Translator’s Introduction

Prior to the Cold War, Mexican Protestants viewed themselves as advocates of social and political progress in contrast to the Catholic Church which they stigmatized as arrogant and reactionary. But their progressive posture was not just a product of anti-Catholic prejudice, they advocated honest elections and respect for the laws, they also embraced a strident nationalism even while they rejected fascism, they were staunch advocates of public education, some promoted agrarian reform and several held important positions in Mexico’s Revolutionary governments. While they were only a tiny minority of Mexico’s population, they played a significant role as loyal allies of Mexico’s radical Liberals from the 1860s to the 1930s.

Protestantism began in earnest in Mexico in the last third of the 19th century when North American missionaries began linking up with individuals and small congregations that had broken away from the Catholic Church. By 1910 there were around 300 missionaries, 600 Mexican preachers, and about 70,000 members, about ½ percent of Mexico’s population. Most of these churches depended on financing from the United States and, as a consequence, they were controlled by missionaries. Congregations were concentrated in northern Mexico along railroads and in new towns where the Catholic Church was weak and society was more fluid. Most converts were middling sorts, few were wealthy or influential in their communities. There were also few Campesinos and Indigenous people in these churches because these groups were still under the influence of landlords and the Catholic Church. Thirty years later, the Protestant

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community had grown to nearly 180,000, almost one percent of the population, with the greatest gains occurring among Indigenous people in remote areas of southern and eastern Mexico. By then too, Mexico’s Protestant churches were largely autonomous in finances and leadership.³

Protestantism entered Mexico at the climax of a violent struggle between two political factions: Conservatives and Liberals. Conservatives wanted to preserve those elements of the colonial order which they regarded as vital to the character and stability of Mexico, and the most important of these was the Catholic Church. At the time, the Church enjoyed legal recognition as the official religion of Mexico, it acted as the principal if not exclusive provider of education, and it owned vast amounts of property that it had acquired over the centuries. The Church also provided religious justification for a relatively static, paternalistic social order which is why Mexico’s Conservatives were so committed to the preservation of its exalted place in Mexican society. Liberals believed that the Catholic clergy exercised a malign influence on society, encouraging superstitious ideas and defending outmoded social structures such as peonage. Moreover the fact that the Church’s property could neither be taxed nor bought and sold represented a serious impediment to economic development. To end these perceived problems, Liberals issued a Constitution in 1857 that abolished the legal privileges of the Catholic clergy, and two years later Liberal President Benito Juárez, ordered all Church properties not used directly for religious purposes to be sold at auction. Conservatives resisted violently with the result that Mexico endured a decade of civil war, foreign occupation, and political instability.⁴

In contrast to their hostility toward the Catholic Church, Liberals expressed admiration for Protestantism and encouraged the entry of U.S. missionaries into Mexico. They even sold some of the properties they confiscated from the Catholic Church to U.S. missionaries and to Mexicans who were trying to start non-Catholic congregations. According to historian Rubén Ruiz Guerra, Liberals were attracted to Protestantism because they believed it brought a new

³ Martaelena Negrete, Relaciones entre la iglesia y el estado en México, 1930-1940 (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México y la Universidad Iberoamericana, 1988), 280.

ethic of work, a new conception of time, and a new, more active, ideal of humanity. Benito Juárez is often quoted as having said that he hoped Protestantism would take hold among the Indians because “they need a religion that prompts them to read rather than spend their savings on candles for the saints.” Mexican Protestants have regarded Juárez as a sort of secular saint ever since.\(^5\)

The successor to Juárez, General Porfirio Díaz, was also a Liberal, but unlike Juárez he chose to mollify the Conservatives by relaxing enforcement of the anti-clerical laws and openly courting the Catholic hierarchy.\(^6\) The generation of political calm which followed his rise to power witnessed Mexico’s transformation from a loose collection of isolated villages and self-sufficient haciendas, into an economically integrated nation of mines, factories, railroads, and export plantations, all under the watchful eye of Don Porfirio’s dreaded rural police. In effect, Díaz combined Liberalism and Conservatism. It was the best of both worlds for domestic and foreign investors who profited from the regime’s pro-business policies. It the worst of both for many ordinary Mexicans who experienced the loss of their communal lands, more demanding conditions of work, and swift punishment if they resisted their incorporation into the export economy or even protested too loudly.\(^7\)

The North American missionaries who came to Mexico during this period viewed themselves as bearers of a liberating gospel. They believed that the message of salvation in Christ could transform individuals, weaning them from alcohol and sloth, making them new people in this life as well as in the life to come. In their eyes, the biggest obstacle to this transformation was the Catholic Church which kept the poor people ignorant and under the control of priests and landowners. They believed that as Mexicans were freed from spiritual and


\(^6\) Baldwin, 32; Bastian, Los Disidentes, 173-180.

