

CRUSADERS, MARTYRS, AND SAINTS:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRISTIAN MILITANCY IN MEXICO, 1850-2013

BY

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the intersections between religious practices and violence, and their representations. It explores how religious insurgents in Mexico have employed religious imagery and expression to foment or justify collective acts of violence. While close reading is my primary critical approach, I also draw on cultural studies, subaltern studies, and postcolonial studies to provide a framework for the interpretation of non-script cultural products (*i.e.* icons, relics, and bodies) and epistemologies; these instruments facilitate analysis of the broad range of cultural products produced by religious insurgents. My work dialogues with scholars who study religious insurgencies from multiple disciplines including anthropology, history, political science, and communication studies.

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## **Introduction: Holy Wars**

I came of age in the United States when concerns about “religious militancy” became a major part of the public dialogue nationally and internationally. After the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in The United States heightened concerns about religious militancy, religious fundamentalism (Islamic), and the violent religious expression of radical Islam. Middle East scholar John L. Esposito articulated American’s concerns about Islam and the Muslim world in his provocative book *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. He posited a series of questions that helped readers engage and understand the belief system of the adversaries labeled as “Islamic Terrorists:” “Why do they [Muslims] hate us? Why is Islam more militant than other religions? What does the Quran have to say about jihad or holy war? Does the Quran condone this kind of violence and terrorism?” (i). These questions led me to inquire about how terror and violence had been propagated in the name of Christianity in Mexico, my country of birth, and how such violence has been represented.

As a student of Spanish and Latin American Literature and Culture, I became increasingly aware that the history of the Spanish-speaking world was full of examples of militancy, violence, and terror made in the name of defending or promulgating Christianity. The most recognizable Christian-led wars were the Crusades. In the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, Christians of Europe took up arms in the name of the Holy Cross (thus the name “Crusade”) to regain control of Jerusalem, which was under Muslim control (Tyerman 9).

Because Christianity advocates pacifism, Christian princes of the Middle Ages sought to justify their use of war and violence by adhering to elaborate criteria for the legitimate uses of war. These guidelines, also known as the doctrine of “just war,” were developed by classical philosophers (like Aristotle and Cicero) and medieval theologians (including St. Augustine and

St. Thomas Aquinas) (Tyerman 68–70; Robinson 1–3). The guidelines aimed to ameliorate the obvious incongruence between a Christian’s professed faith, which forbade killing as one of its central commandments, and the pragmatic need to carry out warfare. Under the doctrine of “just war” six criteria must be met in order to legitimately wage war on an adversary: 1) war must be declared by a legitimate authority; 2) it must be waged in the pursuit of peace; 3) war must be used as a last resort; 4) force must be proportionate to the desired outcome; 5) war “must have a reasonable chance of success;” and finally, 6) war must be waged with moderation by following clear guidelines for combat as to avoid collateral violence (e.g. looting, massacres, and the killing of civilians) (McAfee Brown 19–20). When violence was enacted in order to “defend” or advance Christianity, understood to be “the will of God,” this war was represented by Christian princes as “Holy” (18). The Catholic Church sometimes offered those participating in such wars special dispensations so that they could preserve their spiritual integrity in spite of violating the commandments (Tyerman 15–16).

The Christian princes of the Iberian Peninsula also have a long legacy of religious militancy and violence. In the so-called *Reconquista*, Christian kingdoms attempted to reconquer territories held by Islamic states in the Iberian Peninsula from 711 to 1492 (Tyerman 82, 122–24). The fifteenth century Spanish Inquisition, an institution used by Spanish monarchs to regulate religious orthodoxy within their state, is another infamous example of the use of religious violence. According to historian Henry Kamen, representations of the inquisition exaggerated the actual violence of the period (189). Even so, the Inquisition remains a prominent example of the use of violence and terror made in the name of Christianity.

Spaniards introduced their militant brand of Christianity to the Americas during the conquest and colonization. Famously, Catholic monarchs used evangelization, and the legal



instruments created by the Catholic Church to support it, as justification to explore, invade, and take possession of lands and people (Adorno 73; Arias and Marrero-Fente xiii). A primary religious and legal instrument employed by the Spanish to ascertain their legitimate conquest in the Americas, known as “El Requerimiento” (The Requirement), compelled native communities to accept Christianity by their free will or by force: “we will not compel you to turn Christians. But if you do not do it...with the help of God, I will enter forcefully against you, and I will make war everywhere and however I can, and I will subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and His Majesty, and I will take your wives and children, and I will make them slaves...” (Seed 69). Thus, the Spanish Monarchs gained legitimacy for the territorial conquest of the Americas by explaining the need to convert the inhabitants of the newly encountered territories to Christianity. As native peoples began to accept Christianity (driven by faith or pragmatism), priests regulated their religious expression closely for fear that the natives would revert to their pre-Hispanic religious beliefs. As has been well-documented, the Inquisition, and later the *extirpadores de idolatrias*, zealously sought and punished the religious syncretism of Native Americans in Spanish colonies (Greenleaf 75; Mills 4). Colonial Latin America inherited narratives about religious violence ranging from defense of the faith to the preservation of religious orthodoxy.

Religion was a key instrument of the Spanish Colonial project. As seen in the examples above, Christianity provided the discursive, legal, and religious framework that legitimated and facilitated the corporal and territorial domination of native peoples. Colonialism not only involved the possession of land and people but also a “Spiritual Conquest” that implied the destruction or dismantlement of native epistemologies, histories, and their corresponding institutions, a process that some post-colonial scholars like José Rabasa have labeled as

epistemic violence (Rabasa 59). The Catholic Church portrayed native epistemologies and artifacts—knowledge regarding medicine, science, agriculture, education, religion, history, and language—as idolatry, sorcery, and superstition. It sought to monitor, detect, marginalize, punish, and consequently exterminate native beliefs systems under the pretext of preserving Christian orthodoxy, and in doing so advanced the ideological project that Spaniards understood as “civilization.” As literary critic Walter D. Mignolo observes, the maintenance of power relied on the colonizers’ ability to control both physical and symbolic spaces: “in controlling space, the appropriation of knowledge (two domains of the colonial matrix of power) come together to maintain capital accumulation in particular hands and to increase the marginality and dehumanization of others” (Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* 49). As we will see in the four religious insurgencies that I analyze in this work, the coloniality of religion will continue to contribute to the elaboration of contemporary Mexico, whose governors will repeatedly struggle to reestablish and renegotiate power relations with religious entities who both threaten and reaffirm the *status quo*.

The examples above may suggest that religious violence and militancy only occurred during Spanish Colonialism. However, Independent Latin American republics, which inherited the beliefs and anxieties of the early modern Catholic Church in their religious practices, also witnessed manifestations of violence whose justifications and motivations were rooted in Christianity. With a focus on the Republic of Mexico, my dissertation samples key moments in these religious conflicts, marked by numerous uprisings as well as other forms of violence motivated or legitimated by religion.<sup>1</sup> Mexico offers fertile ground in which to explore how religious discourses have been used to legitimate violence. This project investigates the manner in which Mexicans from culturally or socially excluded communities have manipulated religious

imagery and expression in order to foment or justify collective acts of violence during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. I study four cases of religious militancy from distinct periods of Mexico's history: the Caste War (1857-1861), the peasant uprising of Tomóchic (1891-1892), the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929), and the "crusades" of the evangelical narco-cartels La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios (2006-present).

Certainly, there are other conflicts in Mexico in which insurgents employed religious iconography to bring legitimacy to their armed conflict. In the three-year War of Reform (1857-1861) Conservatives (often highly religious) tried to fend off Liberal political reforms, that attempted to separate religion from public, economic, and civic life by going to war. Alicia Barabas' *Utopías indias: movimientos sociorreligiosos en México* catalogues 54 indigenous revolts, uprisings, and insurrections in Mexico from colonial times to the 1950s; according to Barabas, these revolts often incorporated religiosity.<sup>2</sup> During the Mexican Revolution, many factions led their armies into battle with standards displaying the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe (W. B. Taylor 20). As seen in the above examples, many political factions have employed religious discourses to justify violence and to help them maintain or sustain power. Often times, the Catholic Church provided the legal and theological (and consequently moral) instruments necessary for these groups to support their cause. Sometimes, however, the impulse for rebellion comes from the margins of society. While these groups also rely on religious imagery and expression to legitimate their struggles, unlike the Church itself, they must borrow from other elements of their religious experience (sometimes influenced by distinct cultural and religious traditions) to gain legitimacy for their struggles.

Because of their diverse positions, I situate my reading of these religious insurgent communities within the frameworks of cultural, subaltern, and post-colonial studies. I use the

term “subaltern” to discuss the groups and communities who are excluded from meaningful access to any combination of social, political, or economic capital within the paradigms of national culture (Mignolo, “Coloniality of Power and Subalternity” 426). Not only are subaltern communities excluded from full participation, but their ways of knowing the world—histories, languages, technologies, and cultural products—are also systematically ignored, devalued, or targeted for repression and destruction (Rabasa 15; Chakrabarty 48). Although drug traffickers wield significant economic influence, their culture remains marginal in relation to mainstream Mexican culture and Mexican Christian expression because mainstream culture often rejects and marginalizes the traffickers’ culture as lowly or crude.

This is not to say, however, that marginal or subaltern communities are incapable of making socially and politically significant statements through their cultural production, social and religious movements, and armed insurgencies. Two of the subaltern communities examined in this work, the Cristiano’oob of Yucatán and the Evangelical Drug Cartels, for example, proposed and achieved, at least temporarily, autonomous communities that rivaled the Mexican national project. It is worth noting that marginal or subaltern communities are also capable of enacting significant acts of violence, thereby marginalizing others. Thus, subaltern communities can simultaneously be victims and victimizers of others.

The framework of subaltern studies also allows me to read religious insurgencies, especially beliefs in miracles, faith healings, spirits, and interactions with the divine, not as misguided epistemologies of marginal groups, but rather as self-conscious attempts to provide meaningful responses to political, social, and economic concerns. Subaltern studies has freed me to explore the intersections of personal devotional practices, organized religion, autochthonous religious practices, and their dialogue with local, regional, and national political interests and

policies without having to dismiss, discount, or ignore the true influence of religion on lived experience.

While many of these insurgent communities express themselves through text, other religious insurgents construct their bellicose narratives by employing non-textual discursive practices—these may be inscribed in religious icons (images and statues of saints and folk saints), relics (blood-stained clothing or body fragments), photographic images, and body messages. For this reason, in addition to relying on close readings of a range of textual materials, my analysis of the cultural production of religious insurgents also relies on the analysis of material culture through the framework of cultural studies, whose principal concern is to understand how spectators glean meaning from various cultural products and their representations. Because studying cultural insurgencies is a multifaceted endeavor, my research also draws from, and dialogues with, the research of scholars from multiple fields including anthropology, political science, and communication studies, among others.

My research is framed by a series of questions about the representation of each of the religious conflicts that I examine in this study: How do the religious communities that engage in violence situate themselves in relation to other groups or communities? Also, since Christianity is the dominant religious tradition in Mexico, how do religious militants rationalize their perpetration of violence against persons who, in principle, share their religious faith? In other words, how is difference constructed between the militant community and outsiders? Who articulates the concerns fueling the armed movement? To whom do they direct these discourses? What is the motivation or intention in evoking faith as a premise of their religious insurgency? How do competing discourses shape or influence the rhetoric of the Christian militants? How do religious leaders and their followers reconcile the discrepancies between their actions and the

commandments of their professed faith? Finally, I explore how these acts of religious insurgency have influenced broader conversations about the role of religion in shaping Mexican political life and identity.

My study of religious insurgencies by subaltern communities begins with a study of the Maya-language manuscripts known as the Sermons of the Communicating Cross (also known as the Talking Cross), a crucifix object said to embody Jesus that served as a spiritual and military guide to the insurgents of the Caste War of Yucatan (1850). My analysis of the Sermons of the Communicating Cross reveals how the followers of this icon relied on Classical Maya and Christian epistemologies to construct a rhetoric whereby the insurgents could simultaneously play the role of oppressed and oppressor. We will see that Maya-speaking *mestizo* and indigenous communities advance their own colonial ambitions by appropriating and (re)signifying Christian discourses and practice, formerly symbols of European colonialism.

In Chapter 2, I examine journalistic articles and narratives chronicling the siege of the town of Tomóchic, Chihuahua (1891 and 1892). The Tomochitecos announced that they would only follow the will of God and that henceforth they disavowed the authority of the church and civil authorities. I survey the extant chronicles of the Tomochitecos to uncover why they rebelled against the civil and religious authorities of their state and how religiosity influenced their bellicose enterprise. Additionally, we will see that even narratives that indict the Díaz regime for its extreme use of force, such as Heriberto Frías' *Tomóchic*, and newspaper editorials in opposition journals, ultimately legitimate the violent repression of villagers characterized as "Indian" and "religious fanatics" by reinforcing positivist notions that regarded these traits as a threat to national progress.

Chapter 3 explores the letters, life histories, testimonials, and correspondence of Catholic men and women who took up arms to resist state-sponsored secularization efforts during the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929). These texts and oral narratives reveal that these participants relied on rhetoric from popular and traditional religion and culture—tropes of martyrdom, divine intercession, and crusade—to explain their uprising. I demonstrate that the revalorization and affirmation of these religious discourses in popular memory allowed the Cristeros to establish the legitimacy of their bellicose enterprise, and to claim victory in their modern-day crusade, even when official narratives relied on these same truths to illustrate the contrary.

In the final chapter, I study a modern iteration of religious bellicose rhetoric by examining the cultural production of evangelical drug cartels, La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios. The cartels employ religious tropes informed by Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity to reconcile acts of torture, mutilation, and executions with their professed values. These cartels use *narcomantas*, corpse-messages, memoirs, codes of conduct, and print propaganda to convey their messages. The figures of the Apocalypse and of the crusade adopted by these evangelical cartels offer strategies for both conceptualizing and allegorizing the narco-violence in Mexico. In these narratives, the evangelical cartels portray the violent confrontations between the agents of good (La Familia or Los Caballeros) and the evil outsiders (Los Zetas) as necessary precursors to achieving peace in Mexico.

My research reveals how many religious communities rely on writings and religious tropes elaborated in mainstream Christian religious communities (Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity) to develop a rhetoric of continuity between their religious movements and their parent religion. Establishing these connections allows each group to situate itself as part of a larger mythico-historical narrative (crusade, apocalypse, or prophecy) often culminating in

millenarian ideals of new world orders. Frequently, the cultural production of these religious insurgents self-consciously engages and contests local, regional, and even national imagery, policies, and discourses.

Through their cultural production and narratives, each of these religious insurgencies reveals fissures within totalizing narratives of the Mexican nation. Marginalized communities are able to propose alternative religious and political projects that challenge the cultural and territorial integrity of the Mexican Republic by framing them with religion. Because these groups often lack the social or political capital necessary to propose oppositional social and political projects, they strategically employ religious discourses to redress conditions of inequality, repression, or neo-colonization. Often, these alternative discourses rely on the notion that Christianity can shape a more equitable governance system than that offered by state governmental agencies. These alternative systems are especially powerful when they respond to governments perceived as corrupt, repressive, or unaccountable to those they claim to govern. As we will see, appealing to Christian bellicose discourses offers the insurgents a possibility of redress through a legitimate use of force. Such alternative discourses become more significant when one considers Mexico's perennial struggle to maintain factions (civil, ethnic, and religious) and competing interests engaged in the Mexican national project.

Since devotional practices are manifested through a broad range of cultural expressions—ranging from prayer cards to *corridos*—I sought to gather a spectrum of cultural material produced by insurgent communities. This field research presented many unexpected challenges. During my research of the Cristero Rebellion, for example, I traveled to Aguascalientes, Mexico City, and Jalisco. After reviewing my proposed research, an archive director in a small town of Jalisco denied me access to her Cristero archives. In Mexico City and Guadalajara, I was unable



to access oral histories of Cristeros because many Cristeros and Cristeras gave their testimony on the condition that their texts would be sealed after their deaths. I was also unable to access audiovisual material due to technical limitations. In some instances, the poor maintenance of audiovisual materials meant that their reproduction would damage the materials. In other cases, obsolete recording formats (such as Betamax tapes) made some Cristero testimonials inaccessible. Still, many local, regional, and national archives offered access to many well-preserved hand-written memoirs, oral histories (in VHS and cassette tape), print propaganda, photographs, and relics of the period.

Fortunately, many archives are slowly digitizing their collections and converting older formats to new ones. More archives are slowly opening their Cristero collections to the public. In 2012, for example, the Historical Archive of The Archdiocese of Guadalajara began unsealing some Cristero files and in 2013 the Videoteca of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia began digitizing its Cristero recordings. As these texts become available in coming years, we will have access to more voices from the Cristiada.

In researching La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios, the evangelical drug cartels, I relied on on-line sources and reports from the web, including news reports and blogs. Yet my access to the cultural production of these cartels was also restricted. Due to the danger of researching drug-related issues in Mexico, I relied on digital sources produced by media outlets and the evangelical cartels themselves to learn about the devotional practices of the organizations. Local and regional news outlets from Mexico, especially Guerrero and Michoacán, practice self-censorship for fear of retaliation, especially from 2005 to the present. In spite of having access to a number of texts and cultural products, many of the reports of the cultural and religious practices of the evangelical drug cartels come from the foreign press or

narco-blogs that publish unedited materials. Occasionally materials downloaded from narco-blogs contained malware (including a virus to hijack Facebook accounts). Still, YouTube, narco-blogs, and news reports offered access and insight into the cultural production of these cartels in the form of pictures (of *narcomantas*, victims, costumes, and effigies), songs, flyers, interviews, and other propaganda materials. I am grateful to the many journalists and citizens who continue to document and report on drug-related issues (putting themselves at great personal risk) so that the world can learn about the impact of organized crime in Mexico.

When examining representations of violence in history, literature, and culture created by subaltern communities, it is easy to rationalize, mythologize, and even admire violence as an abstract. As the great-granddaughter of Cristeros, Mexico's Christian soldiers during the 1920s, I first approached my research with a romanticized view of religious violence; stories of Christian valor, unwavering religious conviction, and miraculous events during armed conflict intrigued me. In the abstract, religious violence was heroic, righteous, revolutionary, and admirable. During my research, my understating of violence became more realistic. When I studied the Cristeros, for example, the realities of war and its aftermath were materialized in unexpected ways ranging from prayer cards portraying the cadavers of martyrs, to the bloodstained relics of Cristero Saints and *Beatos* (clothes and body fragments), displayed in museums and Churches. As many researchers of trauma studies have observed, those who produce and disseminate imagery of violence wish to trigger emotions of fear, indignation, or anger by shocking or even traumatizing spectators. Inevitably, reproducing representations of violence extends the traumatic potential of this imagery to new spectators.

My research on religious violence has affected me in unexpected ways. After examining graphic depictions of violence and its aftermath as part of my research, I have experienced

nightmares, insomnia (from fear of nightmares), depression, grief, anxiety, and even emotional numbness. I was grateful to learn that other researchers of violence had experienced similar trauma because of researching and writing about violence. Literary critic Edurne Portela, for example, described experiencing “nightmares or unbearable moments of depression, disgust, or desperation” as a result of her research on women’s writing in Argentina’s dirty war (47). For Portela, however, reproducing trauma serves a didactic function: “I would like the reader of this project to have one of those unreasonable moments, to feel at least once the pain of words, and even to have a couple of nightmares, because it is not until we feel some pain that we start to understand” (Portela 47–48). It is not my intention to inflict pain on my readers, or to make them “understand” the suffering of others by traumatizing them with images of violence. Nor do I wish to re-victimize the victims of these conflicts by making a spectacle of their deaths through the gratuitous reproductions of their suffering. Although my aim is to understand how communities use religion to justify violence, I acknowledge that in discussing and analyzing graphic representations of violence, I also participate in its perpetuation. By studying representations of religious violence in this work, we learn how bellicose discourses of marginalized communities sprout from a clash between local religious traditions and regional or national policy. The representations of violence elucidate how Christianity, perhaps much like Islam in its own context, becomes not only a symbolic but also discursive weapon for those lacking symbolic, political, or economic power.

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<sup>1</sup> Some have argued that the Mexican War of Independence was the first of many religious insurgencies of the republic; however, this assertion is problematic. As noted by historian William B. Taylor, during Mexican Independence the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe was used as an ambiguous symbol which encapsulated both the hope for a millenarian liberation and as a tool to appease those dissatisfied with the colonial system (W. B. Taylor 10, 21). The image of the Virgin was not only employed by Father Miguel Hidalgo, the leader of the insurgents, but also “by other curates who invoked her protection against the *gachupines* (peninsular Spaniards) and by small bands of rebels to justify their acts of destruction;” in other words, even vandalism was carried out “under the higher authority of the virgin” (22).

<sup>2</sup> New readings of some of the revolts listed within Baraba’s catalogue, for example the Tomóchic Rebellion and the Caste War, which I discuss in this work, reveal that some conflicts were deliberately misidentified as “Indian.”

## Chapter 1: Maya-Christian Epistemologies and the Bellicose Sermons of the Holy Crosses

In 1847, the time was ripe for a peasant uprising in Yucatan. Since the Mexican Independence, the Yucatecan elite had recruited Maya-speaking peasants as soldiers with promises of improving their living conditions and lowering their taxes in exchange for their services (Gabbert 91). After decades of broken promises and rampant inequality, forces consisting predominantly of Yucatecan *mestizos* and indigenous people began an uprising against the government of Yucatan in 1847 in order to force social and religious reforms. Today we know this uprising as the Caste War (*La Guerra de las Page* left intentionally blank.

*Castas*).<sup>1</sup> Initially, the insurrection was successful; however, by 1848, the insurgents retreated into the uninhabited jungles of eastern Yucatan. In the jungles, they suffered great casualties as a result of captures, starvation, and disease (G. D. Jones 659; Reed 497). The rebel forces eventually splintered into two factions: those who agreed to surrender to the government at the behest of Catholic priests in 1853 (whom the government labeled the *indios bravos pacificados*) and those who rejected the appeals of the Catholic priests and continued fighting (*indios bravos sublevados*) (Gabbert 497; G. D. Jones 659).

Those who refused to surrender believed that Jesus had commanded their revolt, and that it was therefore bound for success. According to lore, on October 15, 1850, a cross appeared on a mahogany tree near an uninhabited *cenote* (sinkhole). The Cross, understood to embody Jesus, gave a surprising directive:

Is my Father's commandment,  
Ye Christian villagers:  
Know ye  
That not only did there arise the war of the whites

And the Indians;  
Because it has come  
The time  
For an Indian uprising  
Over the whites  
For once and for all! (J. de la Cruz 86–95)

According to the Cross, the reason the Maya peasant revolt had been overrun was because, even though God had offered its blessing to the struggle, the peasants had not followed its commandments. The Communicating Cross, conveying its message through its scribe, Juan de la Cruz, encouraged the insurgents to continue fighting the government so that they could achieve economic and social equity. After the apparition of the Communicating Cross, the fledgling uprising received an unexpected boost.

The insurgents developed a cult dedicated to the teachings of the Communicating Cross and began calling themselves the people of Christ, *Cristiano 'oob* in Yucatec Maya. Relying on the authority of the Communicating Cross and its sermons, the community opted for the development of an autonomous Christian state in the eastern jungles of the Yucatán Peninsula. In this new Christian sect, members of the Maya-speaking peasantry assumed the duties which had been previously held only by ordained priests within the Roman Catholic Church: ministering to the flock, officiating rites and celebrations, and interpreting Holy Scripture. On occasion, as historian Robert Patch noted, the *Cristiano 'oob* negotiated with the Yucatec government so that priests would be invited into their territory to perform sacraments; however, the Catholic Church denounced both the new sect and the rebellion (83). The capital of the *Cristiano 'oob's* autonomous religious and political community was Chan Santa Cruz (the present-day city of

Felipe Carrillo Puerto). The so-called “Caste War” is unique among religious insurgencies in Mexico because the community was able to preserve its territorial, political, and religious autonomy until 1901, when the Mexican Federal Government finally defeated them.

In this chapter, I examine the writings of the religious-military cult of the *Cristiano 'oob*, to determine how religious discourses present in the sermons of the Communicating Cross advanced the decolonizing project of the *Cristiano 'oob* and contributed to the development of the community's hybrid post-colonial identity based on a simultaneous embrace and subversion of colonial religious discourse. The Caste War, spearheaded by indigenous and *mestizo* leaders, was the only successful insurgency in Republican Mexico during the nineteenth century (Robins 84).<sup>2</sup> Unlike previous indigenous religious insurgencies, the *Cristiano 'oob* developed and sustained their decolonizing (and colonial) project by relying on the written word, specifically the recording and circulation of Yucatec Maya epistemologies using Latin script.

Independent *Cristiano 'oob* communities flourished in eastern Yucatán (the present-day state of Quintana Roo) from the 1850's to 1901, and some isolated communities still exist to this day. According to anthropologist Allan F. Burns, the *Cristiano 'oob* communities he studied in the 1970's still believe that their communities are at war with the Mexican government (260). The *Cristiano 'oob* and their descendants have been able to reaffirm their claim to autonomy from the Catholic Church and the Mexican state through the commandments and correspondence of the Communicating Cross, whose sermons, letters, and counsels preserve community memory, provide historical continuity to the rebel communities, and reinforce the justification for their rupture with the Mexican government.

Early in the history of this religious community, the Cross dictated to its scribes sermons and letters intended for the insurgents, for supporters in British Honduras (present day Belize),

and for adversaries in the Yucatán Government. Two extant sermons that the Communicating Cross dictated to its priest, Juan de la Cruz, ordered the insurgents to resume their civil war against the Yucatán forces. By appropriating Christian discourses, formerly tools of subjugation of indigenous, black, and mulatto peasant communities of Yucatan, the insurgents challenged the neo-colonial policies of the governors of Yucatan that reinforced mechanisms that contributed to their exploitation. My analysis of this conflict demonstrates how the followers of the Cult of the Communicating Cross used their knowledge of Classical Maya and Christian epistemologies and texts to construct their own agency and to authorize their revolt against the Yucatan government and Roman Catholic Church.

### ***Juan de la Cruz and The Writings of the Communicating Cross***

The Holy Cross began communicating with the Yucatec Maya-speaking peasants beginning in 1850 and ceased its communication in 1867. Some scholars and Yucatec chroniclers, among them the pro-government historian Eligio Ancona, suspected that the artifice of Communicating Cross was the brainchild of José María Barrera, a *mestizo* military officer who fought with the insurgents (Villa Rojas and Cline 20–21; G. D. Jones 663; Ancona 313–16). According to Ancona, Barrera recruited an Indian ventriloquist named Manuel Nahuat to serve as the high priest to the Cross, or *patrón*, and to “interpret” (or fabricate and perform) the commands and counsel of the Holy Cross (Villa Rojas and Cline 21; Ancona 315–16). When Manuel Nahuat was killed in a battle, and the government confiscated and destroyed the original cross, the Communicating Cross stopped conveying its commands through its own speech (Bricker 105). The destruction of this icon did not mean the end of the covenant offered by the Holy Cross to the peasants, however. The codices of the X-Cacal sub tribe relate that three new “daughter” Crosses—also endowed with the ability to communicate with the insurgents—



replaced the confiscated Cross; Nahuat was succeeded by other *patrones* who were also capable of interpreting the Cross' commandments. The *patrón* of the Cross, observed anthropologist Grant Jones, "was primarily an interpreter of divine will and a presider over ritual events of primarily Roman Catholic content" (G. D. Jones 663). After the death of Nahuat, the Holy Cross communicated with its followers in writing through letters and commandments that it dictated to its *patrones* (Bricker 105). These religious leaders copied and circulated the commands of the Cross.

For the most part, extant examples of the correspondence of Juan de la Cruz exist in prose form; for this reason, translators have maintained the prose form in their transcriptions and translations. Notable exceptions to this trend are Victoria Bricker's transcriptions, translations, and interpretations of the sermons and correspondence of the Communicating Cross: among them, the "Proclama en lengua Maya de Juan de la Cruz, adivino de X Balam Na, dirigida a sus conciudadanos" (1850). According to Miguel León-Portilla and Earl Shorris, in the original, the text appears in continuous prose form; however, in her transcription, Bricker opted to arrange the text into couplets (Leon-Portilla and Shorris 583). The second text that I examine is a similar proclamation of the Communicating Cross: "Sermons of the Talking Cross, Translated from a Manuscript Written in Maya by Native Scribes of Chan Santa Cruz." This text is an appendix to Alfonso Villa Rojas' monograph *The Maya of East Central Quintana Roo*. Pedro Castillo, the translator of this text, arranged his translation in verse form. The original of this version was preserved in manuscript form by native scribes from the Maya-speaking community of X-Cacal, a division of the Cacicazgo of Chan Santa Cruz, located in the present-day state of Quintana Roo.

I suspect that Bricker opted to structure her translations of the letters and sermons in

verse because the texts of Juan de la Cruz resemble other Maya-language texts of the Colonial period in their structure. Discourse and form contributed to the meaning of these sermons because Maya-Spanish rhetorical and discursive practices informed the translation of the sermons of the Communicating Cross. According to anthropologist Munro Edmonson, formal Maya discourse is traditionally written in the form of couplet parallelism with “extensive use of Kennings or *difracismos*” (xii). Furthermore, he adds, each couplet typically has “both an obvious and a synthetic or esoteric meaning” and, he explains, that these texts—like many colonial texts in Indian languages of middle America—are purposefully obscure (xii). When they are translated, these formal elements are often buried in the translation. Pedro Castillo, another translator of the writings of Juan de la Cruz, chose to translate and interpret the Maya text as Spanish prose, effectively limiting the interpretative possibilities offered by the Maya structure. Bricker’s translation suggests a range of possible interpretations, glosses, and commentary in her footnotes, thus leaving the text open to interpretation.

The translation of key terms also influences possible interpretations of the texts. Translating terms such as *dzulob* as “whites” (rather than as a “foreigner” or “wealthy person”) or *masevalilob* as “Indians” (rather than “peasants”) taints interpretations of the discourses of the Communicating Cross (Hanks 366). Although the extant writings of Juan de la Cruz are hybrids (culturally, linguistically, and by virtue of translation), from these sermons we can glean some indications of the ideological vision of the insurgent community that would come to call itself the *Cristiano ’oob*.

The sermons of the Communicating Cross were particularly impactful because they lie at the intersection of orality and literacy. In fact, in nearly all of its correspondence, the Communicating Cross demands to be heard; that is to say, it demands that its words be

transmitted orally before its interlocutor (whether he be government official or peasant devotee). We can conceptualize the intersection between orality and literacy present in the correspondence of the Communicating Cross through the concept of *orature*. Joseph Roach observed that the concept of orature is relevant to oral testimonials which are transcribed, and similarly useful when describing songs and pledges and other forms of cultural production that is written in order to be sung (also preserved); furthermore, he adds, this term recognizes the mutual creation of these modes of communication (11–12). Given the performative nature of the Sermons and correspondence, I would tend to agree with anthropologist Denis Tedlock when he suggested that oral performances are best transcribed as poetry, rather than as prose because traditional poetry tends to preserve its link to song (Tedlock 129).

In the cult's trajectory there is a brief interruption in the communications of the Cross in 1863. The cause: internal strife among the insurgents. José Dionisio Zapata and José Leandro Santos, two insurgent leaders, overthrew the religious-military leadership of the cult. Zapata and Santos justified their coup by explaining that they had discovered that the speech of the Holy Cross was not divine but rather produced by a *cristiano* (mere human) (Bricker 111). The “iconoclasts” Zapata and Santos hoped that by unmasking the Communicating Cross as a ruse, they would delegitimize the Cult and authorize their own government (G. D. Jones 676). On a superficial level, their calculated challenge to the Cross and the *patrones* seems justified. As anthropologist Bruno Latour observes, when it comes to religious icons “the more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth” (Latour and Weibel 18). Latour adds that history has demonstrated that when denouncing those who make others believe in non-existing fetishes, “the trick to uncover [*sic*] the trick is always to show the lowly origin of the work, the manipulator, the counterfeiter, the fraud behind the scenes

who is caught red-handed” (18). In theory, revealing that the *patrones* fabricated the speech of the Cross should have alienated the *Cristiano ’oob* and dismantled their religious and political project; however, in spite of Zapata and Santos’ grand revelation of the machinations of the *patrones*, the insurgents clung to their belief in authority of the Communicating Crosses.

On occasion, Latour notes, the “iconoblasts” reinforce, rather than destroy, the icons they so zealously seek to unmask: “the more you reveal the *tricks* necessary to invite the gods to the ceremony during the initiation, the stronger is the certainty that the divinities are present” (20). Three months after the coup Zapata and Santos were murdered and the insurgents resumed the veneration of the Cross (Bricker 111). Although the Cult to the Holy Cross resumed, it did not operate as it had in the past. After the coup, the power of the *patrón* as a religious and military leader diminished and the correspondence between the Holy Cross and its followers dwindled, but persisted.

Today we have several surviving examples of communications from the Holy Cross, including its sermons and correspondence with British and Yucatec authorities. Historians, ethnographers, archeologists, as well as contemporary *Cristiano ’oob* have preserved and studied these manuscripts. The extant correspondence of the Cross is attributed to the Cross’ patron and scribe, “Juan de la Cruz.”<sup>3</sup> Anthropologist Don E. Dumond summarized the content of the letters of the Communicating Cross as an assortment of earthly and divine concerns: “it calls for the return of its property, asserts its divinity, decries the hostilities, and directs the governor to order his troops withdrawn and his prisoners released, commanding it all in the names of Jesus, Mary, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit” (294). The second category of communication from the Cross consists of sermons, proclamations, and exhortations. In these sermons the medium Juan de la Cruz “announces the divinity of the Cross, laments the hardships

suffered by the insurgents, issues a set of commandments to them, and promises them grace, all interspersed with passages glorifying the cross itself” (Dumond 294). Reed suggests that the purpose of these proclamations was to provide the insurgents with hope during trying circumstances (509).

Anthropologist Alfonso Villa Rojas proposed the continued influence of these texts: scribes of Communicating Crosses in communities in central Quintana Roo continued to perform (read aloud) the sermons of the Cross during the mass which closed the celebration of the Cross on May 3<sup>rd</sup> up to the 1940’s (161). Like most texts and correspondence produced by the *Cristiano ’oob*, the sermons of the Communicating Cross were transmitted in Yucatec Maya.

### ***Maya and Christian: The Legacy of the Spritual Conquest***

When the uprisings of Yucatán began, the insurgents demanded the implementation of reforms that would improve the quality of life and working conditions of peasants and laborers in Yucatán. Yucatan chronicler Eligio Ancona interpreted the conflict using colonial paradigms of race and difference, which effectively exculpated the contemporary Yucatec government of its continued colonial policies that allowed for the preservation of caste hierarchies. According to Ancona, the war was the logical consequence of centuries of exploitation of Maya Indians and this indigenous community’s intrinsic hatred of foreigners:

si el indio aborrecía antes al español porque era extranjero y porque le había vencido en la Guerra, le aborreció todavía más cuando comprendió que aunque agotase todas sus fuerzas en un trabajo constante su salario siempre mezquino y ordinariamente tasado por la ley, nunca le bastaría para el sustento de su familia y para saciar la codicia de sus señores temporales y espirituales. (6–7)

The Yucatec elite had exploited indigenous and peasant communities since they had achieved the conquest of the peninsula, and continued to do so even after the Mexican and Yucatec independence. Anthropologist Victoria Bricker points out that leaders of the insurgency challenged the Yucatán Government and the Catholic Church's policies that imposed higher religious, personal, and civil taxes and fees on peasants (most of whom were indigenous and poor) (94).

Initially, the insurgents demanded reforms to the government in power. Among these reforms was the proposal that all Yucatecans pay equal religious contributions (*obvenciones*) regardless of their caste (93-4). In a letter dated April 7, 1850, insurgents José María Barrera, Pantaleón Uh, Francisco Cob, José Isaac Pat, Calixto Yam, and Apolinario Dzul explained to the priest charged with negotiating peace with the insurgents, José Canuto Vela, that they fought to achieve social and economic equity:

we are fighting so that there will never again be a contribution whether they are Whites, Negroes, or Indians and that baptism [will cost] three *reales* whether they are Whites, Negroes, or Indians, that marriages [will cost] ten *reales* whether they are Whites, or Negroes, or Indians and the forest will not be purchasable: Whites are going to farm wherever they please, Negroes are going to farm wherever they please, Indians are going to farm wherever they please. There is no one to forbid it. (*qtd in* Bricker 93)

Bricker explains that the disproportionate tithes originated when Catholic priests raised the fees for marriage and baptism paid by the Indians in order to recuperate the revenue loss resulting from the abolition of the religious duties after Mexican independence (93–94). The insurgents wanted to eliminate this policy. Additionally, they demanded the abolition of debt patronage,

private ownership of land, and an end to physical abuse of Indians at the hands of their landlords (93). From her analysis of Maya-language correspondence, Bricker ultimately determined that the motives of the revolt surpassed indigenous people's inherent hate of foreigners, as suggested by Ancona, but rather "from the Indian's point of view, the uprising was actually a social revolution which had as its object the erasing of caste distinctions" (94). In other words, the insurgents sought reforms to the Church and the Yucatan state governments, which insisted on preserving burdensome taxes and fees. Initially, the "Caste War" was not a war between races; however, as I will demonstrate, in the rhetoric of the Cult of the Communicating Cross, the war inherited racial overtones when the *Cristiano'oob* attempted to erase this category of racial and ethnic difference and create their own identity based on shared religious traditions.

It is not surprising that the insurgents embraced Christianity as a tool of resistance against the oppressive practices and policies of the regional government and Catholic priests. In the Yucatan there had been a long tradition of using Christian doctrine to defend human rights. During the sixteenth century Franciscan missionaries, charged with the conversion of indigenous people in the region, saw themselves as protectors of the Indians against the abuses of Spanish *encomenderos*; the friars considered their Indian charges as child-like and defenseless, in spite of their bellicose culture (Clendinnen, "Disciplining the Indians" 33, 43).<sup>4</sup> The practices of the Franciscans during the "spiritual conquest" of the Yucatan Peninsula had a mixed legacy. Upon discovering that their Christian Indians continued to practice their faith in secret, the Franciscan *provincial*, Fr. Diego de Landa, implemented one of the most infamous inquisitorial campaigns to extirpate idolatry among the Christianized Indians of Yucatan. According to Inga Clendinnen, during Landa's three-month inquisition 4,500 Indians were interrogated and tortured; the inquisition resulted in 157 deaths during interrogation, 13 suicides, 18 disappearances and

countless cripples (*Ambivalent Conquests* 76; “Disciplining the Indians” 34). In the sixteenth century, Christianity was both a protective buffer between Spaniards and Indians and the conduit for the violence of missionaries intent on exterminating pre-Hispanic cultural traditions and ways of life.

