

“Protestantism and Radicalism in Mexico from the 1860s to the 1930s”

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The topic of Protestantism in Latin American has received much scholarly attention in the last twenty years but most of it has focused on the appearance and growth of Pentecostalism in the second half of the twentieth century.¹ Less attention has been paid to earlier generations of Latin American Protestants.² These generally identified themselves with denominations whose roots went back to the continental Reformers of the sixteenth century and British dissenters and revivalists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While it is conventional in Latin America to lump all Protestants together as “evangélicos,” the older Protestant groups differ considerably from the more recent Pentecostal ones in theology and practice. Perhaps just as important has been the influence of the very different times and circumstances in which they emerged.

Pentecostals appeared during the Cold War when secular Marxists and their sympathizers in the Catholic Liberation Theology movement were challenging right-wing military dictatorships. The older Protestant groups by contrast, came into existence a century earlier when a conservative Catholic hierarchy was wedded to a traditional social-political order. While most Pentecostals remained apolitical or sided with the right during the brutal internal conflicts of the 1970s and

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¹ The most recent “boom” in the academic study of Latin American Protestantism seems to have begun with the publication of *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town* by Sheldon Annis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987). It was quickly followed by two broad surveys that are still quite useful: David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) and David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1990). Since then, scholarly literature on this topic has grown greatly in volume and specificity.

² For a compendium of information about Protestantism’s origins in Latin America, see Cornelius (Neal) Hegeman, *Mission to the People and Church Maintenance: The Origin and Development of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches and Missions in the Caribbean and Latin America [1528-1916]* (Atlanta: n.p., 2002).

1980s, most of the older Latin American Protestants proclaimed their support for the region's liberal reformers in the nineteenth century and its radical nationalists in the early twentieth century. It would not be too much to say that, prior to the Cold War Protestants were among the most consistently progressive elements in Latin American society.³

Nowhere is this phenomenon better documented than in Mexico. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, 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 a mere anti-Catholic prejudice: they advocated honest elections and respect for the laws, they were staunch advocates of public education, they embraced a strident nationalism even while they rejected fascism, 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 an outsized role as allies of Mexico's radical Liberals in the nineteenth century and its revolutionary nationalists in the twentieth.⁴ Their experience shows that classical Protestantism's capacity for political and social radicalism, so evident during its formative years in Europe, continued to express itself through its Latin American descendants right up to the middle of the twentieth century.

³ The progressive social vision of Latin America's Protestant intellectuals in the early twentieth century is the theme of Carlos Mondragón, *Leudar la masa: El pensamiento social de los protestantes en América Latina: 1920-1950* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós, 2005).

⁴ Three general histories of Mexican Protestantism are Gonzalo Báez Camargo and Kenneth Grubb, *Religion in the Republic of Mexico* (London: World Dominion Press, 1935); Marvin James Penton, "Mexico's Reformation: A History of Mexican Protestantism from Its Inception to the Present," (Ph.D. diss., State University of Iowa, 1965); and Kurt Bowen, *Evangelicals and Apostasy: the Evolution and Impact of Evangelicals in Modern Mexico* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996). The best histories of Mexican Protestantism's pre-Revolutionary origins are: Jean Pierre Bastian, *Los Disidentes: sociedades protestantes y revolución en México, 1872-1911* (México, D.F: El Colegio de México y Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989) and Deborah Baldwin, *Protestants and the Mexican Revolution: Missionaries, Ministers, and Social Change* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990). Two excellent denominational histories are Marian Elizabeth McKechnie, "The Mexican Revolution and the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico," (Ph.D. diss., American University, Washington, D.C., 1970); and Rubén Ruiz Guerra, *Hombres Nuevos: Metodismo y Modernización en México (1873-1930)*, (México: Centro de Comunicación Cultural CUPSA, A.C., 1992).

Protestantism began in earnest in Mexico in the last third of the nineteenth century when North American missionaries began linking up with individuals and small congregations that had broken away from the Catholic Church. By the eve of the 1910 Revolution there were around 300 missionaries, 600 Mexican preachers, and about 70,000 members, about one-half of a percent of Mexico's population.⁵ 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. Nor were there many campesino or Indigenous Protestants because these groups were still under the influence of landlords and the Catholic Church.⁶ Thirty years later, the Protestant community had more than doubled to 175,000, 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.⁷

Protestantism appeared Mexico during a time of 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

⁵ George B. Winton, *Mexico To-Day: Social, Political, and Religious Conditions* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1913), 182f and back page insert. His numbers include both ordained and lay workers, including teachers, medical workers, and spouses of foreign workers. See also Obed Arango, "The Evangelical (Protestant) Church in Mexico: A History of its Involvement in Social Movements from 1870 to 2001," *American Baptist Quarterly*, 22, no. 2 (June 2003): 230; Baldwin, 58-60; Bastian, *Los Disidentes*, 320; Penton, 76-108, *passim*; McKechnie, 46f, 64f.

