



CLERICAL IDEOLOGY IN A REVOLUTIONARY AGE: THE GUADALAJARA CHURCH AND THE IDEA OF THE MEXICAN NATION (1788–1853)

by Brian F. Connaughton

ISBN 978-1-55238-608-8

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Brian F. Connaughton
Translated by Mark Alan Healey

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University of
Calgary Press



University Press
of Colorado

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University of Calgary Press
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2N 1N4
www.uofcpress.com

University Press of Colorado
5589 Arapahoe Ave.
Boulder, CO 80303
U.S.A.
www.upcolorado.com

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Connaughton Hanley, Brian Francis

Clerical ideology in a revolutionary age: the Guadalajara church and the idea of the Mexican nation, 1788-1853 / Brian F. Connaughton; translated by Mark Alan Healey

(Latin American and Caribbean series 1498-2366 3)

Translation of: *Ideología y sociedad en Guadalajara (1788-1853)*

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55238-108-0 (bound) University of Calgary Press

ISBN 1-55238-083-1 (pbk.) University of Calgary Press

ISBN 0-87081-718-3 (bound) University Press of Colorado

ISBN 0-87081-732-9 (pbk.) University Press of Colorado

ISBN 978-1-55238-608-8 (Open Access)

1. Church and state—Mexico—Guadalajara—History—19th century.
 2. Catholic Church—Mexico—Guadalajara—History—19th century
 3. Guadalajara (Mexico)—Church history.
 4. Mexico—Politics and government—19th century.
1. Healey, Mark Alan, 1968- II. Title. III. Series.

BX1428.2.C5813 2002

322'.1'097235

C2002-911378-4

The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa
graciously financed the translation of this book.

Canada

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.



The Canada Council for the Arts

Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

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Printed and bound in Canada by AGMV Marquis.

∞ This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Page, cover design, and typesetting by Kristina Schuring.

The present book is a much-revised translation of *Ideología y sociedad en Guadalajara (1788-1853)*, Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1992.



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Acknowledgments

I have become much more conscious of how interdependent we all are after writing this book. Roughly sixteen years ago, I told Dr. Enrique Florescano of my interest in the ideological life of nineteenth-century Mexico. With his encouragement, I began a journey which has become progressively more captivating and endless. I do not wish to blame him, but rather to offer my thanks.

Dr. Florescano sent me off to Guadalajara, to the Fondo de Misceláneas of the Biblioteca Pública del Estado de Jalisco. I had the opportunity there, and in the Archivo de Jalisco, to meet Dr. Carmen Castañeda, of whom Dr. Florescano had spoken so highly. I had long known that the directors of research archives are key people, indispensable for the development of any project. Here I confirmed this. It is impossible to say just how important Dr. Castañeda and her assistants have been for this study.

In similar fashion, my colleague Luis Humberto Olivera introduced me to the Colección Lafragua of Biblioteca Nacional in Mexico City. He gave me considerable advice and led me to Liborio Villagómez and Roberto Beristain, who also helped me with their knowledge and expertise.

On the long road between my entrance into these document collections and my decision to write down the results of my research, I received a great deal of help from a large number of people. I consulted Dr. Andrés Lira constantly on all aspects of the interpretation of the documents I was finding. Professor Lira



guided this research as a dissertation director in order to fulfill the doctoral requirements of the program in Latin American Studies at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. He and his wife Cecilia offered me a home on many trips I made to the Colegio de Michoacán, in Zamora, to receive guidance, constructive criticism, and in general a sympathetic hearing.

Due to his formidable critical capacity, Dr. Lira forced me to strive for a higher level of analysis than I otherwise would have.

I had the good fortune to meet William Taylor in Guadalajara while he was researching topics similar to my own. During lunches, in various conversations, and later through correspondence, Professor Taylor offered me valuable suggestions on how to handle the material I was discovering. He freely and extensively shared with me the results of the research he was carrying out on the Mexican Church. Dr. Taylor critiqued this book chapter by chapter, contributing to the difficult task of evaluating documentary discoveries. This helped to prepare me more fully for the revisions of each chapter with Dr. Andrés Lira.

Special recognition is reserved for Dr. Álvaro Matute, then director of the Center for Foreign Students at UNAM. He gave me singular support, as well as understanding, to the point of giving me full institutional and personal backing and significant financial, moral, and professional assistance. The employees there were also always supportive of my research.

My colleagues in the Center for Foreign Students, in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the UNAM, and in the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa, as well as my students and immediate superiors, all had to deal with the highs and lows of this research. I was fortunate to experience their solidarity. In the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Dr. Norma de los Ríos, then coordinator of Latin American Studies, and her academic secretary, Dra. Carolina Ibarra, gave me continuous support. At the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa, I received intellectual stimulation and indispensable administrative support from colleagues like Maestro Daniel Toledo and Maestra Norma Zubirán. Their help and understanding is sincerely appreciated.

Conversations I had at different points with Charles Hale, Richard Morse, Rosa de Lourdes Camelo Arredondo, Sergio Ortega Noriega, Luis Ramos, José María Muriá, the late Heriberto Moreno, Guillermo de la Peña and Jaime Olveda were crucial to broadening my perspective and resolving specific problems. When it seemed like this project would have to come to a stop



due to circumstances beyond my control, Dr. Abelardo Villegas, Dra. Eugenia Revueltas and Dr. Ignacio Sosa Álvarez of UNAM and Dr. Georg Gugelberger of the University of California at Riverside came to my aid in a singular way. Their assistance helped me win a research grant at UC Riverside. I was able to finish this study there, and at California State University – San Bernardino.

