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Desecularisation of the State and Sacred Secularism. Politics and Religion in Mexico within the Latin-American Context.

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1 Introduction

Recent political conflicts have highlighted the influence of religious actors and organisations in the public spheres of Latin American countries. For example, the Pentecostal Evangelical movement in Colombia was crucial to the success of the 'No' campaign in the 2016 plebiscite, in which citizens rejected the peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).[1] In Brazil, evangelical congregations played a central role during the 2016 impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, and in the subsequent rise of Jair Bolsonaro. Today, these Christian groups represent Bolsonaro's main electoral base. In Bolivia, evangelical leaders and conservative elements of the Catholic Church alike supported the 2019 coup against Evo Morales. His replacement, interim President Jeanine Áñez, has positioned herself in opposition to indigenous symbols and rituals, and, on coming to power, claimed that "the Bible had returned" to the Bolivian government.[2] In Mexico, the 2018 rise of left-wing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has been accompanied by criticism of his proximity to religious actors, and his moralising political rhetoric. Some authors have even described the Mexican leader as a politician with messianic overtones.

Additionally, an unprecedented civil ecumenical coalition[3] – composed of conservative groups, civil organisations, churches of various denominations, celebrities, and politicians – has taken to the streets in marches and demonstrations, in defence of so-called 'pro-life' and 'traditional family'

1 William Mauricio Beltrán and Sian Creely, "Pentecostals, Gender Ideology and the Peace Plebiscite: Colombia 2016," *Religions* 9, no. 12:418 (2018).

2 Nathalia Passarinho, "Por que igrejas evangélicas ganharam tanto peso na política da América Latina? Especialista aponta 5 fatores," *BBC News Brasil*, November 22, 2019, https://bbc.in/3OiqUk8.

3 José Manuel Morán Faúndes, "El Desarrollo Del Activismo Autodenominado 'Pro-Vida' En Argentina, 1980–2014," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 77, no. 3 (2015): 407–35.

values. These activities are heightened during sessions of political decision-making on controversial issues such as the decriminalisation of abortion and euthanasia, the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, and the softening of penalties for the use of some drugs. An example of this is the National Front for the Family (FNF) in Mexico, a broad coalition, supported by Pope Francis, which has protested in the streets against the so-called "gender ideology."[4] There are replica movements in other nations, such as Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, and Costa Rica.

Interestingly, these movements have coalesced despite measures separating politics and religion being in place in various Latin American countries since the mid-nineteenth century. Previous studies have indicated that this distinction between politics and religion, put in place during the post-colonial formation of independent nations, was a means of affirming the autonomy of the political sphere, thereby strengthening state authority. In some cases, this produced a type of combative secularism (*laicismo*),[5] based on condemnatory attitudes and anti-clerical stances towards the Catholic Church, which was seen as a representation of religious power associated with the old monarchic regime.

Against this background, it is worth asking what the implications of the recent convergence between politics and religion in Latin America are. Are these states undermining the historical secularism of the political sphere? To answer this question, we must avoid the oversimplification of suggesting a singular process of religious advance in Latin American societies. It is important to instead highlight the complex interaction of the following factors: 1) the process of secularisation (involving both secularism and secularity) in the region, 2) the trend towards pluralisation of the religious field, 3) the concurrence of counter-secular expressions in the public space, 4) and the occurrence of conflict in the political arena.

Although secularisation in Latin America historically emerged as a process of distinction of the political sphere, I argue here that it is currently

4 Carlos Nazario Mora Duro, "Tensiones de la laicidad en el espacio público: A propósito de la movilización del Frente Nacional por la Familia," in *Familias, iglesias y Estado laico: Enfoques antropológicos,* edited by Carlos Garma, María del Rosario Ramírez, and Ariel Corpus (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana/Ediciones del Lirio, 2018).