\(^7\) John Mason Hart, The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987) depicts Porfrian Mexico an example of the “dependent capitalism” that was developing in several non-Western nations at the turn of the century.
economic bondage, Mexico as a whole would come to resemble small town America as the missionaries remembered it.\(^8\)

The institution that most clearly expressed this social vision was the Protestant day school. By 1910 there were 163 schools with an enrollment of approximately 12,000. Many schools offered free tuition to the children of church members. Consequently, literacy among Protestants was well above the national average, particularly for women who comprised the majority of students. In contrast to traditional Catholic social teaching, Protestant schools rejected the idea of a natural order into which a person was incorporated at birth, stressing instead the obligation of their students to improve themselves so that they could improve their society. Students were required to study the Mexican Constitution so they would know how the nation was governed and what their rights and duties as citizens were, at least in theory. It was not an education for political acquiescence.\(^9\)

Mexican converts to Protestantism have been characterized by Historian Jean Pierre Bastian as working and middle class “dissidents” who had been cut loose from the old patriarchal order and compelled to find their way in the more fluid society that was emerging as Mexico transformed itself from an economic backwater into a virtual colony of Europe and the United States. Protestant ministers were often recruited from among artisans who had been displaced from their trades by factories and foreign imports.\(^10\)

\(^8\) Ruiz Guerra, 17. That U.S. Protestant missionaries despised the Catholic Church is abundantly demonstrated from denominational as well as historical sources, for example, the Presbyterian magazine *El Faro* offers a critique of the doctrines and the practices of the Catholic Church in nearly every issue surveyed by the author. See also Gonzalo Báez Camargo, *The Reason for Protestantism in Mexico*. Trans. Annie Carlyle. (México, D.F.: Union Press, 1929); James Garvin Chastain, *Thirty Years in Mexico* (El Paso, 1927), 155; Frank S. Onderdonk, *A Glimpse at Mexico* (Nashville: Board of Missions Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1930). The Mexican Episcopal Church was the only Protestant denomination to show much sympathy for the Catholic Church and even they could be quite critical as in Frank W. Creighton, “Civil and Religious Conditions Reviewed,” *Spirit of Missions*, 92 (October 1927): 581-594.

\(^9\) Dorothy Hieronimus, *Friends in Mexico* (Richmond, IN: American Friends Board of Missions, [1942]), cites a 1940 survey which claimed that 90% of Protestants could read and write in comparison to 50% of the general population (7). See also Bastian, *Disidentes*, 143-171, *passim*. Baldwin, 56f.

\(^10\) Bastian, *Protestantismo y sociedad*, 10-11, 15-16; Bastian, *Disidentes*, 88-90; Ruiz Guerra, 103; Baldwin, 48f, 98-100.
Mexico’s Protestants shared the radical Liberals’ antipathy for the Catholic Church, attributing many of the nation’s ills to the Church’s influence. As one historian put it, Protestantism

… saw the Catholic Church as a hindrance to the progress of the nation. In its view, the inculcation of customs such as saving, temperance, and love of work, virtues considered to be peculiarly Protestant, were needed to make [Mexico] a better country, more prosperous, more dynamic, more just. [Protestants] … felt compelled to place emphasis on education as the means of bettering society and … [they believed] that industrial development required a new work ethic that would permit the accumulation of capital.¹¹

Protestant hostility toward the Catholic Church was exacerbated by the fact that members of Protestant churches were frequent targets of religious persecution in the years leading up to the 1910 Revolution. Opposition to Protestantism generally took non-violent forms such as social ostracism or a refusal to rent space for religious meetings, but there were also physical assaults and even a few communal riots.¹²

Despite the protection his government offered them from the most egregious instances of religious persecution, Díaz was held culpable by many Protestants for the mistreatment they endured at the hands of Catholics. As they saw it, his well publicized accommodation with the Catholic Church had revived the Roman clergy’s ambition to dominate Mexico religiously. When his administration proved unable or unwilling to protect them adequately, Mexican Protestants began to broaden their critique of his administration to include the obviously fraudulent electoral tactics by which he maintained himself in power, and the repression by which he silenced dissent.¹³


By the start of the twentieth century, Protestants were forging alliances with dissident Liberals. When the Liberal Club of San Luis Potosí called a convention in February of 1901 to organize an opposition political party, eight Protestant pastors and school teachers were among the 42 delegates who came.\textsuperscript{14} Five years later, when the radical Mexican Liberal Party called for an uprising against Díaz, Presbyterian Ignacio Gutiérrez led an insurgent group that included several of his coreligionists from the state of Tabasco.\textsuperscript{15} Protestants also acted as spokesmen for workers in two highly publicized labor disputes: one at the Cananea Copper Mine and the other at the Rio Blanco textile mill. When the Rio Blanco strike was suppressed, the government forced the local Methodist congregation to disband because it regarded the church as a center of workers’ agitation.\textsuperscript{16}

While radicalism appealed to some Protestants, the effort to organize peaceful political opposition to Díaz attracted much broader support. Protestants responded enthusiastically when Francisco Madero, a democratic Liberal, challenged Díaz in the election of 1910. When Díaz stole the election, Protestants responded en masse to Madero’s call for revolt. Samuel Guy Inman, a U.S. missionary in Mexico, observed: “When the Mexican Revolution began, the Protestant churches threw themselves into it almost unanimously, because they believed that the revolutionary program represented what they had been preaching for many years previously, and that the triumph of the Revolution was signifying the triumph of the gospel.”\textsuperscript{17} Madero’s most successful general was a Congregationalist minister—Pascual Orozco, Jr.—but Methodist circuit riders were also effective as revolutionary leaders because they could draw recruits from many congregations and they were familiar with the field of operations from long hours in the saddle.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{15} Bastian, \textit{Disidentes}, 233-237.


\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in Mondragón, 67 (my translation).

