

The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival

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Austen Ivereigh

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Carlos Malamud

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The Nineteenth-Century Latin America Series directed by Eduardo Posada-Carbó has made important contributions to the new political history of Latin America. It now publishes the volume edited by Austen Ivereigh, *The Politics of Religion in an Age of Revival*. This book attempts to compare the political participation of Catholics in the nineteenth century in different European and Latin-American countries. It is indeed a relevant topic, considering that it has been usually assumed that the strong opposition between the Church and liberalism pushed Catholics to the margins of the system.

Amongst the European cases analysed are those of France and Spain, whilst the Latin American studies are of Mexico, Colombia, Argentina and Chile. As tends to happen in many collective works of this kind, the final result is very uneven. This is due not only to the fact that the papers are diverse in focus, but also because some of the studies have a pro-ecclesiastical slant that compromises some of the general conclusions of the book. Probably this is most clear in the introductory chapter by the editor Austen Ivereigh, which seems to be part of the old clericalism-anticlericalism polemic, siding openly with the traditional views of the church and using some of the nineteenth century arguments.

The chapters by Austen Ivereigh ('The shape of the state: Liberals and Catholics in the dispute over Law 1420 of 1884 in Argentina'), David Brading ('Ultramontane intransigence and the Mexican reform: Clemente de Jesús Munguía') and Frances Lannon ('1898 and the politics of the Catholic identity in Spain')

are, to some degree, in this same group. In my view, little can be achieved in the search of a greater and deeper knowledge on the important topic of Catholic participation in the political life of their time through such positions.

The introductory chapter begins by describing the meeting between Fidel Castro and the Pope in Havana during the papal visit to Cuba; this is used as a metaphor for the clash between the church and the enlightenment. It must be said that several current 'metaphors' could better illustrate the clash between modernity and the transformation it has brought about. For instance the support given by the church to the anti-globalisation movement, in Geneva during the last G-8 meeting. That particular case is much more reminiscent of the fight between the church and liberalism than the embrace between the Pope and Fidel Castro.

James F. McMillan in his chapter ('Religion and politics in nineteenth-century France: further reflections on why Catholics and Republicans couldn't stand each other') makes another surprising comparison of the conflict over clericalism, by comparing it to anti-Semitism: 'Republican anticlericalism was not a direct response to "clerical" actions: it had its own internal logic and internal dynamics. A useful analogy may be drawn with anti-Semitism, which is rarely the response to what Jews actually do.' There is a very important factor that the author seems to forget: the strength and presence of the church in nineteenth century in Europe and Latin America was in no sense comparable to that of the Jews in any of the places where anti-Semitism developed.

Ivereigh is clearly inspired by a revisionist message on the role of the catholic church in the nineteenth century, and that is why he compares the clashes of this period with the religious wars that raged Europe in the Modern Age - a comparison that is clearly exaggerated, illustrating his lack of distance with the problem. His pro-clerical angle can be seen once more in the following observation: 'What is now certain is that the nineteenth century did not witness a "Church" decline, but saw every sign, in its second half of an ecclesiastical restoration' (p. 6). A statement such as this might be true for some European countries, but it is simply inadmissible for Latin America, at least for the majority of the countries in the region. After independence and Spain's refusal to recognise the new republics, the Vatican played an ambivalent role for decades, which left dioceses vacant, so that parish autonomy was great. It was necessary to wait until the beginning of the twentieth century for the Vatican to re-impose order on different places so that its message could reach in a uniform manner all the national territories.

The way in which the Vatican regained control over the church in America can be seen clearly for the Argentine case in the excellent work of the Italian historian Loris Zanatta,⁽¹⁾ who presents a very different interpretative line to Ivereigh's. Not all the opposition to the implanting of the liberal project in the nineteenth century came from the church or from the Catholics. For example, in Guatemala a very active role was played by the indigenous communities, whose confrontation with the authorities that tried to implement its liberal project can be seen in the work of Sonia Alda.⁽²⁾

One of the problems with Ivereigh's interpretation is that the Catholic Church is confused with the Catholics to such extreme that he treats them as the same thing. The role of the Pope and the Vatican are thrown in the same bag as part of a shapeless and hard to define *totum revolutum*. Francis Lanon justifies Pius IX without considering the diverse response of the church. In its desire to study the attitude of the church throughout the nineteenth century the book attempts to analyse the role played by Catholics in the building of democracy in Europe and Latin America - through Catholic parties, confessional organisations and other means - reaching the conclusion that their political participation was a defining element.

Even if politics appears as the axis linking all the papers, only some of successfully address the role that the Catholic church really had in the nineteenth century's politics. This can be clearly seen in the chapter by Samuel Valenzuela and Erika Maza Valenzuela ('The politics of religion in a Catholic country: Republican democracy, *Cristianismo Social* and the Conservative party in Chile, 1850-1925') and that of Margaret Lavinia Anderson ('The divisions of the Pope: the Catholic revival and Europe's transition to democracy'). The very 'correct' work of Patricia Londoño ('The politics of religion in a modernising society: Antioquia

(Colombia), 1850-1910') is centred on the problem of associationism and the importance that Catholic associations had in the process of modernisation in Antioquia.