5 Roberto Blancarte, "Laicidad y Laicismo En América Latina," *Estudios Sociológicos* 26, no. 76 (2008): 139–64.

expressed as a democratic ideal through the process of the dispersal in society of certain secular notions favouring state autonomy, especially in those countries that maintain the secularism legally established in the nineteenth century. Following Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, it is useful to distinguish between the concept of secularism, meaning "the ideological-philosophical programme […] for the explicit ideology of separation" and its "related political practices," and that of secularity, defined as "cultural and symbolic distinctions, as well as institutionally anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres."[6]

However, as Peter Berger states, secular ideas coexist in both the public sphere and the minds of individuals with non-secular discourses, such as religious views, and counter-secularising expressions.[7] One can see the relevance of these additional considerations given the emerging religious pluralism in Latin America and the presence of a multiplicity of religious traditions. Almost 60% of the Latin American population identifies as Catholic,[8] but there is also a vibrant presence of Protestant and Evangelical churches. Indeed, in the case of Pentecostalism alone, believers comprise about 50 million people.[9] This is illustrative of a religious upsurge present in the world today, which has occurred simultaneously with a significant growth in those who identify as non-religious. As Talal Asad explains, these emerging religious and non-religious voices challenge the status quo, as "the introduction of new discourses may result in the disruption of established assumptions structuring debates in the public space. More strongly, they may have to disrupt existing assumptions in order to be heard."[10]

Peter Berger also points out that, in the modern world, one cannot escape the pluralist dynamic, and that an important difference between

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6 Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, "Revisiting the Secular: Multiple Secularities and Pathways to Modernity," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 2, Leipzig University, 2017, 12.

7 Peter Berger, "Further Thoughts on Religion and Modernity," *Society* 49, no. 4 (2012): 313–16; Peter Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 2014).

8 Latinobarómetro, "El papa Francisco y la religión en Chile y América Latina: Latinobarómetro 1995–2017," Santiago de Chile, January 2017, https://bit.ly/3KdrwUZ.

9 Peter Berger, "Max Weber Is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2010): 3–9.

10 Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-State, Secularism," in *Nation and Religion:*

modern and historical pluralism is the now "powerful presence" of a secular discourse. However, he criticises the premise that we live in a secularised world, arguing that the world today "is furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever." Accordingly, modernisation had some secularising effects, but "it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization."[11]

Based on Casanova's notion of secularisation – functional differentiation, decline of religiosity, and privatisation of religion – Karpov argues that de-secularisation is a process of counter-secularisation, "through which religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous and/or co-ocurring secularizing process." In this sense, it would imply a tendency towards formal and informal rapprochements between "formerly secularized institutions and religious norms," an upsurge of religious beliefs and practices, the de-privatisation of the religious sphere, and the reinsertion of religious content in different social spheres.[12] Building on this, I suggest that counter-secularising trends are observable in Latin American countries, not particularly in the form of visible religious groups in the public space, but rather in an organised reaction against progressive and secular policies in the social sphere.

In addition, we cannot ignore that these factors interact with conflicts and conjunctures in the political sphere. Cruz Esquivel and Mallimaci explain that, during state-building processes in Latin America, political elites understood, given the enormous difficulty of maintaining their control over the region, the necessity of creating and maintaining sacred and transcendental functions that would contribute to the stability of the state.[13] I contend that this argument is still valid today, as recent conflicts have opened the door to agreements and rapprochements between political and religious

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Perspectives on Europe and Asia, ed. Peter van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann (New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 181.

11 Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 2–3.

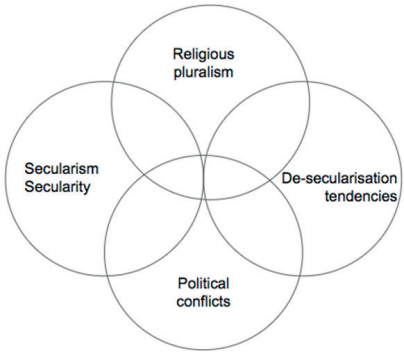
12 Vyacheslav Karpov, "Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 2 (2010): 232–70.

13 Juan Cruz Esquivel and Fortunato Mallimaci, "Políticas y Religiones En América Latina y El Caribe: Recomposiciones Históricas, Epistemológicas y Conceptuales," *Anuario de Historia Regional y de Las Fronteras* 23, no. 2 (2018): 13–24.

actors, involving the use of religious symbols and rituals to legitimise government actions. As a result of this, political decisions may then be based on a different logic to the secular ideas dispersed in society, or even against the general conceptions of the political sphere as a whole. This idea aligns with Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt's view that secularism and secularity may have different historical rhythms, in the sense that "the political influence of the ideological programme of secularism may shift more or less quickly with new political parties coming to power," while secularity "prove[s] to be relatively stable and independent from such political shifts."[14]

Figure 1 shows factors relevant to the relationship between the state and religion in Latin America today. Specific empirical cases would likely exhibit different interactions between these factors, depending on their precise historical context.