\textsuperscript{18} Ruiz Guerra, 125. See also Mondragón, 67f.
After his elevation to the Presidency, Madero failed to make the wholesale break with the Porfirian order that Protestants had expected. He relied on the Porfirian Army to maintain order and he allowed a National Catholic Party to emerge and claim seats in the new democratic legislature. Madero saw this latter development as a healthy sign of political pluralism, but Protestants charged that the Catholic Church was exercising undue influence over Catholic voters who were accustomed to accepting the word of the priest as the command of God, thus opening the door to a new form of clerical domination.¹⁹

In light of Madero’s uncertain course, some Protestants pursued more radical options. Pascual Orozco, Jr. rebelled against Madero in the spring of 1912 on behalf of a more thoroughgoing revolution. His revolt assumed massive proportions before it was suppressed by the Federal Army. In the south of Mexico, several Protestants took prominent roles in the agrarian revolt of Emiliano Zapata. Otilio Montaño, an elementary school teacher and member of the Methodist church, helped draft Zapata’s Plan of Ayala which called for the restoration of lands taken from villages during the Díaz period. However, most Protestants remained aloof from these radical alternatives to the Madero Presidency though they viewed the situation with growing concern.²⁰

Paradoxically, for many Protestants the clouds of doubt and confusion parted when General Victoriano Huerta murdered President Madero and established a military dictatorship. However tragic the circumstances, for Protestants it was as if they had found their place in the script once again. Huerta was the villain, but the Catholic Church, which offered public support for the coup, was complicit in his crime. And a hero, modeled closely on the sainted Juárez, had appeared on stage to avenge the deed and set things right—Venustiano Carranza.²¹

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²⁰ Arango, 229. Bastian, Disidentes, see footnote number 108, page 300.

²¹ Protestant and Catholic commentators disagree over the degree of Catholic complicity with Huerta’s regime. Cf Báez-Camargo and Grubb, 71f and Francis Clement Kelly, Blood Drenched Altars (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1935), 454-456. Quirk offers a measured assessment, 36-40. Bastian, Protestantismo y Sociedad, says that Protestants rose up en masse after the overthrow and murder of Madero (185).
Carranza enjoyed a degree of support among Protestants far above that which they gave to his Revolutionary rivals, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. While to most Mexicans, the bookish Carranza seemed cold and aloof, to Protestants his self-presentation connoted rationality and professionalism, qualities which had long been prized in the Protestant community with its emphasis on formal education and self-control. Moreover as his movement unfolded it became clear that he intended to establish a Liberal republic like the one envisioned by the 19th century reformers, including strict enforcement of the anti-clerical laws. U.S. missionaries estimated that by 1915, 80 to 90 percent of Mexico’s Protestants were supporting Carranza.22

Carranza reciprocated their support by appointing many Protestants to important posts in his movement. His private secretary was a member of the Baptist church in Mexico City. Three governors appointed by Carranza were Protestants. The head of his propaganda office was a Methodist preacher. Several other Protestant pastors and teachers served Carranza in the field of education. Their avidity for the First Chief and his liberal program, their generally high levels of education, and their experience with public speaking made them ideal for such roles.23

The fruits of Mexico’s revolution began to appear in the fall of 1916 when Carranza, having emerged victorious, convened a Constitutional Congress to give his movement a formal political basis. The resulting Constitution of 1917 incorporated demands for redistribution of land, respect for the rights of workers, limits on the political and property rights of foreigners, and tough new restrictions on religious activities. The key anti-clerical provisions included the following:


1. Worship could only take place indoors, and the time, place, and number of services could be regulated by government. No outdoor processions or campaigns were allowed.

2. Churches could not own property, their places of worship now belonged to the nation.

3. Religious bodies could not establish or conduct primary schools, and religious instruction was prohibited in all primary schools, public or private.

4. Only Mexicans by birth could act as priests or ministers.

5. Priests and ministers could not vote, take part in political activities, or criticize the laws, the government, or public officials.

6. State governors had the authority to determine the number of priests and ministers that were permitted to conduct religious activities within the boundaries of their states.²⁴

While North American missionaries expressed concern about the proposed restrictions on their religious activities, many Mexican Protestants viewed the new rules with favor. They had been compelled to fend for themselves when the missionaries left Mexico at the height of the Revolution, and when the North Americans returned, Mexican church leaders were reluctant to go back to what now seemed like a paternalistic relationship.₂⁵ Adding to their resentment was the Cincinnati Plan which the North American missionaries had devised during their sojourn in the United States. The Plan sought to end denominational competition and the waste of resources by dividing Mexico up into regions and then assigning each one, with its mission stations, schools, seminaries, and congregations, to a particular denominational agency.²⁶ The Plan seemed perfectly rational to the North Americans assembled in Cincinnati, but it met a cool reception when they attempted to impose it upon their return to the mission field. Methodist Historian Gonzalo Báez Camargo has noted that the Plan was unpopular with Mexican

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²⁵ McKechnie, 134.

Protestants because they had not been consulted in its development, it appeared more directed at saving money than saving souls, and it was imposed quickly with little time for discussion or alteration.  

For all of these reasons, Mexicans were very supportive of the provisions in the new Constitution which obliged churches to place authority in the hands of Mexican nationals. At the 1920 Mexican Baptist Convention, newly-elected President Josuê Bautista insisted that, in accordance with the new laws, all church offices should be filled by native-born Mexicans. He also proposed that board funds pass through the National Convention rather than going directly from the mission board to the national workers, that churches be allowed to call their own pastors rather than have them appointed by the mission board, and that pastors be considered as salaried employees of their local congregations and answerable to them rather than to the mission board. The Mexican Baptists also tried to take control of the denominational journal and when the mission board denied the request, they voted to publish their own journal. Bautista used the new publication to promote tithing among the Baptist churches so that they could become economically self-supporting. Mexican Methodists and Presbyterians also took control of their denominations during the 1920s because, as one denominational historian put it, they didn’t want to be harassed any longer by missionaries who believed that “the one who pays, rules.”