⁶ Ruiz Guerra, 101f; Baldwin, 98-100; Bastian, *Disidentes*, 87-90; Bastian, *Protestantismo y sociedad en México* (México, D.F.: CUPSA, 1983), 15-16.

⁷ Marta Elena 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.

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 offered 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. In contrast, liberals believed that the Catholic clergy exercised a malign influence on society, encouraging superstition 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.⁸

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 had 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 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

⁸ The mid-nineteenth century struggle between Liberals and Conservatives over the wealth of the Catholic Church is described in Richard N. Sinkin, *The Mexican Reform, 1857-1876: A Study in Liberal Nation Building* (Austin: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1979) and Paul Vanderwood, "Betterment for Whom? The Reform Period: 1855-1875," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, edited by Michael C. Meyer and William L. Beezley, 371-396 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Alberto Rosales- Pérez, *Legislación Religiosa* (México, D.F.: n.p., 1990).

on candles for the saints.” Mexican Protestants have regarded Juárez as a sort of secular saint ever since.⁹

The successor to Juárez, General Porfirio Díaz, was also a Liberal, but unlike Juárez he chose to mollify Conservatives by relaxing enforcement of the anti-clerical laws and openly courting the Catholic hierarchy.¹⁰ 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 incorporation into the new export economy.¹¹

The North American missionaries who came to Mexico during this period saw 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 and 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 once Mexicans were freed from spiritual

⁹ Ruiz Guerra, 140. Juárez’s comments are approvingly recorded in *Bodas de Diamante de la Iglesia Metodista de México, 1873-1948* (n.p.: Imprenta Nueva Educación, 1948), 41 and Julian C. Bridges, *Expansión Evangélica en México* (El Paso: n.p., 1973), 11.

¹⁰ Baldwin, 32; Bastian, *Disidentes*, 173-180.

¹¹ John Mason Hart, *The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987) depicts Porfirian Mexico as an example of the “dependent capitalism” that was developing in several non-Western nations at the turn of the century.

and economic bondage, Mexico as a whole would come to resemble small town America as the missionaries remembered it: “There existed in the missionaries the image of a society of small proprietors, conscious of the place they occupied in society and prepared to do their part for the proper functioning of the whole society.”¹²

The institution that most clearly expressed their social vision was the Protestant day school. By 1910 there were 163 schools with an enrollment of approximately 12,000. Many of these 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.¹³ *El Abogado Cristiano*, a Methodist publication, called explicitly for a type of education that would liberate women from traditional Catholic teachings which, it claimed, unduly limited their prospects in life:

Educate the woman, get her away from fanaticism and clerical domination, prepare her for her destiny by means of an education that is adequate for the exigencies of the century, put a book in her hands instead of a rosary or a crucifix ... destroy in her the rancid fears that the priests have inculcated, ... finally, treat her as she deserves to be

¹² 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 as did *El Abogado Cristiano*. 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), 26-32. 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.

¹³ 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.

treated and as God himself commands, as the equal of man in capacity, intelligence, rights, and dignity...¹⁴

As the quote indicates, Protestants rejected the idea of a natural order into which a person was incorporated at birth, stressing instead the obligation of their pupils to improve themselves and their society. Protestant high schools required students 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. Kurt Bowen maintains that toward the end of the Porfirio Díaz era, the radical implications of this commitment to liberal ideals were being expressed more openly: “By 1905 the former emphasis on patriotism had been replaced by a new stress on liberty, civil rights, their centrality in Evangelical life, and the many hindrances to their achievement in secular society.”¹⁵ Benito Juárez was frequently held up as a paragon of civic virtue in ways which invited invidious comparisons to Porfirio Díaz whose administration was notoriously corrupt.¹⁶ While the North American missionaries who sponsored these schools could not have known it, they were inculcating ideas that would soon be championed by Mexico’s revolutionary leaders.

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

¹⁴ *Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado*, Nov. 1, 1887. See also Laura Espejel López, “El metodismo en Miraflores, Estado de México. Una experiencia local (1874-1929),” in *El Protestantismo en México (1850-1940): La Iglesia Metodista Episcopal*, Laura Espejel López and Rubén Ruiz Guerra, pp91-113 (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1995), 102f.

¹⁵ Bowen, 30. See also Ma[ría] Eugenia Fuentes Bazán, “La educación metodista y la Constitución de 1917,” in *El Protestantismo en México (1850-1940). La Iglesia Metodista Episcopal*, eds. Laura Espejel López and Rubén Ruiz Guerra (México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1995), 134 and *Bodas de Diamante*, 121-123.

¹⁶ Ruiz Guerra, 114f.