In colonial times, Catholic clergy inadvertently offered the Maya-speaking Indians an opportunity to negotiate their subordinate status in the social hierarchy and to revitalize pre-Hispanic religious beliefs. In the colonial church, Franciscan priests and friars trained trusted Indians to read and write Spanish and Latin script and Christian doctrine. In turn, these Indians, who received the title of *maestros cantores*, were charged with indoctrinating their fellow Indians in the ways and traditions of the Spaniards; however, this goal was not fully met. Through their positions, *maestros cantores* were able to preserve the ancient epistemologies because, as anthropologist William Hanks observed, “many were Maya *ah kin* priests and *maestros cantores* at the same time” (Hanks 349). By creating the role of *maestro cantor*, Franciscan friars restored Maya priests to a status of prominence; in this role, Maya priests could continue to cultivate both Maya and Christian tradition among indigenous and *mestizo* persons.

In the colonial Yucatán, some Maya priests also used their position as *maestros cantores* to challenge their marginal positions in the Church hierarchy, and by extension colonial order. Bricker, for example, observes that in 1610 Indians Alonso Chablé and Francisco Caral attempted to appropriate Spanish rights, privileges, and duties when they declared themselves pope and bishop and conferred the sacraments during clandestine nocturnal masses (20). Once discovered, the Church thwarted the challenge to its authority by executing Chablé and Caral. Another notorious example of the use of Christianity to challenge colonialism was the 1761 millenarian uprising of Jacinto Canek. Canek declared himself the King of the Earth (Jesus) on a



mission from God (Patch 76–77). According to Robert Patch, Canek declared that God had sent him to liberate the Indians from the Spaniards; in spite of the insurgent’s efforts, this attempt at decolonization through the subversion of Christian discourse was suppressed (77). Centuries later, in 1850, the Maya-speaking insurgents of eastern Yucatán would adopt the veneration of the Holy Cross to revitalize their uprising against the neo-colonial Yucatán Government. Through the Cult of the Communicating Cross, Maya-speaking revolutionaries were able to legitimate their armed insurgency while at the same time revitalizing several elements of classical Maya religious and political culture.

### ***The Holy Cross of the Cruz’oob: A Maya-Christian Communicating Icon***

To understand the *Cristiano ’oob*’s use of the Holy Cross and the bellicose message that it dictated to his scribe, Juan de la Cruz, it is necessary to discuss possible readings of the crucifix object. Maya-speaking peasants of the Yucatán peninsula were familiar with two interpretations of the Cross: Roman Catholic and classical Yucatec Maya. Understanding the parallel readings of these objects will reveal how both of these religious traditions contributed to foundational narratives of the Cult of the Communicating Cross and how the classical Maya world view facilitated the syncretic representation and interpretation of the presence and communication of Jesus through the symbol of the cross.

Literary scholar Miguel Tamen’s concept of “friends of interpretable objects” offers a useful framework with which to conceptualize the phenomena of communicating objects, such as the Talking Crosses. Tamen assigns the name “societies of friends” to the groups or individuals who believe that they are able to communicate with inanimate objects (for example trees or holy images) (2, 4). He proposes that communicating objects are animated by virtue of the interpretation of their “friends”: “there are no interpretable objects or intentional objects, only

what counts as interpretable object or, better, groups of people for whom certain objects count as interpretable and who, accordingly, deal with certain objects in recognizable ways” (Tamen 4). Put differently, it is the “society of friends” which attributes intentions to inanimate objects (whether they be churches, icons, works of art, or corporations). The *Cristiano’oob’s* interpretations of the Holy Cross were informed by two epistemologies that accepted human interactions with the non-human. For one, Roman Catholic theology accepted the embodiment of the host (an object) by Jesus, during transubstantiation as a core belief. As Tamen explains, “in the Eucharist, participation involves not the replacement by material representation of Christ’s body, but the presence of such a body, it’s very ‘form-ness’” or morphosis (38).<sup>5</sup> Classical Maya epistemology and religious practice, for its part, also accepts the presence of the divine among the living and accepts objects’ communicating abilities (whether they be written or oral) as normal interactions between humans and the divine.

The followers of the Holy Crosses recuperated and re-appropriated pre-Hispanic religious customs, among them the tradition of the pre-Columbian cross and communicating objects to garner support for their political cause. To the ancient Maya, the cross, or *che*, represented trees or plants (such as the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Life) which were associated with ancestors or places of abundance (Astor-Aguilera 73, 83, 85). This element is also significant because according to *Cristiano’oob* lore, the original Holy Cross (or Mother Cross) manifested itself as a carving on, or atop, a mahogany tree. The adornments of the Maya-Christian cross also reflected a hybrid identity. The Communicating Cross was dressed in what anthropologist Don Dumond identified as a *huipil* and *fustán* [dress and skirt] (the manner of dress of an Indian woman) or what anthropologist Miguel Astor-Aguilera has most recently identified as a *sudario*, or burial shroud (Dumond 295; Astor-Aguilera 102).

Idols and other non-human objects, including the *che*, communicated with, and at times spoke directly to the devout in person or through priests who served as interpreters or who were possessed by the object as mediums in pre-hispanic Yucatec religions (Astor-Aguilera 60, 93; Villa Rojas and Cline 21). In Yucatec Maya epistemologies, the non-human and divine could, and did, commune with humans by inhabiting, or embodying, objects or persons. Lois Parkinson Zamora's explanation of "embodiment" is helpful in understanding the phenomena: "in Mesoamerican myth cultures, the body is coextensive with the world, an expressive space that contains—rather than filters or fixes—the world." (10–13). In other words, for many Mesoamerican cultures, an image or icon of a deity did not merely represent said deity, but rather implied the presence of the deity through the object, as in the case of Maya communicating objects.

Thus, to the *Cristiano'oob* the embodied crucifix object signaled the presence of a Christian deity: Jesus. On occasion, the *Cristiano'oob* community interpreted the Trinity as an extension of Jesus, rather than as three discrete beings: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. The Communicating Cross embodied not only Jesus, but also the Trinity, which the *Cristiano'oob* referred to as "The Three Persons." Through the embodied crucifix and his trusted scribe, Juan de la Cruz, Jesus could convey his commandments to his worshipers or to its ministers. All of this background information suggests that perhaps one could consider the texts attributed to the Holy Cross, the sermons and letters themselves, as yet another *embodied object*, for in the performances of his words through public readings of his sermons and letters Jesus-Three-Persons was said to be present with the insurgents.

The embodiment of humans was permissible in Maya tradition; even so, it is difficult to discern whether the *Cristiano'oob* believed that the *patrónes*, as the priests of the Holy Cross,

were themselves embodied by Jesus-Three-Persons. The tradition of embodiment could explain why the *Cristiano 'oob* were undisturbed when outsiders (captives and traders) accused the first *patrón*, Manuel Nahuat, of “fabricating” the speech of the cross.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, if the *Cristiano 'oob* believed that the *patrón* Juan de la Cruz was embodied, his speech and writings carried not his own agency, but rather that of Jesus; his writings were human in their form and discourse, but divine in their inspiration and intention. Belief in embodiment could also explain why polyphony in the correspondence of the Holy Cross (letters and sermons) was theoretically acceptable and why it would be permissible for Jesus Christ, the Trinity, and Juan de la Cruz to narrate texts simultaneously.

Since much of the Communicating Cross’ commands were mediated through its scribe, the identity of this character as a possible historical figure is worth exploring. There has been much debate about the identity of Juan de la Cruz, the scribe of the cross who penned the sermons and letters of the Communicating Cross. Bricker, for instance, guessed that this name was “assumed by one to the leaders of the Maya insurgents in order to win support for the Talking Cross” (106). She observed that some historians assumed that Venacio Puc (the second *patrón* of the Cross) wrote under this pseudonym, yet “Juan de la Cruz” continues to issue proclamations after Puc’s death (106). Other historians speculate that this is a possible pseudonym for José María Barrera, the purported founder of the religious sect (107). Nelson Reed, for his part, proposed that “Juan de la Cruz” was the collective pen name used by the religious-military leaders rather than the name of an actual prophet who spoke on behalf of the cross. According to Reed, the surviving texts of the Cross “are written in at least four hands but signed “Ten Juan de la Cruz, I Juan de la Cruz” (Reed 505). I believe that Reed’s hypothesis is the most plausible because it most resembles the strategy for textual production of colonial

Maya-language codices. William Hanks observes that in the writings of the colonial Maya it was common for individual works to “bear the writing of multiple scribes, a fact consistent with serial recopying and collective production” as is evident in the Maya-language codices known as the *Books of Chilam Balam* and the collection of writings known as the *Codex Pérez* (339). The contribution of different authors could explain why the sermons of the Communicating Cross addressed a broad range of military, social, economic, and theological concerns with equal candor.

### ***As Prophesied by the Jaguar Priests: How Maya Spirituality Sustained the Caste War***

As we have seen, one of the most outstanding elements of the Cult of the Communicating Cross is the hybridization of pre-Hispanic classical Maya and Roman Catholic beliefs as captured in the icon of the Holy Cross. The appropriation of Classical Maya epistemologies for the development of the *Cristiano 'oob's* cosmology was key to their decolonizing project. Anthropologists use the term “nativism” to describe the attempt of societies “to revive or perpetuate certain aspects or elements of a past culture” (Linton and Hallowell 230). According to Ralph Linton and A. Irving Hallowell, nativistic movements respond to communities’ needs to constitute or reinforce their identity during times of stress: “the society’s members feel that by behaving as the ancestors did they will, in some usually undefined way, help to recreate the total situation in which the ancestors lived. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are attempting to recreate those aspects of the ancestral situation which appear desirable in retrospect” (232). In the discourse of the *Cristiano 'oob*, we see the appropriation and revalorization of cyclical notions of time and history held by the Maya and other pre-Hispanic civilizations. The process of revival of cultural elements in the discourse of the *Cristiano 'oob* is in line with what Linton and Hallowell classified as “magical nativism.” In magical nativistic

movements, symbols and elements used to bring about a new millennium (based on old schemes) are magically manipulated to have new meanings; often these ancient symbols are re-interpreted by a prophetic figure (232). This appropriation allowed the *Cristiano' oob* to situate their struggle against the Yucatec Government in relation to the trajectory of colonization and to prognosticate an end to the unequal order that it had imposed.

In the sermons of the Communicating Cross, Juan de la Cruz situates the Caste War in the Maya tradition of a cyclical mythic-historic paradigm. In the “Proclamation of Juan de la Cruz,” originally in Yucatec Maya, the cross explained that the social war fought by the insurgents reflected contemporary concerns and coincided with the prognosticated events of cyclical time:

Know ye  
That not only there arise the war of the whites  
And the Indians;  
Because it has come  
The time  
For an Indian uprising  
Over the whites  
For once and for all! (J. de la Cruz 88–95)

For Juan de la Cruz, the 1848 uprising was not an arbitrary revolt against the government, but rather an event foretold in Maya prophecy, whose ultimate outcome would be to end colonial domination in the Yucatan Peninsula.

The historical-prophetic *Books of Chilam Balam* (The Books of the Jaguar Priest) and the relations of the *katunes* had foretold a monumental conflict between the Indians and their colonizers. These prophetic texts reflected the view of a cyclical conception of history which

could, in turn, be used to prognosticate the future (de Avendaño y Loyola xii–iii).<sup>7</sup> According to Victoria Bricker, the memory of ethnic conflict and notions of cyclical time contributed to temporal distortions in mythic-historical accounts. She explains that “as new conflicts arise and become history, they are mentally fused and confused with older conflicts, their structural components are squeezed into the pigeonholes of the timeless folklore paradigm” (Bricker 9). Rather than a “fusion/confusion” paradigm proposed by Bricker, I would argue that this process of recycling and distorting myth and history is a conscious appropriation that falls in line with the goals and aspirations of magical nativist movements.

The misinterpretation of the past is not accidental, but a deliberate device employed to explain and provide legitimacy to an otherwise questionable revolt or violent struggle. This trend towards temporal distortions explains why it was easy for the *Cristiano ’oob* to realign the beginning of the Caste War (1847) so that it would coincide with the beginning of a new *katun* cycle in the Maya calendar count: Katun 9 Ahau, which began in 1848 (29). As a consequence of this temporal distortion, the “Proclamation of Juan de la Cruz” portrayed the war against the whites as the foil to previous revolts against the Spaniards: the Caste War being the second uprising in line with what the Cross called, “the way wars used to arise” (J. de la Cruz 125–29). The goal of each of these uprisings was to drive out white colonists from the Yucatan Peninsula.

Presumably, the first uprising against the whites in the mythic-historical chronology alluded to by the Communicating Cross was the 1761 anti-colonial uprising of the Maya hero Jacinto Canek. Historian Pedro Bracamonte y Sosa observed, that Canek’s 1761 uprising also coincided with the prophecies of the the *katunes*, which foretold the coming of a mythic Maya hero: “un hombre dios que se puede asociar a Moctezuma, Quetzalcóatl o Kukulcán e Itzamna y la aparición, en el escenario de los pueblos de las antiguas provincias mayas de Sotuta, Cupul

Cochuah y Maní, de un hombre con amabilidad y carisma para proclamar que reunía las peculiaridades del esperado héroe cultural” (10). Like Canek’s uprising, the Caste War also seemed to offer a peasant class the possibility to overthrow the Yucatec government, and by extension to abolish the social system that dictated the subjugation of Indians, mestizos, and other races. Therefore, in announcing that the time had come for a second uprising, Juan de la Cruz-Three Persons also implied the fruition of the return to an Indian utopia promised by the Jaguar Priests in the colonial-era *Books of Chilam Balam*. Many Maya priests, leaders, and some ladino historians suggested that these texts forecasted the end of Spanish rule in Yucatan (Bracamonte y Sosa 40; Rugeley xviii).<sup>8</sup> The final chapter of the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin* (text named after the town where the manuscript was found), for example, prophesied that the arrival of Katun 9 Ahau (set to begin in 1848) would bring about independence for the *macehuales* (Indians or peasants) and the end to the tribute and suffering caused by forced labors (Edmonson 193). *Cristiano ’oob* leaders interpreted Katun 9 Ahau as the era when the Indians would drive out the “white” governments and once again dominate the Yucatán Peninsula. By aligning their uprising with the prophecy, *Cristiano ’oob* leaders proposed to their followers the inevitability of the success of their conflict.

In 1850 when the Holy Cross first appeared before the insurgents, the uprising was already in decline. For this reason, it would seem that the insurgents were misguided in their reliance on Maya prophetic texts to support the war effort, as the Maya’s prediction for the revolt seemed to be unfulfilled. However, rather than dismissing the indigenous epistemologies as false or flawed, Juan de la Cruz proposed to the insurgents that it was their responsibility to fulfill the prediction. To address the discrepancy between prophecy and events, Jesus interjected himself as a character in the mythic-historical narrative of the Maya:



That I was offering my blessing  
That the war of my Indian children might begin  
then.  
It was only because not a single one of my Indian  
children  
Came here on my command  
That it might be obeyed.  
This is the reason  
Why my Indian children retreated  
Because of the Whites [*sic*]  
For the second time. (J. de la Cruz 97–105)

The passage above suggests that according to the Communicating Cross, the insurgents had not succeeded in their *reconquista* of the Yucatán Peninsula because they had not accepted the divinations that the Holy Cross had already consecrated. Here again Juan de la Cruz situated the bellicose commandments of the Holy Cross in the mythic-historical trajectory of Maya cosmology, and in doing so validated the cyclical prophecies of the *katunes* foretelling the war as well as the insurgent's renewed fight.

In his studies of cross-cultural constructions of the concept of the legitimate use force, or “just war,” social scientist Paul F. Robinson observed that different cultures share common criteria for legitimating armed conflict. Robinson suggests that the world cultures he examined tend to agree that “one may righteously wage war if one has: a just cause; legitimate authority; a right intention; a reasonable chance of success; and all other reasonable alternatives to war have been exhausted (the principle of ‘last resort’) (1). In situating the Caste War in the Maya mythic-

historical trajectory and establishing the divine sanction of the Holy Cross, the authors of the Sermons of the Communicating Cross respond to the perennial preoccupation about how to establish the legitimacy of their armed conflict. Not surprisingly, this concern to establish the legitimate use of force will also be central to the discourses of the religious insurgencies studied in forthcoming chapters. According to the sermons, the Caste War was legitimate not only because of earthly concerns about economic and social injustice, but also because it was sanctioned by both an indigenous source (the pre-Hispanic mythic-historical tradition) as well as their interpretation of Christian tradition—which has historically been used as legitimate arbiter of war in the Americas since the conquest.<sup>9</sup> In other words, intentionally or by accident, the struggle of the Maya-speaking insurgents becomes a legitimate “holy war,” in line with Christian tradition, because it has been declared by Jesus (a legitimate authority), and because insurgents believe that the struggle reflects His will.

Although the sermons masterfully establish an ancient motive for the uprising, in 1850 the insurgency was in decline. How, then, did Juan de la Cruz explain the disparity between prophecy and the fact that the uprising had been overwhelmed by 1850? In his sermon, Juan de la Cruz proposed that the retreat of the insurgents and the success of the Yucatec government (led by the whites) in quashing the uprising was not a failure or error in prophesy, but reflected the insurgent’s unwillingness to fulfill the Maya predictions. In other words, the revolt had failed up to that moment because the peasants had not listened to the ancient Jaguar Prophets (J. de la Cruz 106). Rather than declaring the retreat of the insurgents a defeat, the Communicating Cross offered its children the opportunity to reverse the course of the war against the Yucatan government, and in so doing to rectify history and fulfill the prophecies of decolonization proposed by the Maya Priests.

### *The Promise of a Divinely Ordained War: A Better Life in This Land of Yucatan*

The commandments of the Communicating Cross offered its children redemption not in an afterlife, as proposed by traditional Catholic theology, but instead proposed reparations through success in armed conflict that would bring about a new order.<sup>10</sup> The sermons of the Communicating Cross proposed that violence was a divinely inspired (re)solution to oppression. Through this discourse of redemption, the Cross effortlessly (though problematically) portrays the insurgents simultaneously as victims of abuse and as potential victimizers. Without a doubt, the possibility of role reversals would have been appealing to the *macehuales*. In fact, post-colonial scholar Franz Fanon would suggest that such an offer would imply the fulfillment of a dream for any colonized people, since “there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 5). However, Juan de la Cruz seems to be aware that in order to foment the revolt that would bring about autonomy, he had to appeal to skeptic dissident factions as well as to those who had already submitted to the so-called pacification. Without a doubt, the sect’s revival of the pre-Hispanic tradition of prognostications, as in the *Books of Chilam Balam*, provided a foundation for initiating the war. Juan de la Cruz offered his Christian children a stronger incentive to resume the war effort: a guarantee of success through divine assistance. Unlike the first incarnation of the insurrection (the Canek Rebellion of 1761), the Communicating Cross offered success in the second (and final) insurgency.

In the case of the Communicating Cross, it suggested that a new world would be achieved only through success in the battlefield. The Cross’ messianic message is clear: God would save the Maya peasants by leading them into war. Nicholas Robins explains that movements categorized as “magical nativist” by their nature are typically “led either by one who claims to be

the messiah or by a prophet who announces the arrival of the savior” (Robins 12–13). This savior or prophet offers the means for realizing the new world order. The Holy Cross not only commanded the declaration of war, but also pledged to accompany and protect the Christians in the battlefield. In addition to commanding its warriors to unite in their resistance to the Yucatec forces, the Holy Cross offers to the Indians divine protection in battle:

Because even though they are going to hear  
The roar  
Of the firing  
Of the Enemy’s guns  
Over them,  
Nothing is going to cast harm  
Upon them. [...]  
Because know ye,  
Ye Christian villagers,  
That it is I who accompany you;  
That at all hours  
It is I who go in vanguard  
Before you,  
In front of the Enemies  
To the end that  
There not befall you,  
Not even a bit of harm,  
O ye my Indian children. (J. de la Cruz 138–64)

Here we have promises from the Holy Cross that Jesus would enter, literally and metaphorically, into battle with the Indians, would guarantee their victory against the Yucatecs, and that these oppressors would eventually abandon the lands over which they fought.

According to the sermons, the victory of *Cristiano 'oob* was further secured by Jesus' reassurances that He had received a special dispensation from God the Father to initiate the war (J. de la Cruz 225–30). The writings of Juan de la Cruz reveal that the *Cristiano 'oob* were aware of the need to legitimate their insurgency using the traditional Christian rubric of “just war:”

Another thing  
That I command,  
My beloved,  
Ye Christian villagers,  
Is that not a single judgment  
Will be made for me  
That is not just.  
Because so many judgments  
That the honorable Generals make  
Are not just. (J. de la Cruz 269–78)

Certainly, this passage reveals a criticism of Generals of the group who had carried out indiscriminate war. The insurgent's need to establish a legitimate authority and guidelines for combat for their war enterprise harkens back to concerns expressed by Christian princes of Europe who sought to secure moral, legal, and spiritual authority for their military enterprises of conquest and colonization. Ironically, perhaps like European princes, the *Cristiano 'oob* rely on arguments of “just war” to defend their own incursion and colonization of the lands controlled by

the Yucatec Government. Nicholas Robins proposed that the figures of Juan de la Cruz and the Communicating Cross served as buffers in military affairs; that is to say, if ever there were any shortcomings in battle or any unpopular military commands, the community would accept Juan de la Cruz-Three Persons as responsible, rather than the military leaders (62). The artifice of the Holy Cross was useful in negotiations with the government and the Church (whose chief negotiator was Father José Canuto Vela) (Quintal Martín 11). Because of Jesus' authority, both as a deity and as a legitimate harbinger of justice, the insurgents could rally behind a spokesperson with impeccable (divine) credentials that could represent the *Cristiano'oob* community in negotiations with leaders of the Catholic Church and the Yucatan Government.

Beyond assurances of successful war, the most compelling element of the sermons of the Communicating Cross is that the narrator recognizes and reminds the insurgents of the necessity for social change, a central concern of religious insurgents. It says: "I am being asked/ That my children make judgments/ In the World. Because all the complaints of the poor/ Are they just being punished without cause" (J. de la Cruz 282–87). Through empathy and commiseration, the cross reminds the Maya-speaking peasants of the hardships that await them should they again cease their fighting against the neo-colonial government; Jesus recognizes the *macehuales'* burden and claims to share it with them. The discourse of the Holy-Cross-Three-Persons stressed that Christ espoused the suffering of the *macehuales* as his own suffering. This parallel discourse also harkens to the Book of Matthew of the Bible, particularly to Jesus' admonition: "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (25.40). In appropriating this motif, the *Cristiano'oob* recast the lands of Yucatan as the new sacred landscapes upon which Christ relived the torment of the *via crucis*. In this Yucatan Passion play the *dzulob* are adapted in the role of the Romans; the Indians suffer as Jesus.

At all hours  
I am falling;  
I am being cut;  
I am being nailed;  
Thorns are piercing me;  
Sticks are punching me  
While I pass through  
To visit Yucatan;  
While I am redeeming you,  
My beloved,  
Ye men. (J. de la Cruz 193–203)

As this passage suggests, the Christ of the *Cristiano 'oob* endures, as do his followers, the physical mistreatment at the hands of the Yucatec government. In this manner, the “enemy” of the *persignarse* is personified in the form of the *dzulob*, the tormentor of the peasants.

Curiously, in addition to symbolic suffering, the Communicating Cross will also decry its structural defacement at the hands of government forces; enemies of the embodied object confiscated and vandalized the Holy Cross on numerous occasions (Quintal Martín 87). The motif of victimization, marginalization, and exploitation radiates throughout the corpus of the Communicating Cross’ writing.

The Holy Cross identified the white community as the source of sorrow, poverty, hunger, and thirst of the Indians (Villa Rojas and Cline 163). The acknowledgement of the *macehuales’* oppression is powerful because it decries centuries of injustice inflicted upon the castes by the “whites.” Furthermore, this passage challenges the ethics and morality of Christian whites by

means of Christian teachings. This indictment is particularly striking since the sermon of the cross closely parallels Jesus' discourse admonishing his uncharitable followers in the Book of Matthew of the Bible:

for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me. (25.42–45)

However, whereas the book of Matthew threatens the mean-spirited and uncharitable with eternal punishment, the Communicating Cross threatens the Yucatec *dzules* with death and persecution at the hands of their tormented. Presumably, the former tormentors would get their just deserts (either exile from Yucatan or annihilation). The *macehuales*, for their part, would be relieved of their sorrow, poverty, hunger, and thirst.

***In the Name of God the Father: The Appropriation of Roman Catholic Liturgical Language***

Juan de la Cruz also lent legitimacy and authority to the Communicating Cross' war declaration by appropriating colonial discourses in his writings, especially Roman Catholic liturgical discourse. Fanon explored the role of language in the development of the identity and reality of the conquered subject in his discussion of the supremacy of the French language among blacks in the Antilles. According to Fanon, colonized subjects want to use their colonizer's language because in colonial discourse language is often a marker of superiority, civilization, and even humanity: "a man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 2). The assimilation of liturgical discourses in the texts of the Communicating Cross reflects not only the *Cristiano 'oob's* desire to possess the language of power, but also their aptitude to wield and subvert it; their mastery of liturgical discourse allows the *Cristiano 'oob* ministers to



represent themselves as equals, indistinguishable, at least in writing, to the ministers of Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup>

“The Sermon of Juan de la Cruz” adopts the language of catechisms, which for centuries were used as tools to establish the superiority of Spanish culture and intellectual tradition. Both sermons of the Communicating cross intercalate fragments of prayers, such as the credo and the *persignarse*. Hanks noted that other colonial Maya texts, including the historical-prophetic *Books of Chilam Balam*— texts that were recopied through the colonial period and into the nineteenth century—also incorporated well-known doctrinal expression stemming from missionary catechisms, sermons, and dictionaries on their narratives (339; 345). According to Hanks, *maestros cantores*—cultural brokers who were experts in Christian doctrine and writing and were charged with educating indigenous communities—facilitated the understanding of doctrinal expression (345). Within the colonial church, the *maestros cantores* played the role of what Pierre Bourdieu has called “authorized representatives.” Bourdieu proposed that the authority wielded by the speech of the representatives (and in the case of the proclamations of the Communicating Cross, writings and performances) “concentrates within the accumulated symbolic capital of the group which has delegated him” (11). In using language traditionally reserved for the clergy, the ministers of the cult of the Communicating Cross appropriated the symbolic capital that the Roman Catholic Church had accumulated during its three hundred years of ministry and used it in the service of decolonization. The sermons proposed an uninterrupted connection between the Catholic Church and the religious practice of the *Cristiano ’oob*; this vision was supported by the *Cristiano ’oob*’s convincing performance or representation of Roman Catholic discourse and rhetoric.

*Cristiano 'oob* leaders understood the influence of Roman Catholic doctrinal texts in the devotional practice of their community, for this reason they were careful to mimic ritualistic language of the Catholic Church that would have been familiar to their Maya-speaking audience. References to the sign of the cross in the opening of the “Proclamation,” for instance, are unequivocal since the final four lines of each invocation are identical genuflections:

Jesus,

Mary.

In the name of God the Father,

And God the Son,

And in the name of God the Holy Spirit,

Amen Jesus. (1-6, 315-20, 590-604)

The use of sign of the cross is significant because early Christians had used the sign as protection and defense (“Cross”). From the start, both sermons recognize the power inherent in evoking the divine protection of Christian deities. The variant of the sign of the cross offered by the colonial missionaries appeared three times in the proclamation; it serves as both an opening and closing invocation for the sermon.

It is worth noting that the use of Roman Catholic doctrinal texts in Maya-language manuscripts was not novel. In his extensive research on both liturgical and laic texts, Hanks demonstrated that doctrinal discourse in general, and prayer in particular, have permeated Maya-language texts ranging from the common, such as notarial works and legal petitions, to the religious, for example, the aforementioned the *Books of Chilam Balam* (Hanks 283, 215, 338). The cooptation of prayers in diverse texts is possible because, as Hanks observes, prayers are “by design, modular, they are easily fragmented into parts that can be transposed into other genres”

(244). I would also argue that Juan de la Cruz was careful to incorporate basic prayers because these recognizable texts reinforced the notion that the Cult of the Communicating Crosses was but an Indian extension of the Roman Catholic Church. While these prayers, including the sign of the cross and the “Hail Mary,” entreated the intercession, or intervention, of the divine in human affairs, the apparition of the Holy Cross seemed to answer those prayers.

One of the most skillful appropriations of liturgical language by the Communicating Cross was the recurrence of discourse relative to the protective powers of the cross. This too follows trends evident in earlier texts formulated by indigenous communities. For Hanks, the emphasis on the shielding qualities of Christianity and the cross is characteristic of colonial *doctrinas*, or catechisms (251). Such is the case in Pedro Beltrán de Santa Rosa’s popular 1757 Maya-language *Declaración de la doctrina christiana en el idioma yucateco*, for example. In the third verse of Beltrán de Santa Rosa’s sign of the cross, which emphasized the icon’s protective power, the supplicant beseeched God to protect him or her “from the enemies of Lord true God” (*qtd in* Hanks 251–52). Hanks proposed that in the context of the missionary enterprise the enemies to whom the prayer referred were the devil, the material world, and the flesh (251). The missionaries believed that these “enemies” prevented their Indian converts from fully adopting the faith.

The enemies identified in the sermon of the Communicating Cross were quite different: here they were the so-called *dzules*, the foreigners. In one instance, the Communicating Cross acknowledges the existence of several racial categories (white, Negro, Indian, and mulatto), thereby problematizing readings of the conflict as an “Indian” rebellion. Instead, the proclamations of the Communicating Cross redefine the conflict as the struggle between two new classes: the *dzules* and the Christian villagers. Apologists for the Yucatec government

defined the insurgents within colonial racial paradigms, as “*indios bravos sublevados*.” The insurgents, for their part, formulated new markers of identity, which were anchored to their Christian religious identity, and the Maya conceptions of space and time. In the context of these sermons, the citizens of the new civilization were the “true” Christians, the followers of the Cross; the noun “cristiano” is interchangeable with “*masevalilob*,” meaning macehual, peasant, Indian, or commoner (Gabbert 94). Meanwhile, their enemies, the out-group, were the *dzules* (understood in this context as outsiders) (94). Some studies have emphasized the ethnic and racial undertones implied by the terms *macehual* and *dzul*, often translated as Indian and white respectively. I, however, agree with anthropologist Wolfgang Gabbert who has observed that racialized interpretations of the writings of the Communicating Cross, and the Caste War in general, ignore the fact that Maya-speaking peasant communities in revolt consisted of Indians, *mestizos*, and other races and ethnicities including whites, Chinese, and blacks (Gabbert 104).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Gabbert’s research has demonstrated that the *Cristiano’oob* attacked and captured both whites and Indians (102). Although the Communicating Cross identified the in-group through the signifiers *cristiano* and *macehual*, the criteria for membership in the *Cristiano’oob* community, as defined by the writings of the Communicating Cross, was fluid.

This difficulty in discerning membership in the *Cristiano’oobs* imagined community is evident in one of the Cross’ central commandments, in which it forbade the killing of Christians (Villa Rojas and Cline 162). As we will see in future chapters, formulating paradigms of difference, differentiating members from non-members will be a problem shared by other religious insurgents. Still, as McAffe Brown and Robinson suggest, establishing guidelines for a legitimate target is a necessary element in formulating the case for a just war (McAffe Brown 3; Robinson 1). According to Juan de la Cruz, the *Cristiano’oob* warriors would be able to

recognize their fellow Christians according to the performance of a Christian-like demeanor during surrender:

While they embrace each other  
[And] clasp each other's hands  
Over their hearts  
In order to call my Father's name?

It is not possible that they will be killed.  
Because it is a most grievous sin  
For a Christian to be killed

While kneeling [and] mentioning my Father's name. (J. de la Cruz 240–47)

Those who invoked the mercy of God during a siege would be spared their lives, for the cross expected that Christians in battle would make good judgments and would avoid killing other Christians.

To curb indiscriminate killings, Jesus offered his own detailed guidelines for war protocol in his commandments. The “Commandments of Juan de la Cruz,” for instance, explicitly forbade the cold-blooded killings of Christians:

you should not go and kill your neighbors in cold blood and if they kneel with their hands joined, calling the name of my Lord, you should not kill them, because it is very painful and serious to kill a Christian who is kneeling and calling the name of my Lord, it is a sin to kill him and he should only be disarmed as an enemy [...]. (Villa Rojas and Cline 162).

In Juan de la Cruz' commandments, “thou shalt not kill” is reinterpreted as “thou shall not kill *Christians*” (and those who might possibly convert to the *Cristiano 'oob*'s brand of Christianity).

This commandment pretended to protect the members of the *Cristiano 'oob* community from each other by establishing guidelines for war that would theoretically preserve the integrity of the in-group. However, the Christian warriors would identify and spare their fellow believers according to the performance of a specific action, kneeling in prayer. Although the *Cristiano 'oob* make an attempt to construct difference between the in-group (the *Cristiano 'oob*) and the outsiders through signifiers (*cristiano* and *macehual* versus *dzul*) and performative acts, (such as prayer and non-prayer during capture), the criteria for membership in the Christian community established by both sermons seems arbitrary. Still, it is significant that the *Cristiano 'oob* rejected the categories of race or land ownership as central characteristics to identify their members; as noted in earlier letters it was these categories that had been used by past regimes to support disparity, a pitfall which the *Cristiano 'oob* hoped to overcome in their new society.

Even without belonging to the *Cristiano 'oob*, the captive could be spared his life. The cross offered only one other case when the *Cristiano 'oob* were required to spare the lives of their victims: surrender. If an adversary surrendered, the Communicating Cross demanded that the victim be spared death:

all those who surrender willingly they should be put aside be they white or Negro, mulatto or Indian or of whatever birth they be because know ye O Christians, I have already received permission from my Lord to wage war as wars were fought in the past and this is why [...] I tell you how it should be. (162)

I suspect that in ordering the acceptance of the surrender of these groups in the sermons, the leadership of the cult of the Communicating Cross anticipated that the *Cristiano 'oob* would gain the good will of the population, which would potentially lead the captives to join the revolt willingly. In spite of the existence of these war protocols, it is hard to say whether in practice the

insurgents' commanders actually adhered to the commandments of the cross and differentiated between supporters and detractors in their *reconquista* of the Yucatán Peninsula. Ultimately, the primary targets of the insurgents were essentially undistinguishable from themselves.

### ***Conclusion***

Even the most ardent of supporters of the Caste War must have understood that the mandates of the Holy Cross contradicted the commandments: whereas scripture had outlawed killing, the Communicating Cross had directed his followers to murder or drive away the ruling class and its supporters in the name of God. It is evident that Juan de la Cruz had understood the inherent contradiction between his new commandments and those that his audience would have undoubtedly learned in the catechism. As I have demonstrated, Juan de la Cruz-Three-Persons addressed this discrepancy in two ways: first, by reaffirming its divine authority through nativism and the appropriation of colonial discourse; second, by establishing guidelines for the legitimate use of violence. In reaffirming these two positions, the cross preempted potential charges of heterodoxy. Juan de la Cruz had to demonstrate that his bellicose discourse was divinely authorized, as an extension of Roman Catholic discourse, and that he had the authority to speak and write on behalf of the Trinity.

It is worth noting, however, that not all of the insurgents accepted the commandment of the Communicating Cross. After some communities submitted to pacification, the Catholic clergy reduplicated its efforts to reassert its influence over the Indians. The Catholic priests resumed their labors and took over once more the roles left to the *maestros cantores* during the conflict. In other words, they assumed their 'legitimate roles' as interpreters of doctrine. The reason the proclamation of Juan de la Cruz had such little impact among the pacified communities may be attributed to the fact that the presence of Roman Catholic priests nullified

the authority of an Indian priest and his unorthodox Communicating Cross. When framed in this manner, Juan de la Cruz becomes an impostor, and as such, the illocutionary force of his discourse is partly neutralized. As Bourdieu observes, “a performative utterance is destined to fail each time that it is not pronounced by a person who has the ‘power’ to pronounce it [...]; in short, each time that the speaker does not have the authority to emit the words that he utters” (111). This is not to say that the authority of the Roman Catholic priest was intact (before) or after the pacification, since the revolt had also challenged their credibility. Fidelio Quintal Martín explains the Roman Catholic Church’s public relations debacle as follows: during the Caste War few Indians respected the priests, since “la mayoría demostró ser ajeno a su ministerio en alianza con los ‘blancos’ explotadores y extorsionadores” (Quintal Martín 22). I suspect that this dissatisfaction with local orthodox priests created a breach that was easily filled by the Indian and *mestizo Cristiano ’oob* priests during the revolt.

In his writings Juan de la Cruz demonstrated that both he and the cross were authorized to command the Maya-speaking peasants to colonize the Yucatán Peninsula, rather than to once again submit to the injustices of the neo-colonial territorial regime. Their hybrid discourses served as the basis of a de-colonial identity which, although still Christian, sought to overcome the inequality imposed by colonial hierarchies based on race or land ownership. We have seen how, in the sermons, Juan de la Cruz established his authority to declare war against the whites, and by extension promote decolonization, by appropriating native and colonial discourses. The appropriation of discourses and practices of Christianity thus served as a tool for achieving territorial decolonization.

In this chapter, we have seen how a Maya-Christian world view served to empower the *Cristiano ’oob* in their insurgency against the Mexican government. The success of this



insurgency was atypical for the colonial and independence periods. In Chapter 2, we will explore how the Mexican state succeeded in repressing another religious insurgency in Tomóchic, Chihuahua. Although the military strength of the Tomochitecos was evident, the Mexican government was able to neutralize the agency of the rebels by emphasizing the religious nature of the rebellion. Like the *Cristiano'oob*, the Tomochitecos established their own agency through discourses grounded in Christianity. However, as we will see, the Mexican government was able to justify the annihilation of the community of Tomóchic precisely because of their religiosity. By portraying the Tomóchic community as ignorant, indigenous, religious fanatics, the Mexican government was able to justify their repressive policies of internal colonialism.