Despite their attachment to Venustiano Carranza, Protestants adjusted quickly when he was overthrown in the spring of 1920 and Alvaro Obregón succeeded to the Presidency. The new President won their support by restoring order to the Mexican countryside, something Carranza had never been able to accomplish. Moreover Obregón invited Protestant ministers to take a

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27 Báez-Camargo and Grubb, 93, 104f. For negative reaction to the Plan, see also Penton, 213; McKechnie, 173, 190; Scott, 4; Zalatiel Jiménez, Bulletin from the Methodist Church “El Mesías,” Feb. 1, 1970.

28 Anderson, 50-52. Patterson, 149-151.

29 Patterson, 149-151.

30 Re Methodists, see “Mexico, and what the Methodist are doing there,” (New York: Editorial Department Joint Division of Education and Cultivation Board of Missions and Church Extension, [1941]), 5; Ruiz Guerra, 129f. Re Presbyterians, see McKechnie, 158-162.
prominent role in the celebration of Mexican independence in 1921 and he gave $25,000 to the Y.M.C.A. He also appointed many Protestants to government positions.31

Under such favorable conditions, the Protestant community quickly rebounded from a decade of human and material losses. By 1922, more than 260 missionaries and 770 Mexicans were engaged in church work. The aggregate number of baptized members was slightly over 54,000. By that time also there were 115 Protestant elementary schools with a total enrollment of around 8,700, and 27 schools of higher education with an enrollment of over 2,100. While these numbers represented a decline of perhaps 25% from pre-Revolutionary levels, they were still impressive given the tremendous devastation of the previous decade. New denominations were arriving as well: the Disciples of Christ (1920), los Peregrinos (1920), las Asembleas de Dios (1921), and the Mennonites (1922).32

The real test of Protestant loyalty to the post-Revolutionary government came with the church-state conflict that erupted in the mid 1920s and which lasted until the mid 1930s. Already in 1917, Mexico’s Catholic bishops had denounced the Constitution’s anti-clerical provisions, but the reluctance of Carranza and Obregón to enforce them had averted serious controversy.33 Obregón’s successor, the rabidly anti-Catholic Plutarco Elías Calles, preferred to throw down the gauntlet. Calles began his anti-religious crusade in the summer of 1926 by issuing a series of decrees that required priests to place themselves under the authority of the government and established criminal penalties for those who failed to do so. The reaction by the Church included a Papal denunciation of Calles’ government, the suspension of religious services throughout Mexico as a form of protest, and an armed uprising in the rural areas of western Mexico by Catholic rebels known as “Cristeros.” The struggle between church and state convulsed Mexico throughout the remainder of Calles’ presidency and resulted in tens of thousands of deaths,


32 W[illia]m A. Ross, Sunrise in Aztec Land (Richmond, VA, and Texarkana, AK/TX: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1922), 242. See also Chastain, 119-124; the Protestant Episcopal Church, USA, Annual Report of the Presiding Bishop and Council for the Year 1921; Bridges, 13; Velia Patricia Barragan Cisneros, Mennonitas: Etnicidad y Derecho (Durango: Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango, 1996), 21f.

including that of Alvaro Obregón who was assassinated by a Catholic zealot after his reelection to the Presidency in 1928.  

A truce arranged with the help of U.S. ambassador Dwight Morrow in the summer of 1929 ended the Cristero Revolt and led to the resumption of religious services, but the church-state conflict continued to simmer. Calles was no longer President, but he dominated the political scene during the three brief presidencies that followed his own from 1928 to 1934 and his supporters pursued radically anti-religious policies at all levels of government. When another strongly anti-clerical President, General Lázaro Cárdenas, was inaugurated in December of 1934, it began to look like the church-state conflict would break out into open warfare once again.

Mexico’s Protestant community was caught in the middle of this religious conflict. On one hand, they were subjected to much stricter enforcement of the anti-clerical laws as the government’s crusade against the Catholic Church inspired a more general de-Christianization effort by Calles’ followers. On the other hand, they also faced persecution from Catholics who viewed them as allies of the government in its war against the church.

Application of the anti-clerical provisions of the Constitution to Protestants began in earnest in July of 1926. Calles ordered over 200 foreign clergy, including a number of Protestant and Mormon missionaries, to leave the country. The restrictions on foreign clergy were applied to Protestant ministers with much less rigor than was applied to Catholic priests, nevertheless over the next ten years, Protestant missionaries were reduced from 261 to 156.

34 Plutarco Elias Calles, Correspondencia Personal, 1919-1945 (México: Fondo de Cultural Económica, 1991), contains a transcript of conversations between Calles and the Mexican bishops which gives the impression that the President was eager for a confrontation (171-193). Messages between the Catholic bishops and President Calles are reproduced in José Manuel Puig Casauranc, La Educación y el Problema Religioso (México, D.F., Secretaria de Educación Publica, 1926), see back pages. Mexican Protestants tend to blame the conflict on the intransigence of the bishops, e.g., Báez Camargo and Grubb, 75-79; Jiménez, Mar. 29, 1970. Most scholarly accounts portray Calles as the primary instigator of the crisis, see e.g., Quirk, 137-187, passim; Meyer, Cristero Rebellion, 34-50; Jürgen Buchenau, Plutarco Elias Calles and the Mexican Revolution (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 125-130.