United States. He notes that Protestant ministers were often recruited from among artisans who had been displaced from their trades by factories and foreign imports. Many of them, particularly the Methodists, also participated in Masonic organizations which had a reputation for harboring heterodox religious and political ideas.¹⁷ Their message was one of personal salvation and taking charge of one's personal life. Protestantism and liberal political and social views accorded well with their experience and provide them with a moral compass for the self-directed lives they were compelled to lead in a nation undergoing rapid modernization. More was at stake, though, than a new set of values. After joining a Protestant church, converts often found themselves marginalized in their communities. Protestant churches provided them with new communities, located within the larger communities that viewed them with suspicion and hostility. This tended to foster strong bonds within Protestant communities and promoted a keen awareness of their identity as individuals who had broken with the status quo and followed an unpopular path.¹⁸

A copy of the Bible, carried in public by individual converts, was a widely recognized marker of Protestant identity. Possession of a Bible implied literacy, which was encouraged by both American missionaries and Mexican ministers alike as a mark of progress, and it bespoke a religious commitment which was embraced rather than simply inherited and was maintained by intelligent assent rather than the "blind obedience" that Protestants ascribed to the Catholic laity.¹⁹ As one contemporary North American observer put it: "By thrusting final responsibility

¹⁷ Bastian, *Protestantismo y sociedad*, 10-11, 15-16; Bastian, *Disidentes*, 88-90; Ruiz Guerra, 103; Baldwin, 48f, 98-100.

¹⁸ Penton, 161f, Ruiz Guerra, 108-110. See also Oscar Lewis, *Tepzotlán: A Village in Mexico* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 22.

¹⁹ Mc Kechnie, 35. Ruiz Guerra, 152f.

on the individual brain and heart, it [the Bible] is in particular the enemy of a religion which habitually delegates authority on the one hand and demands submission on the other.”²⁰

Not surprisingly, Mexican Protestants shared the radical Liberals’ antipathy for the Catholic Church, attributing many of the nation’s ills to its influence. The famous Presbyterian educator Moisés Sáenz was merely summarizing the opinion of two generations of Mexican Protestants when he asserted:

Church-making was a very profitable business for the clergy. Mexico ... is pretty well covered with Catholic church buildings, and the Indians have been trained to support these churches. ... In the Indian there is, however, no clear conception of Christianity ... Due to this fact ... religion in my country can mean no unifying influence, no binding together of purpose, no spiritual kinship.²¹

Protestant hostility toward the 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.²²

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

²⁰ Winton, *Mexico To-Day*, 179f.

²¹ Moisés Sáenz, “The Program of the Mexican Government,” in Moisés Sáenz and Herbert I. Priestly, 3-84, *Some Mexican Problems [Lectures on the Harris Foundation, 1926]*,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 58.

²² Báez Camargo and Grubb, *Religion in the Republic of Mexico*, 87-90; Baldwin, 25f; *Bodas de Diamante*, 278-285, *passim*.

Catholic Church had revived the Roman clergy's ambition to dominate Mexico religiously. It was here that religious and political discontents merged into a strong critique of the Porfirian order and its religious oppression and political corruption. North American missionaries were reluctant to criticize the Díaz administration too openly because they were dependent on its goodwill. Likewise, during the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s, they sought to avoid taking sides, going only so far as to oppose United States intervention (partly in recognition that the revolution was popular among Mexican Protestants and out of fear of nationalist reprisals by Mexicans). Native Protestants felt less constrained. Moreover, as time went on their complaints broadened from purely religious issues to include the obviously fraudulent electoral tactics and the repression by which Díaz maintained himself in power and silenced dissent.²³

By the start of the twentieth century, native Protestants were forging alliances with radical Liberals who were opposed to the Díaz regime. 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 forty-two delegates who came.²⁴ Five years later, when the 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.²⁵ 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

²³ Baldwin, 88-94, 105f; Bastian, *Disidentes*, 213-228; Elizabeth M. Lee, *Methodism in Mexico* (New York: The Methodist Church, 1945?), 11. Jean A. Meyer, "Una historia política de la religión en México contemporáneo." *Historia Mexicana*. 42:3 (1993): 711-744, see p724.

²⁴ Carlos Mondragón, "México: de la militancia revolucionario al letargo social," in C. René Padilla, editor, 61-76, *De la Marginación al Compromiso* (Argentina: Fraternidad Teologica Latinoamericana, 1991), 65.

²⁵ Bastian, *Disidentes*, 233-237.

disband because it regarded the church as a center of workers' agitation.²⁶

While radicalism appealed to some Protestants, the effort to organize peaceful opposition to Díaz initially attracted much broader support. Protestants responded enthusiastically when Francisco Madero, a democratic Liberal, challenged Díaz in the election of 1910. However 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."²⁷ In support of Inman's observation, a questionnaire sent to Protestant missionaries throughout Mexico in 1911 found that most Mexican congregations supported the Madero revolt.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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

²⁶ Arango, 229; Michael C. Meyer, William C. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 7th Edition (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 468; Bastian, *Disidentes*, 237-243.