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors, including Miguel Astor-Aguilera and Eligio Ancona, have used the term “La Guerra Social” to refer to this conflict. In the *Historia de Yucatán*, Ancona chooses to call the conflict “La Guerra Social” rather than the Caste War (4).

<sup>2</sup> According to Alicia Barabas, indigenous socio-religious movements have been frequent in Mexico. During colonial times, the region of present-day Yucatan, Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, and Tabasco alone saw 19 religious insurgencies led by indigenous communities (*Utopías indias* 275). Several among these, such as the 1712-1713 rebellion of Cancuc led by Tzeltal Indians, appropriated or incorporated Christian religious imagery and discourse to legitimate their uprisings against white colonizers (175-80). Among these revolts, only the Caste War was successful.

<sup>3</sup> The name “Juan de la Cruz” is reminiscent of St. John of the Cross, the 16th century Spanish mystic and author of works of poetry and prose (S. J. de la Cruz 17). Although there are some lexical similarities in the works of both authors in that they both borrow from the Bible and liturgical texts, it is difficult to ascertain whether the *Cristiano’oob* had any knowledge of St. John of the Cross’ work (S. J. de la Cruz 24).

<sup>4</sup> John Leddy Phelan explores the influence of millennial traditions on the evangelization practices of Franciscan missionaries (including the use of violence and coercion during the evangelization enterprise) in his book *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World*.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the ontology and interpretations of Christian icons, including the crucifix, consult the second chapter of Miguel Tamen’s work, *Friends of Interpretable Objects*.

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<sup>6</sup> Victoria Bricker explains that eye-witness reports from ladino prisoners and British traders suggest that the Holy Cross communicated with its worshippers through whistles or high pitched squeaks performed in nocturnal ceremonies (Bricker 110).

<sup>7</sup> Anthropologist Temis Vayhinger-Scheer explains that in Spanish colonial lore it was Franciscan friar, Andrés de Avendaño y Loyola who convinced the last independent Maya state—the Itzaes of Mayapan—to convert to Christianity and submit to Spanish rule. De Avendaño y Loyola proposed to the Itzaes that both the New Testament and the Maya prophetic history of the *katunes* in the *Books of Chilam Balam* had indicated that 13 Katun Ahau was the time when the Itza people were to convert to Christianity (de Avendaño y Loyola xii–iii).

<sup>8</sup> In his work *Historia Antigua de Yucatán*, Bishop Crecencio Carrillo y Ancona transcribed a series of prophecies from the *Books of Chilam Balam*; he surmised that the misinterpretations of these texts had served as the ideological precursor to the Caste War:

no dudamos que como D. Justo Sierra y otros han creído, el nombre de Chilam Balam hubiese dado tal vez ocasión para que, en época reciente, alguna persona ó personas mal intencionadas ó ignorantes y fanáticas fraguaran predicciones más ó menos necias y ridículas, insostenibles á la luz de la sana crítica [*sic*] pero de ninguna manera puede dudarse á la luz de la misma sana crítica, que realmente existió ántes [*sic*] de la conquista no sólo un personaje llamado Chilam Balam.  
(Carrillo y Ancona 515–16)

<sup>9</sup> Catholic monarchs used the desire to convert “pagans” to the Christian faith as justification to explore, invade, and take possession of lands and people (Adorno 73).

<sup>10</sup> Typically, such utopian movements would be characterized as millenarian. According to Nicholas Robins, the concept of millenarianism was inspired by the book of Revelation which

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alluded to a “promised 1,000- year reign of peace prior to the Judgment Day following the Second Coming of Christ” (12). Robins opines that while many insurgencies of the Americas espoused many beliefs and traits akin to millenarian movements (for instance the promise of divine intervention in achieving an earthly utopia), “most uprisings in the Americas were neither millennial nor exterminatory, but rather localized responses to local grievances, and even when they became regional in scope, many insurgents continued to be motivated by community issues such as extractions and abuses by officials (6–7, 12).

<sup>11</sup> It must be noted here that there are pitfalls to this pretense of desiring, appropriating, mastering, and reproducing colonial discourse, as Homi Bhabha has observed in his discussion of what he termed “colonial mimicry.” According to Bhabha, “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (122). Ultimately, the mimetic discourse will be similar, but not quite the same as the original (122–23).

<sup>12</sup> Anthropologist Wolfgang Gabbert explained the racial diversity of the *Cristiano 'oob* community as follows:

“the cult provided the rebels with an interpretation of their destiny but also allowed for the development of military and social structures to integrate different local groups, and made possible the assimilation of descendants of Chinese contract laborers who had fled from Belize, as well as black lumbermen and Ladino prisoners.” (104)

Given the diversity of this group, I hesitate to call the conflict an “Indian” rebellion.

## Chapter 2: Tomochic's Religious Fanatics

As we have seen, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the millenarian *Cristiano 'oob* community relied on the edicts of the Communicating Cross to sustain their struggle against the neo-colonial Yucatec government and later, the armies of the federal Mexican government. This revolt was one of many that challenged the narratives of peace and stability advanced by then dictator Porfirio Díaz and his regime, which governed Mexico during the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. At the turn of the century, another significant millenarian movement emerged in the town of Tomóchic, Chihuahua.<sup>1</sup> As in the case of Caste War, the rebellion of Tomóchic exemplified the discord between local, regional, and national agendas, as well as a clash between rural and metropolitan religious practices.

This chapter examines how the Tomochitecos' religious practices—which were heavily influenced by the folk tradition of venerating living saints—contributed to their religious insurgency. Curiously, unlike other religious insurgencies studied in this work, the Tomochitecos do not revert to religious doctrine or theology to defend their belief in folk saints or to argue for the justification of their struggle. Instead, for Cruz Chávez, leader of the group, a secular discourse—the law—becomes the basis for his argument defending his countrymen's right to follow the belief system of their choice: the veneration of living saints. Still, like other religious insurgents, the battle is sustained by faith, both in the righteousness of their cause and in the intercession of the divine in bellicose endeavors.

Additionally, I explore how the practice of folk Catholicism and the devotion to folk saints became, in the government's discourse, a central justification for their repression. Officials of the Díaz regime, and their allies in the contemporary press, justified the massacre of the town

of Tomóchic by proposing that annihilation was the only means to control the town's virulent fanaticism. Heriberto Frías, critic of the regime, reinforced this portrayal when he penned a fictionalized account of the massacre of Tomóchic. As I will demonstrate, the tactics employed by the Díaz regime to repress the religious expression of folk catholic cults, echoes the tactics employed by the colonial religious apparatus that enacted both real and epistemic violence.

Many later depictions of the Tomóchic massacre convey ambivalent representations of the insurgency: on the one hand the massacre is represented by critics of the regime as evidence of the tyranny of the dictatorship, on the other, the community's annihilation is explained as a consequence of ignorance and fanaticism. These representations reveal perennial tensions about the proper role of religion in civic life in modern Mexico and the ideal of freedom of religion enshrined in the liberal constitution of 1857. Often these ideals of religious freedom and those of secularization clashed because many intellectuals believed that progress in modern times depended on rural communities' ability to transcend their attachment to traditional beliefs that were characterized as superstitions. Whereas in the case of the Caste War we observed the appropriation and transformation of colonial religious practices, in the Tomóchic Rebellion we witness a paradigm shift whereby religiosity becomes the proxy for challenging a the despotic practices of both the Church and State. The representations of the Tomóchic Rebellion as symbols of heroism as well as misguided fanaticism reveal perennial tensions inherent in building a nation whose citizens are divided by a desire for rupture and continuity with its colonial religious past.

On December 7, 1892, Mexico's federal army annihilated a band of insurgents in the town of Tomóchic, Chihuahua. After several run-ins with secular and clerical authorities, the Tomochitecos purportedly announced on November 15, 1891, that they would only follow the

will of God and that henceforth they disavowed the authority of both Church and State.

According to news reports, the rebels also declared death to the sons of Satan (the agents of the Díaz government), following the guidance of their spiritual leaders, the folk saints *La Santa de Cabora* and *El Cristo del Choqueque*. District officials and then-Chihuahua governor, Lauro Carrillo, downplayed the significance of the insurgency by ascribing to the rebels the labels “Indians,” “bandits,” and “fanatics” (Vanderwood, *The Power of God* 135–40). Eventually, Carrillo’s discourse was used to justify the insurrectionists’ annihilation. Official characterization of the insurgents, as literary scholar Enrique Lamadrid observed, was also adopted by many bodies in the Mexican press (449).

Through a close reading of government correspondence, testimonials, and metropolitan periodical publications, I explore how the millenarian community of Tomóchic came to be portrayed in government propaganda as “fanatical Indians.” I argue that by creating racialized narratives, the government propaganda served to legitimate the massacre by perpetuating colonial fears of the dangers of virulent fanaticism and folk religious practices in rural and indigenous communities. These same texts can also elucidate how the Tomochitecos employed religious imagery in order to support their own political and religious project and how elements of their religion helped to sustain the armed uprising.

Unlike other religious insurgencies examined in this work, in which the rebels achieve agency by generating their own narratives and imagery, the extant textual and cultural production of the Tomochitecos themselves is minimal. Narratives of Tomóchic available to present-day researchers were often generated by the clergy, government officials, or federal soldiers, whose political or religious interests were often at odds with the Tomochiteco’s own project to achieve religious autonomy; these texts are often biased and therefore provide a one-sided vision critical

of the Tomóchic Rebellion, its origins, and ideology. Newspapers from the Mexico-U.S. borderlands (the states of Sonora, Chihuahua, New Mexico, and Arizona) and the Mexican metropolis often reproduced official narratives of events in Chihuahua.

These reports, along with editorials critical of the government, generated fragmented narratives of the origins, events, and outcomes of the conflict. Still, these texts can also speak to the political and religious motivations of the Tomóchic Rebellion. In spite of the clear ideological bent of official representations of peasant revolts, Indian historian and subaltern studies scholar Ranajit Guha has proposed that partisan texts that reproduce hegemonic discourses can, in fact, provide insight into the ideology of peasant insurgencies because partisan prose may simultaneously make attempts to understand and suppress the insurgency (2–3, 15). Furthermore, he adds, in documenting rebellion, hegemonic discourses will inadvertently record and reveal the discourses of the insurgents. For this reason, the extant narratives about the Tomóchic rebellion offer insight into how both the government and the Tomochitecos employed religious imagery in order to validate violence against each other.

In order to understand the influence of religion in a variety of representations of the Tomóchic Rebellion, in this chapter I will examine textual and visual materials: news reports, letters, essays, illustrations, novels, and memoirs. I collected some of these texts during research trips to the Archivo General de la Nación, the Hemeroteca Nacional, and the Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional in Mexico City in 2012 and 2013. The document compilations by Lilián Illades Aguiar in her text *Tomóchic, fuentes y documentos* as well as Ruben Osorio's *Tomóchic en llamas* also provided a wealth of primary texts from state and municipal archives in the states of Chihuahua and Sonora and the Porfirio Díaz Archives held in the Benemérita Universidad de Puebla and the Universidad Iberoamericana. The memoir, *La*



*defensa de Tomochi*, by Tomóchic descendant Plácido Chávez is one of the few narratives told from the perspective of the insurgents.

By studying both primary and secondary texts, I am able to reconstruct elements of the Tomochiteco's religious and political tenets as well as the strategies employed by the federal government in order to understand and mitigate the impact of the religious insurgency. This process of repressing autochthonous religious manifestations and cover political expression provides insight into the tensions and negotiations between practitioners of folk Catholicism and orthodox Catholicism in a region where Christian souls, minds, and bodies were highly contested. The official responses to this religious insurgency from secular and religious authorities reveal the uneasy collusion between state and church authorities in preserving the *status quo*: the political hegemony of the state and the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church. My study of the Tomóchic Rebellion will demonstrate the persistence of religion—its discourses, legal instruments, and traditions—in facilitating and legitimating institutions of power. Surprisingly, the Tomóchic Rebellion posed a legitimate challenge to the Church-State alliance by appealing to the constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of religion.

### ***Playing Politics Through the Press***

Like today's papers, the content of newspapers of the Porfiriato (news reports, essays, editorials, and literary material) reflected the ideological, political, and economic interests of the publishers and supporters. During the Porfiriato, observes bibliographer Florence Toussaint Alcaraz, the press was a vehicle for both information and opinion, since it both generated and propagated political ideologies and projects (7). Cognizant of the utility of this tool, the Díaz regime promoted positive press for itself by providing generous subsidies to newspapers willing to proliferate government propaganda (W. D. Raat 47; Toussaint Alcaraz 7). In the case of

Tomóchic, the state was also able to shape public opinion in part because many newspapers relied on government reports and informants to obtain updates about the uprising; often news reports mirror word-for-word reports from government information cables.

The Díaz regime relied on a variety of strategies to insure their control over the narratives presented in print media in the press, and consequently the message and its suggested interpretation. Between 1885 and 1897, for example, the state relied on censure and repression as a means of silencing dissident voices (34). As we will see in Chapter 4, similar strategies for coercing and manipulating press coverage are in use in Mexico to this day and are also exploited by drug trafficking cartels, including the evangelical cartels La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios. These strategies are used in order to shape public opinion, gain positive publicity, or silence dissent. In spite of the Porfirian regime's attempts to suppress alternative view points, independent presses—among them *El Diario del Hogar*, *El Siglo XIX*, *El Monitor Republicano*, *El Tiempo*, *La Patria*, and *El Hijo del Ahuizote*—sustained their opposition to the Díaz regime (Toussaint Alcaraz 35). These opposition papers, as well as the newspaper *El Demócrata* (1893-1896), were crucial to challenging official representations of the events of Tomóchic.

One of the most influential and polemic accounts of the Tomóchic Rebellion was Heriberto Frías' serialized novel *¡Tomóchic!: Episodios de Campaña (Escrita por un testigo presencial)*. On March 11, 1893, *El Demócrata* announced that it would, unlike earlier partisan publications, publish a true and faithful account of the events of Tomóchic: “la exacta narración que hoy ofrecemos al público ha sido escrita por un testigo presencial, es verdadera y está redactada con sano juicio é [sic] imparcialidad” (“¡Tomochic! Episodios de campaña”).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the editors of *El Demócrata* promised that the new narrative revisiting the events at

Tomóchic would revise and review misinformation, omissions, and biases printed in earlier press reports of the rebellion and subsequent massacre. Frías' account would become one of the most prominent representations of the revolt, and consequently the most influential in maintaining the revolt in Mexican consciousness.

Advertised as an eye-witness account of the events at Tomóchic, the anonymous fictionalized narrative was serialized and delivered in 24 installments from March 14 to April 14 of 1893 (Frías, *Tomóchic* xviii). This narrative would later be revised and expanded in four subsequent editions in 1894, 1899, 1906, and 1911; Heriberto Frías, who denied authorship of the text after being persecuted and court marshaled, finally acknowledged his work in the third printing of the text (Frías, *Tomochic* xviii–xix; Brown 49).<sup>3</sup> The 1911 edition is considered the definitive version of the novel. While I was able to attain several copies of the original newspaper printing, I was unable to access a full set of the installments of *Tomóchic* as it was published in *El Demócrata*. For this reason, my study of the text will cite original chapters of the novel as printed in the pages of *El Demócrata*, the second edition of the text (bound, corrected, and expanded), and for comparison, I will refer to the fifth edition of the novel. Following the success of *Tomóchic*, Frías went on to write two sequels chronicling the life of *Tomóchic*'s protagonist, Manuel Mercado: *El Triunfo de Sancho Panza* (1911) and *¿Águila o sol?* (Dabove, “Tomóchic, de Heriberto Frías” 353). Of the trilogy, *Tomóchic* remains Heriberto Frías' most significant work.

*¡Tomóchic!: Episodios de campaña* presents a fictionalized account of the war narrated through a character, Miguel Mercado. The protagonist is a second lieutenant (*subteniente*) in the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion, one of the units sent to Ciudad Guerrero to quash the Tomóchic Rebellion. *El Demócrata* ambivalently presents *¡Tomóchic!* both as non-fiction (“la exacta narración [...]”

escrita por un testigo presencial”) and fiction (coyly declaring episodes portraying the interactions between clearly fictional characters as “Rigurosamente histórico”) (“¡Tomochic! Episodios de campaña” 3; “¡Tomochic! Episodios de Campaña (Relación escrita por un testigo presencial)” 2). Of interest to our study, the narrative also claims to provide a faithful portrayal of the Tomochiteco’s strange new religion, carefully documenting the insurgent’s alleged religious practices. Finally, as we will see, Frías’ account conveys the humiliating defeat of the federal army at the hands of the townspeople of Tomóchic, and later the town’s obliteration.

### *A Religious Insurrection, or an Uprising Against Oppression?*

On December 1, 1891 news wires came from local government officials indicating that the townspeople of Tomóchic had declared themselves in rebellion. To secular and church officials, the revolt was the unfortunate consequence of unchecked religious fanaticism.<sup>4</sup> In his novel, Heriberto Frías offered a more nuanced analysis of the conflict by presenting a broad range of motivations that exacerbated the tensions between citizens, church, and state:

aquella violación de una muchacha por una autoridad de Guerrero; los impuestos excesivos; el cuadro mural de la iglesia que intentaba llevarse el Gobernador Carillo; los atropellos de la soldadesca del primer desacatamiento y la ambición de algunos que atizaron los rencores del pueblo que empezaba á ser fanatizado por Cruz Chávez. (*¡Tomochic! Episodios de la campaña de Chihuahua* 178)

Although Frías offered many possible explanations for the uprising, the most frequently reproduced account for the revolt in government communiqués, and subsequently press articles, was the religious character of the revolt. Church and government derided the political character of the insurgency by characterizing the revolt as a symptom of “religious fanaticism.” For opponents of the religious insurgency, Church and State officials and their proxies in the press,

the crime of the Tomochitecos was not that they attempted a revolt, but that their cause was neither just nor justified because it was motivated by marginal, perhaps even corrupted, religious practices. As historian Alex Nava and other scholars have observed, these allegations of “fanaticism” have been used to depoliticize the insurgents (Nava 506). The authorities decried the negative impact of folk religious practices, including faith healings and the veneration of local mystics as living saints, not only as profane beliefs, but also as having a destabilizing force in rural peasant communities.

We are able to glean the religious and political stance of the Tomochitecos themselves from a brief account by a town official. Commissioner of the Peace Tomás Dozal y Hermosillo interviewed insurgent leaders Cruz and Manuel Chávez who attempted to clarify why they had opted to disobey the authorities. This report, redacted on February 11, 1892, reveals that the insurgents understood their uprising as a struggle for religious freedom rather than as the fight for political and territorial autonomy. Dozal y Hermosillo attempted to correct earlier erroneous portrayals of the conflict by summarizing what he believed were the true motivations of the insurgents:

Que ellos no le manifestaron al presidente seccional de Tomóchic no reconocer en la tierra más ley que la de Dios, porque saben y están persuadidos que en la sociedad ha de existir un gobierno que la dirija; que por el contrario, él (Cruz Chávez) le hizo presente que estaban dispuestos a obedecerle como autoridad local, pero que, en materia religiosa, la ley les garantizaba el ejercicio del culto que profesaban. (Dozal y Hermosillo 284)

This short passage offers a small yet important glimpse into the ideology of the Tomochitecos. It reveals that the insurgents had developed a political consciousness and saw themselves as

subjects of the Mexican state and not as an autonomous politico-religious movement.

Unfortunately, government propagandists pushed the thoughtful memo aside in favor of more sensationalistic and polarizing accounts.

Dozal y Hermosillo's report suggests that the townspeople's discontent stemmed from what they perceived as religious repression: a breach of the social contract. Cruz Chávez articulates his community's grievances through juridical discourse, and thus anticipates redress through the framework of Mexican law. Specifically, Chávez argued that the persecution of his community on the basis of their religious beliefs constituted the violation of the free exercise of religion as allowed by Mexican law. This passage reflects the insurgents' belief that their uprising was permissible because the authorities (secular and religious) had illegally restricted their right to worship their folk saints—the Saint of Cabora and the Christ of Chopeque. The illegitimate abrogation of their right to worship freely implied a break with the guarantees provided by the constitution and was therefore met with disobedience.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the influences that shaped Cruz Chávez' political thought, his argument harkened to the concept of the 'social contract' espoused by political philosophers such as John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, and Jean Jacques Roussau. According to this political model, rulers (in our case the Díaz regime), had authority to rule "by virtue of the contract with their subjects" (possibly interpreted as the Constitution) (Lawrence and Karim 399). The insurgents proposed that insobordination against their local priest and town official was a legitimate (armed) response to what they perceived as a violation of their right to the free exercise of religion. As we will see in Chapter 3, religious repression was also used as a central justification for the Cristero Rebellion in 1926-1929.

### ***Church, State, and the Perils of Folk Catholicism***

In nineteenth century Mexico there was an uneasy relationship between the church and the state. While in the first decades of the century rogue clergymen had led the republic towards independence, by the middle of the century the interest of the church and liberal politicians came to a head. Liberals, hoping to consolidate the power of a strong federalist government, attacked the church's economic and social influence by imposing a new constitution that restricted church wealth. This conflict resulted in a three-year war lasting from 1858 to 1861, known as the Guerra de Reforma (MacLachlan and Beezley 59; Olveda 15–19). The military defeat of pro-clerical conservatives resulted in numerous reforms aimed at marginalizing the Catholic Church by restricting its influence in civic and economic matters.

Still, at the end of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church was on the defensive. While the Porfirian government did not persecute the Catholic Church, as had his liberal predecessors, laws restricting public worship were still in force. According to historian Alfonso de María y Campos, for the Porfiriato the reconciliation between Church and State was a means for the state to achieve peace and national consolidation: “el porfiriato es la era de la ‘política de conciliación’ la pacificación del país, la reincorporación de personas y grupos... pero la ‘conciliación’ fue entre la iglesia y el estado” (132). It was Porfirio Díaz’ devoutly catholic wife, Carmen, who helped to broker the truce between the two national powers (MacLachlan and Beezley 173). Nevertheless, the status of the Catholic Church was tenuous. Novelist and researcher Brianda Domecq describes Catholicism at this time as a religion under siege: Protestantism and Spiritism made steady gains in the northern states; meanwhile, the Yaqui had created their own Church and refused to submit to Catholicism (“Teresa Urrea: La Santa de Cabora” 30). The truce between the Church and State was also tenuous. In order to dilute the

influence of the Catholic Church, the Porfirian regime encouraged and protected protestant missionaries and masons, and used these alliances as leverage against Catholics (W. D. Raat 155; MacLachlan and Beezley 173–14).

Although the relations between the Díaz regime and the Church began to improve, anticlericalism continued to be central to the rhetoric of liberalism and positivism, the philosophical currents in vogue at the turn of the century. As historian Alfonso de María y Campos observed “desde sus inicios en las primeras décadas de vida independiente el liberalismo mexicano fue incorporando, gradualmente, algunos rasgos importantes de anticlericalismo” (129). Furthermore, he adds, Mexican liberals were opposed to the influence of the Church as they considered it an institution that invaded intellectual and political spheres and was a threat to political life (129). Positivism, another political philosophy followed by influential Porfirian advisers, also exhibited traces of anticlericalism. This philosophy, developed by Auguste Comte, advocated a reliance on the logic of new sciences which would lead to philosophical truths resulting from discoveries in math, science, astronomy, chemistry, and sociology (W. D. Raat 11; 18). Positivism proposed the superiority of rational thought over religion and spirituality; for this reason, its adherents assumed religious belief and expression to be irrational and superstitious.

Even though official anti-clericalism was enshrined in the liberal constitution and espoused by many positivist intellectuals, by the end of the century the Díaz government relied on its newly reconciled ally (the Catholic Church) for support with its greater national modernization and consolidation project. Unfortunately, this cultural project was intolerant of communities and ideologies that threatened the positivist ideals of “rationality,” “order” and “progress” (Pérez de Mendiola 61–63). Consequently, the Catholic Church continued to be an



important powerbroker in Porfirian Mexico. Many scholars who explore the intersections between coloniality and religion have observed the complicity of the Catholic Church in the process of continental conquest and colonization; it was the Catholic Church that provided the legal, moral, and material support necessary for the Spanish to conquer and colonize the Americas (Seed; Arias and Marrero-Fente; Adorno).

The complicity between the church and the Porfiriato's (neo)colonial consolidation enterprise is also evident in the Church's dedicated project to eliminate folk saints. In suppressing religious heterodoxy (folk Christianity) and dissent (folk saints and their followers) not only did the Church protect itself but it also diffused the possibility of emerging civil unrest. As we can see in the case of the Tomóchic Rebellion, in providing support for the repression of folk Catholicism, the Catholic Church also reinforced the political *status quo*. The repression of dissenting religious groups and revolutionary mystics was mutually beneficial to the secular and religious powers. Eliminating potentially disruptive elements in the society diffused the possibility of any credible challenge to the hegemony of each group. In the northern borderlands, the multiplication of cults to folk saints was especially worrisome to both entities.

One of the most polemical elements of the Tomóchic Rebellion sensationalized by the metropolitan press was the unorthodox religious practice of the townspeople, especially their alleged veneration of folk saints. Cultural critic Frank Graziano defines folk saints as persons (real or fictitious) who "are widely regarded as miraculous and receive the devotion of a substantial cult, but are not canonized or officially recognized by the Catholic Church" (vii). According to Graziano, these characters often provide "improvised (and often symbolic) compensations for the lack of social services [healthcare and socioeconomic security]" left

unfulfilled by secular and religious institutions (Graziano 33). In other words, folk religious practices fill voids left unfulfilled by traditional government and religious institutions.

Unlike saints recognized by the Catholic Church, whom I discuss at length in Chapter 3, those who achieve veneration within popular religion can be dead or alive. Some individuals may demonstrate no redeeming qualities in life yet achieve popular veneration in death because they are attributed miraculous powers resulting from a tragic, unjust, or violent death (Graziano 13–16). Such is the case for contemporary (narco) saints Jesús Malverde and San Nazario. In life, both characters had dubious redeeming qualities, the first a bandit, and the latter, a drug trafficker. Among the communities in which they are venerated, however, both popular saints gained notoriety as *bandidos generosos*, who, like Robin Hood, participated in criminal enterprises (allegedly) in order to advance the common good. Followers of Saint Malverde and Saint Nazario believe that the two had achieved the ability to intercede before God on behalf of their followers as a result of having suffered violent deaths at the hands of government officials (Creechan and De la Herrán Garcia 5). In addition to interceding on behalf of their devotees in practical needs (health, employment, etc.), these so-called-narco-saints also provide assistance in achieving successful assassinations or drug runs (23). It is hard to say if devotees believe that their use of violence is sanctioned because the saint is interceding on their behalf or whether the saint is merely an accessory to a successful economic and deadly enterprise.

Living persons can also achieve veneration in folk religion. Such is the case for the Saint of Cabora and others venerated in the borderland regions at the turn of the century. Those considered living saints often achieve this status by virtue of their success as *curanderos*, or faith healers; often these healers are believed to be endowed with gift of healing through divine grace

(Graziano viii, 12, 24). As Graziano explains it, faith healings address a combination of spiritual and physical needs through traditional and non-traditional healing techniques:

Spiritual cures are a response to the belief that some maladies have non-biological causes, such as God, magic, envy, evil spirits, and curses. Curanderos generally heal their patients through some combination of religion (prayers and rituals), traditional medicine (herbs, salves), medical practices (surgery, tooth extraction), and folk psychology. (27)

Successful faith healers sometimes gained their own personal following as a result of their miraculous healing abilities. Many scholars rightly interpret the devotions to the Saint of Cabora as an expression of cultural syncretism: her religious practice and expression is a mixture of pre-Hispanic beliefs (shamanism), Christian mysticism (sainthood), and folk Catholicism (Pérez de Mendiola 64–65; Nava 503). Literary critic Mariana Pérez de Mendiola sees a parallelism between the subversive nature of folk saints during the Porfiriato and native shamen during the conquest and colonization: “in the same way as shamans were considered the principal obstacles during the Conquest [...], the ‘saint’ in the times of positivist reform is synonymous with historical aberration.” (65). Given their potential for cultural destabilization, especially by frustrating “civilizing” or “progressive” projects, it is clear that the elimination or repression of folk saints was a political and cultural imperative for the secular and religious hegemonic powers.

Teresita Urrea first gained notoriety in the state of Sonora as a faith healer. As a consequence of her success in healing, she came to be known as the “Saint of Cabora” following the name of the ranch where she held her healing practice. Cabora later became the site of her veneration. Her followers, known as “Teresistas,” helped to spread the devotion to the saint

among the northern states of Mexico and in the United States. The popularity of Santa Teresa was such that, according to news reports, in 1890 she received up to two hundred visitors daily (Lilián Illades Aguiar, “El Monitor Republicano, México 3 de enero 1890” 60). In addition to drawing large crowds due to her healing gifts, Santa Teresa also promoted bellicose politico-religious messages.

The Saint of Cabora was an especially polarizing figure for both the Church and the State. The threat is aptly summarized by historian Lilián Illades Aguiar who explains why Teresita was subversive: “Los frailes veían en las ideas y prácticas de Teresa Urrea a un enemigo poderos del clero; por su parte, Porfirio Díaz tenía que alejar cualquier amenaza que pusiera en peligro la estabilidad política de su régimen” (*La rebelión* 55). The Mexican state employed diverse strategies for discrediting the folk religious expression of the Tomochitecos and their religious leaders. The newspaper *El Tiempo* from Las Cruces, New Mexico, accused Teresita Urrea of being a power-hungry demagogue: “su tema favorito era sobre los abusos del clero católico impugnando algunas prácticas religiosas, entre ellas la de confesión, el casamiento y otros. Algo dice también sobre la misa” (Lilián Illades Aguiar, *La rebelión* 57). These hyperbolic representations are significant because they support an agenda of marginalizing and discrediting of the folk saint, and by extension her followers, who the press portrayed as both ignorant and subversive. As Brianda Domecq suggested, Teresa was a threat to the secular and religious government, not only as a religious figure, but also because of her subversive speech. Originally, Domecq observes, Teresita was not openly hostile towards the Church, however, by the year 1890 she positioned herself as a religious vigilante the of the Church (Domecq, *La insólita historia de la Santa de Cabora* 29). The Saint of Cabora’s radical message promised to turn the world upside down by offering both spiritual and political deliverance. To the infirm,

she offered deliverance from corporeal suffering and direct access to God; meanwhile to the socially and politically marginalized she offered the possibility of a new political regime.

The press, for their part, supported a smear campaign against Teresa of Cabora: her spiritual work was dismissed, and her person defamed. The newspaper *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* from January 9, 1890 satirizes her invectives against the clergy by reducing her as a dirt-eater and a healer of calluses:

Santa Teresa Urrea vende secretos para extirpar los callos, fulmina anatemas  
contra los sacerdotes católicos y come tierra con tomate.

Todos estos indicios hacen creer que se trata de alguna endemoniada para quien el  
tratamiento de agua fría y ejercicio está indicado. Oh con el agua fría el santoral  
católico se habría reducido a su mínima expression. (Lilián Illades Aguiar, “El  
Siglo Diez y Nueve, México, 9 de enero de 1890.” 61)

The article is on the whole anti-clerical and anti-religious. It attacks feminine mysticism, and to a greater extent female religious devotional practice, by associating female religious expression with a feminine ailment such as “hysteria.” In framing female religiosity as an ailment, the author proposes that science and rationality could conceivably cure such “illness” with cold water and exercise. Curiously, in Spanish and Spanish-American religious tradition, the male-dominated clergy has historically portrayed mystics as dangerous and subversive; the transformative power of this religious expression has been neutralized by allegations that women’s devotion is misguided, incorrect, superstitious, ignorant, and even diabolical (as does this nineteenth century writer).<sup>5</sup> Still, with ironic egalitarianism male mysticism received no better treatment in the press.

Carmen María López, The Christ of Chopeque, was another figure venerated by the Tomochitecos. The elderly López and his wife Mariana Carrasco were pilgrims who collected alms for a relic, a painting (*estampa*) of the Virgen del Refugio (Lilián Illades Aguiar, *La rebelión* 59–60; Vargas Valdez 33). Followers of the couple believe that the icon of the virgin was especially potent in facilitating miracles. According to Vanderwood, to some, the two were merely “beggars of God” (Vanderwood, *The Power of God* 47). Nevertheless, the two pilgrims and their miraculous icon gained notoriety when they settled in the town of Chopeque where they began developing a cult following. In some lore, the 85-year-old Carmen María López, carpenter by trade, was venerated as the second coming of Christ: “un nuevo Jesucristo enviado” (“El Cristo del Chupeque”). The metropolitan paper *El Correo Español*, suggests that the Christ galvanized his followers to battle further by proposing a millenarian message foretelling the end of the world on September 24, 1892 (“La revolución en la Frontera.”). This representation facilitated the association between the Christ of Chopeque and a forthcoming change in political regimes. The appearance of the Christ of Chopeque was an omen of change. According to several press reports, it was the Christ of Chopeque who “instigated” disobedience of the government in Tomochic and surrounding villages (“Intencionadesecha”).

Curiously, in chapter five of Heriberto Frías’ narrative, he proposes his own explanation of how the Saint of Chopeque came to be venerated. Although the chapter includes a footnote indicating that the fictionalized narration was “rigurosamente histórico,” the description of the Tomochiteco’s devotional practice is littered with factual errors. For example, the author misidentified the Christ of Chopeque as José Carranza, a native-born Tomochiteco wishing to return to his homeland (*¡Tomochic! Episodios de la campaña de Chihuahua* 31). In Frías’ narrative, his wife “Mariana,” his daughter, Julia, and his brother, Bernardo, accompany the

Christ. While the Christ of Chopeque and his wife are loosely based on the itinerant beggars, an extended family is not prominent in official records or news reports. What is of interest to our study is Frías' representation of Bernardo, the most profane of all religious entities present in Frías' invented spiritual cosmos. Incestuous and vulgar, Bernardo declares himself "soldado de Jesucristo" (*¡Tomochic! Episodios de la campaña de Chihuahua* 31). As we have seen and will see in nearly all of the insurgencies examined in this study, the trope of the Christian warrior will be recycled and modified according to the insurgent's needs. While the term "Christian Warrior" often has positive connotations for those who claim to fight in defense of Christianity, Frías uses this term ironically. Bernardo's Christian qualities are negligible, possibly laughable especially after Frías portrays him and his family as crazed, incestuous, and infirm.

Certainly, the Christ of Chopeque and the Saint of Cabora were not the only active religious entities present in the period. As Vanderwood observed, mystics and religious apparitions in the borderlands at the turn of the century included "visions, weeping holy images, heralds of the Apocalypse, dancing crosses, bleeding Christs, apparitions, 'signs' in the skies, spiritual mediums, wandering santos, and the like [who] appear in a variety of cultural configurations" (Vanderwood, *The Power of God* 45). Among adherents of folk Catholicism, the appearances of mystic and religious apparitions are generally viewed as positive phenomena. Historian Ronald Morgan, for example, argues that the presence of folk saints provided communities evidence of God's favor for them and served as "an exercise of self-affirmation" (4). Unfortunately, the government swiftly repressed many of these mystical apparitions. Local authorities apprehended and questioned the Christ of Chopeque for inciting revolt ("El Cristo del Chupeque"). The Saint of Cabora, for her part, was eventually forcibly exiled to Nogales, Arizona in The United States (Vanderwood, *The Power of God* 229–34).

The Saint of Cabora, the Christ of Choqueque, and Cruz Chávez, like the Communicating Cross of the *Cristiano 'oob*, appealed to their followers by offering them hope of a better world. Typically, such utopian movements are labeled as millenarian. Historian Nicholas Robins explains that within Christian tradition the concept of millenarianism was inspired by the Book of Revelation, which alluded to a “promised 1,000-year reign of peace prior to the Judgment Day following the Second Coming of Christ” (12). According to the Book of Daniel, the new world is preceded by the Apocalypse, a period of devastation that will clear the way for a time of long-term peace and prosperity (Vanderwood, “Millenarianism, Miracles, and Materialism” 396). Within traditions of folk Catholicism, these times of change are often ushered in by messianic or charismatic leaders whose religious messages are often intertwined with messages about attaining political objectives; often, religion is a tool for achieving “real” political goals (Pessar 256, 273). Because she advocated for the overthrow of the Mexican government and the Catholic Church, many scholars have characterized the Saint of Cabora and her message as millenarian (Lamadrid 452). It could be argued that the Saint of Cabora, the Christ of Choqueque, and Tomóchic leader Cruz Chávez exhibited messianic qualities in both their person and their message.<sup>6</sup>

At the crux of the conflict at Tomóchic were the attempts of church and secular officials to repress the veneration of folk saints, thereby taking a page from colonial religious practices of securing the hegemonic discourses by undertaking projects meant to inflict epistemic violence. Many modern-day historians argue that the conflict came to a head at Tomóchic when the local priest attempted to convince his parishioners that they were mistaken in their devotion to the folk saints (Schwaller 177). We can learn about the Tomochiteco’s religious practices from an interview of the priest in charge of the parish at Tomóchic, Father Manuel Castelo, which



appeared in the newspaper *La Frontera de Chihuahua* on October 28, 1892. I found modified reproductions of the article in metropolitan papers *El Monitor Republicano* and *El Universal* from November 2, 1892. In the interview, the priest explains that the conflict began on December 15, 1891 as a result of his initial attempt to correct the religious practices of the townspeople of Tomóchic.

In addition to practicing orthodox Catholicism, the townspeople of Tomóchic began following Teresa Urrea (the Saint of Cabora) and Carmen María López (the Christ of Chopeque). Their veneration included making collective pilgrimages to visit their saints. According to Father Manuel Castelo, in the sermon delivered on December 15, 1891, he attempted to convince the townspeople of Tomóchic of their “mistaken beliefs” (Lilián Illades Aguiar, “El Universal” 148). The priest attempted to diminish the credibility of the folk saints and their threatening messages by questioning their divinity:

les hizo ver que ni Carmen María López era Jesucristo, ni Teresa Urrea Santa; por más que ambos fueran apreciables por sus virtudes y excelentes cualidades. A pesar de los términos comedidos y moderados de que se valió el Sr. Castelo para hacerlos prescindir de sus creencias erróneas y no obstante los elogios que tributo a Teresa Urrea y a López, los fanáticos se indignaron contra él porque les negaba el origen divino; a los gritos de ‘SÍ SON SANTOS’, ‘SÍ SON SANTOS’ salieron del templo, quedando únicamente en él los Sres. Reyes Domínguez, Jesús Medrano, que después se unió con los sediciosos, Francisco, Bartolo y Sabino Ledesma, Domingo López y Santiago N., de origen francés, con sus respectivas familias. (Lilián Illades Aguiar, “El Universal” 148)

Certainly, as an agent of the Catholic Church, it was the priest's responsibility to confirm that the religious practice of his flock was sound. In the passage, the priest represents himself as a benevolent agent of the community, concerned with keeping his flock away from "fraudulent" religious figures.