36 Bridges, 12f; McKechnie, 212 and 236; Meyer, Cristero Rebellion, 43. For comparison, the number of Catholic priests, foreign and native, dropped from 4,492 in 1926 to 111 in 1935! (Bowen, 36).
stayed found their activities greatly circumscribed. Bishop Creighton of the Episcopal Church complained that “when I visit our Mexican congregations I am unable to conduct the service. Our Mexican people may not receive the Sacrament at the hands of their bishop, and furthermore I am unable to confirm candidates in native churches.”

Even Mexican ministers faced restrictions such as the prohibition on religious gatherings in private homes or out of doors. In the most extreme cases, such as in Tabasco under Governor Tomás Garrido Canabal, all pastors were expelled along with all priests and religious activities, whether Protestant or Catholic, were completely outlawed. Less traumatic but more enduring in its effects was the stricter enforcement of the laws against religious education. During the ten years that followed Calles’ decrees, Protestant schools lost over 75% of their students. In part this was due to the growing number and quality of government schools. However the main reason for the decline was the strictly enforced prohibition of religious teaching in primary schools. This trend accelerated when Narciso Bassols became Secretary of Education in 1931. He applied the prohibition on religious instruction to secondary as well as primary schools and required the teaching of “sexual education” and “socialistic education” in private as well as public schools. Some states went even further. In Yucatán, schools were obliged to open each day with the singing of the “International” and other communist songs. In Hidalgo, Guanajuato, and Michoacán, school administrators had to declare themselves to be atheists. After a great deal of soul searching by Protestant teachers, administrators, and mission boards, most decided that Christian education could not be carried on under these circumstances and they closed their schools for good.

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Compounding their difficulties, Protestants faced growing persecution from their Catholic neighbors. At a time when Catholics were locked in mortal combat with the revolutionary government, they viewed Protestants, with some reason, as the allies of their sworn enemies. With less justification but equal effect, influential Catholics publicly accused Protestants of serving as the advance agents of Yankee imperialism, and they added that because Catholicism was inseparable from Mexican-ness, anyone who converted to Protestantism was a traitor to his country and his race. It did not help that Protestants continually accused the priests keeping the common people in ignorance, the better to exploit them, or that they often disseminated this anti-Catholic propaganda with little sensitivity to the feelings of loyal Catholics who sometimes reacted with anger. And sometimes the Protestants openly allied themselves with the government, as when they publicly defended the anti-clerical legislation or joined agrarista communities, thus appearing to justify the hostility of Cristeros and other militant Catholics. Whatever their justification, Catholics acting individually or in groups committed numerous acts of violence against Protestants during the 1920s and 30s. Sometimes the target was the church or the house of the minister, but there were frequent attacks on people as well. Stones were a common weapon but knives and guns were also used. On occasion the attacks were encouraged by local clergy. The evident aim of the attacks was to drive Protestants out of the community and restore religious harmony, but material motives cannot be discounted when the goods of fleeing Protestants were seized by the perpetrators of violence.

Guerra, 117-128 (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1995), 122; Hieronimus, 26; Mecham, 407; Bowen, 37; McKechnie, 264 and 272-277.

41 Their arguments are explained in Palmer, The American Protestant Conspiracy Theory of Mexican History.

42 Bennett, 84; Matthew Butler, Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion, 1926-1929 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 99; Meyer, Cristero Rebellion, 27; Penton, 155; Ruiz Guerra, 8-11. The themes of Protestant preaching about the Catholic Church are summarized in Onderdonk, 26-32.

43 For a discussion of the overlap between Catholic-Protestant and Cristero-Agrarista divisions, see Butler, 68-79.

44 An example that includes most of these elements is documented in Juan G. Cabral to Gobernador del Estado, Guerrero, Feb. 15, 1934, Abelardo L. Rodríguez Collection, 514.159, AGN. See also Executive Summary of letter from Salomán Brito, Francisco Alvarez, et al, to President, Feb. 7, 1934, Abelardo L. Rodríguez Collection, 514.1/59, AGN. See also Bodas de Diamante, 282f; Frank W. Creighton, “Persecuted Mexican Congregation Courageously Perseveres,” Spirit of Missions, 93 (July 1928): 445; Renee De la Torre, Los hijos de la luz: discurso, xx
Caught up in the Church-State conflict, Protestants by and large shunned neutrality and chose to support the revolutionary government throughout the twenties and thirties. As they had under Presidents Carranza and Obregón, Protestants served in prominent positions under Calles and his successors. Calles appointed a Presbyterian, Moisés Sáenz, to the Department of Education where he developed a program of rural education based on John Dewey’s ideal of the “active school.” Under Sáenz’s direction, the number of rural schools grew from about 300 to over 6800 while the number of students grew even faster, from 18,000 to almost 600,000. Catholics complained that many of the teachers Sáenz recruited to serve in the program had been educated in Protestant schools. His brother Aarón Sáenz was appointed Secretary of Foreign Relations, and when Obregón was killed after his re-election to the presidency in 1928, there was an orchestrated movement to appoint Aarón as President of Mexico. In the end, Calles decided that the country was not ready for a Protestant President and the nomination was withdrawn.

Nevertheless, Protestants continued to participate in the Mexican government, some at very high levels of authority.

