of Sinarquistas led by Esteban Méndez.[89] Among the victims was their minister, Leonardo Tamariz, who had been forced outside of his house in the middle of the night and then shot in the town plaza. The Sinarquistas had also forced their way into the house of Doctor Juan V. Montiel with the intention of killing him. When they did not find him, they decided to kill Enrique Aguilar, a young man who worked for Montiel. Aguilar was struck with machetes and clubs, while Montiel's wife was stripped of her clothing and forced out of her house. The signers of the letter asked the president to intervene, stating that local authorities supported the Sinarquistas and had done nothing to protect them.

Like the lynchings against socialist teachers, attacks against Protestants were often preceded by intra-community conflicts that preceded their occurrence. In August 1945, for example, a group of Evangelicals from the town of Esperanza in Puebla addressed the Interior Minister, urging him to condemn and investigate a number of assaults perpetrated against them during the previous month.[90] These assaults included the attempt of lynching of Melquiades Lezama and three Evangelical women by a group of Catholics who had also threatened Evangelical families

87. "Otro sangriento zafarrancho entre Católicos y Protestantes, ocurrió," *La Prensa,* March 24, 1945.

88. "Sangriento ataque contra un grupo de Protestantes," *La Prensa*, May 29, 1945.

89. Letter addressed to president Manuel Ávila Camacho, signed by Nabor Hernández, Luis Acalco, and Domingo Ponce. May of 1945. AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, Serie Asesinatos/Atropellos, exp. 542.1/1221.

90. Letter signed by José María González and Marcelino Vargas, addressed to the Minister of the Interior, DGIPS, AGN, Caja 98, exp. 20.

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with burning down their homes. The signers of the letter complained about the disregard shown by local authorities toward these incidents, stating that, "with a clear partial attitude, [authorities] have neither implemented measures to prevent such crimes, nor proceeded against the wrongdoers." After this petition was submitted, an investigation was carried out in the town of Esperanza during the month of September. Although federal inspector Carlos Reyes Retana concluded that local authorities had indeed protected Melquiades to the best of their capacities, his description of the event deserves some attention, as it brings into sharp focus the impact of intra-community conflicts on religious violence.[91]

Based on several interviews with members of the community, Reyes Retana stated that, over the preceding few weeks, Melquiades had held meetings inside of his shop with some out-of-town Evangelicals who were distributing flyers with information about their religion. Melquiades wanted his children to convert to Protestantism, so he welcomed the presence of the Evangelicals at his business. According to the Catholic parish priest, Odilón Romero, the flyers were "insulting" to the Catholic religion, as they contained images of the pope looking like Hitler and other fascist leaders. The day before the incident, a brawl had taken place in Melquiades's shop, involving a group of Evangelical and Catholic men. As a result of this brawl, a Catholic man had died.

Although he was not involved in the fight, villagers blamed Melquiades for the death of the Catholic man and gathered outside of his house with the intention of lynching him and setting his house on fire. Luz López, a Catholic woman who participated in the attack, claimed that she had been summoned, together with dozens of other women, by the president of Acción Católica, Josefina de Trujillo. The mayor was able to prevent Melquiades's lynching by rushing him out of his house and taking him into the municipal office. While Melquiades was in the municipal office, three Evangelical women went to the local penitentiary to visit one of the men involved in the brawl. It was at that moment that another group of Catholics gathered, with the aim of lynching these women. With the help of a military commander, the Evangelical women were able to find refuge at the local school.

The narrative of the events in Reyes Retana's report exposes Catholics' outright rejection of Protestantism. It also reveals the ways in which Catholic villagers reacted when a community member attempted to introduce a different faith in their towns. Although the lynching of Melquiades was averted, the resentment and antipathy built up around him resemble the tensions that precipitated the

91. Informe de Ing. Carlos Reyes Retana, DGIPS, AGN, Caja 98, exp. 20.

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lynching of Micaela Ortega, the Spiritist and socialist woman who was killed in November 1934 in Acajete, Puebla. Villagers in Esperanza gathered outside of Melquiades' home, in the same way that they did with Micaela. Although the Catholic priest did not participate in the organization of the lynching, his religious authority appears in the background of this incident: he did not approve of Melquiades's Protestantism, and he was openly critical of the religious propaganda being distributed at Melquiades's shop. Furthermore, the fact that it was the leader of Acción Católica, an organization created by the Catholic Church to promote civil and pacific forms of resistance, who summoned the potential lynchers demonstrates that it was ultimately lay Catholics, and not the upper ranks of the Catholic Church, who sanctioned the use of lynching.

Protestants denounced several more incidences of violence in the coming years, pointing at the responsibility of local authorities and the fact that attacks organized against them went unpunished. Like the maestros rurales, Protestants urged authorities to live up to the promise of religious tolerance and secularism promoted by revolutionary elites. Despite the various letters and telegrams sent to the office of the president and to the Minister of the Interior, the central government neither condemned these attacks publicly nor did it provide effective protection for these citizens.

The détente between Church and state did not bring an end to lynchings and other forms of collective violence inspired by Catholics and the Church. In the case of Protestants, in particular, the new ideological proximity of the Catholic Church and postrevolutionary politicos, grounded in the defense of the nation against so-called foreign influences, meant that violence against Protestants could go unpunished.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for an understanding of religion as a political and ideological force in the organization and legitimation of lynchings in postrevolutionary Mexico. Religion did not merely articulate communities' symbolic and spiritual concerns, expressed in the defense of sacred spaces and religious images: it also served to define the political and economic contours of the community. These rather worldly concerns do not deny the authenticity of the religious experience, but rather illustrate the particular weight of religion in shaping social and political relations at the local level.

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Despite the intentions of central elites during the 1920s and 1930s, Catholicism's stronghold in shaping people's mentalities and dispositions remained a dominant feature of Mexico's social and political makeup. As such, Catholic religion, particularly folk strands of Catholic religion, had a central role in the history of lynching in postrevolutionary Mexico.

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