It is not surprising that a priest would want to censure popular religious practices, especially the following of alternative religious leaders. The Catholic Church has viewed the veneration of popular saints as a threat. As Morgan and others have observed, saint-making has historically been tightly regulated by the Catholic Church; under the Catholic Church doctrine, there has been a tight regulation of the process of beatification in attempts to control the proliferation of saint cults to popular rather than official saints (29; Haliczer 10). Folk saints challenge the need and value of institutionalized religion: "if mystics pose a threat to orthodoxy it is often because of this presumption on the part of some mystics—though certainly not all—that the traditional intermediaries (church, sacraments, priests) are no longer necessary. God has spoken to them directly. In this sense mysticism is a direct or immediate consciousness of the Divine" (Nava 502). In having direct connections with God, mystics may suggest the irrelevance of Church institutions and administrators.

The Catholic Church has employed a number of discursive strategies to diffuse the influence of folk saints. Graziano proposed that the Church has traditionally responded to the veneration of folk saints by prohibiting or repressing cults, or by speaking out publicly against saints:

When they [the clergy] articulate their objections, the accusations generally include paganism, superstition, idolatry, magic, commercialism, and the reduction of religion to the exchange of payment for favors. From their perspective, folk

saint devotions are a ‘mixture of religious beliefs with superstition and myths’; they evidence a ‘lack of development, profundity, and purity’; and they ‘reduce the Faith to a mere utilitarian contract.’ (Graziano 69)

As is evident in his message, Father Castelo’s attempt to repress religion were rejected by his parishioners. Castelo’s attempt to suppress the cults to Urrea and López, follows a traditional response of the Catholic Church to threatening groups. As Frank Graziano observes, while “folk saint devotions can be debilitated” by concerted suppression efforts by authorities, Church repression can also galvanize devotees (Graziano 48, 51). The latter experience was witnessed at Tomóchic.

Heriberto Frías is not so generous in his representation of the same event. In his version, the Tomochitecos take the Christ of Chopeque to mass with them: “Terminada la ceremonia, el cura, que traia [*sic*] instrucciones de arrojar al santo y prohibir á aquellas gentes seguir en tan extrañas ideas, los exhortó, regañándoles con dureza y echándoles en cara su estupidez” (*¡Tomochic! Episodios de la campaña de Chihuahua* 32). Researcher Domecq proposed that threatening parishioners who insisted on following Santa Teresa with excommunication from the Church was another strategy for diffusing the cult (“Teresa Urrea: La Santa de Cabora” 30). Not only were Father Castelo’s efforts to repress the veneration of Santa Teresa and El Cristo unsuccessful, from the anecdote, it seems evident that the Tomochitecos’ grievances against their local priest were a result of the latter’s attempt to repress their veneration of local folk saints. Father Castelo attempts to enforce orthodoxy through epistemic violence—challenging and disparaging the belief systems of his parishioners. However, instead of submitting to orthodoxy or preserving their unorthodox veneration in secret (as had been done by Native Americans, Jews, and African peoples for more than five hundred years), the Tomoches instead challenged

the authority of the priest in arbitrating religious affairs. This the *Cristiano'oo* of the Caste War did not do. The priests' attempt to disauthorize the object of the parishioners' devotion offends their sensibility and challenges their understanding of religiosity and spirituality in order that they be realigned with Catholic Orthodoxy.

Father Castelo's indignation is pushed further when, following his failed sermon, the Tomochitecos decide to make a pilgrimage to the nearby town of Chopeque to seek the advice of the Christ of Chopeque, in flagrant disregard to the priest ("Reflejos Políticos y Sociales: Los Escándalos de Tomóchic"). Later, the Tomochitecos would also make a pilgrimage to Cabora, Sonora to visit the Saint of Cabora herself. However, when the insurgents arrived at Cabora, they learned that the Saint was away; the insurgents returned home empty-handed (Carrillo, "Telegram to General Porfirio Díaz. 13 December 1891."). Rather than being a testament to the religious fervor of the townspeople, the pilgrimages can be read as acts of defiance, with the townspeople's affirmation of their right to choose the object of their veneration. The anecdote reveals that instead of accepting the authority and guidance of their local priest, the Tomochitecos opted to berrate him. The response to the priest's invective materialized in an open challenge to church authority through shouts admonishing the priest personally, and subsequently shouts challenging the legitimacy of the priest's authority in arbitring religious matters. As a consequence of this face-off, the priest experienced what he characterizes as "hostility" from the citizens and sought "protection" from the political leaders in the form of a punishment for the "fanáticos" (Lilián Illades Aguiar, "El Universal" 149). According to the interview, the priest appealed to the *presidente municipal* who attempted to apprehend the "fanatics" at the behest of the priest (149).

In his interview, Father Castelo also reveals the tensions between secular and religious authorities. He complains that civil authorities had also antagonized the Tomochitecos prior to his fateful sermon. In making this connection, we learn that the radicalization of Tomóchic is also a consequence of a perceived attack on the community's religious practices and customs.

Igualmente confirma el Sr. Castelo lo que referente á la profunda herida causada al sentimiento religioso y fanático de los vecinos de ese pueblo por la conducta inconveniente del Gobernador Carrillo y sus acompañantes quienes no solamente entraron al templo con la mayor irreverencia, sino que habiendo encontrado en él una imagen [*sic*] de San Joaquín y otra de Santa Ana, de bastante mérito artístico, ordenaron al entónces [*sic*] Presidente Municipal, Jesus [*sic*] Medrano, que las cortara del cuadro en que se encontraban y las remitiera á esta ciudad, al Sr. Carrillo. Medrano cortó las imágenes, pero habiéndose amotinado el pueblo, tuvo que desobedecer la orden del Gobernador, y se vió [*sic*] obligado á volver á poner los cuadros en su lugar, conociéndolos con pita. Aún se encuentran así.

(“Interior”)

The anecdote suggests a clash between competing epistemologies in the borderlands region: secular doctrine, orthodox religion, and popular religion. For Governor Carrillo, the paintings have value and are desirable because of their artistic merit. His authority as a civil official permits him to appropriate said object of value. On the other hand, for the parishioners of Tomóchic the two images are part of their cultural and religious heritage; the icons are testament to the connection between the earthly and the divine. The value of the paintings is symbolic; for this reason, their removal implies a negation, and even a desecration of their system of interpretation. This episode exemplifies what Nelson Maldonado-Torres has proposed as the

inversion of secularism and religion during modernity where “religion becomes [...] a most efficient form of subalternation [*sic*] of knowledges and peoples” and religion “becomes equivalent with fanaticism and irrationality” (369). In the case of Tomóchic, we see other consequences of such inversion in that, like the colonial religious system, the secular system too was capable and willing to effect epistemic violence, through the desecration of religious icons and apprehension of mystics, in order to impose its own value system on its subjects.

Regardless of the ultimate cause for civil disobedience, after the incident of the failed sermon, civil authorities began a military pursuit the community of Tomóchic. On August 14, 1892 the Chihuahua Congress attempted to grant amnesty to the community of Tomóchic as a strategy for reestablishing peace and stability; however, this decree was blocked by Rafael Pimentel and Miguel Ahumada, aspirant to the governorship (Osorio 305). By taking up arms, local and federal authorities forced the Tomochitecos, and the allies who joined them, to take up arms in order to defend themselves and their religious beliefs.

### ***Blessing Bullets and Praying for Protection: Folk Catholicism in the Battlefield***

One of the elements that most fascinated the Porfirian press was the Tomochiteco’s version of Folk Catholicism. Often pro-government newspapers portrayed Tomochitecos and their religious practices as absurd, irrational, and superstitious. None was more eager to describe the eccentricities of the religious expression of Tomóchic than Heriberto Frías who devoted an entire chapter to explaining how the Tomochitecos’ superstitious religious beliefs motivated the insurgents during battle.

Certainly, the small band of insurgents—consisting of townspeople, neighbors, and later an allied band of bandits—were better prepared for combat than the hastily congregated and poorly trained army. Still, many in the press (including Frías) attributed to the Tomochiteco’s

success in battle to divine intervention. *El Monitor Republicano*, for example, reprinted an article that proposed that the Tomochitecos were invulnerable to bullets: “Parece que las santas referidas les han asegurado que las balas respetaran [*sic*] á los que tengan fé, y los cuarenta sediciosos de Tomochic [*sic*] lo sostienen” (“Los sublevados de Tomochic”). A similar anecdote was recounted by the editors of *El Faro*: “una turba de indígenas que creyéndose invulnerables á las balas, por que tal cosa les había dicho el tal “Cristo,” traban reñido combate con las fuerzas federales: fruto monstruoso de un inconcebible fanatismo (“Reflejos Políticos y Sociales: Los Escándalos de Tomóchic”). In this case, I suspect that arguments about divine intervention have an ambivalent function. Superficially, such arguments comment on what is interpreted as irrational, illogical, or superstitious beliefs and dismiss these as religious fanaticism. However, in attributing military success to divine intervention in the form of blessed bullets or blessed weapons, the newspapers, in fact, demonstrate the effectiveness of the religious cult. The righteousness of the cause is validated by the insurgent’s apparently God-given invulnerability to bullets. At heart, this invulnerability narrative can also be read as a veiled criticism of the poorly trained army that was unable to obliterate the insurgents in spite of outnumbering them four to one.

Folk remedies also played an important part of the spiritual and healing practices of Tomóchic and may have also contributed to the Tomochiteco’s belief in their invulnerability. Heriberto Frías and others observe that healing the injured with dirt, allegedly blessed by the Saint of Cabora, was one of the remedies employed by the Tomochitecos during combat. After combat, injuries were treated with what has been described as “powder,” “earth,” or “dirt” mixed with oil, soap, and beef fat; this remedy was said to be especially powerful because the “earth” was considered holy by virtue of its origin in Cabora or because it was blessed by the Saint of

Cabora herself (MacLachlan and Beezley 193; Vanderwood, *The Power of God* 58). According to some reports, dirt was indeed a part of the Saint of Cabora's healing rituals. Even if the remedy was ineffective, it must have been comforting to the wounded to have contact with their spiritual guide through the relic. In my view, the Tomochiteco's belief in the miraculous healing powers of Cabora's earth could have also buttressed the belief in their invulnerability during battle by reinforcing notions about the "divine protection" bestowed by the Saint of Cabora via her healing earth.

The final, and possibly most controversial belief surrounding the Tomochitecos' military success was their faith in resurrection. I suspect that Heriberto Frías' works were instrumental in propagating this myth about Tomóchic through his novel. In addition to discussing the insurgent's alleged belief in their immunity to bullets, the author explained that one of the motives for the insurgent's fearlessness was their sureness about the resurrection; in other words, the Tomochitecos were fearless in combat because they considered their death to be temporary. Without a doubt, resurrection is an important element in the Teresista movement. The Saint of Cabora begins expressing mystical traits after she experiences epileptic seizures, and is left in a death-like catatonic state; her later recovery is interpreted by many of her followers as a resurrection from death and the source of her divinity (Nava 501). However, there is little else beyond the novel to suggest that the Tomochitecos were committed to their death because they expected to resuscitate after three days.

Divine intercession during combat is a common theme repeated in the four religious insurgencies examined in this work. The religious insurgents will appeal for divine intervention in order to achieve success during armed conflicts. For some Christian insurgents, divine intervention manifests itself in the form of protection or healings. For others, divine intercession



occurs when the divinity or intercessor sharpens the believer's aptitude for combat: the divinity interceding on behalf of the combatant will facilitate for the believer accurate aim, deadlier bullets, or fearlessness. In the case of the *Christiano'oob* of the Yucatán, for example, the Christ embodied by the Communicating Cross claimed to shield the warriors from harm during armed battle (J. de la Cruz 193–200) .

Regardless of whether the divine aid is defensive or offensive, it bolsters the insurgents in their resolve to achieve success over their rivals by fostering notions of a divinely inspired war. Readings of the insurrection as “holy war” are bolstered by the belief that God and The Saint of Cabora were on their side. Still, since the insurgents will inevitably suffer casualties, their narrative also reinterprets death as a positive outcome of battle. Casualties are a result of religious persecution, the dead are considered heroic because they sacrificed their lives in defense of religious principles. In the case of Tomóchic, and later the Cristeros, death is interpreted as martyrdom. While the Cristeros will interpret death as honorable through the trope of “martyrdom,” the Tomochitecos's descendants will interpret death as an honorable consequence of conviction and righteousness against a repressive government. Many newspapers and politicians would eventually use the Tomochitecos as models for heroism and valor in preparation for the Mexican Revolution.

### ***Legitimizing the Violent Repression by Indianizing Tomóchic's “Fanatics”***

When reports that neighbors of the town of Tomóchic first declared themselves in rebellion, local section president Juan Ignacio Chávez attempted to downplay the significance of the peasant insurgency by denying the movement any political character and declaring that the uprising consisted of locals, “la mayor parte de los vecinos de este pueblo,” in his correspondence to the Jefe Político de Guerrero. By indicating the local nature of the insurgency,

he implied that the unrest was contained within a restricted geographical area. Early reports failed to note any political or ideological motivations for the skirmish. Instead, most correspondence between regional and national agents dismissed the insurrection of approximately 40 townspeople as inconsequential because it was not ideologically motivated, but rather inspired by local disputes: “La cuestión es puramente local y no tiene importancia alguna” (Sanginés 243). Since the dispute was geographically restricted and limited in its numbers, local political leaders could easily diffuse or quash the revolt.

Chihuahua officials trivialized the insurgents further when they portrayed the protagonists of the revolt as Indians. Miguel Ahumada, future governor of Chihuahua, was one of the earliest government officials to represent the insurgents as “unos cuantos indios” (Ahumada; Carrillo, “Telegram to General Porfirio Díaz. 9 Dec. 1891.”). Ahumada’s telegraph situated the Tomóchic Rebellion within a broader tradition of frequent indigenous revolts in the northern borderlands. These early representations of the revolt—generated by local Chihuahua government officials and propagated by regional and metropolitan media outlets—cemented the reputation of the Tomóchic Rebellion as an Indian revolt.

Contemporary scholars like historian Paul Vanderwood and literary critic Joshua Lund have attempted to revise narratives “Indianizing Tomóchic” by providing evidence that the Tomóchic community consisted not of Indians (or as Lund ironically terms it, “a barbarous tribe”), but of *serranos* (Lund 180; Vanderwood 87). *Serranos* were “the non-Indian inhabitants of the Sierra Madre of the State of Chihuahua” who were tasked with conquering and colonizing indigenous peoples and territories during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Alonso 405). During these periods, anthropologist Ana María Alonso proposed, the struggle between *serranos* and Indians (mostly Apache) embodied the perennial colonizing narratives of civilization and

barbarism whereby the the *serranos* (in this case, the civilizing agents) brought order to the Sierra Madre by subjugating both people and territories (405). Lund rightly argues that during the Tomóchic Rebellion, the Porfirian propaganda apparatus re-frames the descendants of these *serrano* colonists, the former civilizing agent of the frontier, not only as the barbarians to be colonized but also as “intransigent Indians who insist on frustrating the civilization and modernization of Mexico” (178–79). By studying government correspondence and news reports we can explore the process of what Lund called, the “Indianization” of Tomóchic. In my view, the misidentification of Tomóchic as Indians in state narratives repurposes colonial discourses promoting ethnocide, and more specifically the suppression of indigenous religious practices and epistemologies through coercion and violent force. In imposing the labels “indigenous” and “fanatics” on the insurgents, government officials delegitimize the grievances of the insurgents by removing their authority to make such claims because they become marginal subjects.

The misidentification of the Tomóchic insurgents as a band of “Indians,” sometimes Tarahumara (*Rarámuri*), situated the rebels within the realm of broader discussions about the so-called “Indian problem” in Mexico. Intellectuals and politicians of Porfirian Mexico believed that Indian communities frustrated the cultural and economic consolidation of the nation by preserving their languages, beliefs, economies, and social organization systems. Historian William D. Ratt noted that, during the Porfiriato indigenous communities were almost entirely excluded from the Mexican national project and often expressed loyalty not to the nation, but rather to local communities (416). Discussions about the “the Indian problem” often involved strategies for achieving ethnocide of Indian communities (following the slogan “matar al indio y dejar al hombre”) through assimilation, acculturation, miscegenation, colonization, or extermination (Barabas, “La construcción del indio” 13–14; Hernández Casillas 20).

Although Chihuahua state officials originally employed the pejorative “Indio” to downplay the political significance of the Tomóchic Rebellion, the characterization of the Tomochitecos as Indians established a foundation for later arguments about permissible strategies for diffusing the conflict at Tomóchic. In Chihuahua, as in other regions in Mexico and Latin America, the state instituted policies of pacification and civilization in response to their particular “Indian problem.” In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Mexican government waged a series of pacification and extermination campaigns in the northern frontier against the Mayo, Yaqui, Comanche, and Apache (Meyer, “El problema indio en México desde la Independencia.” 56, 63; Macklin and Crumrine 96). When the state began to withdraw troops from the frontier and stopped subsidizing Apache communities, the natives began to raid and pillage settlements, thus threatening the viability of permanent settlements (MacLachlan and Beezley 57). In response to this threat, the state legislature of Chihuahua attempted to “pacify” its barbarous Indians, in this case, the Apache, by stimulating their annihilation through a fee for Indian scalps program and tried to “civilize” other nomadic communities through the reintegration of Jesuits *asentamientos* (missions) in the Chihuahua territories (243). The above examples establish precedent for employing violence as a legitimate measure to eradicate or ameliorate the Indian insurgent who refused to live within the paradigms established by the Church and State.

When they planted the seeds of the “Indianization” of Tomóchic, politicians like Lauro Carillo and Miguel Ahumada, employed imagery of the barbarous Indian to conjure feelings of hostility, fatigue, and indifference toward the community of Tomóchic, since indigenous communities in the region had historically been at war with colonists and the state and were viewed as a threat to local economic stability. It is ironic that, as Heriberto Frías noted in

*Tomóchic*, it was the federal army rather than the Tomochitecos who had actively recruited indigenous communities to fight against the insurgents. According to Frías, the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 24<sup>th</sup> battalions had recruited Tarahumara, Opata and Pima (“los terribles indios de la sierra de Tarahumara”) to fight against the insurgents of Tomóchic (*¡Tomochic! Episodios de la campaña de Chihuahua* 94, 96). This fact was obscured by the media who instead favored reporting on the more salacious elements of Tomóchic religious expression.

The project of “othering” the insurgents at Tomóchic in discourse became problematic in the battlefield. Army troops needed to annihilate a band of insurgents who were essentially ethnically indistinguishable from themselves. As Frías recounts, there were times when the army began to shoot against its own troops because it was unable to distinguish its members from the insurgents. On other occasions, the only thing distinguishing insurgents from the military was by the “vivas,” or praises, that each claimed as their battle cry. While the Tomochitecos evoked “The Great Power of God” and the Saint of Cabora as their protector, the army embraced the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and the Supreme Government (Frías, *Tomóchic*. 118–19). In the novel, the vignette of the “vivas” is eye opening for it shows that even in their religious practices the Tomochitecos and Federal troops seem to be foils of one another: in their invocations of the divine in preparation for battle, both are fiercely devout to their religious icons.

Still, in spite of the facts, most metropolitan newspapers accepted representations of the insurgents as Indians. Indigenous imagery is particularly compelling, considering that just a few decades earlier, it was the “barbarous tribes” that had threatened the territorial integrity of the northern Mexican regions by frustrating attempts to establish permanent settlements in the region. The newspaper *Gil Blas* offers a striking example of this portrayal in an article entitled “Sublevación y toma de Temochic,” from November 18, 1892 (“Sublevación” 1). The cartoon

accompanying the note on the uprising once more reinforces colonial discourses about the perennial tension between civilization and barbarism. In the image, a long-haired, dark-skinned, grass-skirt-wearing “Indian” subdues a smartly dressed and well-armed military officer with his bare hands. The caricature is simultaneously shocking and mocking: it provides evidence of the ferocity of the so-called Tomóchic Indians and their capacity to overwhelm not only the agents of order and civilization, but also “la paz pública.” The caricature inspires awe and trepidation by raising an alarming question: What would happen if the fanatical Indians defeated the federal troops? Would the Mexican nation “regress” into disorder and “superstition”?

In *¡Tomóchic!* Heriberto Frías makes a half-hearted attempt to clarify that the insurgents of Tomóchic were *serranos*. However, in his descriptions of the fighters and their battle tactics, he employed negative stereotypes of Indians: ignorant, simple-minded, savage (“¡Tomochic! Episodios de Campaña” 14, 34, 71). Curiously, in the fifth edition of *Tomóchic*, Frías embraces the “indianizing” project further. One of his final reflections on the destruction of Tomóchic leads to his lament of both the insurgent’s great fanaticism as well as their Indian-like attributes:

¡oh! flamígera extinción de los aduares de la fanática tribu de montáneses,  
sobervios en su ignorancia tremenda y salvaje, hijos bravos de las sierras,  
aguiluchos encamarados en sus nidos formidables, obstinados en el capricho  
bárbaro de su orgullo supremo [...]. (Frías, *Tomóchic*. 244)

Rather than clarifying the true identity of the protagonists as non-Indian, Frías’ account reinforces notions of the Tomochitecos as Indians by describing the insurgents with racially charged descriptors: tribesmen, savage, barbarous, obstinate. Nevertheless, for Heriberto Frías and other authors, it was not the bellicose stance of the so-called Indians that was dangerous, but

rather the fact that their irrational and gullible nature made them vulnerable to lies and superstitions.

When millenarian cults are demonized in the press and other outlets and are only seen for the excentricities of their religious leaders (eating dirt) rather than for the revolutionary message of their proponents, their ability to make a substantial impact beyond their local communities is diminished. Thus, in the case of the Tomóchic Rebellion, the press acts as a proxy for the state and assumes the role of extirpator of “indigenous” idolatries. Following metaphors first employed by the clergy of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the press of the nineteenth century incorporates medical discourse when talking about fanaticism which is portrayed as a localized illness that has the potential to infect the whole body. Influenced by anti-clerical ideologies, many Porfirian policies strive to extricate religion from public life. Finding that the marginal communities are incurably infected with the irrational illness of fanaticism, these publications also propose their eradication in order to inoculate, or contain, their virulent fanaticism from spreading to other regions containing other equally susceptible communities. In the case of Tomóchic fanaticism is fatal.

As historian Jean Meyer has observed, discussions about the socio-economic evolution in Mexico have been closely tied to questions of the Indian (“El problema indio en México desde la Independencia.” 56). As in other American countries intellectuals debated how to deal with rural indigenous communities, which were seen as an impediment to the economic and cultural advancement for the nation. Of particular concern in Mexico was the Indian’s attachment to the Catholic Church. Proponents of liberalism and positivism continued a hostile stance toward the clergy and disparaged the influence of the Church on Mexican society, especially among indigenous people. As Miguel Gomes explains, Justo Sierra, one of the leading intellectuals of

the Porfiriato, argued that the position of inferiority occupied by Mexico's indigenous population was not due to an inherent biological deficiency (as had been argued by other intellectuals), but rather to the Indian's subjugation during the conquest (44). Specifically, he argued, Catholic religious instruction had instilled in the Indian a spiritual dependence and physical weakness. Sierra proposed that the ill effects of religious indoctrination could be reversed through improved nutrition and sound instruction under a secular education program grounded in sound scientific principles (Gomes 44). Many intellectuals shared Sierra's concern about the negative impact of religious practices of Mexican communities, especially indigenous ones, and viewed Indigenous religious expression, characterized as superstition, as an obstacle to progress and state consolidation, since the Church held much economic and cultural influence over rural communities.

Rhetoric condemning indigenous religious practices spilled over into the discussions about the rationality of the Tomochitecos and the righteousness of their cause. One of the most sensational and alarming elements of the Tomóchic Rebellion was the community's adherence to folk Catholicism influenced by syncretism religious practices informed by indigenous and Catholic religious traditions. Within the colonial Catholic Church, historian Alicia Barabas observed, Spanish friars worked arduously to rid indigenous communities of their pre-hispanic beliefs by portraying their religious practices as ills of idolatry, human sacrifice, cannibalism, witchcraft, polygamy, incest, and sodomy (Barabas, "La construcción del indio" 11–12). Critiques of the Tomochitecos' religious practices echo charges made against Indians during the spiritual conquest that were used to justify their subjugation to the Spaniards and their Christian God. Like the Spanish colonization project, the Porfirian neo-colonial project relied on the extirpation of incompatible religious and political beliefs as a key element to securing state



dominance. In the case of Tomóchic, Church and State officials, and by extension newspapers, chided the Tomochitecos for following the guidance of Cruz Chávez who had allegedly co-opted the duties of the Catholic priest and for being captivated by not one but two of the local folk saints.

It is worth noting that Indians also play a prominent role in the narrative of Plácido Chávez, the son of Manuel Chávez (brother of Cruz) and his wife, Clara Calderón—one of the few survivors of the battle of Tomóchic (Chávez Calderón 20, 71). As a manner of correcting the historical record, Plácido Chávez is adamant in emphasizing that only a small portion of Tomochic's population was Tarahumara (Chávez Calderón 27). Curiously, rather than breaking the myth of Indianization, Plácido Chávez chooses to reaffirm the bonds between indigenous peoples and the mestizo insurgents by proposing that his father, Manuel Chávez, had declared himself a protector of Indians (Chávez Calderón 32). In this narrative Manuel Chávez is whitewashed—presented as the heroic defender of the Tarahumara tribe, yet not one of them—in order to rescue his own political ideals from claims of irrationality, barbarism, and fanaticism.

Certainly, the label of fanaticism was one of the most alarming and politically disarming discursive tactics employed by the Díaz regime. Tomóchic descendant Chávez Calderón faces charges of “fanaticism” head on. In his version of Tomóchic, he strips the insurgents of their belief in folk saints altogether:

Cierto que en un punto sí parecían fanáticos, no porque lo fueran en el fondo sino por capricho, para demostrar que ellos eran libres para creer y adorar hasta a un barranco si así les convenía. Lo cierto es que un considerable grupo de hombres, mujeres y hasta niños, a fines del año de 1891 fueron a un lugar llamado *Chopeque*, debido a las versiones repetidas de que unos viejitos traían una estampa

de la Virgen, y fueron a conocerla. Pero no es cierto que el viejito que la traía tomara alguna intervención en la rebelión de Tomochi [*sic*]. Injustamente se ha querido atribuir a Tomóchi el fanatismo como uno de los principales motivos de la rebelión. (Chávez Calderón 33–34)

Instead of pious warriors, Plácido's Tomochitecos are merely a group of obstinate men, women, and children who are willing to fight to the death for religious freedom. Rather than making his ancestors less fanatical by dissociating them from their folk venerations, Plácido Chávez substitutes one fanatical belief (religious superstition) with another (a stubborn pride):

Es un ejército, muy superior a nosotros en número de soldados y elementos. Podremos, si Dios nos ayuda, triunfar por momentos, pero al fin y al cabo tenemos que sucumbir, tenemos que morir. Pero moriremos con el orgullo de que nos acabamos defendiendo una causa justa, como es que nunca hemos dado motivo para que procedan contra nosotros de esta manera. Las personas que después de nosotros se vean en trances iguales o parecidos, nos recordarán por lo menos diciendo: Así llegó al exterminio el pueblo de Tomochi. (Chávez Calderón 54)

Ultimately, by stripping the Tomochitecos of their devotion to folk Catholicism, Plácido Chávez makes a poor case for “just cause.” Fighting for the right to worship a ravine (*un barranco*) makes less sense than dying on behalf of a genuine, even if misguided, belief.

As we have seen, in successfully portraying the Tomóchic rebels as “ignorant, barbarous and Indian fanatics” in the public imagery, the Porfirian government was able to manipulate the discourse of civilization and barbarism to justify the obliteration of an insurgent community. As historian Barabas observed, the concept of the barbarian (*el bárbaro*) emerges from a need to

establish difference between “white culture” and all others: “... la barbarie constituía el contraste necesario para la construcción griega de la noción de civilización. Igualmente, el multiple imaginario de la barbarie desarrollado en América ha contribuido a definir por contraste las nociones de civilización de los blancos” (Barabas, “La construcción del indio” 11). Walter Mignolo has made similar observations about the historical significance of “negative barbarism” in the development of “the modern colonial world” (and Latin America in particular) as “negative barbarism” has been redefined and expanded to refer to those who fight against the West and its ideals: democracy, freedom, and modernity” (*The Idea of Latin America* 20). In Porfirian discourse, the Tomochitecos’ belief in folk saints reinforces the narrative of civilization and barbarism by placing the insurgent’s actions and beliefs in opposition to values of order, progress, and science.

For the Porfirian press, the devotion to the saint of Cabora and the Christ of Chopeque, was clear evidence of the Serrano’s “backwards” beliefs, which were an affront to Mexico’s modernization project. The representation of folk religiosity suggests a neo-colonial project that establishes a new benchmark for “civilization” which is not the ability for Indians to achieve Christianization, as in Colonial times, but rather as the Indian’s ability to transcend the belief in Christian superstitions, such as the belief in faith healings and living saints. Given the virulence of their fanaticism, and the Tó móchitecos’ willingness to fight to the death, extermination by violent means becomes not only a permissible but also necessary strategy to “contain” the spread of the fanaticism of the insurgents.

### ***Conclusion: Tomóchic and Its Aftermath***

In successfully portraying the Tomochic rebels as zealous Indians in the public imagery, the Porfirian government was able to embrace discourses of civilization and barbarism to justify

the obliteration of an insurgent community. Yet it is evident that the opposition press did not have a firm agenda when using the Tomóchic Rebellion as an example of the tyranny of the Diaz government. News from Chihuahua offered the hope of successful rebellion (a potential spark for a revolution) and offered a ready-made group of martyrs and heroes who fought against the tyrants *á la* David-and-Goliath. However, in emphasizing the sensational aspects of the story: the charismatic leader Cruz Chávez, barbarous Indians, and dirt-eating mystics (Teresita Urrea), they ultimately demonized and discredited their own heroes due to charges of fanaticism. The Rebellion of Tomóchic thus becomes the massacre of a crazed band of religious zealots, a tale of the containment of fanaticism. The strong convictions of the town's characters, real and fictitious, inspire awe and horror. In the Tomochic Rebellion we see the tragic consequence of the misalignment between lived religious experience and an idealistic secular political policy.

As we have seen in this chapter, in spite of their powerful act of defiance against Church and State authorities, which hoped to encroach on local rights, the agency of the Tomochitecos was effectively neutralized and eradicated by the publicity campaign enacted by the Mexican government. To this day, the descendants of the Tomochitecos attempt to downplay the role of religion in the insurgency of Tomochic. The stigma of the label "*fanático*" is such that Tomóchic descendant, Plácido Chávez attempted to eliminate the religious elements of the revolt in his telling of the conflict "... injustamente se ha querido atribuir a Tomóchic el fanatismo como uno de los principales móviles de la rebelión" (59). Instead, the descendants choose to exemplify the revolutionary elements of the rebellion. As historian Vargas Valdéz observed, contemporary residents of Tomóchic reject the idea of rebellion in their community and deny any religious connotation associated with the conflict: "se indignan cada vez que se menciona la palabra

‘fanatismo’”(17). The government’s representation was successful, and thus the repression on the basis of the religious expression of a community was legitimated.

In the forthcoming chapter, we will see how the government attempted to quell the dissent of another religious community, “orthodox” Roman Catholics, during the Cristero War (1926-1929). As we will see, the strength of the Cristero’s vision of citizenship was strengthened by their faith and their refusal to be pigeonholed by the use of the label “religious fanatic.” In spite of being labeled ‘fanatics,’ we will see how the Cristeros were able to contest both anti-religious discourse and policy through rhetoric and imagery grounded in the Roman Catholic tradition, as well as belief in local religious practices.

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<sup>1</sup> In the texts examined here, there are inconsistencies in the spelling of the town's name.

Literary critic Enrique Lamadrid explains the discrepancies in the orthography as follows:

The final "c" of the village name "Tomóchic" is often omitted, simply because the final "c" of Tarahumara words is often unpronounced in Spanish. The inhabitants of the village are called Tomochis, or on occasion Tomochitecos. (458)

For the purposes of this study, I will use the town name of "Tomóchic" and refer to its inhabitants as Tomochitecos or Tomoches.

<sup>2</sup> José Carlos Chávez wrote down the testimonial of a combatant of the rebellion in *Peleano en Tomóchic* (1979). His principal informant was general Francisco Castro, who fought in Tomóchic (xii).

<sup>3</sup> In the footnotes of his edition of Tomóchic, prepared for the editorial house Porrúa, James W. Brown indicates the changes undergone by the manuscript throughout the five editions of the text. He notes, for example, that chapters "Listo para matar...o morir," "Evocación la campaña contra los apaches," and "Los Perros de Tomóchic" were added in the fourth edition of the novel; the latter chapter first appeared as a short story in the journal *La Revista Moderna* (*Tomochic* 23, 67, 145).

<sup>4</sup> Historian Lilián Illades Aguiar argues that there are many other possible explanations for the revolt including political repression, land disputes, religious fanaticism, and local political infighting (*Tomóchic, fuentes y documentos* 8).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Haliczer's study, *Between Exaltation and Infamy*, offers a glimpse of the treatment of female mysticism in Early Modern Spain and their changing reception. Initially, these female mystics were respected religious and political authorities, during the sixteenth

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century these mystics were scrutinized and persecuted by the church. His research demonstrates that in the Hispanic religious tradition, female mystics (or *beatas*) too have served as proxies, or “mouthpieces,” for the political opposition through political prophesy (Haliczer 20–27). Given their potential to destabilize the empire and the church with revolutionary messages advocating regime changes or sermons about the irrelevance of Church hierarchies and intermediaries, the Spanish Inquisition eventually began to scrutinize and persecute female mystics. I suspect that the persecution of Saint Teresa Urrea and other male and female mystics in Mexico in the nineteenth century follows a similar logic.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough analysis of the messianic elements present in the Tomóchic Rebellion see John Vanderwood’s article, “Millenarianism, Miracles, and Materialism.”

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### Chapter 3: The Christian Soldiers of the Cristero Rebellion

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed two religious insurgencies in Mexico from the Nineteenth Century. Historians consider the first insurgency, the Caste War, as one of the few successful indigenous insurgencies because the *Cristiano 'oob* achieved over 50 years of autonomy within the borders of Mexico (Robins 19). On the other hand, the Tomóchic Rebellion of Chihuahua has a dubious legacy as both the precursor to the Mexican Revolution and, according to official government chronicles, as the unfortunate massacre of a band of fanatical Indians (Lund 179). To this day, the descendants of the Tomochitecos deny and downplay the religious nature of their ancestor's rebellion in order to exalt the symbolic character of the Tomochiteco's struggle against the Díaz government and the challenge it represented to Porfirian policies of national consolidation and citizenship. The first two Christian insurgencies discussed in this study take place in geographic peripheries: the southernmost and northernmost frontiers of the Mexican Republic. The Maya-speaking peasants and *serrano* frontiersmen of Chihuahua were marginalized by both the policies and politics of metropolitan governments in Mérida and Mexico City, respectively. These religious insurgencies are further trivialized because each community believed in syncretic and folk versions of Catholicism: talking icons and folk saints, popular forms of Catholicism that fall outside of the purview of Roman Catholic priests and their orthodox doctrines. From these two cases one might inadvertently surmise that religious insurgencies in Independent Mexico occurred only in the geographic and social margins of Mexico and beyond the purview of the Catholic Church: this chapter will demonstrate the contrary.

Mexicans have endured two nation-wide religious wars: the War of Reform (1857 to 1861) and the Cristero War (1926-1929).<sup>1</sup> However, while Mexican historiographers

commemorated the War of Reform as the landmark event leading to Mexico's liberal constitution, many Mexicans downplayed the significance of the Cristero War, or forgot it altogether. The similarities between these two wars are uncanny. Each war lasted three years. Both wars resulted from disputes between the Church and State: the Guerra de Reforma and the Cristero Rebellion were responses to anticlerical amendments advanced liberal constitutions. Like the "Laws of Reform" of the 1857 constitution, the clerical reforms adopted in the 1917 constitution attempted to reduce the social and political influence of the Church by regulating its control over civil registries, public education, and land (Olivera de Bonfil 20).<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the actual implications of these laws, Mexican Catholics believed that liberal Mexican governments wished to abolish Catholicism in Mexico through these constitutions; in both cases, some Mexican Catholics took up arms in order to defend their religious freedoms. Yet, in spite of the similarities between these conflicts, many Mexicans, except for the most devout of practitioners and descendants of combatants in the central states of Mexico, are unfamiliar with Mexico's second religious war. This chapter will explain how and why the Cristero War became Mexico's forgotten war, and how Cristeros and Cristero descendants attempted to rescue the legacy of the second Mexican crusade by portraying the Cristero War as legitimate according to Catholic theology and historical tradition. Eventually, these discourses served not only to justify the war, but also the development of a Catholic-leaning political opposition to the secular post-revolutionary Mexican State.

### ***Catholics in Rebellion***

Let me begin this chapter by discussing the historical antecedents of the Cristero War. In the lead up to the Cristero Rebellion, bishops of Mexico protested the implementation of anticlerical reforms of the 1917 constitution by Mexican president, Plutarco Elias Calles. In

order to pressure the government against implementing these reforms, the bishops issued a decree that called for the suspension of daily church activities until the laws were reconsidered or their implementation was suspended. On July 31, 1926, priests suspended religious services and stopped officiating marriages, baptisms, confirmations, and the rites of extreme unction in order to protest the enforcement of the anticlerical policies of the Mexican government. By suspending religious services, the bishops hoped to inspire the Mexican people to protest the repeal of the anticlerical legislation (Dooley 64, 67; Vázquez Parada and Cárdenas 11). Likewise, Catholics—especially those from the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, and Querétaro—denounced the implementation of anticlerical reforms: first, through economic boycotts against secularists and their supporters; later, through armed uprisings of local communities; and finally, through a nation-wide revolt (Olivera de Bonfil 20–2).