Figure 1. Factors Affecting the Relationship between Politics and Religion in Latin America



Note: Unless otherwise noted, all the following tables and figures are my own, based on the respective referenced data.

Section 2 explains these factors in more detail, considering the historical context of the separation of religion and politics in Latin America, and its correlation with the religious configuration of society. After this, particular attention is paid to Mexican secularism and secularity by analysing historical events (section 3), and contemporary discussions in the political arena (section 4). Following Ahmet T. Kuru, Mexico is a clear illustration

14 Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, "Revisiting the Secular," 25.

of the dominance of assertive secularist ideology. "During the nineteenth century, the liberal republicans regarded the Catholic Church as the ally of conservative authoritarian rulers. Whenever they got power, the liberals pursued anticlerical policies."[15] In line with this argumentation, my approach raises the question of how the boundaries between religion and the state in Mexico have been defined historically, and what the current status of this differentiation is, in light of the factors outlined in Fig. 1. I also advance the analytical notion of sacred secularism, as a principle and expectation in the public space.

This paper makes use of a wide variety of primary materials, including legal and political documents, and survey data. It is based on my analysis of the historical and current constitutions of Latin American countries (Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica), and also considers the results of recent surveys conducted by research institutions (e.g. Latinobarometro and Pew Research Center). In the case of Mexico, the paper draws on my analysis of presidential communications, focusing on the political rhetoric of President López Obrador (2018–2024), and social dialogues in the public sphere related to secularity. I collected data from online sources (e.g. the Mexican government website), as well as newspapers (e.g. *La Jornada* or *El Universal*), magazines (e.g. *Proceso*) and relevant social media discussions (e.g. those on *Twitter (*now *X*)). *All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted*. The research period was from June 2020 to May 2021, during which time I received institutional and financial support from the CASHSS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities."

2 Latin American Context

Latin American societies share a common background of colonialism, beginning in the late fifteenth century. In the context of colonisation, the Catholic Church gradually consolidated a religious hegemony. With the coming of independence in the nineteenth century, the creation of new states involved political struggles between conservative and liberal

15 Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

factions, over the dominant and defining ideologies of the new nation states. Most of the new governments embraced the Catholic religion as a constitutive element of national identity. Despite this, the opportunity to renegotiate historical arrangements caused confrontation between political elites and religious hierarchies. This opportunity, coinciding with the spread of liberal ideas in the region, encouraged the implementation of secular policies to build up the dominance of the state, and diminish the authority of the Catholic Church, which, at the time, was perceived as an anti-republican force.

The 1857 Mexican Constitution was the first in the region to declare state dominance over religion. This was legislated in various clauses, particularly Article 123, which stated that "in matters of religious worship and external discipline, the federal powers are exclusively responsible for the intervention designated by law."[16] According to Anthony Gill, the looseness of the wording was a deliberate strategy to destroy the economic and political power of the Catholic Church, by allowing political manipulation of the interpretation of the law.[17] One can trace a similar trajectory in Brazil, where the 1891 constitution provided for freedom of religion and state autonomy, by prohibiting "establishing, subsidising, or hindering the exercise of religious services," and mandating that no religious cult or church should "receive a government grant, or have dependent relationships or partnership with the republican Government or States." The constitution also established the secular character of public services in Brazil, and guaranteed civil and political rights for all persons and religious denominations, including nationals and foreigners (Art. 11, 69, 72).[18]

This liberal ideological programme expanded to other nations of the region, reflected in the constitutions of Colombia (1863), Guatemala (1879), Honduras (1880), El Salvador (1883), Nicaragua (1893), Ecuador (1906), Uruguay (1918), and Chile (1925). This marked an upsurge in liberal thought throughout Latin America from the mid-nineteenth to the