At the grassroots level, Mexican Protestants defended the government even when their own churches were targeted by its harsh anti-religious policies. After President Calles issued his anti-clerical decrees in the summer of 1926, he received supportive letters from Protestants such as the following one from Leonidas Espinosa and the Evangelical Brotherhood in Torreon, Coahuila: “We call your attention to the fact that the Enemy of humanity and the enemy of the laws of our country, enemy even of the federation, is planning to protest against your recent dispositions. Now more than ever you must carry yourself like a Hercules in order to crush our


46. Numerous petitions nominating Aarón Sáenz for President of the Republic, dated from November 17 to 22, 1928, are preserved in O-C 104-S-57, AGN. McKechnie, 246.
enemy.” Protestants also sent Calles and his successors numerous letters complaining that Catholics were conducting open air meetings and religious processions in clear violation of the anti-clerical decrees. When Catholics sought to use these same laws against Protestant activities, Protestants responded that the laws should not be applied to them because, unlike Catholicism, Protestantism was consistent with the government’s progressive aims. For example, when Enrique Valdés was ordered to stop holding worship services in his home, he protested that: “the character of these services are…to evangelize the immense multitudes that are living in the greatest idolatry known to the present and I believe in the obligation of all good evangicals to work to defanaticize all those who are within their reach.” “Fanaticism” was a shorthand term by which government officials referred to the presumed baleful influence of the Catholic Church. Its frequent use by Protestants for the same purpose indicates clearly that in the church-state struggle their loyalties lay unequivocally with the government.

The government’s anti-religious crusade may have reached its apogee in the state of Tabasco where Marxist Governor Garrido Canabal expelled all priests and ministers, closed all churches, and sent his “red shirt” followers into private homes to collect and burn all Bibles and religious images. He also ordered parents to send their children to public schools where the curriculum was explicitly anti-religious and he required workers to attend rallies on Sunday mornings where they heard lectures railing against God, religion, and alcohol, and praising the virtues of Marxism, atheism, and rationalism. Even there, however, Protestants not only refused to identify themselves with the persecuted Catholics, they offered public support for Tabasco’s radical governor.

One obvious reason for the Protestants’ reaction was their deep-seated mistrust of the Catholic Church. Protestants charged that it had provoked the Governor’s anti-religious crusade by promoting bigotry and superstition among the people. While they deplored the governor’s

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47 Leonidas Espinosa y la Hermandad Evangélica al Presidente de la Republica, July 26, 1926, O-C 104-L-23, AGN (my translation). See also DGG-2.340 (1-1) 11 C:45 E:28, Secretario de Gobernación, AGN.

48 Enrique Valdés to Secretario de Gobernación, Saltillo, Coahuila, October 31, 1933, DGG-C27-E15, 2/340(3)/10,300, AGN (my translation).

49 Bennett, 71-74.
promotion of atheism, they expressed satisfaction that the destruction of religious images was finally persuading the masses that the icons possessed no supernatural powers.50

But more was involved than the mere desire to see their religious rivals discredited. Tabasco’s Protestants opposed the use of alcohol and so they supported the governor’s temperance crusade. In fact, several evangelists won his grudging respect, and a degree of official toleration, by giving temperance lectures at the Sunday morning workers’ meetings. Moreover they acknowledged that, in contrast to former governors, Garrido Canabal had the interest of the workers at heart. Most of Tabasco’s Protestants were laborers and farmers from remote areas and they took note of the governor’s efforts to secure better wages for workers, to improve agricultural and livestock production, and to build roads and airstrips in the interior of the state. Given all of these benefits, they felt that the sufferings they had to endure were well worth it. As one hardy Presbyterian expressed it: “Although many believers suffered for their faith, none was killed, seriously injured, or even imprisoned for more than a few days.”51

Another remarked of Garrido Canabal:
He was only a Socialist, not a Communist. He desired to raise the economic and social level of the people. He was the first to begin to light the way; to … establish Sunday cultural meetings so the people would open their eyes. … He attacked the Catholics but the Evangelicals were caught up in it. … In the schools he required that the children be given good food…He was not influenced by the Evangelical Church, but he was a good friend of the Evangelicals.52

Protestants were not entirely silent in the face of the government’s radical excesses. When leaders of the official labor organization—the CROM—accused Protestants of being agents of U.S. imperialism, a group of pastors issued a strong protest and asserted their complete loyalty to the Mexican nation.53 Protestants also expressed frustration with the government’s

50 McGavran, Huegel, Taylor, 80.
51 Bennett, 71-74.
52 McKechnie, 290f.
53 The CROM’s anti-Protestant resolutions are recorded in Nicolás Marín Negueruela, La Verdad Sobre Méjico, o antecedents,historicos, origin, desarrollo y vicissitudes en la persecucion religiosa en Mejico. Segunda Edicion (Barcelona: Tipografía Católica Casals, [1928]), 315-320. For the response of “the Evangelical Ministers of Mexico City” see: Miguel Z. Garza, Vincent Medraza, C. E. Morales, Eleazor Z. Pérez, David G. Ruesga, P. Flores
educational policies which compelled the closing of nearly all Protestant schools and they protested the materialistic character of the “Socialist Education” promulgated by Secretary of Education Narciso Bassols. When John MacKay, Secretary of the Presbyterian Mission Board, was asked by Protestant teachers what they should do when ordered to sing the “International” at the start of each school day, he responded:
We think it unfortunate … that songs which are … associated with a foreign anti-religious movement, and which … inculcate sentiments of hate in children, should become an integral and obligatory part of the curriculum of the school. I say this while having the deepest sympathy with some of the most radical social and revolutionary movements on the continent…