²⁷ Quoted in Mondragón, 67 (my translation).

²⁸ McKechnie, 100.

²⁹ Ruiz Guerra, 125. See also Mondragón, 67f.

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.³⁰

In light of Madero's uncertain course, some Protestants pursued more radical options. Pascual Orozco 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 Montaña, 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.³¹ However, most Protestants remained aloof from these radical alternatives to the Madero Presidency, though they viewed the situation with growing concern.

Paradoxically, for many Protestants the clouds of doubt and confusion parted when General Victoriano Huerta seized control of the government and murdered President Madero. 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.³²

³⁰ Jesús Reyes Heróles, "La Iglesia y el Estado," in *México: Cincuenta Años de Revolución*, vol. III: *La Política*, 341-372 (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1961), describes how priests sought to influence the vote in the elections of 1912 (p368). Robert E. Quirk, *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1910-1929* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973), describes the religiously charged politics of the Madero period (pp25-33). See also J. Lloyd Mecham, *Church and State in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), 460f; Penton, 120f.

³¹ Arango, 229. Bastian, *Disidentes*, see footnote 108 (p 300).

³² 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 (p185).

Carranza enjoyed a degree of support among Protestants far above that which they gave to his Revolutionary rivals, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. While most Mexicans viewed the bookish Carranza as cold and aloof, to Protestants his self-presentation embodied rationality and professionalism, qualities which had long been prized in the Protestant community with its emphasis on formal education and self-control.³³ Moreover as his movement unfolded it became clear that he intended to establish a Liberal republic like the one envisioned by the nineteenth 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.³⁴

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 state 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.³⁵

The fruits of Mexico's revolution began to appear in 1917 when Carranza, having emerged victorious over his rivals, convened a Constitutional Congress to give his movement a formal political basis. The resulting Constitution incorporated demands for redistribution of land,

³³ See e.g., Manuel Zavaleta to Venustiano Carranza, May 2, 1915: C38, L4104, D1 and Alfonso Herrera to Venustiano Carranza, Jan. 14, 1916: C-65, L-7224, D-1, CONDUMEX: Archivo Venustiano Carranza (hereinafter cited as AVC).

³⁴ Kurt Bowen, *Evangelicals and Apostasy: the Evolution and Impact of Evangelicals in Modern Mexico* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 32; James Ervin Helms, "Origins and Growth of Protestantism in Mexico to 1920," (Diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1955), 552; McKechnie, 124.

³⁵ Juan Bortina[?] to Venustiano Carranza, May 15, 1916: C-77, L- 8559, D-1, AVC; Andrés Osuna to Aarón Sáenz, Dec. 11, 1916: C-106 L-12,121, D-1, AVC; Alfonso Herrera to Venustiano Carranza, Dec. 19, 1915: C-63 L-6998 D-1, AVC; Andrés Osuna to Venustiano Carranza, April 16, 1916: C-74 L-8056 D-1, AVC. See also James Garvin Chastain, *Thirty Years in Mexico* (El Paso: n.p., 1927), 119; Sara Quintanilla Reyes, "The Place of Moisés Sáenz in Mexican Education," (M.A. Thesis, Austin: University of Texas, 1952), 35; Bowen, 32; Baldwin, 130; McKechnie, 126f.

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: 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. Churches could not own property, their places of worship now belonged to the nation. Religious bodies could not establish or conduct primary schools, and religious instruction was prohibited in all primary schools, public or private. Only Mexicans by birth could act as priests or ministers. Priests and ministers could not vote, take part in political activities, or criticize the laws, the government, or public officials. Finally, 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.³⁶

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.³⁷

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

³⁶ Alberto Rosales Pérez, *Estado e Iglesia en Mexico: Legislación Religiosa* (México, D.F.: n.p., 1990), 143-176, *passim*; Báez-Camargo and Grubb, 150-153; Justo Anderson, *Historia de los Bautistas*. Tomo III: *Sus Comienzas y Desarrollo en Asia, Africa y América Latin* (El Paso: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1990), 46. For a discussion of the politics of the Constitutional Congress see Quirk, chapter 4.

³⁷ McKechnie, 134.

denominational agency.³⁸ 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 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. Given the nationalist tenor of the times in Mexico, it is hard to conceive a less favorable moment for the introduction of an externally-imposed project.³⁹

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 Josué 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 salaried employees of their local congregations and answerable to them rather than the Mission Board.⁴⁰ Mexican Baptists also tried to take control of the denominational journal and when the Mission Board denied their 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

³⁸ Luis Scott, "Los Evangélicos Mexicanos en el Siglo XX," (México, D.F.: Editorial Kyrós, n.d.), 3f; Baldwin, 157-162; McKechnie, 173-182.