16 Mexico, "Constitución Federal de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos 1857," Orden Jurídico, 1857.

17 Anthony Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 151.

18 Brasil, "Constituição de 1891," Portal da Câmara dos Deputados, 2021.

early twentieth century.[19] Previous studies have highlighted the promotion of a range of secular policies at this time, such as those requiring secular education, and others prohibiting the establishment of any state religion (a move against the Catholic Church, which was the dominant institution in the region). Policies also established religious freedom – also referred to as freedom of cult or conscience. However, most of these national constitutions especially restricted the participation of religious actors in the political arena (Table 1). For instance, the 1893 Constitution of Nicaragua – promulgated after the overthrow of the previous conservative regime – established the separation of political and religious activity in four distinct articles (77, 94, 103, and 107). In particular, clause 94 affirmed that "President and Vice-President and those elected must be: Citizens in the exercise of their rights, a layperson [i.e. not ordained], over the age of twenty-five years; and natives of Nicaragua or any other Central American Republic."[20] This constitution was even titled *La Libérrima* (the arch-liberal).

Table 1. Secular Policies in Latin American Countries, 1857-1925

Constitutions	Secular Policies									
	i)	*ii)*	*iii)*	*iv)*	*v)*	*vi)*	*vii)*	*viii)*	*ix)*	*x)*
1857 Mexico	-	-	Art. 56, 77	-	Art. 123	-	-	Art. 27	-	-
1863 Colombia	Art. 23	Art. 15	Art. 33	-	Art. 23	-	-	Art. 6	-	-
1879 Guatemala	-	-	Art. 50, 65, 86	Art. 18	-	Art. 24	-	-	-	-
1880 Honduras	Art. 9	Art. 9	Art. 10	Art. 24	Art. 9	-	-	-	-	Art. 13
1883 El Salvador	-	Art. 14	Art. 93	Art. 30	-	-	-	-	-	-
1891 Brazil	Art. 11, 72	Art. 72	Art. 69	Art. 72	-	-	Art. 72	-	Art. 72	-
1893 Nicaragua	Art. 47	-	Art. 77, 94, 103, 107	Art. 50	-	-	Art. 48	-	-	-
1906 Ecuador	-	Art. 26	Art. 42	Art. 16	-	-	-	-	-	-
1918 Uruguay	Art. 5	Art. 5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1925 Chile	-	Art. 10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Articles of national constitutions providing that: *i)* The state does not support any religion (no national religion or economic support); *ii)* freedom of religion (cult or conscience); *iii)* restriction of religious actors' political participation; *iv)* secular public education; *v)* state authority over religious activities; *vi)* restriction on religious activities in public spaces; *vii)* no religious control over the civil status of citizens; *viii)* restriction on religious property; *ix)* state control over cemeteries; *x)* rights and guarantees (religious freedom) for foreigners.

Source: National constitutions.

19 Roberto Blancarte, "América Latina: Entre Pluri-Confesionalidad y Laicidad," *Civitas – Revista de Ciências Sociais* 11, no. 2 (2011): 198.

20 Nicaragua, "Constitución Política 'La Libérrima' y la Reforma de 1896," Asamblea Nacional de la República de Nicaragua, 1893.

Although some scholars emphasise the financial motivations for the reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and religion, the secular norms implemented during this period in Latin America also had wide-ranging impacts in the political and public spheres.[21] Measures such as the transfer of religious property, and the centralisation of public services such as basic education or the registration of births, marriages and deaths certainly reinforced the dominance of the state (and its economy), while the refusal to recognise a state religion also opened the door to other confessional groups, such as Protestants, establishing themselves in the area.[22] A further consequence was the provision of socio-economic rights and guarantees to foreigners (European immigrants, monastic orders, and traders), which represented a sign of modernity and development for Latin American political elites.[23]

In addition, a combative and anticlerical attitude among political elites (*laicismo*), mostly in opposition to the Catholic Church, was underpinned by the demand for an autonomous public space in which political institutions no longer derive their legitimacy from religious authority.[24] According to Kuru, assertive secularism would be common in countries where there is a hegemonic religion, a monarchical background, a perceived alliance between these actors, and a successful republican movement. In cases of assertive secularism, Kuru argues that the state plays an assertive role in excluding religion from the public sphere, and confining it to the private domain. This is in contrast to a passive secularism model, where the state plays a passive role, allowing public visibility of religion. In this perspective, Mexico provides an example of assertive secularism in the Americas, while the passive type corresponds to the status quo in the United States of America.[25]