Nevertheless, while they resented these radical excesses, Protestants generally blamed them on the Catholic Church which, in their view, had provoked them. One Presbyterian editor bemoaned the fact that socialist education was launched by political elites who were disillusioned with the Catholic Church but who had never encountered the true evangelical gospel. He urged his readers to show by their words and works that the true Christian faith is compatible with progress and open-mindedness. Episcopal Bishop Efrain Salinas y Velasco went even further:
We have faith that socialist education is trying precisely to prepare the future generations for the conscious enjoyment of those goods that must be collective; to illuminate their minds in such a manner that the darkness of fanaticism, of superstition, and of ignorance will not be able to cloud the moral and intellectual development of our people along the paths of new goals and methods by which the Mexican people are directing themselves. In a word, one doesn’t want “to sew a patch of new material onto old clothes, nor pour new wine into old wineskins” as the Master declares.

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Valderrama, Ignacio P. Chagoyán, Eduardo Zapata, V. D. Báez, V. G. Santín to Presidente de la Republica, Aug. 26, 1927, O-C 104-C-124, AGN.

54 McKechnie, 280.


56 Protestant Episcopal Church, USA, Convención del Distrito Misionero de México, 1934, 15.
Lay Protestants also expressed loyalty to the government, as when a delegation of “evangelical campesinos” who had come to Mexico City for a church gathering asked for an audience with the President so that they could personally convey “their respect and admiration.”

By most measures, General Lázaro Cárdenas, who served as President from 1934 to 1940, was the most radical of Mexico’s post-Revolutionary executives. While he defused the Church-state conflict by relaxing enforcement of the anti-clerical provisions of the Constitution and downplaying “Socialist Education,” in economic matters he was far to the left of any other President in the history of Mexico. Cárdenas redistributed more than fifty million acres of farmland, more than all of his predecessors combined. He put the weight of his office behind efforts to improve the lot of the Indigenous people. And he nationalized Mexico’s oil industry despite intense opposition from foreign oil companies and their allies in the U.S. government.

Historians have noted that Cárdenas faced substantial opposition throughout his presidency, much of it directed by the Catholic hierarchy. By contrast, Protestant leaders and publications often praised him and embraced the goals of his administration. For example, the Consejo Evangélico Nacional which included Methodists, Congregationalists, Disciples, and Friends, published a statement in 1936 claiming that Protestants had always been concerned with the poor and oppressed, that these were the sort of people who filled its ranks, and that while they believed that private property is good, they also recognized it had a legitimate social function which they contrasted with greed, competition, and the bad use of money. The editor of the Presbyterian monthly *El Faro* praised Cárdenas for launching two crusades, one against illiteracy and the other against alcoholism. He proudly noted that Mexican Protestants had been working on these two issues for more than fifty years. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, *El Faro* ran a series of articles expressing sympathy for the Spanish Republican government and condemning Fascism which it characterized as a cynical alliance between a corrupt Catholic Church and a military dictator. On several occasions, *El Faro* made the point that President

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57 Abraham M. Avila, telegram to President de la Republica, April 21, 1934, ALR 514/62, AGN.

58 Negrete, 286.

Cárdenas was defending democracy and religious freedom against fanatical Catholics who wanted Mexico to follow in the footsteps of General Francisco Franco. 60

Cárdenas’ agrarian reform program was opposed by the Catholic clergy as a violation of the eighth commandment, but many Protestants supported it. In Michoacán, the state where Cárdenas had served as governor prior to becoming President, Catholic communities tended to support the Cristeros who resisted government efforts to redistribute land, whereas Protestant communities generally sided with the government and fought against the Cristeros. Moreover, ranchos and ejidos that had received land from the government were said to be more receptive to Protestantism than other rural communities. 61 Some Protestants agreed with the Catholics that land should not be taken without compensation, but that did not necessarily preclude involvement in agrarian reform. For example, the Presbyterian Church sponsored fourteen agrarian colonies in Chiapas which were comprised of “day laborers … renters and small property owners…” The colonies combined traditional Indigenous patterns of communal landholding with capitalist features such as the obligation of the community to purchase the land rather than receive it as a grant from the government. The project served as the model for a law proposed to the Mexican Chamber of Deputies. 62 In Vera Cruz, Methodist Pastor Abraham Avila helped thirty-three towns to obtain land from the government. Some Methodists complained that the church should not get involved in such activities. In reply Avila wrote:

We say that we must be salt of the earth and light of the world … it is natural that we should endeavor to do this because right now we are in a better condition, culturally and spiritually, to see how things ought to be, so it is also our obligation to … do all the good that we can as good Christians and as good Mexicans. 63

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60 See for example: Guillermo de la Torre, “Miras politicas del Romanismo actual,” El Faro, 52, no. 7 (April 1, 1937): 5 and 16; Marcelino Domingo, “El Catolicismo en Rebeldía,” El Faro, 52, no. 9 (May 1, 1937): 4-9.


62 McKechnie, 249-251.

Other Protestants echoed Avila’s perspective. A member of the Church of the Bretheren noted that Friends were working to promote health and education at a communal ejido in the Laguna District. She praised the government’s redistribution of land, saying “for thousands, the change has meant new liberty and opportunity.”