I owe a special debt to Dr. Leopoldo Zea, founder of Latin American Studies in the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UNAM. The constant support he and his wife, María Elena Rodríguez, have given me has been useful and stimulating. The Centro Coordinador y Difusor de Estudios Latinoamericanos, previously directed by Dr. Zea, has provided me with a forum for exploring my ideas. There Dr. Juan Manuel de la Serna and his wife Zoila granted me unlimited assistance. Other colleagues in the Center, especially Dr. Elsa Cecilia Frost, gave me their priceless friendship and understanding. Appreciable traces of all these good people are present here.

The educational and research institutions of Mexico City, Zamora, and Guadalajara, with their dynamism and cultural commitment, have provided me with a favorable setting for carrying out this study. By meeting with many Mexican and foreign colleagues, I was able to constantly enrich my own outlook. In the United States, the University of California and California State University systems also provided considerable help. The scholars and general libraries at several campuses, and the Bancroft and Sutro research collections at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University, have been a constant stimulus. In addition to those already mentioned, I have also received friendly assistance from Dr. Eric Van Young, Dr. David Sweet, Dr. John Borrego, and Dr. Carlos Cortés, all colleagues at different campuses of the UC system. Their contributions are sincerely appreciated.

For the publication of this study in English I owe special thanks to Dr. Jaime E. Rodríguez, at the University of California – Irvine, and to Dr. Eric Van Young, at the University of California San Diego. Dr. Christon Archer and Dr. Walter Hildebrandt of the University of Calgary have given me crucial assistance in this regard. At the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana – Iztapalapa I received enthusiastic support from the campus president Dr. Luis Mier y Terán Casanueva, and from other colleagues such as Dr. José Lema Labadie, Dr. Carlos Illades, Dr. Gustavo Leyva Martínez and Dr. Luz María Uhthoff López. I would also like to thank Dr. Gilbert Joseph of Yale University for suggesting a translator and Dr. Mark Alan Healey of New York University for his thoughtful and creative work in translating this book into English.



I want to express my deepest gratitude to my children Erik, Tania, and Marisa. They have been able to stoically put up with many difficulties during the long years of my research. I appreciate the constant understanding and love I have received from them. My brother Michael also gave me much needed help on several occasions, for which I would like to express my thanks here.

Finally, I would like to thank the late Marcos and Celia Mauss for the public recognition they gave this work, awarding it the prize as the best history dissertation presented to the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras of the UNAM in 1988, and to the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, which awarded the Spanish-language edition of this study the 1994 research prize.

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Introduction

It is well known that the periods of Mexican history least subject to the scrutiny of historians have been the seventeenth century (roughly speaking, from 1630 to 1750) and the first half of the nineteenth century (except for Independence).¹ Yet there is a widespread sense that these periods might be key to understanding the long-term structures and development of Mexico. Far from the din of the century of conquests, the seventeenth century, with international trade fallen into a lull, long seemed terrain unworthy of the heroic efforts of a serious historian. Similarly, the nineteenth century had been trapped between the fervor of the Enlightenment and Independence and the fury of the War of Reform. The study of the first half-century of independent life – taken as a whole – seemed appropriate only to intrepid souls wanting to lose themselves in a historiographical maze.

Such intrepid historians have of course existed, and the success of their efforts has underscored the possibilities of forging useful knowledge from the studies of both periods. This study comes out of the admiration inspired by reading several of these works.² Since I began this research, numerous valuable works have been published on the period stretching from the second half of the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth. William B. Taylor has produced a magisterial study of the parish priests of Indian villages covering the Bourbon Reforms and the beginnings of Independence.³ An excellent collection of his essays on the same period is about to be published.⁴ Virginia Guedea,



Manuel Chust, Jaime Rodríguez and Josefina Vázquez have enormously broadened our understanding of the transition from the late colonial era to Independence.⁵ François-Xavier Guerra, Annick Lempérière and other have suggestively problematized the ideological leanings of the regime being born then.⁶ The range of historical subjects worthy of analysis has been extended: Peter Guardino, Florencia Mallon, Guy Thomson and Dorothy Tanck have studied the centrality of peasants, and even of their political discourse, to the period of transition and new life under the republic.⁷ Christon Archer, Antonio Serrano Ortega and Juan Ortiz Escamilla have delved deeper into the world of soldiers and militiamen.⁸ Donald Stevens, Michael Costeloe, Richard Warren, Eric Van Young, Antonio Annino, Marcello Carmagnani, Pedro Pérez Herrero, Reynaldo Sordo and others have contributed to clarifying the answers to questions about the first half of the nineteenth century, and especially about the very nature of the political regime.⁹ It is also necessary to mention several suggestive works, in addition to those of Taylor, recently published about the Church in Mexico between the Bourbon Reforms and Independence.¹⁰ I trust that within a growing field of such distinguished authors, this book may still provide a fresh view of the role the Mexican clergy played in that period, above all the high clergy whose hegemony was subjected to singular stress by the rise of new values and doctrines such as “popular sovereignty.”

Some have suggested a new historical periodization for the nineteenth century, positing the years between 1750 and 1850 as a distinct period. This question of the appropriate time frames for Mexican history has drawn my attention. It has strengthened my desire to explore a period long and varied enough to be able to test a traditional historical dividing line, in this case Independence. Perhaps, for the study of the Church’s role in Mexican history, Independence may not be the definitive watershed it is usually thought to be. At the same time, by including in a single study what we frequently think of as the most and least heroic periods of Mexican history (heroic Independence and the less-than-heroic eras before and after), we may illuminate more sharply the most enduring structures in the country’s historical experience.¹¹

Charles Hale has suggested that the best way to overcome preconceptions – whether economic or cultural – about the nineteenth century may be the direct “reconstruction of nineteenth-century politics.” He adds that “this can be done most effectively through the systematic and critical study of ideas.”¹²



Hale warns historians against adopting the partisanship inherent to the period by making imprecise use of the political labels used at the time. He also insists that historians resist a deceptive sociologizing of the history of ideas which presumes to know the authors and the interests of the proponents of various ideas, without having analyzed those ideas in depth and examined their internal cohesiveness.