³⁹ Báez-Camargo and Grubb, 93, 104f. For negative reaction to the Plan, see also Zalatiel Jiménez, Bulletin from the Methodist Church "El Mesías," Feb. 1, 1970; McKechnie, 173, 190; Penton, 213; Scott, 4.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 50-52. Frank Willard Patterson, *A Century of Baptist Work in Mexico* (El Paso, n.p., 1979), 149-151.

economically self-supporting.⁴¹ In similar fashion, Mexican Methodists and Presbyterians took control of their respective 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."⁴²

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 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.⁴³

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 too there were 115 Protestant elementary schools with a total enrollment of around 8,700 and twenty-seven schools of higher education with an enrollment of over 2,100 students. While these numbers represented a decline of perhaps 25 percent 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

⁴¹ Patterson, 149-151.

⁴² 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 and Ruiz Guerra, 129f. Re Presbyterians, see McKechnie, 158-162.

⁴³ Bowen, 35; Jean Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People between Church and State, 1926-1929*. Trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 26; Regis Planchet, *La Intervención Protestante en México y Sud America* (El Paso, Texas: Editorial "Revista Catolica," 1928), 61.

(1920), las Asembleas de Dios (1921), and the Mennonites (1922).⁴⁴ Also making its appearance in the 1920s was an indigenous Pentecostal church: Luz del Mundo.⁴⁵ While these Protestant groups varied considerably in their understanding of the church's role in society and its relationship to government, all expressed the view that the estrangement between the Catholic Church and the Revolutionary government had created opportunities for Protestants.⁴⁶

The real test of Protestant loyalty to the new regime came when the church-state conflict degenerated into acts of official repression and violent resistance that lasted from the late 1920s to 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.⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁴ Chastain, 119-124; W[illia]m A. Ross, *Sunrise in Aztec Land* (Richmond, VA, and Texarkana, AK/TX: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1922), 242; F. H. Soltero, *The Romance of the Pilgrim Missions in Mexico* (Indianapolis: Pilgrim Publishing House, [1937]), 10; the Protestant Episcopal Church, USA, Annual Report of the Presiding Bishop and Council for the Year 1921; Velia Patricia Barragan Cisneros, *Mennonitas: Etnicidad y Derecho* (Durango: Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango, 1996), 21f; Bridges, 13.

⁴⁵ Renee De la Torre, *Los hijos de la luz: discurso, identidad y poder en La Luz del Mundo* (Tlaquepaque, Jalisco: n.p., 1995), 56-60.

⁴⁶ See e.g., *Bodas de Diamante*, 128-131, 160-162; Chastain, 149f, 155; De la Torre, 154f; Henry D. Aves, Report of the Bishop, Missionary District of Mexico, Protestant Episcopal Church USA: Annual Report (1921): 170-173; Patterson, 123; W. Reginald Wheeler, Dwight Day, and James B. Rodgers, *Modern Missions in Mexico* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1925), 205.

⁴⁷ Jiménez, Dec. 28, 1969. Quirk, 99-109.

convulsed Mexico throughout the remainder of Calles' presidency and resulted in tens of thousands of deaths including Alvaro Obregón who was assassinated by a Catholic zealot after his reelection to the Presidency in 1928.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

Mexico's Protestant community was caught in the middle of this religious conflict. On the 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.

⁴⁸ Plutarco Elías 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., Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1926), see back pages. Protestant observers tended to blame the conflict on the intransigence of the Catholic bishops, e.g., Báez Camargo and Grubb, *Religion*, 75-79 and Jiménez, Mar. 29, 1970. Most scholarly accounts portray Calles as the primary instigator of the crisis, e.g., Quirk, 137-187, *passim*; Meyer, *Cristero Rebellion*, 34-50; Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 125-130.

⁴⁹ For the perspective of one President, see Emilio Portes Gil, *The Catholic Clergy against the Mexican Government*. Mexico City, D.F.: Trans News Agency, 1934. Charles Bennett, *Tinder in Tabasco: A Study in Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 71-75. Bowen, 40. Mecham, 495-501. McKechnie, 229f. Protestant Episcopal Church, U.S.A., Annual Report of the National Council for the Year 1932, 188. Penton, 138. Quirk, 246. Scott, 7.

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.⁵⁰ 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 the number of Protestant missionaries was reduced from 261 to 156.⁵¹ Moreover those who stayed found their activities greatly circumscribed. Bishop Creighton of the Episcopal Church complained: “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.”⁵² Even Mexican ministers faced restrictions such as a prohibition on religious gatherings in private homes or out of doors. In the most extreme cases, such as Tabasco under Governor Tomás Garrido Canabal, all priests and pastors were expelled and all religious activities, both Protestant and Catholic, were outlawed.⁵³

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

⁵⁰ See e.g., Frank W. Creighton, *Missionary District of Mexico: Report of the Bishop for 1926*, pp159-164, Protestant Episcopal Church USA, Annual Report for 1926, 159; Soltero, 19; Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Mormon Passage: A Missionary Chronicle*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 99f.