Government forces nicknamed the Catholic rebels “los Cristos Reyes” or “Cristeros” after the insurgents’ famous battle cry: “¡Viva Cristo Rey! y ¡Viva la Santísima Virgen de Guadalupe!” Certainly, adopting Christ, the Virgin, and God as patrons of bellicose enterprises was not a new phenomena in Mexican insurgencies; however, in the 1926 rebellion these rallying cries became key to shaping the insurgent’s identity. Political scientist Jennie Purnell explains the evolution of the moniker “cristero” as follows:

The term *cristero* was not employed until 1929, when the government began to use it in a pejorative sense to imply that any military movement led by Christ was doomed to fail. Although rebel veterans later adopted the name, throughout the course of the rebellion they usually referred to themselves as Catholics, as did many people who opposed the regime but did not actively participate in the rebellion. (Purnell 197–98)

According to Purnell, during the conflict the rebels usually called themselves Catholics; after the war, the rebels reclaimed the formerly pejorative term “Cristero” (197–78). In their propaganda (*corridos*, memoirs, and war chants), the insurgents referred to themselves as *católico*, *cristero*, and sometimes *cristiano* to differentiate themselves from other Mexicans who did not oppose the political regime in power, although those who supported the government likely also self-identified as Catholics or Christians. In appropriating the terms “católico” and “cristiano,” the Catholic opposition proposed the notion that only truly devout Catholics would oppose the anti-clerical policies of the state; in their discourse, those who did not oppose the government’s assault on the Catholic Church implicitly rejected Catholicism. In other words, in the rhetoric of the insurgents, the war, and more specifically direct or indirect support for the Catholic opposition by individuals, would determine the individual’s true commitment to Christianity. After the conflict, the uprising came to be called the Cristero War, the Cristiada, or the Cristero Rebellion; the label would evoke the corresponding pejorative or laudatory meaning according to context and use.

The Cristero’s revolt ended after three years through an armistice, *los acuerdos*, agreed upon by Catholic Bishops and the Government on June 21, 1929. Many combatants felt that the Catholic Church had betrayed them and their cause by forcing them to surrender before they had achieved any significant changes in the government’s anti-clerical policy or philosophy. In spite of the truce, many Cristero fighters refused to surrender their arms because they felt that the Cristeros had not reached their objective: Catholic principles did not inform or direct legislation or policy in Mexico. State-sponsored histories and chronicles of the conflict further aggravated the sense of defeat and betrayal felt by Cristero combatants. Official histories portrayed the Cristeros and their supporters as ignorant peasants or religious fanatics who were manipulated by

their priests to fight for a cause that was to their detriment. In response to official depictions and what Cristero descendants perceive as omissions, Cristero communities created social, discursive, and physical spaces of their own in which they could reinterpret the Catholic insurgency, advance their religious-political projects, and praise their own heroes and battles.

In this chapter, I will survey oral and written sources written by Cristeros of both elite and popular classes in order to analyze the discursive strategies that Cristero combatants and witnesses used to contest government representations of the conflict and to justify and legitimate the Cristero Rebellion. Historians and literary scholars such as Alicia Olivera de Bónfil, Ángel Arias Urrutia, José Luis Martínez, Lourdes Celina Vázquez, and Wolfgang Vogt have studied much of the published literary production defending the Cristeros and their cause (Olivera de Bonfil; Arias Urrutia; Vázquez; Vogt; Martínez). The pro-Cristero short stories and novels they examined often advance the political projects and agendas of middle and upper-class Catholics. In addition to surveying prose propaganda produced by elites, I also analyze how members of the popular classes and their descendants, specifically Cristero combatants and women, reinterpreted the revolution in representations grounded in popular memory. These popular representations of the revolt are in constant dialogue with elite Catholic propaganda and discourses of official chronicles of the conflict, such as public school textbooks, that either marginalized or omitted the Cristero War through Mexican history. I examine the discursive strategies used by men and women who supported the Cristero Rebellion hailing from lower, middle, and upper classes to legitimate and vindicate the armed conflict. I will demonstrate that the writings of the Catholic elite, that proposed arguments for a just war and the examples of early Christian martyrs to rationalize the conflict, influenced the accounts of the lower classes. However, I will also suggest that combatants of the illiterate and semi-literate lower class portray the war as a logical response

to the government's irrational intervention in local and personal religious practices. I conclude this chapter by examining how the Cristero combatants and their descendants evoke their religiosity and religious expression in their performances of cultural memory defending the Cristero Rebellion and how these performances contest the notions of national consolidation proposed by post-revolutionary politics.

***“Todo lo que Dicen los Libros Son Puras Mentiras”: The Marginalization of Cristero and Cristera Voices***

Since popular voices appear infrequently in widely circulated sources about the Cristiada, in 2011, I traveled to the Los Altos, the highland region of Jalisco to conduct research on the Cristero movement. During my trip, I met several Cristero descendants and amateur historians; they often shared the concern that the official history of Mexico had maligned and sidelined the Cristiada and the Cristeros. The director of the Municipal Museum of the town of San Miguel el Alto in Jalisco, summarized this sentiment best when he opined that when it came to representations of this religious conflict: “todo lo que dicen los libros son puras mentiras.”<sup>3</sup> Cristero descendants and Catholic historians believe that the government's downplay of the Cristero Rebellion is but another symptom of the deliberate marginalization of the combatants since the negotiations of the armistice. The Church and the Government excluded soldiers from negotiations in the armistice of 1929; because the insurgents were excluded from these discussions, the Church and State censored and undermined the legitimate motives for the Cristero's uprising.<sup>4</sup> In his memoir, Cristero combatant Clemente Pedroza explained that preserving memories of the Christian crusades through written accounts like his was necessary because the exemplary feats of the Cristeros were falling into obscurity:

No puede quedarse oculto el ejemplo de este pueblo aun cuando los enemigos de la Iglesia tratan de borrarlo; por lo tanto, con la ayuda de Dios, trataré de hacer un relato aun lacónico, pero lleno de realidad, porque nuestro deber de los que Dios escogió como testigos vivientes de esta epopeya, es decir la verdad. (Meyer, *El coraje cristero* 155)<sup>5</sup>

Like Pedroza's narrative, the retellings and testimonials of the Mexican crusade seek to elucidate the Cristero's truth and to (re)vindicate the legitimacy and legacy of what combatants characterized as the crusade against the Mexican government. The telling of these stories became more urgent in the 1980s and 1990s because by then few Cristero combatants and witnesses survived. Furthermore, in the 1990s-2000s the Catholic Church sought Cristero testimonials and memoirs to support the beatification and canonization proceedings of Cristero martyrs. Luckily, Cristeros and their sympathizers preserved many testimonials and writings in spite of governmental and church policies that denied or distorted the war.

After the war, the official policy of the Mexican government was to marginalize the Cristeros and to disqualify their knowledge and interpretation of the rebellion. In 1931, General Joaquín Amaro directed historians and chroniclers of the Commission on History to frame their writings from the government's perspective. The official histories, he explained, would rebuke chronicles by *reactionaries*, the Cristeros and their supporters, who distorted the "truth" of the conflict in their own retellings of the war. Read through a postcolonial studies lens, the federal government's move to de-authorize and erase the religious insurgents' historical memory follows historical strategies to repress and distort the consciousness of the colonized. The government's policy to control the "truth" responds to a desire to exercise real and symbolic power over their subjects, as is evident in General Amaro's decree. In a 1931 letter to Mexican historians, General

Amaro proposed that history should make clerics responsible for the conflict and bloodshed (Meyer, *Pro domo mea* 77). In a move that harkens to the struggle between hegemonic powers, secular and religious, evident during the Tomóchic Rebellion, Amaro directed historians to represent the religious conflict as a plot by high dignitaries of the Catholic Church whose goals were to ignore the mandates of the Constitution and to challenge the state's authority to legislate ecclesial matters.

Amaro's instructions to Mexican historians reveal that the Mexican Government was aware of the benefits of fashioning the "truth" to further its secularizing agenda. To this end, according to Amaro, histories of the conflict should exemplify the perverse acts of the priestly castes:

reproducirá todos los incidentes ridículos que tuvieron efecto en la turbia actuación de los prelados y todas las fechorías criminales consumadas por los clérigos, que abandonando de sus curatos y parroquias, se lanzaron a la aventura de capitanear chusmas de humildes labriegos, sin voluntad y sin cultura, y quienes lograron arrancar de su terruño con falsas prédicas y mentirosos halagos.

(*Pro domo mea* 77–78)

Moreover, Amaro instructed his colleagues to immortalize any exemplary act during which the clergy and their bands of malefactors (Cristeros) displayed their impunity and disregarded basic human life and rights: (savage) attacks, derailments, raids, and incinerations of passenger trains, and the brazen robberies and destruction carried out by the *bandits* (*Pro domo mea* 78). Above all, General Amaro coached fellow historians to stress that the "bandits" perpetrated these atrocious acts in the name of Christ (Meyer, *Pro domo mea* 78). Through its version of the "historical truth," which it disseminated in chronicles of Mexico's recent history, the government



undermined and marginalized the Catholic militants by caricaturizing them, and by extension trivializing their knowledge, belief system, and grievances against the government. Thus, official Mexican history was a powerful weapon in the culture wars between the secularist Mexican government and the Catholic opposition.

Amaro's communiqué embraced the notion that the victors of the conflict had the right to shape their version of history in a manner that was most beneficial for them. As in other conflicts discussed in this work, the written word was crucial to advancing internal colonial projects. During and after the Cristero rebellion, books and newspapers would be the tools whereby the government would combat the idolatrous fanaticism and superstition prevalent in the Mexican nation: "llevando la luz de la verdad a todos los rincones de la Nación y a todos los lugares del mundo donde no se conoce la realidad porque el clero se ha empeñado siempre en exhibirnos como un puñado de verdugos sin conciencia que perseguimos a los ministros del culto y la libertad religiosa" (Meyer, *Pro Domo Mea* 79). By controlling the message and interpretations of the Cristiada, the government sought to cement the hegemony of the post-revolutionary state at the expense of the now ousted Church and its ministers. Whereas at the turn of the century the Porfirian government and the Catholic Church had embraced a mutually beneficial power-sharing model whereby the Catholic Church continued to provide moral legitimacy to state repression, by the 1920s the Calles government was ready to seize all control for itself through a legal discourse that embraced anti-clericalism. Following the colonial tradition of enacting epistemic violence to subjugate dissident masses, the government did not address the grievances of the Cristeros, but rather used the insurgent's cultural and political expression as evidence of the inferiority and irrationality of their cause. Furthermore, the government went to great lengths to control its message and restrict the possibility of alternative representations of the conflict.

Writing about the war, Lourdes Celina Vázquez Parada notes that until 1960, the government restricted access to documents of the Cristiada at the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) and military leaders declined all interviews (36). By denying access to combatants and written record, the federal government hoped to control and diffuse the disruptive potential of religious dissidence.

For its part, the Catholic Church was also intent on downplaying or erasing memory of the conflict altogether so that it could renew its power-sharing relation with the state.<sup>6</sup> Historian Agustín Vaca and others have demonstrated that in order to achieve reconciliation with the state, the Catholic Church spearheaded efforts to downplay the influence of the Cristero Rebellion in popular memory upon the culmination of the religious conflict (Vaca 79). According to Vaca, in order to clear itself of wrongdoing, the Catholic Church directed the destruction of documents and prohibited the consultation of archives pertaining to the conflict. During my research I learned that many archives and collections holding Cristero testimonials continued to be sealed, and thus inaccessible to researchers, well into 2012. I suspect that sealing the archives was also a strategy for the Church and combatants to conceal the fact that at times the Cristero front lacked ideological coherence within itself and that some fighters simply fought for the sake of fighting. Cristeros must also contend with discrepancies in action and inaction of notable figures such as Father Aristeo Pedroza and Father Vargas, or characters such as Victoriano Ramirez “el Catorce,” whose war actions and lives did not reflect any of the Catholic values that they purportedly defended and cherished.

To some degree, even Cristeros are complicit in silencing marginal voices within the movement. Although various historians have noted the significant contributions of women, some memoirs and retellings of the Cristero War have minimized or ignored their contributions to the

revolt. Historians Elizabeth Mirtea Acuña Cepeda and Florentina Preciado Cortés explain that women contributed to the Cristero cause as combatants, educators, associates of religious organizations, intermediaries, nurses, and as supportive mothers, wives, and girlfriends (4). However, in spite of their contributions, Acuña Cepeda and Preciado Cortés observe that women “...posiblemente carecieron de voz para expresar su opinión respecto a esta lucha” (2). The labor of women who participated in the *Brigadas Femeninas de Santa Juana de Arco* (1927-1929) and other religious sororities were crucial to the success and survival of the resistance, yet they are curiously treated as peripheral in many partisan and official retellings of the conflict. The purpose of this secret organization was to raise funds for the war cause, procure provisions for the fighters and priests in hiding, gather intelligence, provide sanctuaries, and to tend to the sick (Reynoso de Alba 40–41). During the war, the contributions of women in the conflict were so underestimated that the network of 29,000 women was not discovered and disrupted until April 1929, months before the end of the rebellion (40–41).

The clergy also attempted to erase evidence of female participation in the conflict, and in doing so, marginalized the voices of women who participated in the Cristero Rebellion further. Upon the culmination of the conflict, the superior of the Brigadas, Mons. Darío Miranda, ordered the destruction of the archives of the Brigadas Femeninas. Chroniclers of the Cristero Rebellion had limited knowledge of the workings of this sorority because surviving members of the Brigadas Femeninas were bound by a strict vow of secrecy:

Ante Dios, padre, hijo, espíritu santo, ante la santísima virgen de Guadalupe y ante la faz de mi patria, yo [x], juro que aunque me halaguen o me prometan todos los reinos del mundo, guardare todo el tiempo necesario secreto absoluto sobre la existencia y actividades, sobre los nombres de personas, domicilios, signos ... que

se refieran a sus miembros. Con la gracia de Dios, primero moriré que convertirme en delatora. (*qtd in* Reynos de Alba 42)

Yet, in spite of the scarcity of narratives by or about Cristeras, we can discern the commitment and role of women in the uprisings through documents and testimonials captured in the works of historians committed to the study of Cristeras, such as Agustín Vaca, Elizabeth Mirtea Acuña Cepeda, and Florentina Preciado Cortés. Acuña Cepeda and Preciado Cortés, for example, interviewed female professors and students of teacher training colleges from the state of Colima who were active participants in the insurgency.

Regardless of the Church and State's efforts to eradicate the Cristeros' rebellion from popular memory, Cristeros and their descendants have been able sustain the memory of their movement in their cultural production. Thus, the memories and discourses of the Cristeros suffered a double attack: in order to renew their power sharing understanding, secular and religious powers required the suppression of historic memories and religious traditions. Inevitably, as subjugated knowledge, the local popular discourses present in oral, visual, and written retellings of the Mexican crusade must contend with and contest a legacy of demonization and marginalization historically imposed on them by both the Catholic Church and the Mexican state. For this reason, we can reasonably designate the cultural production of the Cristero community and their supporters, and the subjugated knowledge encapsulated therein, as the products of a subaltern group.

The tales of Cristeros and Cristeras sometimes include awareness of spiritual and mystical events and activity, such as the intervention of God, the Virgin, and spirits, which would be inadmissible evidence for the writing of secular historiography such as that of the Mexican government. This fits with what subaltern studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty has

observed in his critique of historical narratives about subaltern groups in India. Chakrabarty observes that the knowledge of the divine and supernatural of subaltern communities is censored, neutralized, limited, or redefined (for example, as fiction) in secular histories and sociologies; this knowledge is thereby relegated to the margins (48). Following the impulse to disqualify the knowledge of Cristeros, Mexican historians reinterpreted the religious consciousness of Cristeros as evidence of their ignorance and their proclivity to superstition. Chakrabarty proposes that scholars must recognize all aspects the historical consciousness of subaltern groups, including the presence of spiritual and mystical agents, because “the subaltern classes need this knowledge to fight their battles for social justice” (48). Thus, to deny the existence of a religious or mystical experience in Cristero narratives is to deny a central element of their politico-religious construction of citizenship and identity.

There is no doubt that when Catholic fighters and supporters elected to participate in the religious conflict, they privileged their religious identity over their national identity. Still, as is evident in the oath of the Brigadas Femeninas, which also holds the “patria” as a witness, the Cristeros viewed the fight to protect religion as a patriotic endeavor. *La Patria*, a Los Angeles weekly magazine summarized the importance of preserving Catholicism best when it observed the contributions of Catholicism to national identity and order:

El espíritu religioso de nuestro pueblo es proverbial: No se concibe una población mexicana sin su Iglesia en primer término, su sacerdote, consejero de todos los habitantes del lugar; sus fiestas populares netamente religiosas, en fin, toda la vida de nuestro pueblo gravita sobre el sentimiento religioso, el cual se hace más sensible y hondo gracias al hecho sobrenatural de la aparición de Nuestra Madre la Virgen Santísima de Guadalupe [...]. (*Nuestra na...* 8)

Given Mexico's foundation in Roman Catholic tradition, in the pro-Cristero view, Mexico needed more moral grounding and religion in order to achieve good governance, not less. Though they came together to bolster their Catholic identity, the Catholic combatants advanced diverse interests. Within the movement several factions advocated for their own regional, economic, and social welfare. Despite the fractures within the Cristero movement, the Mexican government and the official press exploited the self-selected identity marker "católico" to marginalize the Cristeros, regardless of their implicit interests.

The Cristeros hailing from different walks of life explained the motivation (to be read as justification and legitimacy) of the armed conflict through different vectors. Catholic organizations, such as the *Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa* (LNDR)—the organization that implemented Church policy and organized lay Catholics in the fight—, produced print publicity to thwart the impact of anti-clerical and anti-Cristero propaganda disseminated in the government-sponsored press. This is not to say, however, that all segments of the Cristero movement expressed their views in writing nor had access to the means of cultural production of the Catholic intellectual elite, such as the ability to produce printed texts. Following the lead of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group, in the section that follows I will examine the cultural production (oral and written) of Cristeros from different walks of life, with an emphasis on the experiences of witnesses and participants of the conflict hailing from the region known as Los Altos in the state of Jalisco, the epicenter of the revolt.

***"Si Es Lícita la Defensa Armada": Lettered Strategies for Legitimizing the Armed Conflict***

Ángel Arias Urrutia suggested that the protagonists of the Cristiada were essentially peasants and ranchers, presumably male, from the mid-west Mexican states (Arias Urrutia 9). This characterization is incorrect because, as I have noted earlier, members of the Catholic

middle and upper class and women also supported the movement. Furthermore, Catholics of all walks of life supported the Cristero movement indirectly by producing and distributing pro-Cristero propaganda, raising funds to finance the crusade, and by procuring, transporting, and delivering supplies, munitions, and refugees to and from the frontlines. Although these activities did not require combat, many risked their lives by participating in auxiliary or intellectual endeavors. In addition to facing injury and death, the Cristeras risked rape (de la Torre 211). Arias Urrutia's characterization of Cristeros as ranchers and peasants contributes to the marginalization of the Cristero movement by circumscribing the actors of the conflict in the margins of Mexican society. The writings of the lettered elite are crucial to the public construction of Cristero discourses and identity. While it is impossible to determine the influence of the writings of Catholic intellectuals in motivating the soldiers, generally considered peasants, it is certain that the call for resistance began with written propaganda developed in urban centers, Guadalajara and Mexico City.

The press was an important tool in fomenting resistance to the enforcement of the anti-clerical amendments of the 1917 Constitution and later for garnering support for the Catholic fighters. In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson proposes that the press has contributed to the development of national identity and consciousness by forging a sense of unity among readers within the nation (Anderson 44–46). We see this during the Cristiada, when the Catholic presses urged readers to recognize that their religious identity was the keystone of Mexican national identity. Early on in the conflict, Catholic essayists emphasized the Catholic roots of Mexico and fashioned the secularist government as the nemesis of the Catholic Republic. Several Catholic organizations, such as the *Asociación Católica de la Juventud Mexicana* (ACJM), the LNDR, and Catholic

newspapers in both Mexico and the United States developed campaigns to generate support for the resistance. This propaganda exemplified the victimization and persecution of Mexican Catholics by the government. Moreover, it fostered the notion that the mainstream press was dominated by the interests of the Church's enemies, the government, presumably directed by Freemasons and Protestants, whose goal was to misinform the public, discredit the Church, and to pressure the clergy into ending the Cristero movement. According to these representations, Catholics were a people at siege. Without a doubt, these texts contributed to the development of the Cristero identity as they often depicted the religious conflict as a battle in defense of the Christian faith.

Catholic intellectuals in urban centers produced print propaganda to foment support for the resistance and, at times, to urge citizens to fight. In Mexico, for instance, there were many pro-Cristero bulletins such as *Desde mi sotano*, *Dios y mi derecho*, *La Voz del Pueblo*, *La Cruzada*, and the broadsheet *Peoresnada*. Another example is Guadalajara's *Gladium: Semanario de combate*, that urged Catholics to persist in the fight: "para despertar cada día más entusiasmo y de este modo conservar encendido el fuego sagrado de la Guerra Santa que hacemos los católicos para ganar la libertad de la iglesia" (González Flores). As I noted earlier, Mexican communities in the United States also propagated the narrative of victimization through Catholic Newspapers. Pamphlets, flyers, broadsheets, bookmarks, prayer cards, post cards, photographs, and hymns also served as vectors for pro-rebellion narratives. Through print, intellectuals worked to foment support for the resistance, to urge men to take up arms, and to explain the discrepancies between the armed conflict they were proposing and the Sixth Commandment: "thou shall not kill." The justification for war that the Catholic intelligentsia outlined relied on traditional arguments for legitimizing war that relied heavily on knowledge of



Catholic doctrine and theology: canon law, arguments about what constitutes a just war, and historical examples of religious persecution of early Christians.

Although numerous Catholic newspapers and journals speak to the need to defend the faith (*la religión* or *la fe*) against the tyrannical government and its forces, in this section I will examine two pamphlets (*folletines*) that speak specifically to the question of when war is permissible for Christians. These flyers seem to have been broadly circulated since I found copies of these in archives of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City, the Casa de la Cultura in Aguascalientes, and the Museo Nacional Cristero, in Encarnación de Díaz, Jalisco. Among the most prominent of these texts is a series of pamphlets entitled “¿Es lícita la defensa armada?” written by Cristero apologist and war advocate, Regis Planchet. These pamphlets address the discrepancy between the Sixth Commandment, “thou shall not kill,” and the fact that lay and religious leaders urged their parishioners and fellow Christians to engage in civil disobedience and to take up arms against fellow Mexicans (more likely than not Catholics themselves). The target audience of these pamphlets was the conflicted Catholic who had previously engaged in acts of civil disobedience, such as the economic boycotts. The goal of these writings was to persuade congregants that armed conflict was the only means to achieve the free exercise of religion in Mexico.

Although the two pamphlets are a mere illustration of the print rhetoric legitimating the armed conflict, “¿Es lícita la defensa armada?” and “No matarás” exemplify the broader discursive strategies used by Catholic intellectuals to sanction participation in the Cristero’s armed rebellion. Here I analyze one of the series, “¿Es lícita la defensa armada contra los tiranos?—El ejemplo de los santos,” which is representative of the types of arguments that Planchet used to compel his fellow Catholics to support and participate in armed resistance.

Alluding to medieval doctrines of “holy war,” Planchet’s treatise argues that Catholics should not fear or be reticent to participate or support an armed uprising against the government. He acknowledged that taking up arms or supporting armed resistance would inevitably involve killing, in clear violation of the Sixth Commandment. Nevertheless, Planchet deals with this issue by emphasizing the virtue of dying for a cause, martyrdom, rather than condemning killing for its own sake. According to Planchet, dying on behalf of a just cause was an admirable endeavor, especially when this death was necessary to combat the tyranny of the government. To support his often pedantic argument, Planchet supports his argument by relying on the authority of the Bible and examples of Christian martyrs—St. Lawrence, St. Bernard, and St. Stephen—to legitimate his argument. In citing the examples of Christian martyrs, Planchet proposed to the Mexican Christians that their participation in the religious conflict of the Cristeros offered them the possibility to share in the glory of martyrdom and possible sainthood.

Although the glory of immolation on behalf of the Catholic Church and the examples of early Christian saints must have been compelling to his readers, Planchet nonetheless had to address the fact that armed conflict implicated a potential sin. For this reason, both government apologists and some Catholics observed that the Cristero movement was hypocritical, since in participating in war the Cristeros acted against the principles that they claimed to profess. In questioning murderous Christians, the government and other Catholics interrogated Mexican Catholics’ actual adherence to their professed Christian values. James Scott has named this rhetorical strategy “discursive negation.” According to Scott, a hegemony bases its claim to power on its ability to advance the wellbeing of subordinate classes; a subordinate class may take the hegemonic class to task by challenging any conduct that violates the affirmations that the hegemonic ideology benefits the population (Scott 104). In these criticisms, Catholics questioned

whether the Catholic leadership was benefiting the population by advocating that Catholics harm others.

Planchet deflected allegations of discursive negation by relying on history and Church authorities that dissertated about how a Christian might legitimately engage in war. In order to support his argument, Planchet had to demonstrate that the armed conflict and Christianity were not incongruous. History, he explained, provided examples of Christian militancy sanctioned by the Church. He presented the case of Pope Nicholas IV (1289) who ordered Christians to take up arms in order to defend the Roman Church, the Christian faith, and the fatherland. Planchet explained that Christian conflicts and soldiers who fought to defend their faith had existed for centuries: crusader and holy wars, St. Dominic's Christian Militia, and Christian soldiers, such as the crusaders and Knights Templar. Using the writings of a fellow Spanish contemporary Andrés Majón, Planchet proposed that because of their faith Christians, Mexican Cristeros included, were ideally suited to battle against a tyrannical state. In offering these examples of Christian martyrs and warriors, Planchet situated the Cristero Revolt within a long tradition of religious wars and conflicts in which Christians argued that they fought on behalf of their faith.

Ironically, in spite of the copious examples of just and legitimate violence that Planchet uses to justify the war of the Cristeros, his essay does not explicitly call upon Mexicans to take up arms against their civil government nor does it venture to label the Cristero Rebellion as a legitimate religious conflict, or a "holy war." A major flaw of Planchet's argument is his adherence to the conventions of academic tradition. He cannot argue that the Cristero revolt is a religious conflict in the tradition of the crusades of the middle ages because the Catholic hierarchy had not labeled the conflict as such. For this reason, Planchet can only suggest to his public to seek similarities between their own Mexican insurrection to those of early Christians.

The conclusion of Planchet's essay continues this non-committal stance and includes a caveat in the form of an ambiguous editorial note, a *nota de redacción*:

Téngase presente que la luucha [*sic*] actual de los “Libertadores” mexicanos no es propiamente Guerra de religión en la cual se levanta bandera a nombre de un “credo” contra la imposición violenta de “otro credo”, sino que es la defensa cívica de todas las libertades conculcadas, y entre ellas principalmente la libertad religiosa. Por tanto, lo que el autor dice en alguno de los ejemplares aducidos, adquiere doble fuerza aplicado al caso presente. (Planchet)

In other words, the editor cautioned against identifying the rebellions a religious war and instead proposed that the readers view the conflict as a rebellion against oppression. A lettered reader would recognize that in spite of the examples of the saints, popes, and previous Christian soldiers, this was because the Catholic hierarchy had not declared the Cristero revolt a religious conflict. Nevertheless, this pamphlet established a historical and theological basis for legitimating a religious war that resembled the conflict fought by the Mexican insurgents.

Another anonymous pamphlet entitled “No matarás” legitimated the armed uprising of the Cristeros by portraying the conflict as a strategy of self-preservation and appealing to the reader's sense of indignation at the government's restriction of religious liberties (*No matarás*). Like Planchet's essay, “No matarás” pretends to justify the armed uprising of the Cristero rebels as necessary. But rather than relying on Christian theology to legitimate actions in defense of the Church and Catholicism, this essay proposes that in implementing the Calles Laws, the morally corrupt government actively engaged in religious persecution. Not only had Mexican Catholics suffered, as good Christians must, the government's attack against their faith and religious leaders, according to this pamphlet Christians were also actively persecuted and even executed

by their government. The anonymous authors bolster this point by offering anecdotal evidence of how government forces had attacked their faith.

According to the pamphlet, soldiers had desecrated temples and vandalized religious icons in churches, chapels, convents, and monasteries. Purportedly, government forces had slaughtered 30 men whom they discovered peaceably celebrating mass in the town of San Luis Soyotlán, Jalisco. The pamphlet went on to present how these same forces had persecuted Rev. Rodrigo Aguilar and had raped a number of nuns. In the face of such persecution, it was only logical for Catholics to defend themselves and their faith. “No matarás” proposed that the Calles government had criminalized Christianity and any public or private religious devotion. The author tried to convince the Catholic Mexican that under the political regime in power religious devotion in Mexico would be met with unjust punishment. The arguments presented in this pamphlet hearken to those made by Tomóchic insurgent leader Cruz Chávez three decades earlier: for these two, armed insurrection is defensive rather than offensive. In exemplifying the abuses perpetrated by the government forces and suppressing evidence of comparable Christian armed retaliation, this pro-revolt pamphlet characterizes the Christians as the innocent victims of a hostile secular government.

The author of the pamphlet relies on superficial markers of religiosity in order to create difference between Catholics, “el que es católico,” and those who presumably were not. In order to establish the claim of religious persecution in a predominantly Roman Catholic nation, “No matarás” must speculate on the criterion that the government presumably used to distinguish the true believers from the rest of the Mexican population. Catholics, according to this pamphlet, are those persons who cherish and guard documents and religious artifacts in their person or in their

homes. For this reason, the author argues, any person who possesses religious artifacts, and thus identifies himself/herself as a Catholic, is a target for government persecution:

El que es católico, teme constantemente que le encuentren un papel religioso, o un objeto cualquiera que huelga a Cristiano, o que se presente un adulón vendiéndole parque y por bien o por la fuerza lo deje en la casa, y antes de que tenga tiempo para ocultarlo, ya estarán [*sic*] tres de la reservada para conducirlo a la Inspección y de allí al panteón sin remedio.

In order to make his case about undue religious persecution, the author must exaggerate the distinction between Catholics or Christians (Cristeros and their supporters) and those who did not support the Cristero cause. In this pamphlet, as in much of the pro-Cristero propaganda, “*Cristiano*” and “*Católico*” were reserved for the Cristeros and supporters of their pro-Clerical and religious-political project. The markers differentiating Catholics/Christians from the rest of the population are arbitrary to be sure, yet they illustrate the rhetorical contortions that apologists for war had to perform in order to explain why “Christians” were asked to kill their neighbors, who also practiced Roman Catholic traditions.

Mexican government forces and the peasants who fought with them (the group known as the *agraristas*) were portrayed as unreasonable and godless tyrants and Christian headhunters, though these forces were Catholics themselves. In portraying the government as godless, the author of “No matarás” relies on the facile dichotomy of good and evil whereby all persons labeled “Christian” are necessarily pure, good, reasonable, and right. Predictably, the Cristero's adversaries (government officials, their forces, and supporters) embody all of the negative social attributes and values that the Christians were fighting. Government supporters are portrayed as hoards of bandits (*una HORDA DE BANDIDOS*), perverse bands (*CUADRILLA DE*

*PERVERSOS*), assassins, ants, scorpions, and rabid dogs determined to end freedom, honor, dignity, and decent society in Mexico. When the author characterized government forces as bandits, malefactors, and dangerous animals, he invited and authorized their destruction. When a Cristero is faced with such dangerous foe that will strike indiscriminately, the author intimates that killing in self-defense was an obvious remedy.

“No Matarás” suggested that the only reasonable defense against a tyrannical authority that violated the rights of its citizens without just cause was armed insurgency. Like Planchet, the author of this pamphlet had to address critiques of Catholic hypocrisy. Rather than relying solely on theological argumentation to support his claim, the author proposed that an armed uprising was the only reasonable way to achieve self-preservation when dealing with an unreasonable tyrant. The pamphlet argues that the abuses against priests and other parishioners were evidence that the legitimate authority (the Mexican government) was able to impose the death penalty at will, and was no longer bound by laws or moral restraints. Consequently, it reasoned, defending oneself against those who attack without motive was permissible, even if this should result in death (*No matarás*). Again, the author portrayed the armed insurgency, and killing, simply as acts of self-preservation of Mexico’s true Catholic communities who were unfairly targeted by the Mexican government because of their faith: “diariamente ruedan las cabezas por estas arbitrariedades. ¿Ya entienden por qué los católicos matan, no obstante que en sus Mandamientos tiene el ‘NO MATARAS’?” (*No matarás*). Here killing is an act of self-preservation, rather than an act resulting from intellectual, moral, or legal self-reflection.

“No matarás” is as compelling as Regis Planchet’s pamphlet, yet more direct and forceful in its call for war. Where Planchet loses sight of his goal of legitimizing the Cristero uprising in keeping with precepts of academic precision, “No matarás” is direct and deliberate in its

justification of the conflict: Catholics kill only because they are being persecuted by the government on the grounds of their faith. Ultimately, the binaries the pamphlet develops to distinguish Catholics and non-Catholics are problematic. Most Mexicans were Catholic, however all were not supporters of the armed uprising. Certainly, a Catholic would be outraged by the persecution of nuns and priests. However, not all communities had close ties with their religious leaders nor did all persons who identified themselves as Catholics embraced the Catholic Church and their priests and nuns wholeheartedly. In his study of the Cristero Rebellion Matthew Butler observed the diversity of religious practice in 1920's Mexico:

the spiritual landscape of the 1920s was not flat but varied, encompassing a variety of religious cultures which cut across class lines and which ranged from the ultraclericalized catholicity of Jalisco's highlands and the Zamora Bajío to the syncretic and relatively declericalized regions of the Tarascan and Otomí sierras; from the Methodist and Presbyterian belts of southern Jalisco and east Michoacán to the Church of the Light to the World in Guadalajara in 1926. (9–10)

Given the varied spiritual landscape, the pamphlet does not address the critical question: Why do certain Catholics kill, and not others, if the government is persecuting Christians? Perhaps the author of the propaganda would argue that those who do not engage in armed conflict, contribute, or actively participate in the armed struggle are not Catholic at all.

Lettered apologists for the government engaged the Catholic propagandists with their own rebuttals against violence and armed conflict. In August 1928, J.B. Ferreres H. wrote a pamphlet entitled "*¿Es lícito matar a un tirano?*." Although I cannot prove this, the title of this work leads me to suspect that this pamphlet is a response to Regis Planchet's "*¿Es lícita la defensa armada contra los tiranos?*" The pamphlet concerns the murder of former president-then-



presidential candidate General Alvaro Obregón at the hands of a Catholic José de León Toral on July 17, 1928. Like Planchet, Ferreres relies on the writings of Catholic theologians to argue against the use of violence. Here we see a clear example of the strategy used between two entities, the Catholic Church and the secular Mexican State, which vie to appropriate, reinterpret, and transform each other's discourses. Ferreres relies on the writings of St. Alfonso to argue that the murder of Alvaro Obregón was improper. Paraphrasing St. Alfonso, Ferreres determined that it is not reasonable to kill a tyrant “a no ser con autorización del Gobernante legítimo” (Ferreres H.). By relying on canonical sources similar to Planchet's to authorize his argument, Ferreres derives a conclusion that contradicts arguments for a legitimate use of violence. Ferreres argued that others had misinterpreted the Catholic canon in order to support the Cristero uprisings. Ferreres proposed that Mexican Christians would conclude that violence against a governor—even a so-called tyrant—was improper if they were able to truly understand the writings of the ancient theologians.

From the two pro-revolt pamphlets that I have discussed, we see that the intellectual elites of the Cristero movement relied on diverse rhetorical strategies and sources to reconcile the incongruence between the commandments of their faith and the violent actions that they and the Catholic hierarchy were advocating. While instructive, scholarly pamphlets, like Regis Planchet's, may have contributed to the combatant's decisions to participate or join the conflict, as will be evident in the testimonials, memoirs, and life stories of Cristero fighters and witnesses. “No matarás” is perhaps representative of the more visceral responses of Cristeros to the government's encroachment into their territory and spiritual lives. As we will see in the following section, the discourses present in narratives of Cristero combatants and witnesses reveals that personal motivations (such as revenge or personal grievances against the

government) were vital factors in many Cristeros' decisions to engage in the armed conflict because these factors were key in their of formulation citizenship.

***“Cuando Me Dió Mucho Coraje, Padre”: Rescuing the Cristero Conflict in Popular Memory***

In their own time, as in the present, Cristero narratives must compete with histories and representations of Cristeros in the official media and propaganda of both the Church and the Mexican State. Official discourses, as evidenced in newspapers and later histories aligned with the government, portrayed the Cristeros and their supporters as renegades, religious fanatics, religious fundamentalists, or as persons of inferior intellect susceptible to the manipulations and misrepresentations of the Church (Vaca 47). By portraying the Cristeros in this manner, government propagandists sought to undermine the Cristeros' grievances against the government. In order to maintain unity and civility in the state, these government apologists reasoned, it was not only just, but necessary to quash the rebellion to preserve the integrity of the Mexican state. The armistice gave further credibility to negative characterizations of the Cristeros because the government interpreted the armistice as surrender.

Following the armistice, the Cristero community felt betrayed by the Catholic Church leaders and defeated by the government's narrative of the conflict. The discontent led Cristero communities to formulate discursive spaces of their own in which to tell their own stories, praise their own heroes, and vindicate their struggle against the government. Former combatants and their supporters undertook the task of commemorating their crusade through celebrations commemorating significant events and personages of the conflict. Fraternal organizations such as *La Legión de Cristo Rey y Santa María de Guadalupe* and the *Veteranos de la Guardia Nacional* incorporated by ex-Cristeros, their descendants, and sympathizers compiled information and documents regarding the Cristero Crusade, its causes, consequences, friends, foes, heroes and

martyrs (Vaca 49). Historian Agustín Vaca catalogued the cultural production with Cristero themes as follows: “relatos de batallas, memorias, polémicas, opiniones, rectificaciones a algunos relatos, poemas, corridos, oraciones, obituarios, biografías mínimas, efeméridades, testimonios, homenajes y escritos de diversa índole” (49). This cultural production was meant to contest the narratives of the official discourses of the Cristiada, these texts were most often pro-Cristero: laudatory of the Cristero crusade and disparaging of the government and its allies (the peasants seeking land reforms).