This in no way rules out referring to specific evidence about the socio-political behavior of the authors and groups responsible for ideas. But it does not assume such behavior without rigorous prior analysis. Hale insists that we must study ideology without prior partisanship, if we want to advance our knowledge of the period.¹³

The study of ideas does not mean adopting an idealist perspective in which ideas are equivalent to the totality – or the determining portion – of a historical reality. But it does mean that we still must study governance and formal institutions of social power, even in the nineteenth century when they have generally been seen as less important, in order to produce a historically rigorous analysis of the composition and social meaning of political ideas. Hale suggests that “the rationale or logic of central government policy and the assumptions of the governing elite are still so insufficiently understood as to warrant searching examination.” He underlines the usefulness of the printed writings of intellectuals close to government circles, of statements in newspapers and official and semi-official pamphlets, and of laws and parliamentary debates, while not excluding unpublished manuscripts, although not considering them “intrinsically superior.” He rejects the priority some wish to give to supposedly unique sources, instead emphasizing the absolute need to “grasp the intractable and often elusive nature of the assumptions” of the documents under study.¹⁴

To paraphrase Hale, we could say that we need to pay attention not only to the ideas being expressed but to how they are embedded in an implicit culture or historical situation, where ideas themselves are to some extent predetermined by socio-cultural values or understandings which need to be specified. From another standpoint, Hale adds, this is the study of ideology, especially to the degree that “the *political* objective and *polemical* function of ideas ... make them ideological. Ideology ... presupposes conflict in society or the existence of conflicting interpretations of the social order.” Insofar as a political program



is associated with a rhetoric and program of its own, these are ideological, even when they draw on unifying or supposedly non-partisan traditions or myths. Hale suggests that handling ideological statements in a non-Manichean way requires a willingness to address the contradictory aspects and internal dialectics of each line of thinking.¹⁵

If we conceive of ideas in their social context as another dimension of the political action of individuals and groups, we cannot escape some reflection, however brief, on the nature of all human society. Richard Burks has stressed Alfred North Whitehead's idea that "no civilization can endure without transcendental goals."¹⁶ Both religious and secular ideologies have a unifying function for their followers within society, giving them a global interpretation of history, a concrete theory of the social order, means for perpetuating themselves through education and self-promotion, significant popular support, and identification with a center of power, be it a party or the state. Although one could well assume the existence of illusory or deceptive elements in such ideologies, or of interests which could be "unmasked," such elements are not the only factors in explaining an ideology's success. In addition, the specific elements involved in a given ideology may well change over time, interacting with other constitutive elements.¹⁷

Stressing this last point, Georges Duby has stated that "all ideologies are 'practical' and therefore contribute to the movement of history. But by the very fact of this movement, they are themselves transformed."¹⁸ He insists that there is enough correspondence between ideology and reality that a change in reality affects the transformation of ideology. In the struggle between the different groups existing in any society, or as an effect of demographic and economic changes and their political effects,

Ideologies must adapt if they are to survive or win. In their struggle with opposing ideologies, they become more or less aggressive, affirm themselves more openly, or else take refuge behind some new facade. When they are in a dominant position, they partially absorb the images or models which threatened them, taming them and turning them to their own advantage.¹⁹

In Duby's words, "the stuff of the history of ideologies" is made up of "processes of struggle, revolt, incorporation and integration." Of particular importance for this study is the French historian's assurance that certain ideological systems are transformed



[w]hen the culture of which they are part is subjected to the influence of neighboring foreign cultures. This cultural penetration is frequently the result of an unequal balance of power between the civilisations in question.... [Frequently] it proceeds insidiously, through the distant attraction of foreign beliefs, ideas and ways of life. It can also be the result of deliberate borrowing, since ideologies will seek reinforcements from any quarter.²⁰

In any case, the objective of studying ideology for Duby would be to trace its survival in the long term, to define not only “successive adaptations” but also “its influence on the overall development of social relations.”²¹

The principal interest of this study will be to closely follow what one Spanish author has called the Church’s struggle – from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century – to win “a public place after the eighteenth century revolutionary upheaval which threw the religious foundations of civil society into question, affirming the independence of civil society from the ecclesiastical institution.” This was the “battle of a corporation to find new ways of establishing its social reach.”²²

This author rightly states that “the influence of the Church does not end with its own religious actions but extends to the furthest lay ideas, because of how Church actions have suffused the most diverse ideologies.” By freeing the study of the Church from the framework of critique or apologetics, we can delve into the Church’s internal organization and external influence as an organization or corporation within larger society. One crucial aspect of the study of this organization, although not the only one, is the activity of the ecclesiastical hierarchy commonly known as the high clergy.²³ Speaking specifically of the Spanish Church, this historian points out that one way the clergy kept much of its influence in the midst of a society undergoing secularization was by adopting strong nationalism:

Nationalist ideology with its spiritualization of the concept of the *people* [not opposed to the religious meaning] was able to offer clerics the possibility of strengthening their pastoral ministry by means of priestly dedication to the human salvation of that people who appeared, as a people, to be threatened by the dominating drive of another cultural or ethnic community.²⁴



Scholars need to go beyond tracking the Church's nuanced shifts of position on matters of divine absolutism, liberalism, traditionalism, and conservatism. They must reflect on the production of a clerical space which, interacting with the spheres just mentioned in a more creative way than is usually recognized, also managed to undergo its own version of the modern transition towards the dominion of the "people" over matters of state.²⁵ Furthermore, one could argue it could hardly have been otherwise. Considering that the task of the Church in the nineteenth century was to produce a space of its own within secularizing changes, it could not ultimately place itself at the margins of the emergence of popular sovereignty.