⁵¹ Bridges, 12f; McKechnie, 212 and 236; Meyer, *Cristero Rebellion*, 43. By comparison, the number of Catholic priests, foreign and native, dropped from 4,492 in 1926 to 111 in 1935! (Bowen, 36).

⁵² Rev. Frank W. Creighton, “The Church’s Work Today in Mexico,” *Spirit of Missions*, 94 (Jan. 1928): 15-20, quote is from p17. See also Protestant Episcopal Church, U.S.A., Decima Cuarta Convención del Distrito Misionero de México, 1927, Appendix D: “Report of Archdeacon Watson,” 59.

⁵³ Enrique Valdés to Secretario de Gobernación, Saltillo, Coah., Oct. 31, 1933: DGG C27 E15 2/340 (3)/10,300, Archivo General de la Nación (hereinafter abbreviated as AGN); Bennett, 71-89; Jiménez, June 14, 1970; Donald Anderson McGavran, John Huegel, and Jack Taylor, *Church Growth in Mexico* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 80f; F. H. Soltero, *Romance of the Pilgrim Missions in Mexico* (Indianapolis: Pilgrim Publishing House, [1937]), 77f.

government schools. However the main reason for the decline was the strictly enforced prohibition of religious teaching in primary schools.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ Even some medical facilities were affected: a Methodist hospital in Torreon was closed because religious services were held there for the patients.⁵⁷

Compounding their difficulties, Protestants faced growing persecution from their Catholic neighbors. At a time when they were locked in mortal combat with the revolutionary government, Catholics viewed Protestants, with some reason, as the allies of their sworn enemies. With less justification but equal effect, influential Catholics 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

⁵⁴ Báez Camargo and Grubb, *Religion*, 111f. Fuentes Bazán, 138-140. Hieronimus, 18-20. Patterson, 142. Creighton, “The Church’s Work Today in Mexico,” 19.

⁵⁵ Thomas Benjamin, “Rebuilding the Nation,” in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, edited by Michael C. Meyer and William L. Beezley, 467-502, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 485f; McKechnie, 264f.

⁵⁶ Beatriz Cano Sánchez, “Pioneros de la Iglesia metodista. Un protagonista del metodismo moderno,” in *El Protestantismo en México (1850-1940). La Iglesia Metodista Episcopal*, Laura Espejel López and Rubén Ruiz 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.

⁵⁷ *Bodas de Diamante*, 127.

country and his race.⁵⁸ It did not help that Protestants continually accused Catholic priests of keeping the common people in ignorance, the better to exploit them, or that they often disseminated their anti-Catholic views with little sensitivity to the feelings of loyal Catholics who sometimes reacted with anger.⁵⁹ Moreover on some occasions Protestants did openly ally themselves with the government, as when they publicly defended the anti-clerical legislation or joined agrarista communities, thus appearing to confirm the suspicions of Cristeros and other militant Catholics.⁶⁰

Whatever their justification, Catholics acting individually or in groups committed numerous acts of violence against Protestants during the 1920s and 1930s. Sometimes the target was the church or the house of the minister, but there were frequent attacks on people as well. Eusebio Joaquín González, founder of Luz del Mundo, was beaten by Cristeros.⁶¹ Two Quakers were killed by Catholics in Tamaulipas.⁶² 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 baser

⁵⁸ Catholic anti-Protestant claims are analyzed in Dennis R. Palmer, "The American Protestant Conspiracy Theory of Mexican History: A Case Study in the Literature of Mexican Militant Catholicism" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, 1978).

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the overlap between Catholic-Protestant and Cristero-Agrarista divisions, see Butler, 68-79.

⁶¹ De la Torre, 56f.

⁶² Hieronimus, 21f.

motives may have played a role as the goods of fleeing Protestants were often seized by the perpetrators of the violence.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ Moisés' 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 Sáenz's nomination was withdrawn.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Protestants continued to participate in the revolutionary government, some at very high levels of authority.

⁶³ 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, identidad y poder en La Luz del Mundo* (Tlaquepaque, Jalisco: n.p., 1995), 56-60; Soltero 43-46; Saul Tijerina González, *Peregrinaje de un pueblo* (San Cristobál de las Casas: n.p., 1993), 22; Scott, 5f.

⁶⁴ Sáenz, "The Program of the Mexican Government," 78; John A. Britton, "Moisés Sáenz: Nacionalista Mexicano," *Historia Mexicana*, 22, no. 1 (Julio-Sept., 1972): 77-97, page 77; Palmer, 82.