This corpus of the cultural production about the Cristero Rebellion is an example of what which Joseph Roach denominates as “vortices of behavior” and Pierre Nora identified as “*lieux de mémoire*” (sites or places of memory); Roach explains that these artificial sites, which serve as spaces in which to produce national and ethnic memory, replace predominantly oral and corporal sites that encapsulate traditional culture, also called *milieu de mémoire* (26). These sites of memory, explains Roach, serve to channel the needs, desires, and habits of a community in order to reproduce them (28). Without a doubt, several traditions in Mexican popular culture including the *corrido* and other oral and written narratives (such as oral histories, correspondence, and *memorias*) serve as *milieu de mémoire* in which history can be (re)written to represent the perspective of the politically or socially marginalized. In these sites of memory, the marginalized Cristero communities are able to postulate their ideal world (the ideal relationship between citizens and their government, and the role of their faith in this interaction) through their own cultural production, which can freely contest and reject external interpretations of the Cristero War.

Roach suggests that in spite of existing in the periphery, the site of memory can challenge dominant discourses. The site of memory, he explains, “seems to offer a place for transgression,

for things that couldn't happen otherwise or elsewhere, in fact what it proves is far more official: a place in which everyday practices and attitudes may be legitimated, 'brought out into the open,' reinforced, celebrated, or intensified" (28). For those communities that privileged their Catholic identity over their national identity during and after the Cristero War, the corrido, oral testimonials, and memoirs defend and celebrate the Cristero's religious identity through examples of commendable devotion and courage in the face of religious oppression.

The Cristero's reaction also constitutes the discursive formation that Michel Pêcheux categorizes as "counteridentification." In discourse, Pêcheux argues, the subject may choose to identify blindly with the discourse imposed upon him that justifies his subjection or subjugation. Ex-combatants could have accepted and internalized the armistice as the government's defeat of religion and their characterization in the historiographies of the state. However, most Cristeros rejected the government's representations of the Cristero War. When the subject rejects this discourse of inferiority imposed upon him and expresses "distantiation, doubt, interrogation, challenge, [and] revolt," he begins to produce a discourse against the external discourse, or a *counterdiscourse* (157). Using these processes of discursive counteridentification, Cristero communities defeated the forces of government through their own representations of heroic men and battles, though these feats and characters may have not been factual or verifiable (as will be evident in the many reports of miraculous interventions and events). Furthermore, in the memory of the Cristero community their crusade, which ends in an armistice, does not constitute a lost for Christianity, but instead serves to reaffirm the core beliefs and faith of true Christians in Mexico.

In the official discourse, Cristeros were stereotyped as renegades, religious fanatics, religious fundamentalists, or as persons of inferior intellect susceptible to the manipulations and misrepresentations of the Church. Historian Agustín Vaca suggests that when Cristeros

combatants, witnesses, and their supporters recounted the events and consequences of the Cristiada, their tales were often meant to justify the uprising: “a partir de la demostración de los propósitos del gobierno de aniquilar a la Iglesia católica, y con ella la religión misma, o por la otra, probar la siniestras intenciones que abrigaba la institución levítica de erigirse en única administradora de la vida pública nacional” (Vaca 51).<sup>7</sup> In other words, Cristero combatants and supporters’ narratives departed from the belief that the government would exterminate the Catholic Church, and Christianity, if it were left to its own devices. By sampling testimonials, life stories, memoirs, and letters of Cristeros from the state of Jalisco, the state in which the revolt erupted, we will see more about the role of personal religious experience devotional practices in the discourses of Cristeros and their supporters.

Testimonials from the central Mexican states of Colima, Jalisco, Guerrero, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas elucidate how witnesses and combatants of the Cristiada relied on religious discourses to vindicate the religious conflict after the *arreglos*.<sup>8</sup> I examined ten testimonials of men and women who participated in the war effort directly and indirectly. The narratives of these ten participants of the Cristiada exemplify the process of developing counterdiscourses that vindicate or rehabilitate the legacy of the Cristiada in popular memory.

One surprising element in many of the narratives of the Cristero participants is the fact that many of the combatants and participants did not cite a “defense of religion,” the possibility of achieving martyrdom, or fulfilling any other spiritual duty as their primary justification for engaging in the conflict. Rather, many Cristero witnesses and participants offered their personal convictions, interpersonal bonds, and desire for vengeance against government forces as the motivator for their *alzamiento* (uprising). In many testimonials, among them the narratives of Clemente Pedroza, Agustín Valdéz, and José Pérez, the Cristeros explain their impetus for

joining the revolution as a matter of honor and personal conviction; in the face of government abuse, the Cristeros explain, what other man would not defend his own honor and that of his community?

Eugenio Hernández and Clemente Pedroza enter the conflict after government forces overrun their town. In his taped interview, later edited by Víctor Ceja Reyes in his book *Los cristeros: crónica de los que perdieron*, Eugenio Hernández “El Mechón” explains to Father Nicolás Valdéz, that he joined the revolution as a result of the indignation he felt after witnessing government forces take possession of the indigenous hospital in the town of Apulco, Zacatecas, and desecrate the chapel:

cuando me dio mucho coraje, padre [Nicolás Valdéz], fue cuando vide que al templo de nosotros, de la Divina Concepción, que es un hospitalito allí, pertenecía a una comunidad indígena de aquel tiempo, allí fue cuartel general y allí echó cadenas y sudaderas, galápagos encima de los santos, en el altar mayor, allá el desbarajuste. Nomás di media vuelta, llegué con mi madre y le dije: Yo me voy a la revolución. (Ceja Reyes 73–4)

Here “El Mechón” expressed personal outrage over the desecration of the local hospital and chapel. Clemente Pedrosa, for his part, explained in his manuscript that the government preempted the revolt by overrunning town of Villa Hidalgo, Jalisco before the townsfolk had decided whether to join the revolt. The government’s takeover helped them to pick a side:

entraron al pueblo tropas federales con actitud de terror y con gran furia, aun cuando todavía no se daban cuenta de la decisión que los católicos tomaban: se cometió el gran sacrilegio que consistió en que los federales penetraron la

parroquia, abren el Sagrado y tiran por el suelo las sagradas formas y después de pisotearlas, ponen en la mesa del altar maíz para los caballos de los jefes.

(Meyer, *El coraje cristero* 156)

In both testimonials, the Catholic population is portrayed as a victim of the “terror” and “fury” of the federal army. In penetrating and defiling the Church, the federal troops also perpetrate a literal and metaphoric defilement of the community. Both of these combatants consider the violation of their town churches as an affront to the residents of the community; as such, men of conviction, such as Hernández and Pedrosa, were called to avenge the affront through force. Actions such as these, repeated in town after town, are evidence not only of the federal troop’s misbehavior, but also represent the government’s general disregard local values and customs. As we have seen in the case of the Tomóchic Rebellion and the Cristero Rebellion, the government’s cavalier attitude toward popular religious practices reflects the legacy of philosophies and policies aimed to supplant religiosity with secularism as a new epistemological (and political) paradigm.

Another oft-cited justification for engagement in the war was the persecution of local parish priests. The battle cries of the Cristeros suggest that they fought in defense of their religion; however, testimonials reveal a concern for the safety and wellbeing of specific priests who risked their lives by continuing to conduct services clandestinely. The interpersonal bonds to parish priests, rather than an attachment to the Catholic Church as an institution or to Christianity, supersede the fervor for the Cristero cause. According to Agustín Valdés, he first attempted to join the “refolufios” when the government apprehended his beloved parish priest: Father Mateo Correa Magallanes (67). I suspect that the attachment to individual local priests is also related to the general misgivings about the “*arreglos*” which were negotiated and executed

by bishops and archbishops who betrayed the cause by negotiating an armistice and did not suffer any personal risk or loss during the conflict. Unlike much of the Church hierarchy, which was for the most part exiled in the cities or abroad, many local priests continued to minister to their flock in spite of placing themselves in grave personal danger.

In Cristero testimonials civilians, priests, and Christ's soldiers are all admired for risking and surrendering their lives. These testimonials exemplify the valor of many people who would otherwise remain anonymous in the conflict. I was particularly struck by the mention of the women, young and old, whose contributions were typically unrecorded in official recounting of the war. María del Refugio Espíritu, who gave her testimonial to Lourdes Celina Vásquez and Federico Munguía Cárdenas at age 89 in 1989, confessed to aiding and abetting Christian soldiers in her home at much personal risk. Yet determining her allegiance in the conflict is problematic because she chooses to aid both parties, perhaps recognizing all soldiers as Christian soldiers. When she came upon the victims of a shoot out between *agrarista* and rebel forces, she offers comfort and prayer to moribund soldiers of both parties: "Yo rece y rece [*sic*] por los dos; corría para allá con el agua bendita cuando se acabó de morir y le prendí una vela a uno y luego al otro" (Vásquez and Munguía Cárdenas 111). María Santos de la Cruz, who worked as catechist during the rebellion, embraced a more active role in the conflict: "Yo también iba revuelta con muchas señoritas" (143). She identifies her contribution to the conflict as both active and passive resistance: she continued adoration of the Holy Eucharist, and she and other young women continued teaching catechism and raised money for arms and munitions for the *revueltos* from "la gente que era católica"(144). According to her, the resistance against the government was necessary because "acá el pleito era de que la iglesia se cerró"(144). Although churches were closed by order of Catholic Bishops, here, as in many other testimonials the assumption was that



the government was responsible for closing the Churches and driving public worship underground.

The Catholic resistance risked death regardless of the nature of their activities. However, as many *testimonios* attest, Christ's soldiers and their supporters were emboldened by the belief that if they died during the crusade, they would go straight to heaven. This belief, frequent in the pro-Cristero press, evokes times in early Christianity when religious persecution and martyrdom guaranteed one a place in heaven. For Don José Pérez, keeping priests alive meant that they could continue officiating the rites necessary to preserve the spiritual wellbeing of the flock. Eugenio Hernández seems to pride himself on contributing directly to this element of the war, in ensuring that the priests and the parishioners were both kept safe after attending clandestine masses in the sierras. However, at times the loss of life of a Christian soldier was inevitable. These casualties are not considered losses to the cause, but rather interpreted as heroic and honorable sacrifices on behalf of God: represented as martyrdom.

The trope of martyrdom is one that resurfaces in nearly all of the documents that I examine in this work is embraced as a positive outcome of the uprising. Although the soldiers who died in the battlefield are well regarded, those martyrs who died without resistance are the most lauded. Such is the case, for instance, for Father Pedro Esqueda who was captured and executed by the army during the Cristero War. Don José Pérez laments his inability at having rescued the priest because at the time he was responsible for the safe passage of priests between towns. However, he also expresses grief due to the fact that he did not achieve his own martyrdom (“Tambien le dije con toda mi fe a Cristo si necesitas mi sangre doy pero si me es posible y es tu voluntad que me maten parado haciendo mi deber” [*sic*]) (9–10). This grief is overshadowed by the belief that he carried out his duty to Father Esqueda fully: “Cumpli como

Dios quiso” because, Don José believed, it was Father Esqueda’s destiny to become a martyr for Christ (9-10). Thus, murder by the government, which would be seen by the government as the successful containment of dissidents, is recast in Cristero memoirs as destiny, liberation, and as the fortuitous fulfillment of martyrdom.

Some martyrs, like José Luis Magaña, deliberately sought martyrdom. Magaña had supported the rebellion by producing and distributing pro-Cristero propaganda. He surrendered himself to government troops with the full knowledge that he would be immediately executed. According to Father Rafael Ramirez Torres, who compiled Magaña’s history from the testimonials of relatives and neighbors, Magaña embraced his sacrifice for God. Magaña’s commitment to his own martyrdom is evident in his alleged final words: “¡Sí, yo voy a morir aquí, pero resucitaré con Cristo Rey!’ Y añadió otras cosas. Luego gritó tres veces ‘Que viva Cristo Rey y nuestra Señora de Guadalupe’” (Ramírez Torres 5). During the Cristiada, Catholics held the belief that giving life up for God in the crusade guaranteed them immediate entry into heaven, whether in combat or through martyrdom. Death again, even murder such as that of “innocents,” is reinterpreted as a positive outcome of the crusade, for it serves as a ticket to heaven and nearness to the divine.

This connection with the divine, and a sense of the justice of the struggle is also interpreted by protagonists of the war because of numerous accounts of divine intervention. In the testimonial of “El Mechón,” for instance, he claims that he is rescued from starvation by a spirit (*ánima*) in the sierra who hides him from federal scouts, feeds him, leads him out of the wilderness and blesses him (Ceja Reyes 103). Here again, divine intervention allows a Cristero to continue fighting and delivers the crusader home safely. When he shares his experience with his friends, explaining to them that he met their father in the sierra and he sent his greetings the

friends interpret that he received divine intervention from God. The element of divinity is further emphasized by the dire circumstances under which he finds himself. As he tells it, he is at death's doorstep, hungry, cold, lost, helpless. The *ánima*, or spirit, comes to rescue him when he most needs it. In instances like these, in which prayer or divine intervention is cited in the survival or success of a battle or troops, the protagonists and witnesses formulate further legitimacy to their struggle. The participants suggest that interventions of the divine revealed that God was on the side of the Cristero soldiers.

### ***Conclusion***

In spite of the apparent losses of men and dignity, the Cristero War strengthened the Cristero's religious convictions. However, my examination of the ten Cristero narratives partly agrees with the analysis of Cristero testimonials of Lourdes Celina Vásquez Parada, who suggests that many combatants took up arms for reasons other than their religious beliefs (Vásquez, "Testimonios Sobre La Revolución Cristera Hacia Una Hermenéutica De La Conciencia Histórica" 75). Similarly, in practice, even the interchanges between popular and religious discourses of the Cristeros were not unproblematic, as evidenced in the difficulty in distinguishing the atheist-assassins-bandits from the soldiers of Christ. Nevertheless, it is evident that in their discourses the Cristero opposition, both during the conflict and in their historical conscience, relied on religious discourses and the trope of honor to explain the origins of the conflict, (personal and collective participation in the struggle) and to justify the righteousness of their cause. Empowered by the embrace of local knowledge, discourses of popular and traditional religion and culture, accepted by the fighters as legitimate discourses of "truth"—as seen in the tropes of martyrdom, divine intercession, and crusade—the Cristero propagandists

and protagonists were able to reclaim their right to speak and formulate their own versions of the rebellion.

As we have seen in this chapter, the revalorization of these religious discourses in popular memory allowed the Cristeros to claim victory in their religious-political enterprise even when official narratives relied on these same truths to illustrate the contrary. They did so through discourses that appropriated the trope of “truth” and interpreted this according to their understanding of morality, religious values, and popular spirituality. In official chronicles, for instance, suggestions of miraculous events performed by God and the Virgin Mary served as proof that the rebels were victims of their own ignorance or interpreted as fairytales (Vázquez, *Testimonios sobre la Revolución Cristera* 58–9, 111–2). Similarly, death in the battlefield and executions by firing squad, which would otherwise be accepted as evidence of defeat, were reimagined in the Cristero imaginary as the successful fulfillment of the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of God through martyrdom. Divine intercessions on behalf of Cristeros were also interpreted by the participants as evidence of God’s satisfaction with their undertaking and divine patronage of the Cristero cause. Their fight against the federal government was effectively transformed in the Cristero’s memory as a crusade against the abuses of a Godless and tyrannical government. In this way, the discourses used to justify armed resistance essentially validated a general opposition to the Mexican Government.

During the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s the Mexican government made several attempts to consolidate its power over the country by imposing further policies of secularization. However, rather than strengthening the government’s moral and political standing, these policies served to alienate communities of fundamentalist Catholics, especially in the central states of Mexico. Such was the case with the proposal to write history that disparaged the Cristeros and the

Catholic Church. Rather than shaming Cristero communities into submission or silence, and marginalizing their knowledge, the policies of the state and the Church drove the Cristeros and their descendants to defend the rebellion and to immortalize their cause in local sites of memory.

Following the truce, middle and upper-class Catholics continued to resist the Mexican government; however, their struggle against anti-clericalism was no longer armed, but rather political. Militant Catholics, many ex-Cristeros, from around the nation came together in the 1930s and 1940s to form the Political Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*), which would continue to combat secularism through its pro-clerical ideology, “Christian socialism” (Mabry 36–9). The religious persecution would also inspire a young Marcial Maciel, the now disgraced founder of the polemic Catholic Order of the Legion of Christ; the Cristero Revolt, especially the sentiment of religious persecution, would become part of this organization’s founding myth (Maciel 1–6).<sup>9</sup> As we have examined in this chapter, the government’s policy to downplay or eliminate the grievances of the Catholic opposition did not silence dissent, but rather caused narratives of resistance, particularly the value of crusade, to take root more deeply among Cristeros, their sympathizers, and descendants.

The trope of the Christian Crusade continues to be reinterpreted and reconstituted in Mexico to this day. In the forthcoming chapter I will examine the cooptation of the tropes of crusade, divine justice, and other Christian discourses by self-proclaimed contemporary Christian crusaders: the narco-cults of the state of Michoacán. La Familia Michoacana and its offshoot, Los Caballeros Templarios, claim to be unlike other cartels because they purportedly work for the good of the local people (Beaubien). In their propaganda these cartels declared that they would rehabilitate drug addicts and protect the people of the state of Michoacán from unscrupulous and ill-intentioned “foreign” cartels. These drug cartels have declared a crusade

against invading cartels and the federal government in order to reclaim and protect the spiritual and bodily well-being of the population of the state of Michoacán. As we will see, like the testimonials of Cristero participants, the cultural production and rhetoric of La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios seeks to contest negative representations of drug cartels by the media and government through rhetoric grounded in Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> During the period known as “la Reforma” (from 1850 to 1874) pro-clerical and anti-clerical lettered elites publicly debated the proper role of the Catholic Church in the Mexican Republic (Vanderwood “Betterment for whom?” 372)

<sup>2</sup> The anticlerical amendments of the 1917 Constitution included the establishment of mandatory secular education (Article 3), the prohibition of religious orders (Article 4); the prohibition of public religious activities (Article 24), the prohibition of religious schools, convents, seminaries, bishoprics and curate’s homes and ordered the confiscation of the Church’s goods (Article 27) (Reynoso de Alba 23).

<sup>3</sup> In 1955 former Cristero leaders came together to revive the memory of the Cristiada through the revival of the organization “Guradia Nacional Cristera.” In an interview with Lourdes Flores, historian Edgar González Ruiz observed that one of the goals of this movement is to provide continuity to the movement—to advance the idea of a social order based on traditional Christian values—and to commemorate former fighters and martyrs (Flores).

<sup>4</sup> In her research, Vásquez Parada explained that a central concern of combatants at the end of the conflict was that the groups who had taken up arms were not invited nor consulted in the negotiations for the armistice held between the church hierarchy and the Mexican government (34).

<sup>5</sup> Historian Jean Meyer included Clemente Pedroza’s “memorias” in his text *El coraje cristero: Testimonios*. According to Meyer, his role in transcribing and editing the tale is marginal: “Clemente Pedroza me mandó su relato manuscrito y lo pasé a máquina, corrigiendo la ortografía y respetando sintaxis y puntuación. Se publica la versión mecanografiada por no tener a la mano el facsimilar” (155).

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<sup>6</sup> In 2000 the Catholic Church canonized 25 saints and martyrs from the Cristero Conflict (Vázquez, *Testimonios sobre la Revolución Cristera* 32).

<sup>7</sup> In his study of the Cristero Rebellion in the state of Michoacán, Historian Matthew Butler cautions on the pitfalls of the overgeneralization of devotional practices among Mexican Catholics when he explains that during the period “religion was a multiple variable, not stable but porous and subject to change, and that within the Mexican Church, different levels of religious commitment, distinct forms of religious practice and meaning, and diverse religious identities not only existed but constituted a significant part of social and cultural worlds of ordinary people.” (Butler 9–10).

<sup>8</sup> Originally I anticipated that I would incorporate oral life histories from the extensive collection of video recordings made by Alfredo Hernández Quezada, presently held at the Centro de Estudios Cristeros Alfredo Hernández Quezada, the Casa de la Cultura de Aguascalientes, and the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, and the audio-recordings made by father Nicolás Vázquez at the Archivo Histórico of the Arzobispado de Guadalajara and the Instituto de Antropología e Historia, Jalisco Branch. While I was able to view a few interviews of Cristero and *Agrarista* combatants at the Centro de Estudios Cristeros, they lacked the equipment to reproduce the remaining trunk full of Betamax and 8mm tapes. The technicians at the BNAH and the Arzobispado also expressed concern about damaging their materials in reproduction.

<sup>9</sup> In 2006, Pope Benedict ordered Marcial Maciel, to reclusion in prayer and silence for his extensive involvement in child sex abuse (BBC Mundo). While it is beyond the scope of this work, future investigation on this subject can examine representations of collective acts of violence, in this case of rape, incest, and child molestation, by The Legion of Christ.



#### **Chapter 4: “Know That This is Divine Justice”: Michoacan’s Evangelical Cartels**

The rhetoric of the crusade used by the Cristeros to justify their uprising against the federal government in the 1920s has reemerged in the twenty-first century in a most unexpected context in Southwest Mexico. Two drug cartels from the state of Michoacán have framed their turf war against other cartels as a religious crusade. However, whereas the Cristeros argued for martyrdom and the defenses of their faith, these contemporary crusaders emphasize that their use of violence is the only means to defend the population from the corrupting influence of “foreign” drug cartels. As other messianic groups discussed in this dissertation, La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios claim that they will bring about a new era of peace, order, and stability to the territories under their control, especially their home state of Michoacán. In these crusade narratives, the cartels promise the citizenry the restoration of traditional local values, and an end to drug consumption and drug culture in the territories under their control. In exchange for this secure world, the cartels’ rhetoric compels the citizenry to accept these cartels, which claim to be divinely ordained to rule as the sole narco-power of the region. By employing religious discourses, these cartels seek to fill a vacuum of power in Mexico; when all other institutions and organizations (state, criminal, and religious) have lost their legitimacy, only by claiming to enact the will of the divine can they declare to end violence, corruption, and impunity.

Mexico’s current drug war began in December of 2006 when then-president Felipe Calderón sent 4,260 soldiers, marines, and federal police to combat the drug cartels of his home state of Michoacán (Associated Press, “Mexico to Crack down”). At the time, the state was the site of a violent turf war between the Valencia Organization, allied with the Sinaloa Cartel, and an organization associated with the Gulf Cartel calling itself “La Familia Michoacana.” In 2005,

the conflict between the two bands had resulted in 500 casualties in Michoacán (Weissert). It was during this conflict that La Familia Michoacana began beheading its adversaries and placing their decapitated heads and mutilated bodies for public display (Weissert). In signs accompanying the displays of its victims, the cartel declared itself as the enforcer of “divine justice.” By adopting the standard of divine retribution, the cartel hoped to capitalize on the public’s fear and frustration with government institutions under which crime and corruption was rampant. Although La Familia Michoacana operated as a drug cartel, it wished to brand itself as a civil service organization rather than as narco-vigilantes or a drug cartel (although they also functioned as such): to that end, it touted its mission as the defense and promotion of morality, family values, and justice.

Since its debut in 2006, La Familia Michoacana has engaged in mass-scale publicity campaigns, which employed traditional media (radio, television, and newspapers) and narco-messaging techniques (including narco-banners and corpse messaging) to develop its brand as the enforcer of “divine justice.” Critics of the cartel have accused La Familia Michoacana and its breakaway cartel, Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán, of co-opting religious discourse in order to sanitize their corporate image, otherwise marred by their participation in the drug trade and their ultra-violent activity. I agree that these evangelical cartels’ use of religious rhetoric is not altruistic and recognize the trauma and fear inflicted on witnesses through these cartel’s violent displays of religiosity. Yet in spite of the negative value judgments passed on actors in the drug wars and their “profane” cultural and religious practices, we cannot ignore how these evangelical cartels actively construct their own imagery and ideology. Their narratives offer a response to the public’s concerns about impunity, social inequality, and the impact of the global drug trade on local Mexican communities. By employing religious symbolism, the cartels

attempted not only to question the policies of the Mexican government, but also to contest the efficacy and legitimacy of the Mexican state. In other words, the cartels challenge the integrity of the Mexican state both by identifying its structural and policy flaws and by proposing that local governance guided by religious principles is a more appropriate model of administration in the region. As in the other cases examined in this study, subaltern religious communities turn to divine patronage so that they can achieve the legitimacy needed to contest the authority of the state. However, unlike other cases examined in this dissertation, the evangelical cartels negotiate a space of cultural subalternity while wielding significant social and political influence gained through violence and wealth.

Certainly, La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios are not the first actors of the drug trade to invoke the divine in their pursuit of personal well-being and economic success. Several Latin American writers and scholars of narco-literature have explored the trope of divine intercession in the production, transportation, and sale of drugs.<sup>1</sup> In the late 1980s, drug runner Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo convinced his followers that *Santería* rites and human sacrifices would shield members from the police (Applebome); Costanzo's story inspired several fictionalized novels and films representing Costanzo's sect including Barry Gifford's novel-turned-film *Perdita Durango* (Gifford). Colombian writer Fernando Vallejo examines the devotion of Colombian *sicarios* (assassins for hire) to an image of the Virgin Mary in his critically acclaimed novel, *La virgen de los sicarios* (Vallejo). Mexican folk-saints Jesús Malverde and La Santa Muerte, for their part, have also inspired numerous literary texts.<sup>2</sup>

Nicknamed *narcosantos*, these and other religious icons are venerated by actors of the drug trade who invoke their assistance in completing professional responsibilities ranging from drug smuggling to assassinations. Folk saints, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, intercede on

behalf of the devotee in times when saints approved by the Catholic Church do not meet the needs of the population; this is especially true in the case of narco-saints. Anthropologist James F. Griffith captured the pragmatic function of these *narcosantos* in a curious anecdote telling of the peculiar niche met by these folk saints now inextricably bound to the drug trade: “If one needs to get a load of heroin across the border or rub out the opposition, as one friend told me, there’s no sense in asking for help from the Virgin or the Holy Family. That’s not what they do” (158). Thus, actors of the drug trade invoke alternative religious figures in order to fulfill tasks that orthodox Christian sects would not condone. Among those invoking a higher power to successfully complete tasks related to the drug trade, however, La Familia Michoacana was the first crime organization to go a step further and to claim that it performed the will of God in carrying out the torture and execution of its adversaries.

In this chapter, I explore how evangelical drug cartels employ discursive strategies informed by Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity in order to reconcile acts of torture, mutilation, and executions with their professed moral and cultural values. I argue that the narratives of La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán, in which cartel members are represented as agents of public good (vigilantes, drug-addict rehabilitators, and social bandits), appropriate and invert the trope of “good and evil” typically used to conceptualize the relations between the actors of the war on drugs and the state. I also examine how teachings of Evangelical minister John Eldredge shapes the gendered identity of these two evangelical organizations and how this identity conditions this group’s rhetoric of Christian militancy. Finally, I propose that La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán allegorize the drug wars of Mexico through narratives adopting Christian metaphors, such as the Apocalypse and the Crusade. In these narratives, the violent confrontations between

the agents of good (La Familia or Los Caballeros) and the evil outsiders (Los Zetas and other actors in the drug war) are seen as a necessary precursors for achieving an everlasting peace in both Mexico and the state of Michoacán.

On the surface, the use of a religious framework to structure the cartels' religious, financial, political, and social movements echoes the rhetoric of a Christian Militancy espoused by religious entities active in the state of Michoacán in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their imagery resonates with that of the Cristeros of the 1920s and 1930s and of the religious order known as the Legionaries of Christ, founded in the 1940s. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Cristeros also employed the imagery of martyrdom and the crusade to frame their insurgency against Mexico's government. In that conflict, the "soldiers of Christ" declared war on the secular government to challenge its attack on the Catholic Church and Christian practice and expression. The religious fervor fomented by the *Cristiada* moved Michoacán native Father Marcial Maciel to found the Legion of Christ, a religious order devoted to the revitalization of Catholic education and missionary work. The religious order adopted the bellicose imagery of a "Christian Legion," as way to conceptualize the aggressive evangelization projects (especially among the marginalized) that it would undertake in order to "extend Christ's Kingdom" (Regnum Christi). This imagery underlies the fact that evangelization, the so-called spiritual conquest, has been the handmaiden of conquest and colonization enterprises since the Spaniard's arrival to the Americas. In Michoacán there is a tradition of employing the figure of the Christian soldier as the symbol for Catholic and Christian social and political projects.

In the case of La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios, their adoption of religious imagery also resembles the practice of the Maya-speaking rebels in the Caste War. In both cases, Christian discourse is a vehicle through which subalterns can denounce precarious

social and economic circumstances and it offers a remedy for these conditions in the form of divine retribution. For the *Cristiano 'oob* as for the evangelical cartels, the marginalized achieve retribution not in an afterlife, but through violent actions, which involve a cultural or territorial conquest. Concerns about violence and insecurity held by marginalized communities (especially the rural and urban poor) are mediated through familiar, though resignified, religious imagery and expression; in turn, these same discourses offer the basis for a legitimate armed response meant to remedy the conditions of oppression and marginalization suffered by the population. In the narratives of La Familia Michoacana and the Caballeros Templarios cartels, the adoption of familiar religious imagery and rhetoric ultimately provides legitimacy for what would otherwise be considered a turf war between cartels.

Due to security concerns, I did not travel to Michoacán to research La Familia Michoacana or Los Caballeros Templarios. Nevertheless, I have ample access to their discursive production since these cartels have a strong presence in traditional media and on the web: they publish and maintain blogs and channels on YouTube, write editorials, and call in to radio and television talk shows. I obtained samples of textual and visual propaganda (editorials, advertisements, corpse messages, and *narcomantas*) from YouTube, the blogs “El Blog del Narco,” “El Rincón del Narco,” and “Borderland Beat,” and from newspapers. During my research, I acquired fragments and full manuscripts of texts that the press has identified as La Familia’s “narco-Bibles:” the book of proverbs, *Pensamientos*, written by cartel capo and religious leader Nazario Moreno González, the manual *El Código de los Caballeros Templarios*, and Moreno Gonzalez’ “posthumous” memoir, *Me dicen el más loco*. These texts are representative of the cultural production of the evangelical cartels and reveal the foundations of these organizations’ ideological project.

### *Narcocultura: A Review of Culture About and By “Narcos”*

The drug trade and actors of the drug trade have penetrated a broad spectrum of popular culture in Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Language, architecture, music, film, fashion, and television (to name a few) have appropriated drug-related themes (Rincón 147; Palaversich 85–6). Drug-related cultural production necessitated new terminology that recognized the influence of the drug trade in popular culture. According to sociologist Luis Astorga, the prefix “narco” fulfilled this need: “pretende abarcar a todas las categorías particulares inventadas para nombrar a los diferentes agentes sociales de la división del trabajo en el campo del tráfico de drogas” (Astorga 70). Literary critic Diana Palaversich observes a broader use of the prefix “narco” when she explains that it created neologisms “in order to capture *a series of activities and issues* related to drugs” [my emphasis] (105). Narco-related neologisms include *narcocultura*, *narcopolítica*, *narcoeconomía*, *narcoviolenencia*, *narcoestética*, *narcochic*, *narcocorrido*, and *narconovela* (Palaversich 105). The influence of the drug trade on culture is so pervasive that the prefix “narco” has also been affixed to any number of unexpected religious entities including “church,” “saint,” and “priest.”

Although the signifier “narco” implies influence, power, and wealth generated by the drug trade, it remains a pejorative prefix as it taints otherwise reputable institutions, causes, and cultural products. Astorga observed that the media created an ethic and aesthetic whereby the narco-trafficker embodied lowness or evil because of his ill-gotten wealth (41). For his part, Nery Córdova Solís, a communication studies researcher, called this stereotype “*el narco-naco*.” In Mexico, “naco” is a term used by upper and middle-class Mexicans to denigrate poor, rural, or uneducated people whom they considered to be “tacky,” “vulgar” or without “Culture”

(“Naco”).<sup>4</sup> According to Córdoba Solís, narco-culture is “naca” because it purportedly promotes the values and taste of an uneducated, often rural or urban poor, *nouveau riche* community:

mediano, o segundón, que presume y enarbola como trofeos joyas, propiedades, altanería, hembras y ‘hombría’, modelo que se ha expandido social y culturalmente. Tales actitudes son formas de la desviación sociocultural, como las rutas elegidas en áreas del ascenso social, y tiene que ver incluso con el resentimiento y los deseos de venganza que conducen hacia la violencia.

(Córdoba Solís 228)

For Córdoba Solís, the *narco-naco*’s ostentatious displays of wealth overcompensate for the rural or poor beginnings of many drug dealers and highlight both their economic and social success and capacity for violence. In spite of influencing both popular and “high culture,” and having access to wealth and channels of power, however, the culture of the *narco* is marginalized and stigmatized as the grotesque byproduct of social deviants with illegitimate access to wealth and power.

As is expected, state-sponsored representations of the drug trade and of drug traffickers in the media are generally negative. According to Palaversich “until the late 1980s, drug-related themes only had a limited representation in the official media and were restricted to the uniformly negative picture of drug traffickers;” in these representations, the drug dealers are “physically ugly, cruel, and uncivilized people” (85). These depictions are meant to marginalize and distance the actors of the drug trade, and reflect what literary critic Hermann Herlinghaus has termed “affective marginalities” (13). Herlinghaus proposes that in discourses of the war on drugs it is the producers and distributors of narcotics (typically on the low end of the class spectrum) who are blamed for the ills of the drug trade; meanwhile, drug consumers of the



upper-class or from the U.S., are left blameless (12–14). These negative representations of actors of the drug trade were not universal, however. Less simplistic, if not apologetic, portrayals of the trafficker's world appear in music and literature in recent decades.

In Mexico and Colombia, countries scarred by drug violence since the 1980s, actors of the drug trade were also immortalized in popular and literary culture. According to critic Francisco A. Ortega, these narco-narratives portray a broad cast of actors touched by the drug trade and drug-related violence: “characters and situations whose hold on life is tenuous as a result of social violence: kidnapped victims, *desechables* (those considered to be ‘disposable’ human beings), journalists, police, judges, *sicarios* [hired assassins], prostitutes, homosexuals and drag queens” (Ortega). Narratives *about* drugs, drug dealers, and drug culture, especially the *narcocorrido*, are now abundant and have received much critical attention (Palaversich 85–7). Adding another angle to this cultural conversation, I take up as the central object of analysis culture produced *by* narcos, which has been studied in fields such as communication studies, sociology, and political science. By reading these texts from a literary and cultural studies perspective, I am able to explore how the cartels employ images and texts in order to create alternative narratives that allegorize narco-violence as a grass-roots response to insecurity in order to contest the sovereignty of the Mexican state and to justify their ultra-violent actions.

Persons involved in the drug trade actively contribute to the production of their own culture and myths with *narcocorridos*, the most prominent example of drug dealers generating their own narratives.<sup>5</sup> These ballads are characterized by having narco themes that serve as counter-discourse to government-sponsored representations of drug traffickers as they often exalt drug dealers as folk heroes either for their deeds or for their economic success (Astorga 39). These ballads offer novel readings of the actors of the drug trade, observes Astorga:

Según la odisea relatada por los corridos, los personajes son hombres y mujeres con atributos como valentía, fiereza, osadía, astucia, etc. Por lo que independientemente de su actividad y posición frente a la legalidad, o tal vez precisamente por ello, son dignos de respeto y merecen un lugar en el recuerdo, en el panteón de los traficantes ilustres: son valorados por los suyos. La pérdida de un personaje es una tragedia; desde el punto de vista contrario significa una profilaxis social. (40)

Thus, corridos not only rescue *narcos* from infamy, but also mythologize them as folk heroes. However, *corridos* are not the only autochthonous products of *narcocultura*.

The turf wars between cartels and the government, denominated “the narco-wars,” have also fomented the explosion of other vehicles of self-promotion. Sociologist Abraham Paniagua Vázquez studied the marketing strategies of drug trafficking organizations in Ciudad Juarez and concluded that their ultimate goal was to achieve legitimacy for their enterprises:

el discurso en forma de ‘narcomantas’, desplegados, declaraciones y la utilización de tecnologías de la información como la página de videos *youtube* sirven como medio para justificar acciones, clamar solución y reivindicar exigencias, a la vez, se utiliza como estrategia de propaganda e información y como elemento de legitimación de las acciones llevadas a cabo por los cárteles del narcotráfico [...].  
(Paniagua Vázquez 191)

Through these media, the cartels craft their own narco-mythologies (*narcomitología*), to use a term coined by Astorga, the mythologies serve to outline their history, exalt their ethics and to explain or rationalize their violent actions (40). Like other cartels, La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios generate copious amounts of propaganda to promote themselves and

to mark their territories. In addition to the publicity strategies mentioned above, these cartels also develop their own narco-mythologies through texts, such as memoirs, religious manuals, and manuals of conduct.

In a 2005 editorial published in *Letras Libres*, political analyst Jorge Antonio Chabbat proposed that one key trait of drug-related organized crime was that it was only profit driven and did not concern itself with advancing any political or cultural agenda (Chabat 14).<sup>6</sup> Recent innovations of drug culture have demonstrated that this dictum no longer holds true. This is especially evident in the cultural production of La Familia Michoacana (and by extension Los Caballeros Templarios) that purports to promote a social agenda. Unlike previous drug trafficking organizations, these cartels have developed and disseminated their own cultures and ideologies among the communities that they control as a part of their domination strategy. What is perhaps most innovative about the rhetoric of La Familia is that it relies on religious imagery and discourse, grounded in Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism, to advance what they frame as the pursuit of “justice.” They claim to “avenge” the exploitation of common citizens by torturing or killing criminals and drug dealers. According to their ideology, Christianity informs their role as community vigilantes and their mission to advance justice and restore peace and tranquility in the land of Michoacán. In spite of these claims, we will see how the propaganda of the evangelical cartels is not purely religious or altruistic.