The people came to be "the obligatory reference, the source and standard for all politics after the 'ideals' ... of the glorious French Revolution resounded in Europe and across the world."²⁶

The nation, conceived as "a single and homogeneous body [which receives and exercises sovereignty] ... by means of elected representatives," is the instrument by which the people assume sovereignty.²⁷ Thus the state became the only vehicle for sovereignty, and all owed it unquestionable loyalty, since it derived from the people and the nation.²⁸ Yet if the Church could dispute, in one particular case, whether national legislative representation effectively expressed the national will, then could that not be the basis for a broader challenge to the hegemony of the rising liberal state?

Since the eighteenth century, the Bourbon state in Mexico had been much less concerned than its Hapsburg predecessor with keeping the moral support of the Church. During the same period, regionalism and a clearer identification with local interests in the New World were on the rise.²⁹ With the advance of liberalism in the nineteenth century, a lay elite fought the Church for its hegemonic role, and the Church had many reasons to grow uncomfortable. If the Church could argue that the majority of the people, and national interests, were harmed by the measures of the liberal state, would that not lay the groundwork for arguing that the liberal state was an illegitimate spokesman for the nation? And if that were the case, the Church could well suggest that for a Catholic people, the Church was a more sure navigator than a handful of men smitten with the idea of making private interest into the ethical standard and goal for national political activity. Reaching that point meant the Church had implicitly and explicitly negated what one author has called the



“general political anthropology” of liberalism, underscoring the crisis of the Church’s adaptations to the new era.³⁰ Yet while this study will show that the Church reached this point, that does not negate what we have been arguing, namely, that the play of ideologies in the struggle for political hegemony always involves changes, even if at a certain moment those changes come to an end, or prove unable to go beyond certain limits without betraying their own origins.

In independent Mexico, just as in the Spanish Empire, the Church and the state were united in law and social practice. This obviously affected the structure of power, and limited “the impulses toward pluralism ... [and] subsystem autonomy.” Thus, “aspirations for new types of prestige and status remained tied to pre-independence frameworks.” We might say that the very internal weakness of the Church forced it to insist on continued union with the state because of its fear of not being able to maintain a viable position in society without state support. Because of its privileged role in the Ancien Regime, the Church had not developed full internal solidarity, nor did it enjoy widespread and well-informed support among parishioners, beyond ritual observance and routine orientations. “Consequently, when basic changes occurred in the political sphere, the Church did not possess bases of autonomous religious strength.” Only legal assurances and alliance with political elites could compensate for this weakness.³¹

The Church proved adaptable to the new situation, but could never be dissuaded from looking for traditional political guarantees. It allied itself with those social forces willing to guarantee its existence as a corporation with a monopoly on religious and moral matters. Turned toward this struggle, it had difficulties in properly attending to the internal dynamics of its own integration. When the traditionalists and conservatives lost in the political arena, the Church found itself facing a difficult choice whose solution unfortunately falls outside of this study. But this does not counter Vallier’s claim that “the Church is actually one of the most innovative and experimental of large-scale organizations, being continuously engaged in the process of sociological construction.”³²

Is there some way to measure the extent of these changes – and their impact on national life – in the nineteenth century Latin American Church, and specifically in the Mexican Church? Frederick Pike has concluded that the Latin American Church often joined in the liberal New World optimism which argued that



the New World could avoid the ills of the Old, and even the rise of class conflict.³³ E. Bradford Burns has observed the confluence of liberal and conservative opinion in Latin America, including the Church in his observation that the essentially urban elites of Latin America were obliged to follow the course of European liberalism in order to guarantee their own survival. The speed of change was open to debate, but not the overall direction.³⁴ A closed conservatism like that attempted in some parts of Europe was simply unviable. While this argued for greater flexibility in the Mexican Church's adaptation to the changes during the period, Pike himself fundamentally agrees with Ivan Vallier. He determined that the Latin American Church ultimately followed the course of Spanish Catholicism, commenting that in the latter case:

Theological pluralism, the give-and-take competition between religious ideas, became inescapably associated with social pluralism, the unregulated competition among different social classes and functional interest groups in which the right of a permanent elitist directing group to exercise a never-to-be questioned moderating power was not recognized. This association between theological and social pluralism helped doom the cause of religious diversity....³⁵

Howard Wiarda has interpreted such limitations on the Church's ability to adapt as a Latin American inheritance of Spanish corporatist tradition. He sums up this tradition's implications as follows, looking forward to the twentieth century:

Along with the rejection of liberalism went the rejection of its institutional accoutrements. The need for unity and authority was at cross purposes with checks and balances and a coequal parliament. Divisive political parties would be replaced by a single movement. Since society's interests were to be represented functionally, competitive elections were no longer necessary. Civil liberties would be respected, but they could also be limited for the common good. While these changes would likely serve to expand the power of the central state, the creation of corporate intermediary structures and the revitalization of society's natural associations (family, community, guilds, etc.) would provide for decentralization and limits on state power.³⁶

But however much corporatist tradition the Church had, after Independence it found itself openly competing for the loyalties of its fellow Mexicans. Speaking of Mexican Independence, Hugh



Hamill discovered that after 1808 even the propagandists most opposed to changes along the lines of the French Revolution proved to be “fearful of radical change, yet inventive in communicating traditional values.”³⁷ The character Hamill studied was capable of ferocious and radically traditionalist rhetoric, but even in the midst of the anti-Independence counterrevolution he made use of a wide range of arguments, diverse sources – including even modern experts – and he did not refuse to speak of the “wise Benedictine Feijóo.”³⁸ His thinking was even able to respond to the socio-racial worries of Mexicans, going so far on one occasion as to state:

There is no dignity or honor, however high it may be, which cannot be had and enjoyed by a loyal Indian, and even the child of an Indian man and a Spanish woman, or of a Spanish man and an Indian woman.³⁹

One might say that it is by combining ideology with the desire to preserve the status quo, while admitting the fewest possible changes, that the phenomenon of traditionalism or conservatism in the broadest sense emerges. More than one author has cited Count Metternich’s statement that “la stabilité n’est pas l’immobilité.”⁴⁰ Mayer argues that

In ordinary times conservatives can afford to be purely practical and empirical in defense of the established order, while claiming special credit for being antidoctrinaire and above partisan politics. In times of crisis, however, the logic of their position forces them into joining, condoning, or supporting those advocating an antirevolutionary prophylaxis that is both ideological and aggressive.⁴¹

According to Mayer, while a distinction can be made between ideological conservatives – who tend towards reaction and counterrevolution – and pragmatic ones, at times of crisis there are often attempts to fuse these different currents. Given the complexity of the matter, only increased by the variety of possible concrete settings, the relative shortage of works on this theme is unfortunate. Mayer recognizes, by the way, that once a revolutionary change has taken place somewhere, “the mere existence of a model is enough to stimulate political actors to locate themselves in relation to it by positive, qualified, or negative imitation.”⁴²



Until now, the most impressive effort to study conservatism in Mexico was that of Gastón García Cantú. García Cantú confesses, however, in a note preceding the text of his book, that "I am far from having fulfilled my objective. This is only an attempt."⁴³ If one gives any credit to the idea that there was opposition to the liberal transformation of nineteenth-century Mexico, then undertaking a new attempt would seem appropriate. In so doing, it might seem most appropriate to draw close to the corporation that has been most accused of leading reaction, traditionalism, conservatism or counterrevolution in Mexico at the time. Bourbon absolutism contained a good portion of anti-clericalism and secularization of political power. Liberalism took the same tendencies much further. Thus it would be only natural for an institution under siege, at first partly, and later completely, to be inclined to try to block the changes threatening it. Yet it is imperative, returning to the point made by Hale, that we not assume beforehand what research into the historical phenomenon seeks to discover and reveal. Or to put it in the words of a theorist: "no subject is constituted outside of the [historical] process."⁴⁴

If the Mexican Church was indeed at the center of effort to hold back a historical change raising the secular state and the earthly ends of man to new importance, and if the Mexican Church was indeed opposed to a more plural and atomized vision of civil society in relation with the national state, than that is precisely what must be proven, taking the broadest possible view of the historical forces of the time.⁴⁵ However much the Church represents a key organization in Mexican society, and however much it does have a certain accumulated ideological tradition, we must think of it within the setting of a specific time and place if our analysis is to remain historical. The Church is part of a larger whole, and we should observe not only the internal variety and evolution of its actions, but also its efforts to reach out to elements which did not necessarily share its social interests. One scholar has put it well:

Hegemonic action would be that constellation of political and cultural practices carried out by a fundamental class by means of which that class manages to articulate other social groups beneath its control through the construction of a collective will which translates its corporatist interests into universal ones, partially sacrificing them along the way. This implies a process of political constitution of classes which cannot be seen outside an analysis of the balance of forces and the history of social practices expressed on an organizational level.⁴⁶



In the Mexican case, we could well claim that the structure of the concrete "historical bloc" presumably articulated by the Church still remains to be clearly determined. Insofar as the overall analytical structures for studying colonial Mexican and Latin American society have become uncertain, we must discard any possibility of resolving this question easily. While this is unsettling, it also may impel us to drawing closer to the specific characteristics of the concrete historical structures of Mexican society.⁴⁷ This may yield very positive results for historiography.

Some time ago, Karl Mannheim wrote:

[The modern researcher] will no longer be inclined to raise the question as to which of the contending parties has truth on its side, but rather he will direct his attention to discovering the approximate truth as it emerges in the course of historical development out of the complex social process. The modern investigator can answer, if he is accused of evading the problem of what is truth, that the indirect approach to truth through social history will in the end be more fruitful than a direct logical attack. Even though he does not discover 'truth itself', he will discover the cultural setting and many hitherto unknown 'circumstances' which are relevant to the discovery of truth. As a matter of fact, if we believe that we already have the truth, we will lose interest in obtaining those very insights which might lead us to an approximate understanding of the situation. It is precisely our uncertainty which brings us a good deal closer to reality than was possible in former periods which had faith in the absolute.

The study of intellectual history can and must be pursued in a manner which will see in the sequence and co-existence of phenomena more than mere accidental relationships, and will seek to discover in the totality of the historical complex the role, significance, and meaning of each component element.⁴⁸

The goal of the analysis that follows is to study the struggle of the Mexican Catholic Church, particularly the high clergy of the Guadalajara diocese, to maintain its hegemony against the waves of Bourbon secularization, to sustain order in the midst of social upheaval, and to preserve ecclesiastical privilege as the theory of popular sovereignty redefined the nation. In so doing, Guadalajara clergymen transformed a respectable tradition of regional patriotism into a transcendent vision of Mexico's destiny as a nation. The critical element that they developed was that of Providence as the motor of Mexican history.



How did the divine will come to play this complex political role? David Brading, in particular, has enriched the study of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with his important contribution to the understanding of how the notion of God-given destiny worked its way into the intimate fibers of a nascent sense of Mexico's uniqueness within the Spanish Empire and indeed within the divine plan for human salvation.⁴⁹ His analysis has centered on the Virgin of Guadalupe and the rise of a precocious search for identity among key clerical thinkers that clearly anticipates national consciousness in Mexico. In so doing he has deepened our knowledge of the once-forgotten seventeenth century and linked its events to the formation of a burgeoning Creole group awareness that prefigured a growing Mexican national identity through the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century.