⁶⁵ 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. See also McKechnie, 246.

At the grassroots level, Mexican Protestants defended the government even when their own activities were targeted by its harsh anti-religious policies. For example, a report on education issued by the Prebyterian Church offered this sympathetic explanation the laws which prohibited religious education:

These regulations may seem too radical; doubtless they are, but they have to be considered in the light of past history, when the Roman Church was actively fighting the State. The conditions which justified these measures may have disappeared, but there is a feeling among Liberal leaders that were these restrictions to disappear, the Church would again try her policy of propaganda against public institutions.⁶⁶

Eusebio Joaquín González, founder of Luz del Mundo, was jailed by the government for preaching in the open air, nevertheless this veteran of Carranza's army and self-proclaimed Pentecostal prophet described Mexico as God's "chosen nation" and urged his followers to celebrate national holidays as religious events and to regard its liberal heroes—Father Hidalgo and Benito Juárez—as secular saints.⁶⁷ After President Calles issued his anti-clerical decrees in the summer of 1926, he received numerous supportive letters from Protestants such as the following one from Leonidas Espinosa and the Evangelical Brotherhood in Torreon, Coahuila: "Now more than ever you must carry yourself like a Hercules in order to crush our enemy."⁶⁸

Other Protestants expressed their loyalty in person, as when a delegation of "evangelical

⁶⁶ Quoted in Wheeler, 225.

⁶⁷ De la Torre, 56f, 144.

⁶⁸ 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.

campesinos” who had come to Mexico City for a church conference asked for an audience with the President so that they could convey “their respect and admiration.”⁶⁹

Protestants also sent Calles and his successors many 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 is ... 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 evangelicals to work to de-fanaticize all those who are within their reach.”⁷⁰ “Fanaticism” was the 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.

Protestants were not entirely silent in the face of the Mexican 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.⁷¹ Protestants also expressed frustration with the

⁶⁹ Abraham M. Avila, telegram to President de la Republica, April 21, 1934: ALR 514/62, AGN.

⁷⁰ Enrique Valdés to Secretario de Gobernación, Saltillo, Coahuila, October 31, 1933: DGG-C27-E15, 2/340(3)/10,300, AGN (my translation).

⁷¹ The CROM’s anti-Protestant resolutions are recorded in Nicolás Marín Negueruela, *La Verdad Sobre Méjico, o antecedentes, 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 Valdarrama, 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.

government's 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..."⁷²

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.⁷³ 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."⁷⁴

⁷² McKechnie, 280.

⁷³ "La Escuela y la Religión, *El Faro*, 48, no. 11 (Nov. 1933): 3, 13.

⁷⁴ Protestant Episcopal Church, USA, Convención del Distrito Misionero de México, 1934, 15.

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 that railed against God, religion, and alcohol, and praised Marxism, atheism, and rationalism.⁷⁵ 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 promotion of atheism, they expressed satisfaction that the destruction of religious images was finally persuading the masses that the icons possessed no supernatural powers.⁷⁶

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 genuinely 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

⁷⁵ Bennett, 71-74.

⁷⁶ McGavran, Huegel, Taylor, 80.

improve agricultural and livestock production, and to build roads and airstrips in the interior of the state. In the eyes of one Protestant from Tabasco, the Governor

... 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.⁷⁷

Given all of these benefits, Tabasco's Protestants 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."⁷⁸

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. In spite of, or perhaps because of, these radical measures, Cárdenas faced substantial opposition throughout his presidency, much of it directed by the Catholic hierarchy.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ McKechnie, 290f.

⁷⁸ Bennett, 71-74.

By contrast, Protestant leaders and publications often praised Cárdenas 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 because these were the sort of people who filled its ranks, and that while they believed that private property was good, they also recognized it had a legitimate social function which they contrasted with greed, competition, and the bad use of money.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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 Cárdenas was defending democracy and religious freedom against fanatical Catholics who wanted Mexico to follow the path of Spain under General Francisco Franco.⁸² Methodist Gonzalo Báez-Camargo, Secretary of Christian Education for the Committee of Cooperation for Latin America, asserted in 1940 that Jesus was a

⁷⁹ John W. Sherman, "Reassessing Cardenismo: The Mexican Right and the Failure of a Revolutionary Regime, 1934-1940," *The Americas* 54.3 (1998): 357-378.

⁸⁰ Negrete, 286.

⁸¹ "Información General," *El Faro*, 51, no. 5 (May, 1936): 2.

⁸² See for example: Guillermo de la Torre, "Miras políticas 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.