### ***La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios Drug Cartels***

La Familia Michoacana’s genealogy is typical for a Mexican drug cartel; its founders rose up in the ranks of the Gulf Cartel as a regional cell called “La Empresa,” established in 2002 (Carrasco Araizaga 15, 18). A then-paramilitary group called Los Zetas trained the staff of La Empresa in commando techniques that included the use of torture, psychological warfare, and

counterinsurgency techniques, such as the generation of propaganda campaigns to gain the cooperation or acquiescence of the local population; this would allow the organization to traffic drugs freely in the territories under its control (Carrasco Araizaga 15–16). The Gulf Cartel charged La Empresa to control the flow of drugs in Michoacán; however, eventually La Empresa became independent and allied itself with Los Zetas. In 2006, the cartel’s main leaders, Nazario Moreno González (also known as “El más loco”) and José de Jesús Méndez Vargas (“El chango”) re-branded La Empresa as La Familia Michoacana (also known by its acronym “LFM”) (Grayson, “La Familia: Another Deadly Mexican Syndicate” 16). Notoriously, the organization’s members were required to study the Christian Bible and to practice meditation. While other organizations, like Los Zetas, were viewed as well disciplined, members of La Familia were considered religious fanatics. When Los Zetas became an independent organization, they became La Familia’s principal competitors. Thenceforth, these and other bands have fought for the drug smuggling corridor leading from Pacific ports such as the Port of Lázaro Cárdenas to the US border (“Mexico’s Drug Gangs”). In the regions under its control, the cartel managed the production of marijuana, opium poppy, cocaine, and crystal methamphetamine (Finnegan). La Familia also supplemented its income through money laundering, kidnapping, and extortion.

At its height, La Familia controlled the drug trade in Michoacán, Guanajuato, Querétaro, parts of Guerrero, and the state of Mexico, and had encroached on the borders of the states of Colima, Querétaro, Morelos, and Jalisco (Carrasco Araizaga 18; Finnegan). The organization rebranded its subsidiaries in its narco-mantas to reflect its operations beyond Michoacán; in Guanajuato, for example, the organization adopted the name “La Familia Guanajuatense” (“La

Familia Michoacana' anuncia"). The goal of the organization was to control the Mexican drug trade, and Mexican society, through a nation-wide network: "La Familia Mexicana."

After the alleged death of La Familia's messianic leader, Nazario Moreno González, in December of 2010, the cartel splintered into two organizations.<sup>7</sup> Those loyal to José de Jesús "El Chango" Méndez Vargas continued to operate under the name La Familia Michoacana. The break-away faction loyal to Nazario rebranded itself as "La Hermandad Templaria," also known as Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán (Romero Puga). Los Caballeros Templarios claimed that La Familia Michoacana had been disbanded and that they would assume the tasks formerly completed by its parent organization; however, La Familia Michoacana was still active. The two organizations became rivals and began their own turf-war ("Mexico Police Raid").

Both organizations claim to adhere to strict codes of conduct (which guide them to promote social justice and public safety) and at their height claimed to have broad popular support in areas under their control. Often the popularity of cartels stems from the economic development that the cartels foster as well as public works and social service projects they enact in order to curry the favor of communities within their areas of influence. Yet, many cartels also rely on coercion (fear and intimidation) to insure their dominance. La Familia Michoacana was considered the bloodiest and cruelest drug cartel in Mexico until 2010 ("Perfil Nazario Moreno González, el adoctrinador"). Los Caballeros Templarios, for their part, were so aggressive in extorting merchants that local indigenous communities in the states of Michoacán and Guerrero began to organize self-defense militias to protect their communities from the extortionists ("Just What the Mexican Drug War Needs"; Pineda; Mendoza Aguilar). The actions of these local militias reveal a tension in the cartel's professed social and political projects and their actions. Moreover, the militia uprisings reveal a mass-scale rejection of the cartel's legitimacy. In

retaliation for these uprisings, the cartel began persecuting and executing militia members (Mendoza Aguilar).

***Performing “Divine Justice”: Narco-Propaganda, Spectacles of Terror, and the Claim to Justice***

La Familia Michoacana entered the public eye with a memorable and horrific publicity stunt. On September 6, 2006, La Familia associates emptied five decapitated heads in plastic bags in the middle of the crowded dance floor of an Uruapan night-club called “Sol y Sombra” (Finnegan; Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel* viii). To complete the spectacle, the messengers placed a hand-written poster board sign in the center of the heads. Then-attorney general Juan Antonio Magana [*sic*] observed of these and other decapitations: “they [members of La Familia] don’t need to leave written messages. The mere fact that they are using such high levels of violence is sending messages of intimidation, causing fear [...] But doing it shows other gangs they can act in even more gruesome and violent ways than their rivals” (Weissert). After this period, images of decapitated and dismembered bodies became synonymous with ultra-violent drug cartels.

Political scientist George Grayson suggests that the spectacle at “Sol y Sombra” was “the first time that severed heads had been used for completely propagandistic purposes” (Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel* viii). However, this observation neglects the age-old practice of exhibiting corpses, even severed heads, in public view as a tool of state-sponsored terrorism (Dabove, *Nightmares of the Lettered City* 24–5). Even in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica there was a tradition of displaying the decapitated heads of enemies as trophies in public squares on the skull racks called *tzompantli* (Echeverría García and López Hernández 137–8). During Mexican Independence, the colonial government displayed the heads of Mexican insurgents, including

that of the nation's father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, in cages on each corner of the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, in Guanajuato (González de Alba 58).

The *tzompantli* and the insurgent's caged heads, like *La Familia's* decapitated victims, meant to demonstrate the strength and superiority of the executioners and to awe and intimidate opponents and spectators. In her analysis of performances of violence and terror during Argentina's dirty war, literary critic Diana Taylor designates the use of theatricality to terrorize the population as "public spectacles of terror" (D. Taylor x). Understanding these spectacles, she adds, "is dependent on a complex scene of interface: understanding both the local cultural specifics of national dramas and the way that national and international spectacles interface and produce each other" (D. Taylor xi). In other words, spectacles of terror are not spontaneous violent incidents, but should be read against local and international cultural practices. Following Taylor, we must situate the "Sol y Sombra" spectacle within the tradition of narco-executions and public exhibits of the dead in Mexico's red and yellow press.

Messaging with bodies and near bodies has long served as a deterrent and warning during times of war (94; D. Taylor x). As Taylor observes, relations of power have been inscribed into human bodies since time immemorial: "terror systems transform human bodies into surfaces, available for human inscription" (x). As we saw in previous chapters, Mexico's Cristeros, also took up the corpses of men belonging to the Catholic resistance for propagandistic purposes; however, in addition to displaying the corpses of their enemies, they revered and exhibited the bodies of their own dead. In that war, the Cristeros venerated the tortured and mutilated bodies of their dead as Christian martyrs. The faithful circulated images of the dead through prayer cards and postcards. The rhetoric of religious oppression was inscribed in the images of these bodies

since they were used (and reproduced) to foster indignation and garner support for the Cristero Rebellion.

For their part, the actors of the drug trade also inscribe messages in and on human bodies. In his essay, “Plata o Plomo,” journalist Jesús Blancornelas observed that in the drug world, “se pueden dejar narcomensajes sin escribir;” in other words, the executioner can and will stage or mutilate a victim’s body for propagandistic purposes (Monsiváis, *Viento rojo* 60). The public display of mutilated bodies and cadavers of victims, known to journalists of the drug wars as “corpse messaging,” is a common messaging tool in the narco-world. The assassin for hire who serves as the informant in Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary, *El Sicario, Room 164*, explains that the staging of mutilated body parts in different positions near, on, or in the corpse reveals the transgression that merited the victim’s execution. The staging and degradation of the victim’s cadaver serves as a message and warning for those considering taking liberties with the boss’ business, money, or merchandise, or even for those considering not paying extortion or kidnapping money (Rosi). Literary critic Marianne Hirsch observed in her study of the images of detainee abuses in Abu Ghraib (Iraq), that “visual images function not just as evidence of violence, but also—and herein lies the collateral damage—as actual instruments of humiliation” (1212). In the case of *narcomensajes*, the propagation of graphic images means that the torturers can continue humiliating their victims and their families long after the torture or execution is finished. Blancornelas explained that placing corpses in mass graves (*narcofosas*) and melting victims in vats of acid have been some of the most recent innovations in narco-executions (Monsiváis, *Viento rojo* 60–62). These practices and other practices that eliminate the identity of the victim are especially traumatizing since the violence is meant to extend to the victim’s families, who are denied the relief of learning the whereabouts of their disappeared.



Thus, as in other regimes of violence, the absence of a victim's body (as happened with the disappeared in many southern cone regimes) also sends a message.

Unfortunately, in the narco-world the spectacles of terror have escalated in brutality so that these representations can scandalize and terrorize all (officials of the state, other *narcos*, and citizens). In her study of wartime graphic photographs, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, cultural critic Susan Sontag proposed that in order to reach the spectator, images have become more shocking: “the hunt for more dramatic (as they're often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and a source of value” (23). That is to say, producers of images, in our case *sicarios* and photojournalists, must stage more dramatic scenes in order to capture the interest of the consumer or spectator. Organized crime *is* aware of the draw and detrimental effect of representations of staged crimes scenes: when images of violence circulate in the news, newspapers, and the blogosphere, the *narcos* anticipate the victimization of the spectator as well as that of the victim. The *narcomensajes* of *La Familia* fueled an increase in the brutality of the drug wars. In order to break through other spectacles of terror and other images of death and cruelty already circulating in Mexico and to achieve the desired effect of awe, fear, and acquiescence, the tortures became more brutal.

In Mexican culture there is a high threshold for shock-producing images and accounts. Since the nineteenth century, and perhaps even earlier, reports (and images) of tragic or violent death and gore have captured the Mexican public's imagination through *corridos* and the genre of tabloid journalism known as “*la nota roja*” or “*la crónica roja*” (Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios* 6–10). Curiously, these genres are notorious for using violent crime to reinforce social messages: values and morals.<sup>8</sup> Allegedly, graphic crime tabloids, such as *Alarma!* [*sic*],

presumably have social value because they exploit crime for the good of society, observes cultural critic Cuahutémoc Medina: “the positive side of crime may be the example it sets, the warning call that ALERTS someone who, without gauging the consequences, may get involved in dangerous situations where lives are continually endangered” (42). This moralizing function of sensational crimes is not lost on cartels, as is evident when *sicarios* stage corpses, and corresponding signs-turned-captions, that will eventually be photographed by crime reporters and land on the front pages of newspapers and crime magazines. In these publicity stunts, bloggers, crime reporters, photographers, and even academics like me who reproduce and comment on these crimes become wary (and at times unwilling) proxies for organized crime since we capture and propagate these narco-messages even as we condemn the violent crimes represented therein.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, organized crime is careful to control its image in the press by intimidating, bribing, or assassinating editors, crime reporters, and bloggers who attempt to (un)cover the perpetrators of these carefully staged crimes.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of *narcocultura*, what was unique in the *narcomensaje* at the “Sol y Sombra” discotheque was the sign that La Familia placed next to the five heads. The note, which serves as a caption for the spectacle, offers instructions for how to read and interpret the execution. The sign read:

La Familia no mata  
por paga.  
No mata mujeres,  
no mata inocentes,  
solo muere quien deve [*sic*] morir.  
Sepanlo [*sic*] toda la gente

esto es: justicia divina. (Gerardo)

Through the sign, the cartel made an argument for a divinely authorized and therefore legitimate use of violence in the case of this multiple homicide and appealed to the public for support. Unlike petty criminals or *sicarios* (assassins for hire), La Familia proposed that their members did not carry out indiscriminate killings.<sup>11</sup> Because they did not kill for profit, the executions they carried out were not tainted by greed. Moreover, the sign attempted to reassure the population of their safety by revealing the beginnings of an ethics of violence, a code of conduct, whereby the women and those deemed innocent by the organization would be protected by “divine justice.” The narco-message is incomplete as is, however; the reports of crime-reporters and crime investigators were necessary in order to corroborate and complete the narrative.

Investigations revealed that the five beheaded men dealt crystal meth and belonged to a rival gang, the Valencia Organization (McKinley, Jr and Lacey). George Grayson explained that the execution avenged the murder of a woman who had worked at “Sol y Sombra” and added that “a few days before the ghastly incident, she allegedly refused to have sex with these men, who raped and killed her” (Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel* viii). Once the investigation was completed, the executioners were seemingly vindicated, as the *vox populi* would presumably clamor for justice for the woman and would therefore approve of the punishment delivered to the five decapitated victims.

At its core, this narco-message exploits anxieties about insecurity and channels Mexican’s concerns about the ability (and willingness) of Mexican law enforcement officers to investigate, apprehend, and punish criminals. La Familia’s memo captured the population’s loss of faith in Mexico’s criminal justice system, in particular, and in the government as a whole. Mexicans use the euphemism “*la inseguridad*,” to name the rise in crime (including homicide,

kidnapping, and extortion) that envelops Mexico. Former president Felipe Calderón and his war on drugs are blamed for the upsurge in violence in Mexico since the start of his presidential term in 2006. To date, organized crime is one of Mexican's top concerns as it has claimed 150,000 lives and has led to an increase in kidnappings and extortions (“Van 150 mil muertos en México por la narcoviencia”). However, organized crime is not solely responsible for the surge in violence: insecurity is a product of both organized crime and agents of the state.

In Mexico, as in other regions of Latin America, corruption influences the public's faith in state institutions. As historian Alan Knight has observed, there has been collusion between the Mexican political apparatus and drug traffickers since the 1930s and 1940s; under what Knight calls “the centralizing discipline of the PRI,” drug dealers paid government officials in order to operate in their territories undisturbed (125–29). The collusion between drug traffickers and government officials holds true to this day. The *sicario* who serves as the informant of the documentary *The Sicario in Room 164* explains that when it comes to narco-violence, the population should distrust the police as much as it does the drug dealers because organized crime has infiltrated all levels of law enforcement. At times, the police are on the cartels' payrolls; for this reason, the *ex-sicario* explains, society can scarcely expect crooked cops to investigate the crimes that they themselves perpetrate (Rosi). When neither the state nor the drug dealers can ensure peace, security, or justice, it is reasonable that the population might appeal to a divine authority in order to achieve relief from crime and violence.

In the incident at “Sol y Sombra” as in other violent crimes, La Familia's tortures and executions are “legitimated” through poster board signs, whereby the organization proposed that in carrying out executions, they imparted “divine justice.”<sup>12</sup> In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the concept of divine justice proposes that all injustices, transgressions, abuses made against the

faithful will receive retribution from God. In the Book of Hebrews of the Bible, for example, there is a warning to those refusing the commandments of God: “For if the word announced through angels proved firm, and every transgression and disobedience received its just recompense” (Hebrews 2.2).<sup>13</sup> Other Biblical passages forewarning divine retribution are included in the book of Genesis (18.28), and Psalms (98.9), among others. The notion of divine retribution for affronts and abuses gave hope and solace to marginalized groups who otherwise had no recourse for addressing or remedying their exploited condition.

To be sure, in announcing that it enforced divine justice, La Familia Michoacana legitimated its use of violence through the Biblical principle of divine retribution. In the narco-message of the “Sol y Sombra” discotheque, La Familia declared that it would thenceforth assume the role of judge and executioner in the territory under its control. I must note, however, that the use of the trope of “angels of justice” [*ángel justiciero*] and the display of acts of benevolence by a group of drug traffickers is not a strategy unique to La Familia Michoacana.<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Duncan observed that clientelism, including providing services, resources, and offering protection as a form of “‘public’ service” becomes a key element of securing social influence (and consequently, political power) for criminal organizations in Colombia and Mexico (Duncan 21–24, 32). Pablo Escobar, Duncan suggests, created the Medellín Cartel “with the goal of imposing authority over the rest of the criminals and monopolizing the income of the business” (23). In the rhetoric of La Familia Michoacana, what would otherwise be considered “street justice” is cast as “divine justice.” Regardless of its name, the message at “Sol y Sombra,” like subsequent messages, warned other groups vying for control over Michoacán and other territories to respect the bystanders of the war on drugs. Similarly, the messages claimed to offer relief to communities that long suffered rampant crime and impunity.

The executions of individuals within the community can also be read as an expression of the concept of *homo sacer* as described by Giorgio Agamben in his study of political sovereignty. According to Agamben, in political tradition the figure of the *homo sacer*, or sacred man, represents “bare life,” or life which operates at the margins or outside of political order (121). Because the *homo sacer* was excluded from political life or a religious community, he was not a subject of the rules and order established by these institutions (121, 2086). For this reason, explains Agamben, the object *homo sacer* represented “life that may be killed without the commission of homicide”; in other words, the *homo sacer* could be killed and his murder would not be considered a homicide (1864). Although La Familia Michoacana is not a political agent, nor a sovereign political power, it nevertheless aspires to situate itself as such within the territory under its domain. Nevertheless, as an aspiring sovereign, the cartel required a discursive mechanism whereby it could dispense violence (murders, tortures, and other aggression) when such actions tested the limits of “divine justice.”

Those whom La Familia placed within the grouping of “los que deven [*sic*] morir,” (murderers, rapists, drug dealers, and others operating at the margins of street law), can be read through the model of the *homo sacer*. The rhetoric of the narco-message implies that the executions were permissible because the decapitated men transgressed the bounds of law and morality. Because La Familia’s members had tortured and decapitated men who were no longer abiding by universal codes of morality, the executioners would rightly be spared the charge of homicide. In many of its executions and tortures, La Familia claims to seek the restoration of order and stability by targeting those who fit their definition of *homo sacer* (theoretically): only delinquents, retail drug traffickers, and other miscreants. Under this rubric, drug retailers are

considered especially devious because they poison not only individuals but also entire communities, which must in turn deal with crime and blight created by drug addicts.

To achieve stability, drug cartels “pacify” or “order” the territories under their control through violence and coercion, purportedly targeted only towards guilty parties. A news item dated May 5, 2010 is led by three photographs of men, t-shirts raised above their heads revealing lacerations on their backs. From the caption, spectators learn that they are flagellants who walk in a public roundabout in the city of Zamora, Michoacán. This image mirrors the flagellants of Holy Week processions who mortify their own flesh as an act of penance and contrition. The men in the photographs are in the process of penance. However, the signs they carry reveal that the men depicted were alleged criminals captured and castigated by La Familia. Each penitent holds a sign indicating his (no women are evident in the picture) alleged crime. *El Universal* reported that the signs born by the men read:

Rateros Vamos por Ustedes Ojo.

Sociedad, estamos limpiando tu ciudad, no nos señales, atentamente La Familia.

Soy rata y por ello La Familia me castigó

Esto es para todos los rateros y recatos, atentamente La Familia Michoacana.

(Rivera)

The *homo sacer* parade attested the fulfillment of the organization’s divine mandate to deliver their version of swift and efficient justice to victims of crime and to bring those outside the law either within in the fold or to eliminate them from its territory.

La Familia Michoacana, and later Los Caballeros Templarios, also proposed mechanisms to demonstrate their own accountability and transparency to the public. In their narratives, each organization developed more elaborate codes of conduct. Both organizations publicized their

regulations as well as the mechanisms by which these dictums were enforced. “El Tío,” La Familia’s self-described spokesperson explained in his interview with journalist Ravelo that torture and murder were on occasion legitimate sanctions for Familia associates themselves:

Quienes cometen errores y fallas, se les amarra por un largo período. Si la falta es grave, se le tortura, y si hay pérdida de confianza y traición tiene que morir. Esta es la medida más fuerte a la que no queremos llegar, pero muchas veces se tiene que actuar para preservar ‘la empresa.’ (Ravelo 80)

This statement reveals that the members of *La Familia* are subject to a parallel or multi-tiered code of conduct: first, they are subject to the dictum of “universal moral values” which, according to their ideology are applicable and necessary for all of humanity; secondly, they are bound by the codes of the cartel which relies on trust and obedience. The transgression of the second code of conduct compromises the integrity of the organization, and therefore merits death.

To demonstrate accountability Los Caballeros Templarios outlined their internal mechanism for self-discipline more explicitly. *El código de los Caballeros Templarios* delineates an explicit code of conduct for the members of its organization. In addition to promoting morals and values akin to those of La Familia, code 48, for example, outlines the process for delivering “justice” and forbids assassinations for hire.

Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán aplican la justicia, por ello, ningún elemento debe matar por gusto o matar por dinero, cuando se tome esta decisión debe investigarse bien previamente y si existen razones suficientes [remaining fragment missing]. (Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán)



*El código* also regiments the personal conduct of members, as it prohibits the use of drugs (code 34) and mandates random drug tests (code 38). Additionally, it ensures the integrity of the organization by ordering a vow of silence (code 47) and respect of the hierarchy.

According to the code, violation of the organization's policy will merit an appropriate punishment. Code 47 warned that breaking the vow of silence or challenging the hierarchy would merit capital punishment. Treason, addressed in code 52, would merit the ultimate punishment: "a quel Caballero que traicione a lo [*sic*] Templarios, sera castigado con la pena maxima y además se le decomisarán sus propiedades, sus familiares correrán la misma suerte" (Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán). In a punishment worse than banishment, the misdeeds of the member would have consequences not only for himself, but also for his extended family. Like the torture and executions of non-members meant to appease the population at large, internal tortures and executions of La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios would be used to reinforce trust and obedience within the organizations.

The spectacles of terror, whether in the form of internal or external tortures or executions, carry the same moralizing or didactic function as images in the tabloids by demonstrating the consequences of engaging in petty crime or treason. The tortured bodies cautioned the "ratas," a shortened version of *rateros* or crooks, to refrain from conducting their criminal activities in areas controlled by the cartels. Such images also have the potential to deter crime or preserve order since, as literary critic Marianne Hirsch observed of images of graphic tortures, "potential victims who confront photographs of tortured bodies will not merely look at these representations of trauma suffered by others but also experience the trauma affectively and viscerally, in their own bodies" (1211). In theory, the narco-message was supposed to reassure the public that so long as they were not involved in crime, they were not to fear the wrath of La

Familia (and later Los Caballeros), since punishment was reserved for those who “deserved it.” This message is problematic, however, because the spectator was also aware that she or her loved ones could easily become the subject to torture or execution as targets of La Familia or Los Caballeros’ extortion or kidnapping schemes. Thus, employing violence for didactic purposes certainly had a counterproductive effect.

Narco-messages reiterate the rhetoric of “cleansing” and “expiation” which permeate the corpus of La Familia’s discourse. La Familia proposed a remedy to insecurity through active policing: “estamos limpiando tu ciudad.” In other words, the organization fulfilled the job of the state through law enforcement, and the promise of divine retribution by “cleaning up” the disorder left by organized crime. The reader does not know whether those depicted in narco-messages are guilty or not, but the perpetrators assumed that the audience would approve of the pain and torture of the flagellants and executed since the tortured bodies fulfill the public’s desire for justice. However, these images indiscriminately victimize the viewer as much as they do the victims because the executioners of the *homo sacer* are themselves not recognized as a legitimate political or religious body, and paradoxically were also at the margins of the law. How, then, did La Familia re-insert itself discursively within the boundaries of law, order, and the divine? How did the organization distinguish its members from those categorized as *homo sacer*?

### ***La Familia Michoacana Vs. “Los Malos”: Translating the Discourse of Good and Evil***

La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán claim their own agency by rejecting the identities ascribed to them by the state and the media and creating alternative ones. Although it is widely reported that both evangelical organizations generate income for their social and public works by participating in the distribution and sale of drugs, kidnappings, and in extortion, the corporation refuses to identify itself as drug cartel or criminal

gang. Unlike other drug-trafficking organizations, in their propaganda La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios portray themselves as grass-roots social movements, civic organizations (*organización civil*), or insurgent groups (Romero Puga). They reject the labels “cartel,” “element of organized crime,” or “religious organization.”<sup>15</sup> The final discarded label is the most curious because it reveals that in the twenty-first century, religious identification can still serve the state as a tool for marginalization, as in Tomóchic and the Cristero Rebellion. To counteract defamatory narratives, to advance their own policies, and to situate themselves within political order, both La Familia and Los Caballeros have resorted to traditional publicity strategies to formulate a counter-narrative.

In his article “Conflict Graffiti: The Art of War,” journalist Paul Salopek observed that narco-banners are often placed in public spaces and in busy intersections and “mimic the campaign clutter of Mexican political parties” (Salopek 95). I would argue that this characterization is applicable to a great deal of print narco-propaganda also. Like the *políticos*, who court the public’s vote, drug trafficking enterprises must also constantly court the favor of the population to gain the acquiescence or cooperation of the public. This courtship is especially evident when gangs or cartels seek to invade or maintain control of a *plaza* (drug smuggling corridor or territory). Like political pamphleteering, narco-messages entreat the public by offering favors—typically in the form of security, relative peace, or economic funding. However, unlike political campaigns, narcos rely both implicitly and explicitly on coercion. The sign carried by one of the flagellants of Zamora, which read “Sociedad, estamos limpiando tu ciudad, no nos señales”, is simultaneously evidence of law enforcement and a threat to those considering turning in La Familia members to law enforcement (Rivera).

As mentioned earlier, in addition to corpse messaging, and body messaging, the narco-evangelicals fashion their identity through more formal media outlets. In Mexico, news outlets, radio, television, and print became unsuspecting (and at times unwilling) propagators of narco-messages and narco propaganda. In March of 2011, newspaper associations signed a pact, the “Acuerdo para la Cobertura Informativa de la Violencia,” in which outlets pledged not to become unwitting vehicles of narco-propaganda by carefully vetting any published item related to “la delincuencia organizada” (“Acuerdo para la cobertura informativa de la violencia”). The agreement also sought protections for journalists covering organized crime and was sensitive to the role of the media in perpetuating narco-culture and advancing narco-ideologies.

The agreement is largely symbolic since local newspaper editors and reporters in Michoacán, as in other cities in Mexico, have limited say in refusing to publish propaganda and statements redacted by cartels like La Familia. US journalist Jason Baubien exemplifies the danger to journalists and editors of being caught-up in the paper wars in Michoacán:

Francisco Rivera Cruz, the editor of *La Noticia de Michoacan*, inherited the job last year when his predecessor was gunned down and dumped in a ditch. Rivera says they don’t investigate issues around crime or security. And they only report information that is released by the police. The whispered explanation for the previous editor's murder is that he moved too aggressively to cover a grenade attack on a crowd of Independence Day revelers last year. Authorities pointed fingers at La Familia, but the cartel hung up banners blaming its rival, the Zetas, for the grenades that killed eight people and injured more than 100 others.

(Baubien)

Thus, refusing to distribute the narco-propaganda that advances the narco's political and economic projects is often not an option in areas controlled by cartels.

This tenuous editorial license could explain why shortly after their debut, in September 22, 2006, the newspapers *El Sol de Morelia* and *La Voz de Michoacán* published a half-page manifesto outlining La Familia's origins, mission, objectives, which included a plea for support.<sup>16</sup> Although other narco-banners and pamphlets would follow, the September 22 text was a foundational one as it established the organization's identity as crusaders against evil, community vigilantes (the enforcers of the public order), and identified the object of its vigilance by name: other actors of the drug trade. As in the spectacle of "Sol y Sombra," the group declared itself as a divinely inspired vigilante group, or a local militia (the good guys), intent on driving out organized crime, halting drug consumption, and containing the drug-related violence that had burdened Michoacán:

Who are we? Common workers from the hot-lands region of the state of Michoacán, organized by the need to end the oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who have always had power, which in turn allowed them to perpetrate all kinds of dirty tricks and abuses in the state. These include members of the Milenio cartel, those named Valencia, and other gangs, like the Gang of 30, who from the 1980s until today have terrorized much of the state [...] and who have carried out kidnappings, extortions, and other crimes that disturb Michoacán's peace. (*cit in Grayson, Mexico 212*)

In this passage, as in other print propaganda, members of La Familia Michoacana generate and embrace an identity of "otherness" [*alteridad*] because their ranks consist of the oppressed, humiliated, powerless, the abused. Nevertheless they identify themselves as subjects within the

hierarchy of power, as citizens of Michoacán and of Mexico; on the other hand, we see the beginning of a narrative “othering,” and thereby marginalizing, other actors of the drug war (the Mileno cartel *et. al.*) who are framed as terrorist and outlaws.

According to La Familia Michoacana’s rhetoric, its members operate within the boundaries of an imagined community comprised of those they identify as “*michoacanos*”—a term used for persons hailing from the state of Michoacán. As to be expected, the cartel constructs and remodels this community to suit its needs through press releases, *narcomantas* (banners), and other texts and images. It situates the group’s identity both in a spatial geography (the state of Michoacán and bordering regions) and a cultural one. In his memoir, *Me dicen el más loco*, the cartel’s co-founder and spiritual leader, Nazario Moreno González, proposes that *La Familia* was an organic and cohesive social unit which shared goals and values:

les di ese nombre a los grupos que les daba terapia, a los que apoyaba y lideraba y a todas las masas que de alguna manera tenían relación conmigo. Decidí ponerle ese nombre ya que por definición, la familia es un concepto que se refiere a un grupo homogéneo, a una misma clase social, a una cultura, tradición, misma sangre, mismo linaje, mismos intereses e iguales objetivos y metas. En síntesis y a grandes rasgos, así fue como empezó la conspiración, lucha o causa a la que puse por nombre “La Familia”, para darle más vida e intimidad a nuestro movimiento social (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 69).

This passage suggests that in Nazario’s narco-mythology the group was conceived as a social movement, not a cartel, whose members shared the same class (urban lower classes, migrants, and rural *campesinos*), culture (rural), tradition (Christian religion and family values), and lineage. The interests and objectives proposed by the group generally centered on reinstating

order in Michoacán, assuming that there was a mythic past of peace and tranquility, through the revitalization of local values, community activism, and when necessary vigilantism and violence.

The organization's adoption of the moniker La Familia Michoacana is a particularly astute marketing tool and the significance of the name should be analyzed in the context of La Familia's cultural and social agenda. At first glance, La Familia Michoacana seems like a fitting name for a crime organization as it harkens to the names of Italian and American crime syndicates. However, in Mexico and Latin America, organized crime dedicated to the sale and transport of drugs is typically referred to as "cartels" (*cárteles*) (Astorga 130) or "organizations," even when they are owned and operated by members of the same family.

Through its corporate name, La Familia Michoacana offers a critique of the impact of exterior or foreign influences, especially the transnational drug trade, and implies a revalorization of the local and a return to traditional family values, which seemed lost in the drive for profit and consumption of both drugs and goods. It also, perhaps ironically, questions capitalism's single-minded emphasis on profit and its detachment and disregard of people and place. In referencing "Michoacán" and "family," the organization offers a response to globalization by revalorizing and emphasizing the local. Families, villages, cities, *municipios* [municipalities], the state of Michoacán, and even the country of Mexico become ideas and ideals to be rescued from the clutches of globalization and the transnational drug trade, which are viewed as disruptive and unscrupulous. I agree with political analyst Antonio Chabat when he proposes that the organization seeks to present itself "as some sort of moral order, criticizing the disorder that prevails in Mexican society" (Baubien). Still, as an agent in the drug trade, La Familia participates and promotes the same activities that it critiques and condemns.

La Familia's rhetoric plays on notions that in the drug trade the drive for economic gain has fueled violence, and the increase of domestic drug consumption has caused the disintegration of families and local communities. The association between money, moral degeneration, and the demonic is common in folk spirituality in Mexico. Countless Mexican folk tales remind us that the desperate or avaricious are willing to sell their souls in exchange of monetary or social gain (Ingham 106–17). By this logic, the greed of those identified as *narcos* causes them to become morally corrupt, even evil, as they sell their soul (compromise their values), and jeopardize the wellbeing of their local community, in exchange of wealth.

In appropriating the family metaphor, the cartel—and more specifically Nazario, as the group's spiritual guide—assumed the role of *paterfamilias*, the head of household responsible for guiding, protecting, and ordering its family and the family home, Michoacán. In other words the organization (re)presented itself as an agent of good. As such, cartel members also assumed the role of spokespersons voicing the concerns of *michoacanos* regarding a broad range of issues including *la inseguridad*, organized crime, drug consumption, and the abuses of the law by law-enforcement. As a self-declared homegrown entity, La Familia proposed that it was interested in maintaining the wellbeing of the community, ending the abuses suffered by the population besieged by the drug wars, and purging drugs and (alien) actors of the drug war from the territory (Grayson, *Mexico* 212). In other words, they purported to undertake a crusade against what *La Familia* characterized as organized crime.

Time and again, La Familia Michoacana (and later Los Caballeros Templarios) demonstrated in their narco-messages that they, not the government or other bands or cartels, defend the families of Michoacán from the “*inseguridad*” caused by the drug war. Newspaper articles with their corresponding narco-messages such as the “Sol y sombra” spectacle gave



proof that, unlike law enforcement, the cartel expediently captured and punished alleged criminals. Yet, I suspect that at some point in their trajectory many cartels have cast themselves in the role of *ángel justiciero* and claimed to bring peace and stability to the *plaza* they sought to control or overrun. This is evident in the *narcomantas* produced in March of 2006 during the conflict between Los Zetas and the Federación Nueva Alianza, an alliance formed by the Gulf Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel, and La Familia Michoacana. The Federación Nueva Alianza reassured the community that they would free the population from the clutches of Los Zetas:

No se preocupen, no sean paranoicos [sic] esto pronto se va a acabar, es un reacomodo. Pronto se van a acabar las extorsiones, secuestros, derecho de piso.

Habrà paz sin Z, se vivirá sin miedo. (El Blog del Narco, *Dying for the Truth* 20)

For their part, los Zetas assured the population of Ciudad Mante, Tamaulipas that they would defeat the offensive of the New Alliance Federation. In a *narcomanta* displayed on March 20, Los Zetas advocated for the preservation of their tenure:

Este pueblo está muriendo a causa del terror que infunde el CDG [the Gulf Cartel] no es justo para ustedes que están ajenos a nuestros negocios, por eso vamos a defender esa paz con Z que se tenía en Mante; dénos la oportunidad de trabajar para devolver a Ciudad Mante su tranquilidad, ustedes ya nos conocen, somos gente que los va a cuidar por esos ayúdenos... cuídense aquellos que andan mal que a los inocentes no se les molestará para nada. (El Blog del Narco, *Dying for the Truth* 41–42)

The rhetoric of both *narcomantas* has the semblance of an ethics of violence crafted to safeguard the “innocent.” After painting broad and imprecise pictures of the enemy, Zeta or CDG, each cartel promises peace and stability upon the elimination of its target. However, these assurances

often proved to be empty rhetoric since the cartel on duty would assume the labor of the displaced drug cartel, drug-trafficking and public service, and local residents were always victimized by the real or perceived threat of violence.

One aspect of *La Familia* that stands out from other drug cartels is the institutionalization of religiosity in its organization. Religion, then, offers the members of the organization guidelines and rules that allow them to remain within the margins of order, and beyond the realm of what Agamben called “bare life” (121). The leaders of the cartel require members to participate in daily Bible study and practice meditation. The reading of original motivational texts such as a book of aphorisms entitled *Pensamientos*, penned by “El más loco,” and self-help books such as U.S. evangelical minister John Eldredge’s *Wild at Heart* is also compulsory (Padgett and Grillo; Garcia, “Evangelical’s Bestseller”; Grillo; Garcia, “Violent Mexican Gang”).

In an interview with journalist Ricardo Ravelo, a Familia spokesperson calling himself “El Tío” explained that the religious inclinations of the members of the cartel contributed to the wellbeing of the organization and its members:

para evitar traiciones y fallas graves, a todos los ‘empleados’ de ‘la empresa’ se les ha asignado una Biblia: ‘se les sensibiliza en que tienen que ser obedientes y no perder valores como personas’ (80).

Values are also reinforced through the organization’s own texts. In his *Pensamientos*, Moreno González identifies key human values to be embraced by his followers such as those of humility, honesty, love, generosity, patience, acceptance, true justice, kindness, unity, respect, humanity, and the act of listening without judgement (“Documento” 28). The *Pensamientos* and the Christian Bible offer guidelines for conduct, but also serve as tools for mollifying the members

of the organization as well as the community at large. In effect, the organization believes that it will restore order and tranquility to Michoacán and other areas under its influence by revitalizing the belief in and the practice of universal values, derived from biblical principles, by promoting citizenship, public safety, public service, and by rehabilitating alcoholics and drug addicts.

Both La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios have represented service as a central element of their ministry and narco-mythology. In a passage mirroring the beatitudes of the Christian Bible, La Familia Michoacana guided its members to service:

es preferible ser un pobre bendecido de dios y vivir en paz que ser un rico sin vergüenza y sin la gracia de dios y sin tranquilidad, es preferible buscar el reyno y la gracia de dios [*sic*] y asesorarlos en nuestro corazón que buscar los millones del mundo, es preferible buscar a dios y servirle al prójimo en el nombre de dios, el que le sirve a dios [*sic*] siempre será servido, es la regla. (Moreno González, “Documento” 25)

Similarly, the code of Michoacán’s Caballeros Templarios directed its members to serve both God and mankind: “Un Caballero Templario entiende que hay un Dios, una vida creada por Él, una verdad eternal y un propósito divino servir a Dios y al prójimo” (Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán). In the narco-mythologies, Nazario Moreno González models service to humanity:

me dedicaba a apoyar a mis prójimos y así ayudé a organizaciones civiles de beneficencia, fundé escuelas, pequeñas clínicas e Iglesias rurales, antenas para que captaran señal de la televisión, medicamentos, equipos médicos, artículos escolares, semillas y fertilizantes, sin más compromiso que reintegrarlo refaccionado sin ninguna ganancia para mí y poder seguir apoyando en las

temporadas venideras a ejidatarios con parcela, que no tenían crédito oficial ni de la banca privada [...]. (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 56)

In addition to fighting against social disintegration by expiating evil from the bodies of bandits (and traitors), these evangelical organizations also proposed to edify the community by offering to provide public works and services otherwise denied to marginalized communities.

Sociologist Neri Córdoba Solís explained the natural appeal to narcos of participation in their communities of origin, especially through religious works. He explains that public works serve to strengthen the bond and interdependence between drug lords and local communities in which they operate:

La vinculación orgánica de tales actores sociales ... con sus regiones y poblaciones de origen, les ha llevado a relacionarse, casi obligadamente, con las propias representaciones eclesiásticas lugareñas. De modo que las obras de infraestructura que tales sujetos patrocinaron en algunas comunidades, como pavimentación de calles y caminos, drenaje, energía eléctrica, agua potable, parques, jardines, plazuelas, tuvo que tocar también a templos y espacios religiosos. (Córdoba Solís 216)

He adds that public works conducted by narcos are not wholly altruistic since they help the drug dealers gain protection and support when they face government forces or other bands (217).