My own study has led me to believe that understandings of the meaning of Providence in Mexican history were by no means tied exclusively to the Guadalupe tradition. Moreover, for many years after 1810 the notion of providential destiny was in dispute and far from fully woven into the political fabric of the nation. Although it is well known that Father Miguel Hidalgo made a significant statement in bringing the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe to the fore in his cry to end bad government and improve Mexico's collective destiny, the political content of his movement was by no means fully worked out. Bishop-elect Manuel Abad y Queipo of the Diocese of Michoacán believed, by contrast, that providence was tied to his own grand project of a bicontinental Spanish nation.⁵⁰ After 1815 the popular insurrection in Mexico would be violently repressed, allowing for its remnants to be swept along by a much more politically conservative, elite-led independence movement under Agustín de Iturbide in 1821. Certainly a strong notion of Mexico's God-given role in Christian civilization was present in the movement of 1821 and the years following. But the Virgin of Guadalupe does not appear, in my study, to displace a broader Marian devotion and concern with God's plan, the precise political significance of which was still being decided in the decades under analysis in this book.

A free press and a wider public debate after independence allowed for the challenging of fundamental political and social beliefs in the decades after 1821. Churchmen in Mexico often perceived that Christian norms, as they understood them, were coming under increasing attack. They felt compelled to define the



relationship between divine transcendence and national destiny and to exercise a key role in debating the goals of the nation and their legal expression. In their opposition to the secularization of the state and of social mores, clerical writers grappled with the introduction of an individualistic, opinionated liberalism which on the basis of resounding abstract principles would re-order society with little respect for the past. In fact, speaking with growing assurance that they represented the best interests of a sovereign people, Jacobin liberals advocated ecclesiastical and religious, as well as civil, reform. Faced with a challenge to their authority as churchmen and social spokesmen, clerics tended to strike back by appealing to the liberal notion of constitution and law as bulwarks against arbitrary attacks on Church interests, and increasingly to a sense of the free will and the purportedly Catholic views of a Mexican nation. As they built the sense of a providential Catholic nation into this political discourse by the 1830s and 1840s, clerics did not consistently or exclusively have recourse to the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the 1840s, a Christ-centered notion of providentiality in Mexico's history was emphasized by some to counter conservative Christian leanings and promote the idea of an intimate connection between Christian liberation from sin and the political renewal promoted by liberalism. More research has to be done on both Marianism and Christo-centric thought in Mexican Catholicism.⁵¹

As this research develops, it is necessary to re-open the whole question of the formation of Mexican nationalism and the role played therein by providential Christianity as developed by clerical or even non-clerical thinkers. The divine dispensation may have been contemplated differently in different regions and by different groups in Mexico. For example, in a recent study on Puebla I have shown how not only providential thinking but also holistic religious thought permeated civic discourse there and was promoted by it. It has seemed to me that a region such as Puebla was more susceptible than others to an organic metaphor – such as the “body,” the “family,” or the “mystical body of Christ” – for social life because of long-standing ethnic conflict and economic decline which threatened the coherence and the peace of local society.⁵² Guadalajara, by contrast, was a relatively more uniform Creole-mestizo society, with strong individualistic qualities and a generalized sense of economic and social improvement as well within the grasp of the immediate future. Regional outlook seemed to gravitate towards optimism rather than border on



despair.⁵³ Guadalajara churchmen seemed to connect to this climate of optimism even in their attacks on secularization and “Jacobin” liberalism. The holistic approach, while not absent, seems less developed there. Contrary to imagining the national community as a secular experience, however, as Benedict Anderson would have us expect,⁵⁴ these clerics conceived of a commonwealth whose progress was a Christian pageant most faithfully reflecting the deep-felt beliefs and desires of the people. This was not a simple story of Mexico having been chosen once and for all above other nations; it was rather a pact in which Mexico must merit its place in the divine scheme: Mexico must stand out by standing up for certain Christian goals. Clerics clearly developed the idea that this was fully compatible with representational government; after all, the people of Mexico were seen as steadfast in their Christian commitment, even while a handful of politicians might be pushing a vastly different agenda. If only the nation’s desires were represented transparently by its politicians! Guadalajara optimism brought forth a peculiar synthesis of liberal and providential thinking, here. The national community was imagined in religious and civic terms simultaneously.

Churchmen in Mexico after Independence coupled, in Anderson’s terms, an anachronistic “Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” to the modern “homogeneous, empty time” of the clock and calendar which allowed them to compare Mexico with developments in the United States and Europe.⁵⁵ The providential pact between the Mexican people and God was seen as ethically and religiously undergirding Mexico’s desire to progress and stand out in the international sphere. Mexican churchmen and their allies wrote in ways that appealed to a broad audience with whom participation in national values could be shared through satire and laughter, not just through high-minded goals. Mexican nationalism of the 1830s and 1840s in many ways looked like Anderson’s “last wave” Third World nationalism after World War Two – still uncertain, still inheriting colonial modes of conduct and views, enjoying at best a troubled hegemony, still lacking public institutions and a school system to disseminate a national project which was still too Creole in a largely mestizo and Indian population.⁵⁶ But both Churchmen and Catholic laymen in Guadalajara were actively involved in responding to the calls of nationhood and citizenship, now understandable only within the liberal-leaning climate of the Cádiz Constitution of 1812 and then the Mexican Constitution



of 1824. However, even in Guadalajara there were moments in which ecclesiastical nationalism looked strangely like the “official nationalism” which Anderson studies in nineteenth-century Europe: a response by privileged pressure groups to current political and nationalist demands to avoid exclusion or marginalization.⁵⁷