“proletarian” and a friend to workers.⁸³ And Alberto Rembao, a Congregationalist, put these revolutionary sentiments in the mouth of a Protestant character in a novel published in 1941:

Friends, my religion is the religion of liberty, of protest, of rebellion, of reform. . . . It is the religion of the prophets, of the defenders of the oppressed. It is the religion of Isaiah, of Amos, the religion of the Gospel of Luke and the religion of Saint Jerome. . . . I could mention the names of powerful Mexican revolutionary leaders who were educated in this or that Protestant school. I ask you to show me a Protestant minister who is exploiting the people today. Show me just one who is not working for the redemption of the lowest classes, of the humble classes.⁸⁴

One of Cárdenas’ most controversial programs was agrarian reform. It was roundly denounced 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.⁸⁵ Some Protestants agreed with the Catholics that land should not be taken without compensation, but that did not necessarily preclude their involvement in agrarian reform. For

⁸³ Pedro Gringoire, “El proletario de Nazaret,” in *Las manos de Cristo* (México: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1950), 45. (“Pedro Gringoire” was the pseudonym of Gonzalo Báez-Camargo.)

⁸⁴ Alberto Rembao, *Lupita. Un relato de México durante la revolución* (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Ercilla, 1941).

⁸⁵ Jim Tuck, *The Holy War in Los Altos: Regional Analysis of Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982); Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 132f; McGavran, Huegel and Taylor, 122; Meyer, *Cristero Rebellion*, 23.

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.⁸⁶ In Vera Cruz, Methodist Pastor Abraham Avila helped thirty-three towns to obtain land from the government. When some of his fellow Methodists complained that the church should not get involved in such activities, Avila replied: “it is our obligation to ... do all the good that we can as good Christians and as good Mexicans.”⁸⁷ Other Protestants echoed Avila’s perspective. A member of the Church of the Brethren 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.”⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Sáenz’s concern to improve the

⁸⁶ McKechnie, 249-251.

⁸⁷ Espejel López, “El metodismo en Miraflores,” 112.

⁸⁸ Hieronimus, *Friends in Mexico*, 24.

⁸⁹ Moisés Sáenz, telegram to President Lázaro Cárdenas, Sept. 14, 1935, LCR 533.4/1 Legajo 1, AGN. Moisés Sáenz to Luis J. Rodríguez, Secretary to the President, Nov. 7, 1935, LCR 533.4/1, Legajo 1, AGN.

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.⁹⁰

Moisés Sáenz made one other important contribution to Mexico's Indigenous people. On a visit to Guatemala he met Cameron Townsend, a North American missionary and fellow Presbyterian who was pioneering the concept of using indigenous languages rather than Spanish in evangelism. Sáenz invited Townsend to do the same sort of work in Mexico. At the time, missionary work was strictly forbidden by the government, however Townsend 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. Townsend wanted to translate the gospel into the languages of the Indigenous people so they could read the Bible for themselves, unmediated by Spanish-speaking

⁹⁰ See the Lázaro Cárdenas file 533.4/1, Legajos 1-4, AGN.

priests. The two agreed that Townsend 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. Townsend 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, Townsend 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!⁹¹

The victory of Manuel Avila Camacho, President Cardenas’ 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.⁹² 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 churches. But, crucially, in the interim, Protestants’ commitment to societal improvement seems

⁹¹ Todd Ferguson Hartch, “At the Service of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics in Mexico, 1935-1985” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2000), 63-96; William Cameron Townsend, *Lazaro Cardenas: Mexican Democrat* (Ann Arbor: G. Wahr Publishing Company, 1952). See also Scott, 7.

⁹² Bowen, 230; Bridges, 13; Penton, 139; Scott, 7-14.

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 1930s never reopened, so a key component in the formation of their distinctive outlook and social influence was lost. The demise of their 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 attention on religious and ecclesiastical issues. Finally, many urban Protestants (of all stripes) 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. By then, the radical sympathies of former generations of Protestants had come to seem odd, slightly embarrassing, almost unbelievable.⁹³

The support given by Protestants to Mexico's secular, even socialist radicals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may seem odd, but 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. Many

⁹³ Arango, 234; Paul J. Bonicelli, "Testing the Waters or Opening the Floodgates? Evangelicals, Politics, and the 'New' Mexico," *Journal of Church and State*, 39, no. 1 (1997): 107-130; Scott, 14f.

Guatemalan Protestants were enthusiastic supporters of Jacobo Arbenz in the mid 1950s and mainline Protestants in Nicaragua cooperated with the Sandinistas in the 1980s. Evidently the strong support given by Protestants to Mexico's secular radicals in years between 1867 and 1940 was not anomalous at all. While it reflected in part the pragmatic politics of a religious minority, it also was the expression of something inherent within Protestantism itself: liberal idealism about progress, education and literacy, and economic development. Their commitment to personal and social improvement reveals a facet of Protestantism as deeply rooted as the personal respectability and social conservatism of their wealthier and more socially secure descendants.