In their narco-mythologies the evangelical cartels must contend with the fact that the income used for public works was generated through illicit activities. In *Me dicen el más loco*, Nazario proposed that the income used to fund the group's social welfare activities derived from a used automobile business and other investments (*Me dicen “El más loco”* 40–46).

Furthermore, he responded to allegations that his organization was a body of organized crime by arguing that the representation stemmed from a case of mistaken identity:

A últimas fechas he sabido que grupos afines a “La familia” han torcido nuestros objetivos sociales y se dedican, ciertamente, al crimen y a la rapiña... en cuanto pueda, los acabaremos, ya que la delincuencia no es nuestra meta. (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 69)

With this statement, which attributes crime to rogue groups who use La Familia for criminal activities, Nazario pretends to distance his organization from the criminal activities associated with the cartel: drug trafficking, extortion, tortures, and executions. Nevertheless, as journalist Paul Medrano noted, this response can be characterized as facile and naive:

Así, uno se pregunta por qué el autor no reconoce algo tan evidente como un cártel. Cómo creer que toda la infraestructura detrás de la Familia proviene de la venta de autos y demás negocios que *el Chayo* afirma que eran lícitos. Cómo no reconocer a la Familia como cártel cuando se le ha visto funcionando como tal en pueblos y ciudades del sureste de la república mexicana. (Medrano)

Medrano’s critique points the fundamental flaw in the narco-mythology of the evangelical cartels. However, rather than tarnishing the group’s reputation, these allegations may enhance their standing in the community. The social works of La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios reflect a long-held myth developed in popular culture and among marginalized communities of the “social bandit” or the generous bandit. In the prototypical myth, the outlaw performs an illegal activity in order to achieve a nobler purpose (*à-la*-Robin Hood, robbing from the rich to give to the poor). Though Nazario acknowledged that he and his organization operated at the margins of society and were persecuted by law enforcement, he dismissed allegations that he

managed a drug trafficking organization as a smear campaign mounted by a corrupt and ineffective government.

A most surprising advocacy issue promoted by the organization was its concern for the elimination of drug consumption in the state of Michoacán. La Familia responded to this local concern by vowing to eliminate the retail sale of recreational drugs in the September 22, 2006 press release printed in newspapers *El Sol de Morelia* and *La Voz de Michoacán*: “we are eradicating completely from the state the retail sale of the lethal drug known as ice, as it is one of the worst drugs, one that causes irreversible damage to society. We are going to prohibit the sale of altered wine said to come from Tepito. We know that what comes from there is of poor quality” (*qtd in* Grayson 212). This is evidence of concern for public health. For its part, adulterated beverages from Tepito had become a major health concern since the consumption of such drinks was known to cause dizziness, head ache, abortions, blindness, and even death (Michel). La Familia’s strategy for suppressing domestic drug market manifested itself in two ways: first by eliminating the local retail sale of drugs, next by treating the drug problem through drug rehabilitation clinics.

Religious instruction is part of the skills training that La Familia offers in its self-run drug rehabilitation clinics. In the organization’s narratives, the rhetoric surrounding drug addicts parallels the treatment of these subjects in the greater war on drugs that treats the consumers of drugs hailing from lower classes as a human blight, or another incarnation of the *homo sacer*:

Estas miles de personas no eran sino parias sin oficio ni beneficio que representaban un problema para la sociedad y las autoridades, pues para obtener sus diversas drogas robaban, pedían caridad, dormían en plena calle, andrajosos,

sucios; o sea que eran unas verdaderas lacras. (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 49)

In La Familia’s narco-mythology, drug rehabilitation is an allegory for the social and political project of reconstituting the social body destroyed by drugs, drug dealers, and banditry.

Nazario describes the fruits of his rehabilitation efforts as another example of La Familia Michoacana’s service to the individual and to society. Through the drug rehabilitation process, the men in the program dominated their drug-induced urges and impulses.

Al salir de ahí estaban transformados en hombres de bien, aborreciendo el alcohol y otras drogas y avergonzados de su vida anterior. Muchos hasta el cigarro dejaron. Eran ya, hombres nuevos, que no darían problemas ni vergüenzas a la sociedad. (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 49)

Detoxification provides for a spiritual, physical, and social purging of the former drug-addict who is then able to govern his demons and become a contributing member of society. In *Me dicen el más loco*, Nazario claimed that through his sponsorship of Alcoholics Anonymous programs, from 2006 to 2010, his organization rehabilitated more than forty-seven thousand persons nation-wide (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 48–50). Clearly, Nazario’s insistence on exemplifying the volume of rehabilitated men and women was designated to attest to the scope of the social good enacted by La Familia.

Drug rehabilitation clinics also had some positive benefits for the organization. La Familia is notorious for recruiting its members from drug and alcohol rehabilitation clinics where they purportedly indoctrinate recovering addicts (Finnegan). Chabat described their training as a combination of self-help techniques, spiritualism, and some “family” and “moral” values

(Beaubien). Once “rehabilitated,” says Grayson, the recovering addicts can apply to join La Familia and must undergo rigorous religious training:

the novitiates must submit themselves to two months of brainwashing that includes scripture readings, exposure to motivational speakers, and long periods of silence and meditation. (Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel* vii)<sup>17</sup>

To outsiders, La Familia’s version of Alcoholics Anonymous programs exploits the vulnerability of persons seeking support in managing their drug and alcohol addiction and serves as a vehicle for training and recruiting members for the organization.

Nevertheless, La Familia’s religious instruction provides members of the organization with a moral compass necessary to help them transcend the condition of “bare life,” and therefore marginalization, to which they would otherwise be confined. The rhetoric of moral regeneration and physical rehabilitation serves as the crux for establishing difference between the members of La Familia Michoacana and those whom they consider to be at the service of organized crime. Through this rhetoric La Familia Michoacana offers discipline and order:

nuestros elementos no tomaban ni alcohol ni drogas y era raro el que fumaba además, estaban acostumbrados a dormir temprano y levantarse entre cinco y seis de la mañana, bañarse con agua fría y hacer ejercicios y simulacros de batallas.

(Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 74–75)

In other words, members of La Familia exemplified the ideals of a productive and well-disciplined man. The military discourse, which exalts discipline and readiness to combat “evil” harkens to the figure of “soldados de Cristo” seen in previous chapters. Conversely, those identified by Nazario as belonging to organized crime, especially Los Zetas, embody chaos and vice:



los enemigos [here referring to Los Zetas] lo único que sabían era robar a gente pacífica, violar a mujeres en despoblado, matar a mansalva, tragar como puercos y atiborrarse de alcohol y drogas llevando una vida de disipación. (Moreno González, *Me dicen “El más loco”* 75)

In vilifying ‘the enemy,’ La Familia casts Los Zetas and other gangs as *homo sacer*. Because they operate beyond the margins of order, the eradication of these subjects is legitimate and necessary for the well-being of the community.

In some latter narratives, this dichotomy takes on more explicitly religious tones. The warfare between cartels is portrayed as both a crusade waged against invading hoards of miscreants but also as the Apocalypse; the turf wars between both organizations essentially embody a battle of good versus evil. This rhetoric parallels the official discourses identified by Herlinghaus and others, whereby the law enforcement fights for good and traffickers represent evil (12-14). In 2010, *narcomantas* sometimes incorporated Christian iconography including doves (symbol for peace and the Holy Spirit) and the *ichthys* (the so-called-Jesus fish) (“Deja ‘La Familia’”; Gerardo). These icons act as trademarks and reinforce the notion that the cartel is an agent of Christianity. Los Zetas, on the other hand, are the personification of evil itself.

After the formation of a new alliance between the Gulf Cartel, the Milenio Cartel, and La Familia, *narcomantas* displayed on February 2, 2010 began referring to Los Zetas, their principal rival, as “Las Bestias del Mal” (“‘La Familia Michoacana’ anuncia”). This moniker is an allusion to the beasts of the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation in the Christian Bible (*New American Bible Revised Edition*, Rev. 13). According to the Bible, the beasts of the Apocalypse were meant to charm and deceive humanity into the service of evil (Rev. 13.4), yet are ultimately defeated and thrown into a fiery pit by Jesus who reinstates order and initiates a thousand year

reign of peace (Rev. 20.2) before the final judgment. Like the second beast, which branded its subjects (Rev. 13.16), Los Zetas became famous for branding their territories and victims with their mark: the letter “z.” This allegory advances La Familia’s religious-cultural promise of order, peace and tranquility for the territories under its domain. The demonization of Los Zetas advances La Familia’s millenarian message because it proposes that after a period of chaos, violence, and repression forces good (La Familia Michoacana and its supporters) would be destined to defeat the demonic Zetas. Thenceforth, a period of peace would ensue.

### ***Damas y Caballeros: The Crusade of Los Caballeros Templarios***

Los Caballeros Templarios organization also adopted the rhetoric of good versus evil. In this episode of selective historical translation, the drug cartel adopted the name, values, costume and function resembling the medieval military-religious order, The Knights of the Temple, or the Knights Templar. Like the Cult of the Communicating Cross and the Cristeros, discussed in chapter one and three, the Michoacán’s knights are selective in their adoption of historical figures and traditions; they borrow the narratives and performances that advance their religious-political projects and discard or ignore practices and rhetoric that are incongruous with their objectives.

The historical Order of the Temple was the first of many military religious orders whose role was to ensure the safe passage of pilgrims traveling to and from the Holy Land; eventually, the Templars also became the defenders of the Holy Land (Nicholson 30, 36).<sup>18</sup> For their part, Michoacán’s Caballeros Templarios hold as their sacred landscape the former territories held by La Familia Michoacana. According to their manual of conduct, *El código de los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán*, “su misión principal, es la de proteger a los habitantes y al territorio sagrado del Estado libre, soberano y laico de Michoacán” (Los Caballeros Templarios de

Michoacán). This same document proposes that charges of these contemporary knights are not pilgrims, but women, children and “innocents.”<sup>19</sup> I suspect that as in other cartel-related-propaganda, the term “innocent” is not only meant to describe those not involved in crime but especially those who have no direct participation in the cultivation, transportation, trade, or consumption of narcotics. Nevertheless, it is probable that “innocent” subjects must support or acquiesce to the reign of the Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán or face censure, or worse, retribution for challenging the sovereignty of the cartel.

It is worth noting some of the tensions and contradictions in the historical translation of the medieval religious order to the present-day-evangelical cartel. In 1307, the Order of the Knights Templar was disgraced, disbanded, and persecuted after being accused of sodomy, idolatry, and heresy (Nicholson 30, 35). Still, the historical translation is fitting because the population is likely familiar with tales of chivalrous knights, like Don Quixote de la Mancha. Similarly, social and religious fraternal organizations, which also employ rites and secret codes, such as the Knights of Columbus and the Masonic groups are also prominent in central Mexico.

As a cartel, Los Caballeros is also innovative in that it developed more ritualistic performances, produced their own narco-propaganda, and revised its code of ethics. They embraced the seminal texts of La Familia such as the Christian Bible and the *Pensamientos* (by Nazario Moreno Gonzáles), and also generated texts of their own, including a booklet *El Código de los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán* and Nazario’s posthumous narco-memoir *Me dicen el más loco* (Medrano). Keeping with their new identity, the organization has adopted performances that include religious ceremonies and costumes (fashioned after those of the medieval Knights Templar). They also began a new religious cult which has canonized their deceased spiritual leader, Moreno González as a *santo popular*, “San Nazario” (Romero Puga).

Saint Nazario is represented in iconography as a sword-wielding knight and his followers believe that he is the protector of the sick and of the poorest (El Blog del Narco, “Canonizan a Nazario Moreno”). Romero Puga explains that in the iconography of Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán, Saint Nazario is portrayed as “un guerrero medieval, con una túnica y un cinturón adornados en pedrería, una cruz templaria en el pecho y una espada entre las manos” (Romero Puga). The group’s new identity reinforces teachings about Christian masculinity, and the notion of crusade, as necessary to justify violence in the protection of women, children, and the elderly.

Grayson has suggested that evangelical cartel’s emphasis on the protection of women is informed by the teachings of John Eldredge, a US evangelical minister. According to Grayson, *La Familia* associates were required to read Eldredge’s book *Wild at Heart*. Eldredge advocates for the return to performance of strictly defined gender roles: women should embrace their femininity and beauty and men their role as protectors and providers (strong, passionate, and dangerous). His rhetoric regarding gender relations is influenced by the Victorian movement of muscular Christianity, which promoted the expression of Christian masculinity as “physical strength, religious certainty, and the ability to shape and control the world” (Hall 7–8). Following this movement, Eldredge critiques interpretations of Christ and expressions of Christian masculinity that espouse pacifism, meekness, and submission which he views as emasculating or castrating of Christian men. Instead, Eldredge emphasizes Jesus’ hyper-masculine qualities as models for Christian masculinity:

Jesus is no ‘capon priest,’ no pale-faced altar boy with his hair parted in the middle, speaking softly, avoiding confrontation, who at last gets himself killed because he has no way out. He works with wood, commands the loyalty of dockworkers. He is the Lord of hosts, the captain of angel armies. And when

Christ returns, he is at the head of a dreadful company, mounted on a white horse, with a double-edged sword, his robe dipped in blood (Rev. 19). (31)

In Eldredge's view, the warrior Christ should be the model for an active and bellicose Christian masculinity. While other religious movements in Latin America emphasize action, the preferential treatment of the poor in liberation theology, and evangelization (as in the Legion of Christ) as adequate expressions of Christianity, the evangelicals promote both service and masculinity as their guiding principles. Eldredge's instruction reinforces La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios' rhetoric of a militant masculine Christianity.

Eldredge's teachings about a return to traditional gender roles are echoed in Los Caballeros Templarios' mythology, which embraces what the organization calls *caballerosidad*, as their ideal expression of masculinity. In the manual of conduct, *Código de los Caballeros Templarios*, members are called to be *caballeros*: they must exemplify values of chivalry as they must be "los más honorables, los más nobles, los más corteses, los más honestos y los más caballerosos" (Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán). As mentioned earlier, the knights themselves must discipline their own bodies and urges, since members must pledge to abstain from drugs and alcohol and submit themselves to random drug screenings. In addition to imposing self-discipline, the *caballeros* take on the task of disciplining society "la Orden luchará contra el desmoronamiento de los valores morales y los elementos destructivos que prevalecen hoy en la sociedad humana" (Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán). The ideal gentleman, like Eldredge's Christian man, is simultaneously charitable *and* bellicose.

The defense of women is a common theme in the writings of La Familia Michoacana, but is especially pronounced in the discourse of Los Caballeros Templarios. Although women are ever-present in the organization's writings, their function in the discourse is largely symbolic as

they lack any agency of their own. In rhetoric that resembles machismo, *Los Caballeros* argue that the honor, and therefore the masculinity, of (Christian) men, rests on their ability to safeguard the chastity and honor of women. For los *caballeros* it is paramount that they protect women both from outsiders and from the manly urges of *caballeros* themselves. Code 22, for example, indicates that women “deben sentir su protección,” and code 33 prohibits the exploitation of women: “se prohíbe el abusar de la inocencia de mujeres castas y menores de edad, utilizando el engaño para seducirlas” (Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán). Interestingly, this code may suggest that there are some women, those who are considered “impure” or amoral, may not be worthy of protection. The codes and other anecdotes remind men that women are constantly in danger of being dishonored by foreign men. The emphasis of feminine protection harkens to medieval and golden age literature and its emphasis on codes of honor whereby the morality of a male character was gauged according to his ability to safeguard the chastity of women (C. A. Jones 200–01).

Rape is simultaneously a transgression against both men and women. As well as violence against women, violation represents the emasculation of the captive men who were unable to fulfill their role as protectors. The precarious condition of women is echoed in Nazario’s memoir when he exemplifies the impunity and amorality of Los Zetas in part by emphasizing their mistreatment of women:

Su crueldad no tenía paragón en los anales de la narcoviolencia, pues asaltaban en las carreteras solitarias, y no conformes con robar las pertenencias de los viajeros, violaban a las mujeres delante de sus esposos y sus padres; si estos trataban de salvarlas y prestarles auxilio, simplemente los mataban cobarde y ruinmente. (*Me dicen “El más loco”* 71)

According to Nazario, the cruelty of Los Zetas, then, lies not only in their willingness to desecrate women, but also in their deliberate torture of men.

The protection of women's bodies and honor through violent means serves not only as a vehicle for reestablishing masculinity but also as an allegory of the territories to be conquered, dominated, and protected during the drug wars. This colonizing rhetoric, echoes Spanish colonial discourses discussed earlier in this work in which the colonizing agents claim that in possessing land and people the colonizer seeks only to protect the conquered. The rhetoric arguing for the protection of the local population, especially women, belies the fact that like other cartels, the organization must win the support and allegiance of local citizens in order to conquer, dominate, and preserve the drug smuggling corridors in play. The test for not only *caballerosidad*, but also *masculinidad*, therefore resides on the men's ability to secure the sacred land of Michoacán from the invading hoards of "foreigners" who desire to possess their women, their land, and their manhood.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen throughout this chapter that the rhetoric of the Michoacán's narco-cults and the restoration of the family unit as the core of society is an allegory for the restoration of order in Michoacán. Central to the cartel's founding myth is a millenarian message: the notion that La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios will reestablish order, peace, and tranquility in Michoacán (and other states under their domain). In their ideal world, order is achieved when either of these evangelical cartels suppresses or drives out other cartels, gangs, and petty criminals.

Unlike previous cartels, evangelical drug cartels are particularly threatening to the Mexican state. Their ideology, which employs religious, military, evangelical, and gendered

discourses, allows them to propose a new political project, akin to nativism, which projects a return to a mythical earlier time of values, morals, and traditional gendered hierarchies.

According to this myth, the ills of Michoacán (and by extension Mexico) are a consequence of moral failings resulting from the importation of foreign economic and social values derived from globalization. For the cartel, a response to the violence and instability caused by these moral failings is presented as an alternative social project, which is grounded in religious, gendered, and military discourses. Through these, the evangelical cartels propose an alternative to the values imposed by globalization and accepted by the state.

This project of regional domination and the construction of a regional identity is in direct conflict, not just with other cartels, but it also challenges the efficacy of the Mexican State and its public service and law enforcement institutions. Much like other millenarian movements studied here, the promised new age is achieved when the “Christian warrior” achieves hegemony over his desired territory. The evangelical cartel’s identity offers a new model for Mexican Masculinity, which borrows from the British evangelical tradition of “muscular Christianity.” This masculine paradigm advances narratives of conquest, colonization, and domination, not only of a “invading cartels” but also of people (women and children) and territories.

There is no doubt that in their role as enforcers of divine justice, the cartel displaces the state when it assumes the task of supervising “public safety” and further challenges its competence in achieving a swift “justice” for crime victims, as has been observed by Chabat in his interview with Jason Baubien. La Familia, as other actors of the drug trade in Latin America, seeks to fill in what Brazilian studies professor Kees Koonings calls “governance voids” (Koonings 257). Koonings suggests that when the state fails to “promote social participation, citizen security, and the rule of law,” non-state actors will assume these tasks. Spectacles of



terror, including executions, corporal punishment, torture, and other vigilante activities allow La Familia to capitalize on the fatigue of impunity of the population. As in the case of the *Cristiano 'oob* and other millenarian communities, for La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios retribution for evil-doers is not for the eternal afterlife, but rather manifested in the material present; its impact is felt in day-to-day life.

In spite of their narco-mythologies, however, let us remember, again, that the central objective of La Familia Michoacana is economic: to gain control over the drug transport and distribution networks of Michoacán and surrounding territories in order to control the access to ports and trafficking corridors that lead to the Mexico-US border. As Paniagua Vázquez reminds us:

el principal objetivo de las bandas al servicio del narcotráfico es el total control del territorio y el dominio del rival mediante su aniquilación. Debido a la actuación fuera de la ley, el elemento más importante es el poder de las armas que genera intimidación. (25)

Control of the territory requires the acquiescence or cooptation of the public. Journalists such as Finegan and Baubien have observed that the authenticity of acquiescence is difficult to assess given that publically people may be coerced into accepting the domination or dominance of the cartel “on duty” for fear of reprisals. In other words, as Paniagua Vázquez observed, the cartels can also achieve intimidation through execution (205).

Nevertheless, the figures of the Apocalypse and of the crusade adopted by La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán offer strategies for both conceptualizing and allegorizing the violence in Mexico. These discourses are useful in that they project a desired end to the war on drugs and offer the possibility of peace and tranquility. In

these narratives, the spike in violence and the violent confrontations between the agents of good (La Familia or Los Caballeros) and the evil outsiders (Los Zetas and other actors in the drug war) are seen as a necessary precursor to achieving an everlasting peace in both Mexico and Michoacán.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Day brought to my attention that there are rumors that Menonite communities of Chihuahua have been involved in the drug trade. Certainly, because of their economic success, Menonites have been targets of extortion and kidnapping by organized crime (Joynes-Burgess)

<sup>2</sup> Nery Córdova Solís, Kristin Jonsdottir, and James H. Creechan and Jorge de la Herrán Garcia, are but few of the many cultural and literary critics who researched the cultural production related to the *narcosanto* Jesús Malverde (Córdova Solís; Jónsdóttir; Creechan and De la Herrán Garcia). Novelist Homero Aridjis wrote about the followers of the cult to death in his novel, *La Santa Muerte* (Aridjis).

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, I will use the term *narco* to refer to persons whose profession involves the cultivation, manufacture, transport, or sale of narcotics and other psychoactive substances.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Day brought to my attention that the term “naco” has some racial undertones, as it has also been used to disparage Indigenous persons in Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> In justifying her study of the *narconovela*, Palaversich proposed that “the phenomenon of the narcocorrido has been practically exhausted” (86-87). However, the research of scholars such as Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, demonstrates that the genre continually undergoes thematic innovations as evidenced by his study of a corrido variant which he calls the “religious narcocorrido” (Ramírez-Pimienta).

<sup>6</sup> Chabat identified thirteen characteristics of drug trafficking, the first being its non-ideological character. Other traits include the use of violence, its use of explicit rules, including secret codes, and its transnational scope (Chabat 14–15).

<sup>7</sup> Nazario Moreno Gonzales’ body was never recovered after the government alleged that he had been assassinated in a shoot-out in Apatzingan, Michoacán. In August 2013, media

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reports surfaced alleging that Moreno Gonzalez was alive and led *Los Caballeros Templarios* (Pineda). According to journalist Leticia Pineda, Moreno Gonzales' new alias was Ernesto Villa Moreno, in honor of Pancho Villa and Ché Guevara. In March 2014, the Mexican government declared that it had killed the drug lord, again; this time they had tested the body to verify Moreno Gonzales' identity (Shoichet).

<sup>8</sup> One of Mexico's most famous *corridos*, dated 1900, narrates the death of Rosita Álvarez, a young woman who is executed after she refuses to dance with a man during a dance. According to cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis, this tale promotes guidelines for the conduct of young women and warns her about hurting the pride of a man: "Cuando vayas a los bailes/ no desaires a los hombres" (Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios* 12).

<sup>9</sup> The brutality of the narco-executions is best exemplified in the narco-blogs, which, unlike traditional broadcasters, do not censor images. In their book, *Muriendo por la verdad*, the editors of the *Blog del Narco* explained that they publish photographs and videos of executions in their blogs to demystify the glamour of the drug trade:

La otra razón por la cual publicábamos fotografías y videos era para mostrar una realidad sin distorsiones, y poner un freno a la glorificación de los capos por parte de niños mexicanos, de jóvenes y de la industria del entretenimiento. La fantasía del dinero y el lujo obtenidos al ingresar a ese submundo ha hecho presa fácil de adolescentes influenciables para quienes los reclutan desde los grupos narcos. Algunos jefes de cárteles nos han enviado fotografías suyas en fiestas con estrellas del espectáculo y viviendo una vida glamorosa, y esas nos hemos negado a publicarlas. (El Blog del Narco, *Dying for the Truth* 4)

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While the mission of the bloggers is commendable, I can't help but wonder whether having access to this venue and the dissemination and propagation of these images contributes to the creation of more spectacularly brutal images?

<sup>10</sup> In Mexico, journalism, especially crime reporting, is a dangerous career. The impunity is more evident when it comes to murders and attacks on journalists. A recent investigation by the National Commission on Human Rights in Mexico revealed 84 journalists have been murdered and 20 have disappeared since the year 2000 (Camacho Servín). According to the same study, of these cases, only 27 have been investigated and only 12 cases have gone to trial.

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca E. Biron examines the labor and ethics of *sicarios* in the context of the global market and their motivations to enter their chosen profession in her *PMLA* article "It's a Living: Hit Men in the Mexican Narco War."

<sup>12</sup> In the drug war, several parties have taken up the standard of "divine justice" as a strategy for coping with the drug violence and the effects of drugs and drug culture in Latin America. In a visit to Brazil in February of 2009, Pope Benedict called drug traffickers to "reflect on the grave harm they are inflicting on countless young people and on adults from every level of society" (Associated Press, "Pope"). In the same sermon, he reassured his parishioners in a drug rehabilitation center that drug traffickers would receive divine retribution for their actions.

<sup>13</sup> Religious scholar Haim Shapira observes that in the Bible, God does not himself dispense divine justice:

Biblical law assumes and even requires the existence of a human system of law by which to judge transgressors and to rule in interpersonal disputes. Within this framework, human beings perform the judicial functions; they serve as judges, and they are responsible to execute the sentences. From the Biblical viewpoint,

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one might say that God is the one who authorizes the judges to judge and act in His name. (Shapira 276)

It is hard to say whether the members of La Familia Michoacana situate themselves in this tradition, but from their *narcomanata* it seems to be the case.

<sup>14</sup> Cultural critic Paul Sneed, for example, observed the ambivalent use of violence by drug-related gangs in the case of Brazil's *favelas* (squatter communities) where organized crime is simultaneously the perpetrator of crime and an enforcer of order and street justice.

On the one hand, outside of their favelas they [gangsters] may be involved in heinous crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and bank robbery. In contrast, in their own communities the factions typically impose a strict martial law, prohibiting street crime and brutally punishing those who commit offenses. (Sneed 225)

<sup>15</sup> In addition to distancing themselves from the image of cult, Michoacan's evangelical narcos wanted to distance themselves from the Nueva Jerusalén Group. Nueva Jerusalén is a catholic-salvationist sect of Michoacán founded in 1982 by a catholic priest and a *beata* (Barabas, *Utopías indias* 6). Recently, this cult has also been associated with violence when members of the group destroyed the public school and drove out teachers who taught a secular curriculum (Univisión; Aguiar and Juárez). It is not clear whether La Familia Michoacana or Los Caballeros Templarios have any ties with the Nueva Jerusalén cult.

<sup>16</sup> I was not able to acquire a copy of the original publication of this memo. Since the manifesto was published as an advertisement, it did not appear in the electronic version of either of these publications. George W. Grayson included a translation of the text by Mark Stevenson in his work *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (212). Grayson reprinted the same

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manifesto as an appendix in *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican security* (101-3). I cite from the former version.

<sup>17</sup> Grayson adds that another component of this religious and job training of La Familia associates includes special training for *sicarios* (trained killers): they are taken to a wilderness area, they are directed to shoot, butcher, and cook 15 victims in vats of acid (Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel* vii). The description reproduced by Grayson seems like a fable or dark legend that further contributes to the development of the ultra-violent mythology of La Familia Michoacana.

<sup>18</sup> Other contemporaries of the medieval Knights Templar included The Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem (the Knights Hospitaller) and the order of the Hospital of St. Mary Teutons (known as the Teutonic Knights).

<sup>19</sup> In the code of conduct of the Knights Templar of Michoacán, codes 24 and 33 are devoted to the protection of women (Grillonautas).

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## **Conclusion: Mexico's Holy Wars**

In the four religious insurgencies examined in this work, critics often label militant religious communities as “irrational,” “fanatical,” or “ignorant” to challenge their particular use of Christian imagery and expression to address real-world concerns. Through writings and cultural production that appropriates and reinterprets Christian discourses, metaphors, and tropes, the religious communities studied here offer responses to what they see as a misalignment between local customs and values, often represented as wholesome and good, and regional and national policies in Mexico, often perceived as degenerate, ineffectual, or oppressive. In the Mexican context, Christian metaphors and figures of martyrdom, the crusades, and sainthood are continuously (re)appropriated and (re)signified in order to form narratives that propose safer, more principled, or more equitable communities. The Christian communities we have studied, often lacking cultural, political, or economic capital of their own, rely on the spiritual, moral, and cultural capital enshrined in their faith and religious traditions to justify their use of violence. For this reason, they continue to recycle familiar Christian tropes and metaphors while updating them to reflect local knowledge and traditions: Maya epistemology, protestant muscular Christianity, folk Catholicism, and shamanism. This study shows how Christian imagery and expression has offered, and continues to offer, a site from which subaltern communities are able to question and contest the policies and practices that contribute to their marginal status in Mexican society.<sup>1</sup>

As they mount their armed response to perceived violations by local, regional, and national entities, religious insurgencies must address perennial concerns about their legitimate use of force. Adhering to these guidelines is necessary in order to achieve moral and ethical legitimacy for their struggles. However, a critical challenge faced by the four religious

communities studied here was to define, at least discursively, the object of their violence. The *Cristano'ob* offered protection in battle for “Christians” whom they would identify through their performance of prayer during capture. Yet, the applications of these proposed guidelines during armed combat seem impossible to enforce. In the Tomóchic Rebellion, in spite of efforts to portray the Tomochitecos as “Indians,” there is evidence of a challenge to identifying the enemy when federal troops attack other federal troops due to their misrecognition of their adversary. The soldiers of the Cristero Rebellion also struggled with differentiating their Christian soldiers from federal troops, revealing the arbitrariness of their framework for establishing difference between Christ’s soldiers and all others. Perhaps the most determined to define the adversaries discursively, are the evangelical cartels that insist on distinguishing themselves from their adversaries by developing elaborate codes of conduct and distinctive costumes. The surge of indigenous self-defense militias in regions controlled by La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios demonstrate that the evangelical cartels were no different in their treatment of local communities than the “outside” cartels. In order to establish its legitimate claim to declare war, each group must argue that the community can expect protection (or violence) from a principled Christian soldier, rather than an indistinguishable other.

The four communities discussed in this work place faith in Christianity above their allegiance to local, state, or national governments. For these groups, Christianity provides cultural, moral, and spiritual grounding for establishing a personal and communal identity. This is not to say, however, that the four religious communities studied reject the Mexican national project. The Tomochitecos and the Cristeros went to war in order to bring attention to the shortcomings of the Mexican government so that they could achieve proper redress for actual and perceived abuse. The Tomochitecos fought for the fulfillment of their constitutional right to

the free exercise of religion, the freedom to worship folk saints according to their regional custom, without church or state intervention. Similarly, in fighting for their freedom to worship, the Cristeros sought to reaffirm the bonds between the Catholic Church and the Mexican Government, thereby strengthening the moral grounding of the nation. These Christian communities—though politically, socially, and culturally marginalized—continued to anchor their identities within a national paradigm thereby reaffirming their commitment to its ideals.

In other instances, rather than re-affirm the Mexican national project, some religious insurgencies, like the *Cristiano 'oob* and the evangelical drug cartels, exploited the nation's flaws and tested its limits in order to advocate religious and political projects to rival "the nation." The *Cristiano 'oob* and La Familia Michoacana (and later Los Caballeros Templarios) rejected the Mexican national project altogether, instead proposing their own regional projects which were informed by their interpretations of Christian doctrine. Through the Maya-Christian Cult of the Communicating Cross, the *Cristiano 'oob* proposed, and briefly achieved, sovereignty for the territories now known today as the state of Quintana Roo by relying on Christian apocalyptic discourse and Maya prophecy. In this Maya-Christian regime, the Cult of the Communicating Cross proposed equality among the races and equitable access to land and resources, which had been denied to the Maya-speaking peasants under the tenure of the Yucatec and Mexican governments. La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán, for their part, exploited concerns that Mexico had already become a failed state by offering alternative local and regional governance structures (La Familia Michoacana, La Familia Guanajuatense, and La Familia Mexiquense). At the center of this new order is the idealized Christian family, whose central pillar is the masculine, yet chivalrous, Christian man. In their alternative political projects, La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán proposed that the observance

of “traditional” Christian family values was the most effective strategy for overcoming the social ills imported by globalization: the disintegration of the family and drug addiction, among others. The drug cartels elaborate contorted narratives to downplay the fact that they themselves foment the drug addiction and family disintegration that they condemn in their propaganda through the products they manufacture and distribute and the terror they induce. By creating alternative religious and political projects anchored by Christian imagery and expression, these marginalized communities are able to propose recognizable ideals, morals, values, and customs, that appeal to their constitutive communities.

Certainly, more questions regarding the religious expression of religious insurgents remain. The most glaring concern is the absence of women’s voices in the writings and cultural products that I explored. My research revealed that women’s stories are absent or sometimes, as was the case of the Cristeros, deliberately marginalized or silenced. Future research on the religious insurgencies in Mexico, may find other resources to be able to examine how gender shapes the religious rhetoric and expression espoused by religious insurgencies. This research should consider whether women’s writings and cultural production serves to reinforce, revise, or contest gendered ideals of “Marianism”—exemplifying maternity, sacrifice, and chastity. Following the pioneering work of historians such as Agustín Vaca, Mirtea Acuña Cepeda, and Florentina Preciado Cortés, literary and cultural critics can continue to research the cultural production of women during the Cristero Rebellion in order to broaden our understanding of the struggle and its social and political objectives. While my work begins to tackle this issue, many questions remain: Do Cristeras, and other female religious insurgents, conceive of their contribution to war and armed conflict in similar ways as men? Did women also represent themselves as Christian soldiers and martyrs? Following this line, future research can also

explore the religious expression and experience of female followers of the evangelical drug cartels, and devotees to Saint Nazario, in order to understand if there is a particularly “feminine”<sup>2</sup> reading of the chivalry and chastity paradigm advanced by these groups.

This work also leads to further discussions about religious insurgencies and religious violence in Mexico and in Latin America. Further research can explore the influence of symbolism from other religious and spiritual traditions in supporting religious violence in Mexico and Latin America. The case of Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo (the Narco-Santero discussed in Chapter 4), for example, suggests the possibility of examining the influence of *Santería* and other African-inspired religious expression in legitimating drug-related violence in Mexico and greater Latin America. More broadly, future researchers can continue to explore the use of representations of African, indigenous, and other symbolisms and discourses in rebellions and insurgencies in Mexico.

It is worth noting that recently Pope Francis, the first Latin American leader of the Catholic Church, has decried the use of religion to justify violence. Pope Francis attempted to broker reconciliation between Christians and Muslims in a visit to the Central African Republic on November of 2015 by arguing that violence in the name of religion is never justified. In a speech given in a Mosque in the city of Bangui, Francis said: “Christians and Muslims and members of traditional religions have lived peacefully for many years [...] Together, we say no to hatred, to vengeance and violence, especially that committed in the name of a religion or God” (Associated Press, “Pope Francis Says”). Given the discursive turn of this pope’s teachings on the issue of religious violence (in contrast to the long tradition of Church-sanctioned epistemic and real violence), scholars can also explore the posture of Pope Francis toward religious violence. These works can examine how the pope’s Latin American background (perhaps

influenced by Liberation Theology) shapes his stance toward violence, and how his message dialogues with historical uses of Catholicism to support violence.

I suspect that discussions of past and present manifestations of religious violence in Mexico will be ongoing. Perhaps we already have signs of Mexico's next religious conflict. For the past 40 years, the religious community of Nueva Jerusalén, located in the Municipality of Turicato, Michoacán, has been staving off the end of the world by rejecting fashion, immorality, and vices (Aguilar and Juárez). According to anthropologist Miguel Leatham, the community believes "that apparitions and messages from the Virgin Mary are warning humanity that God will soon destroy the world because of the corruption of 'modernist' Catholic apostates and unbelievers" (177).<sup>3</sup> Nueva Jerusalén's beliefs reflect "apocalyptic marianism," a Christian religious current whose followers believe that the Virgin will protect her followers on the Day of Judgment (177). According to ethnographer Juan Carlos Dozal Varela, the community strives to stay free of sin by rejecting the trappings of modern life (ranging from revealing clothing to technology) in order achieve the salvation of their town and that of the world. Three thousand strong, the Nueva Jerusalén community proposes an alternative to the decadence of modernization and globalization, which forces men and women to forgo what they interpret as traditional Christian values and customs. While the community has not yet declared war on other citizens, it is evident that tensions between the believers, the breakaway faction of Nueva Jerusalén's apostates calling themselves "*laicos*," and state and federal governments are slowly rising.

On July of 2012, the Virgin of the Rosary allowed her followers to raze the secular public schools of Nueva Jerusalén (Aguilar and Juárez). Three were injured because of the clash between the believers and the *laicos*, who wished to preserve secular public schools in the town.

Nueva Jerusalén's religious leaders explained that the demolitions were necessary because the education imparted in the secular public schools promoted knowledge, including sex education and evolution, which was against the teachings and beliefs held by the residents (Dozal Varela). For fear of violence and retaliation, public school teachers began to impart classes in clandestine classrooms in the town. Luckily, in this incident, the violence did not escalate further. For now, the Virgin of the Rosary has approved the destruction of schools and the expulsion of the *laicos*, who nevertheless insist on remaining in their community. To deliver the believers from a degenerate world, will she ask for martyrs next? Will the Virgin eventually grant special dispensations with elaborate guidelines for driving out the apostates, public school teachers, and other government officials through force? Time will tell whether the Nueva Jerusalén community can maintain modernization and globalization at bay, or if its increasing intolerance of incursions from the outside world will trigger the end of their world. Still, in the Nueva Jerusalén community we see traces of a familiar use of Christian imagery and expression as a tool for expressing dissatisfaction with national and global institutions and social trends.

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Christians in Latin American have advanced social justice and change through non-violent means. Most notable among them, the work of Catholic priests and missionaries, like Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and others, who sought to protect native peoples from exploitation by appealing to the religious convictions of Catholic monarchs (Berryman 10). More recently, in the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic and Protestant clergy and laypersons sought to improve the conditions of the poor and marginalized in Latin America by following the doctrine known as “Liberation Theology.”

<sup>2</sup> Here I use the term “feminine” to refer to social, rather than biological, constructs.

<sup>3</sup> When using the term “modernist,” the community refers to social trends leading to the liberalization of women’s roles (including their open sexuality, independence, and what they interpret as “immodest” dress) and the disintegration of the traditional family. They interpret these social trends as the unwelcome importations of globalization, in spite of their existence in Mexico.



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