While such a preemptive corporate ethos was present, focus on it alone does not do justice to a larger process of Catholic adjustment to change. Even the early national awareness promoted by the insurgency under Hidalgo and Morelos borrowed from a long-standing Spanish Catholic identity, setting it on its ear by determining that Spain had fumbled this identity under French influence.⁵⁸ The insurgent newspaper during Father Hidalgo’s stay in Guadalajara, *El Despertador Americano*, referred to the French threat in religious terms, crying out against Americans who had been deceived by Napoleon’s overtures toward the New World:

What hurts the most is that, when all is said and done, in the bitterness and chains of your oppression you will not have the solace of the Catholic religion, which [even] in the loss of your freedom and other temporal belongings would have encouraged you with the hope of eternity. Do not be deceived, oh perverted Americans, all countries dominated by the monsters aborted by the Corcegan will sooner or later be touched by the contagion of atheism which they profess, and which those Despots have spread.⁵⁹

El Despertador Americano went back to this topic again and again. In its second issue it reminded readers that “we count on the declared patronage of Holy Mother of Guadalupe, Protective Guide of this Empire, and Sworn Captain of our legions.”⁶⁰ In its fourth issue it chided Spanish policy for having succumbed to French materialism and dared to attack the Church. The rejection of secular oppression was followed by bitter comment against taxes on Bulls granting indulgences and the loosening of Lenten observance. The newspaper added:

“Have not even the goods of brotherhoods, [as well as] the funds of Wills, Chaplaincies and Pious Works of all sorts been placed on public auction, to ship their earnings back to the Metropolis? Have not the precious jewels of our Churches been despoiled only to disappear for ever from our sight?”⁶¹



Such ideas opened the way for the advance of a providential notion of Mexico's national role, already prefigured in the Guadalupe tradition, which the independence under Iturbide could not pass over lightly. Yet the use of Guadalupe to divide Mexican society between Creole and peninsular Spaniards in the insurgency may have impeded her use as an exclusive symbol of providential destiny after 1821. As Lucas Alamán would later suggest, caste war was much feared in Mexico down to the 1850s, and the appropriation of the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe had been associated with a bloody civil war in which Spaniards were mercilessly pursued.⁶²

By elaborating on a providential notion of the Mexican nation, then, churchmen were responding to, as much as leading, the quest for Mexican national identity. In Mexico, clerical nationalism was not tied to dynastic or even governmental interests. In fact it represented a growing breach within the Creole establishment wherein Church-related intellectuals argued that government and society were drifting toward secularism and menacing both Church wealth and Church spiritual leadership in a Catholic Mexican society. Nationalism as promoted by clergymen thus aimed at re-sacralizing Mexican bonds of community and elevating common destiny to a sense of mission. While this was grounded in clerical conviction regarding the non-Jacobin character of the Mexican people, and thus hoped to ensure ecclesiastical presence in society and constitutional guarantees for the clergy in the polity, this nationalism contributed to an imagining of the Mexican nation as a community under law, bound by a territorial – if not ethnic – past and destined for a sovereign, national future of increasing social and economic improvement. In this view, accountability of elected authority was a primary topic, and thus all public representatives were responsible to the nation.

In this way, Mexican clerics helped form a composite nationalism which is as much a response to the legacy of the French Revolution as it is a manipulative or hide-bound reaction by a vested interest. Clerical nationalism assuredly benefited from the past of bureaucratic pilgrimage and the viceregal print culture in Spanish – as Anderson would suggest – since they contributed to bonds of identity related to what was to become, approximately, the Mexican national territory. But it dug deeply into the history of providentialism that David Brading has studied through the Virgin of Guadalupe tradition and which William Taylor has persuasively shown to be growing dynamically through



the eighteenth century in the mestizo center-north and north of the country.⁶³ Clergymen and their allies were continuing the process of imagining begun long before in quite different circumstances. They chose, or chose not, to emphasize the Virgin of Guadalupe, but their notion of a national destiny under an accountable, lawful government was not simply manipulation, although it indeed was developed in response to a need to protect Christian and ecclesiastical interests.

It may be that Guadalajara played a particularly relevant role in this process because of the active political participation in Cádiz and the Constituent Congress of 1823 by prominent local clergymen, and their often outspoken identification with the goals of federated states (for example, Jalisco and Zacatecas) and the independent nation. Canons José Miguel Gordo, Diego Aranda, José Miguel Ramírez and José Domingo Sánchez Reza had significant experience within this political tradition. Gordo and Aranda would become bishops of Guadalajara. The wording of their published documents can be read as a complex response to the dual demand of loyalty both to a cherished political tradition and to Church interests as they saw them. They can also be read as reflecting a more self-confident regional attitude that emphasized the present and the future. Dutifully respectful of the past, many Guadalajara churchmen were not slaves to it.

In this sense, the Guadalajara Church must be seen within the polemics of Mediterranean Catholic society over internal reform of the Church and the place of the papacy and the state within this process, not only within the turbulence of Bourbon reforms and Mexican independence. Since the Church Council in Pistoia, Italy, in 1786, political reformers and religious reformers had tended to be very closely associated in Spain itself,⁶⁴ and there is a complex history of how this thinking made its way into Mexico over the next few decades, a history largely still to be written.⁶⁵ Despite massive Mexican rejection of secularization or impiety as French in origin, the Pistoia tradition is clearly present in Mexico by the 1820s. The Church's response to this threat in Guadalajara brought it into the public forum to protect its values and interests in a way which led it to imagine and promote nationalism. It did so, as Lomnitz has said in his remarks on Anderson's view of nationalism, "not as an ideology, but rather as a hegemonic, commonsensical, and tacitly shared cultural construct."⁶⁶