A chapter that powerfully catches the attention for both its tone and its content is that by Eric Van Young ('Popular religion and the politics of insurgency: Mexico, 1810-1821'), which has little in common with the rest of the chapters. His study does not really touch the problem of religion and even less on politics, at least in the sense in which both concepts are usually understood. It begins by talking about the 'colonial state', a very debatable concept that does not relate to any administrative reality of the Spanish Empire.⁽³⁾ Such a 'state' is an invention of some historians that does nothing to help interpret the colonial society. Indeed, this particular reference responds to the need to link the building of the Mexican State with a previous past, of which the present state would necessarily be the heir and would have the Virgin of Guadalupe as one of its key protagonists.

This explains the insistent references to a 'Creole nationalism', even during the colonial period. This 'nationalism' would become a nationalism without a nation unless the existence of a 'colonial state' is postulated. It also explains the need to detail the self-determination of the 'Mexican people' - a term that seems excessive for the time of the dismantling of the colonial order. Van Young forgets that in the contract theory the sovereign is not the country but the 'people'. Ivereigh also refers to the contract theory, pointing out that 'Creoles referred to the *pactum translationis* and argued that power was invested in the community and reverted to it in the absence of the lawful ruler'. In the same article the excess of comparison with other parts of the globe contrasts with the slight attention paid to the other areas of the Spanish empire, such as the viceroyalties of Peru or the River Plate, ⁽⁴⁾ attention which would have allowed a tighter interpretation of the workings of the imperial apparatus and the colonial society in the Americas. Van Young's efforts to talk of 'nation-building', 'Creole nationalism' and 'Mexican Nation' is curious, considering that the documents he quotes talk of an 'American Nation' and not a 'Mexican Nation'. The 'American Nation' terminology used at the time underlines the fact that the present Latin American republics did not exist, and that at the time of independence they were not present even in the minds of visionary ideologues.

The work on the history of the Iberian Peninsula also presents some serious problems of interpretation starting with the characteristics of the Spanish enlightenment. Most of the Mexicans that read the work of the Abbé Raynal, quoted by van Young did not do so in the original French version but in the Spanish translation, which was in reality a very free re-creation, especially with regard to religion and the nobility. Its translator, a noble Spaniard, gives a clear idea of how the Peninsular Spaniards and the American Spaniards understood the enlightenment. On the other hand, the period 1810-21 is presented in a one-sided fashion, without considering the depth of the political changes in the Peninsula, which affected the process of independence so much - the liberal Constitution of 1812, the absolutist restoration of the monarchy in 1814, and the three-year return of liberalism (1820-23). In reality, the process of American independence cannot be clearly understood without considering the evolution of peninsular politics. There is one final linguistic abuse I would like to point out - the use of the concept of 'village soviets' and 'people-as-soviets' to talk about the indigenous communities during the independence process; these were the same communities that did so much to create constitutional municipalities, as has been demonstrated by Antonio Annino.

A series of chapters deal directly with the topic of politics and make interesting points, especially if we consider the lack of rigorous studies dealing with the role played by the church and the Catholics in the construction of democracy during the nineteenth century. Margaret Lavinia Anderson defines the period as the transition to democracy and treats the topic in a direct and clear way, which she combines with a determinant variable: education. Did the church try to create citizens or was it only preoccupied in making sure that its faithful voted in defence of its particular interests? What can be concluded of the political participation of the church, as it has been presented, is that the priests mobilised the faithful when they needed to but were not interested in creating citizens. Anderson's analysis is based on the argument in Steven Fish's book *Democracy from Scratch* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996) about post-soviet Russia and which can be reduced to the following dilemma: 'the existence of large numbers of people believing in democratic values, of laws permitting free association and of democratic elections have proved in Russia insufficient to establish effective representative government.'

Ivereigh's chapter also looks at the political question, even if the author's description of the Argentine electoral system is clearly erroneous, motivated perhaps by his desire to justify the government's tricks against the interests of the church. He speaks of 'limited suffrage' (pp. 172, 173, 176, 179 and 186), when in Argentina, according to the 1853 Constitution, there were no voting restrictions, neither educational (it was not required to be able to read and write), nor economic. All Argentine citizens could vote and it is quite another issue whether a high percentage did so - but this also happened in other parts of the world where representative governments existed. Ivereigh also defines the Partido Autonomista Nacional (PAN) as a *single party*, which is relatively true for national politics but not for the provinces of the interior, in many of which open electoral competition existed. There is finally a slightly surreal and even anti-democratic argument: Ivereigh criticises the fact there was no referendum to approve the 1420 law of free, obligatory non-religious education, pointing out that 'the true preferences of the Argentines must remain a matter for speculation', when the Argentine Constitution did not contemplate this kind of measure, nor did representative democracy expect it.

As mentioned before, one of the most serious and original chapters that goes to the crux of the question is that by Samuel and Erika Valenzuela, which analyses the formation of the political identity of the Catholics through the conservative party. This was not a confessional party, but it allowed Catholics to express their political preferences clearly. In short, I think we have a book that tries to cover a necessary hole and that has a polemical content. The objectives are achieved only partially and in some cases more clearly than in others.

Notes

1. Loris Zanatta, *Del Estado liberal a la Nación Católica, Iglesia y ejército en los orígenes del peronismo, 1930-1943* (Quilmes: Bernal, Argentina, 1996); and Roberto di Stefano and Loris Zanatta, *Historia de la Iglesia argentina. Desde la conquista hasta fines del siglo XIX* (Mondadori: Buenos Aires, 2000).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. La participación indígena en la construcción de la República de Guatemala (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid: Madrid, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Carlos Malamud, 'Acerca del concepto de 'Estado Colonial' en la América hispana', *Revista de Occidente*, 116 (1991), 114-27.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See the work of José Carlos Chiaramonte and François-Xavier Guerra.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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