Protestants played a surprisingly crucial role in the efforts of the Cárdenas Administration to incorporate the Indigenous people more fully into the life of the nation. In 1935, President Cárdenas commissioned Moisés Sáenz to draw up plans for a new department of Indigenous Affairs. Sáenz’s plan envisioned a more culturally sensitive approach to development work among the Indigenous people. His plan was adopted in its entirety, but his hopes of becoming head of the new department were disappointed. Nevertheless, Sáenz’s concern to improve the lot of the Indigenous continued and in 1940, with support from President Cárdenas, he convened a Congreso Indigenista in Pátzcuaro, Mexico. Representatives from several American nations came including John Collier from the United States. The Congress urged each of the participating nations to establish a Department of Indigenous Affairs and offered the following recommendations to guide their policies toward their own Indigenous people:

I. Indian schools should use native teachers and native languages should be taught.

II. Indians have an inalienable right to resources. They should be given productive land.

III. Political offices in Indian communities should be held by Indians.

IV. Since there is no scientific evidence proving innate biological or mental differences between Indians and other racial groups, they should have equal rights.

The conference concluded by establishing an Inter-American Indian Institute and it chose Sáenz to be the first Director.

Moisés Sáenz made one other important contribution to Mexico’s Indigenous people. On a visit to Guatemala he met Cameron Townshend, a North American missionary and fellow Presbyterian who was pioneering the concept of using indigenous languages rather than Spanish.

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64 Hieronymus, *Friends in Mexico*, 24.

65 Moisés Sáenz, telegram to President Lázaro Cárdenas, Sept. 14, 1935, LCR 533.4/1 Legajo 1, AGN. Moisés Sáenz to Luis J. Rodriguez, Secretary to the President, Nov. 7, 1935, LCR 533.4/1, Legajo 1, AGN.

66 See the Lázaro Cárdenas file 533.4/1, Legajos 1-4, AGN.
in evangelism. Sáenz invited Townshend to do the same sort of work in Mexico. At the time, missionary work was strictly forbidden by the government, however Townshend was able to secure an interview with President Cárdenas himself and the two formed an alliance based on complementary interests. Cárdenas had a great desire to communicate directly with the Indigenous people, unmediated by the Spanish-speaking political bosses who traditionally managed their affairs. Townshend wanted to translate the gospel into the languages of the Indigenous people so they could read the Bible for themselves, unmediated by Spanish-speaking priests. The two agreed that Townshend would bring “trained linguists” to Mexico to render Indigenous languages into written form and that in return the linguists would help the government convey its progressive message directly to the Indigenous people. It was more than a marriage of convenience. Townshend wrote a glowing biography of the idealistic Mexican President who put the needs of the poor first, and when Cárdenas nationalized Mexico’s oil industry, Townshend toured the United States defending his action. For his part, Cárdenas visited the translation site and expressed great appreciation for the kind of religion represented by the translators. In fact, he even paid their salaries out of the budget for Indigenous Affairs.

The victory of Manuel Avila Camacho, President Cárdenas’ designated successor, in the 1940 elections, proved to be a watershed in the history of Church-State relations in Mexico for Protestants as well as Catholics. Avila Camacho’s pronouncement “I am a believer” indicated that the government was ready for détente with the Catholic clergy. For Catholics, it represented a chance to reopen schools and restore some previously banned religious practices such as public processions. For Protestants, it meant the loss of a powerful ally. During the next six years, the Avila Camacho administration turned a blind eye toward acts of religious persecution directed at Protestants and it pursued a policy of passive resistance to Protestant requests for the opening of new churches—more than 1000 requests for permits were ignored by the government during that time. The Mexican government became more even-handed under Avila Camacho’s successors who protected Protestants from overt persecution and granted their petitions to build new

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68 Bowen, 230; Bridges, 13; Penton, 139; Scott, 7-14.
churches, but in the interim, Protestants’ commitment to societal improvement seems to have waned. Several factors appear to have played a part in the cooling of their sympathy for political and social reform. Most of the Protestant schools which closed in the 1920s and 30s never reopened, and so a key component in the formation of their distinctive outlook, and their social influence, was lost. The demise of the schools left Protestants dependent on secular public institutions or on seminaries that were narrowly religious in focus. Moreover, the rise of Pentecostalism confronted old-style Protestants with a challenge to their leadership from within the evangelical community, and many responded with defensiveness and dogmatism that focused their attention on religious and ecclesiastical issues. Finally, many urban Protestants shared in the growing prosperity of the post-war years and this encouraged a more conservative outlook on life. Increasingly they viewed Communism as a greater threat than fascism. Protestant churches and leaders offered no distinctly Protestant response to the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968 or the economic austerity of the 1980s. The radical sympathies of former generations of Protestants came to seem odd, slightly embarrassing, almost unbelievable.  

Nevertheless, while the support given by Protestants to Mexico’s secular radicals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may seem odd, it was not unprecedented. French Huguenots supported the Revolution of 1789 even in its radical anti-clerical phase. Dissenters and Calvinists were prominent in the American Revolution and in the Hungarian independence movement of 1848. The strong backing given by evangelicals to both sides in the U.S. Civil War reflected warring, but not very different conceptions of liberal Protestant republicanism. Later there would be the cases of Protestants in Korea identifying themselves with national aspirations for freedom from Japanese control, and in China with democratic government and social progress as measured by broader access to education and material improvements. In the mid 1950s, Guatemalan Protestants were enthusiastic supporters of Jacobo Arbenz, and in the 1980s, mainline Protestants in Nicaragua cooperated with the Sandinistas. Perhaps the strong support given by Protestants to Mexico’s secular radicals was not anomalous at all but rather the  

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expression of a commitment to personal and societal improvement inseparable from Protestantism itself.