Clerical nationalism in Guadalajara is not unparalleled and there is a global context; Adrian Hastings has tellingly found the



role of religion to be integral to the history of “ethnicity and construction of nations.”⁶⁷ Central to Hastings view of nationhood is the development of a “self-conscious community” which is creating “a horizontally bonded society to whom the state in a sense belongs,” all within a community characterized by “an extensively used vernacular literature.”⁶⁸ A sense of threat to the “proper character” of the community can be part of this. Beyond any definitive secular–religious divide, Hastings sees “Biblical Christianity” providing a model for the development of a sense of nationhood, emphasizing “a unity of people, language, religion, territory and government.”⁶⁹ In his view, whereas a state can be instrumental in creating it, a nation “is not a nation until it senses its primacy over and against the state.”⁷⁰ In fact, Hastings sees religion as potentially crucial in this regard, observing as he does the “defiant power of a nationalism grounded in religious identity.”⁷¹

In the Mexican case, William Taylor has shown how eighteenth-century parish priests helped to weld Indian parishioners into a body politic that transcended Mexico City.⁷² And in independent Mexico, parish priests were considered such bellwethers of popular opinion as to have their conduct carefully monitored by government authorities.⁷³ Priests, including Fathers Hidalgo and Morelos, were very much at the center of Mexicans’ imaginings of themselves as a people. Indeed, not only priests but bishops and canons were at the heart of determining the sense of national “holiness and special destiny,” to use Hastings’ words again.⁷⁴ Although later historical events profoundly transformed and secularized this identity, it would be safe to follow Hastings’ caution that “one must not be deceived into thinking ... that modernised, secularized forms of nationalism in any way represent its beginning.” In the eyes of this English historian, the enduring strength of a nationalism to transport the nation through thick and thin is related to this “religious rock” on which nationalism is generally founded.⁷⁵

Although later to be partially superseded by a more secular legal and nationalist development during and after the Mexican Reforma starting in the 1850s, the promotion of early Mexican nationhood is very much a part of events related to the commonsense perception of the Mexican community as eminently Catholic. Catholic nationalism in Guadalajara was an attempt to shore up Mexican national identity on one side of the divide represented by the Council of Pistoia. Diocesan churchmen claimed popular support for Church autonomy, exclusively Church-led



– not state-directed – ecclesiastical reforms and the defense of Church interests as corresponding to the constitutional rights of citizens and to Mexico as a Catholic nation. In so doing, they were juggling contrary traditions.

While ultimately not triumphant, bowed by the deepening and popularizing of liberal reformism, this nationalist Church discourse built off and contributed to an ongoing sense of Mexican identity as distinct from the state, tied to constitutional guarantees, embracing a broad territory and competing in a complex but distinctive way with cultural, social, economic and political models in Europe and in the United States. Although it is generally assumed that modern Mexican nationalism is a secular product of nineteenth-century liberalism, it may be more appropriate to see it as forged by these contrary forces of Christian fulfillment and secular liberal commitments, and perched on the horns of its own dilemmas.

As José Gutiérrez Estrada made clear, the war with the United States would bring national survival to the fore in all political debate.⁷⁶ Even liberals would be faced with the need to reckon with the nation's complex past, which made the implant of liberal institutions extremely difficult or impossible. Church opposition to anti-clerical liberalism in the press and in government had in fact promoted the forum of public opinion, with writers on one side and the other aiming their discourse at a national audience. Down to the time of the war with the United States, liberal authors seemed more concerned to catch up with progressive countries in Europe and the United States; they rarely if ever developed the national question as a distinctive issue. From the mid-Forties they would have to modify their outlook and show that liberalism was indeed more conducive to Mexico's social fiber and future well-being than anything social conservatism or monarchy could offer. The question they never could fully address was Catholicism and its role in Mexican nationhood. Ultimately, this would become a moot question after the Constitution of 1857 eliminated any reference to an official religion.

Understandably, however, many Mexican liberals and conservatives were moving in the direction of a pragmatic political culture in which survival of the nation was a preoccupation. Erika Pani may be right to argue that it is a fallacy to think that the convergence of such thinking around the Second Empire, followed by its defeat, was the end of such an orientation.⁷⁷ Not only would triumphant liberals become more conservative, as Charles Hale



has argued,⁷⁸ and more authoritarian, as Pani and Laurens Perry⁷⁹ have suggested, but they would be noticeably concerned with the survival and celebration of the nation.⁸⁰ But it may have only been in the twentieth century that public nationalism truly displaced Church-led collective identity. According to Claudio Lomnitz,

In the Porfirian arrangement, schools and patriotic festivals were mainly organized by and for regional elites, and the church still provided the broadest arena for the political assertion of collective force in its fiestas. It is only after the revolution, with the decline in the coercive power of local politicians and the introduction of competitive sports, that the civic fiesta became a forum in any way comparable to the church fiesta, and, interestingly, it is only at this point that rural schoolteachers mustered the local support they need to really expand the school system with the tight budgets that they have always had.⁸¹

It remains to be seen whether Mexican religious nationalism has been superseded by its secular successor, or whether indeed there still is a complex mix within Mexican nationhood of two distinctive projections of what it means to be Mexican. Do the strengths of Mexican nationalism come from the “religious rock” of its origins, or do they proceed from the liberal and libertarian tradition so clearly identified with the figure of Benito Juárez? More telling, are these two traditions separable in any attempt to explain the composition and the internal tensions of Mexican livelihood as a national experience? Are they always antagonistic? Did Mexican Catholic nationalism cease to stoke the fires of national imaginings of the nation after the liberal Reforma triumphed over the Second Empire in 1867? Has it done so now? Are we dealing with leftovers, or with live coals within a living tradition?