Other nations such as Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Panama, and the Dominican Republic did officially recognise

21 Gareth Williams, "Secularization in Latin America," *The Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Sangeeta Ray, and Henry Schwarz (Wiley Blackwell, 2016); Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*.
22 Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, 116.
23 Luis Eduardo Ramírez Suárez, "Una historia de la Iglesia Presbiteriana en Colombia. 1956–1993" (PhD diss., Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2020), 51.
24 Blancarte, "América Latina: Entre Pluri-Confesionalidad y Laicidad."
25 Ahmet T. Kuru, "Assertive and Passive Secularism: State Neutrality, Religious

Roman Catholicism as the state religion. They also maintained historical agreements with the clergy (concordats, patronage and bulls, as well as tax exemptions), respected the clergy's right to own property, and/or preserved religious references in the drafting of their constitutions (Table 2).[26] The 1870 Constitution of Paraguay for example, affirmed that "the religion of the State is the apostolic Roman Catholic Church" (Art. 3). It also urged the National Congress to promote the "conversion to Christianity" and "to civilisation" of the country's indigenous population (Art. 72), and dictated that, in the cases of both the presidency and the vice-presidency, "the candidate must be a native of the Republic" and "profess the Christian religion" (Art. 89). Despite this, the Paraguayan legal framework also guaranteed "the free exercise of any other religion" for both natives and foreigners, and restricted the political participation of the clergy (Art. 69).[27] It is interesting to note that, despite making confessional concessions, even these political systems imposed liberal laws to strengthen the state's own position, joining the liberal wave of the period.

Table 2. Religious and Secular Policies in Latin American Countries, 1853–1907

Constitution	Religious Policies			Secular Policies			
	i)	*ii)*	*iii)*	*iv)*	*v)*	*vi)*	*vii*
1853 Argentina	Art. 2	Art 83	Art. 77, Text	Art. 62	Art. 14	-	Art. 20
1864 Venezuela	Art. 14	Art. 98	-	-	Art. 14	-	-
1867 Peru	Art. 3	Art. 85, 59	Text	Art. 49	-	-	-
1870 Paraguay	Art. 3, 89, 72	Art. 102	Art. 93, Text	Art. 69	Art. 18, 3	-	Art. 33
1871 Costa Rica	Art. 66	Art. 109	Art. 138	Art. 36	-	-	Art. 12
1878 Bolivia	Art. 2	Art. 17, 89, 111	Text	Art. 45	-	Art. 89	-
1904 Panama	Art. 26	Art. 43	Art. 71, Text	Art. 135	Art. 26	-	-
1907 Dom. Republic	Art. 9	Art. 48	Art. 46, 96	-	Art. 9	-	-

Articles in national constitutions providing for: *i)* State recognition of a religion (Catholicism); *ii)* agreements with the clergy: concordats, patronage, bulls, tax exemption, and respect for properties; *iii)* other mentions: oaths, religious promotion, etc.; *iv)* restriction of religious actors' political participation; *v)* freedom of religion (cult or conscience); *vi)* state authority over religious exercises; *vii)* rights and guarantees (religious freedom) for foreigners. Text: not limited to a specific article.

Demography, and the Muslim Minority in the United States," in *The Future of Religious Freedom: Global Challenges*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Online, 2013).

26 Religious references also remained in several liberal documents, in some cases until the present day. See: Edgar Gonzalez Ruiz, "La Iglesia y Las Leyes En América Latina," *Red Voltaire*, May 1, 2004.

27 Paraguay, "Constitución de Paraguay 1870," Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 1870.

The hegemony of the Catholic Church, which operated as a political actor throughout Latin America, accounts for the anticlerical attitudes that sometimes arose in response to it in the political arena. At the same time, the predominance of Catholic religiosity at societal level in these nations may also explain the maintenance of the status quo in some constitutions, and the acceptance of agreements and rapprochements between the state and the religious domain in times of conflict. Such agreements often involved the government appropriating religious symbols and rituals to legitimise their actions.[28] Mallimaci argues that the political elites were not anti-religious per se, but that they were confronted with the increasingly Romanised and anti-liberal Catholic apparatus, as a challenge to their own authority. These ruling classes thus sought to destroy clerical power, through institutional marginalisation, criticism, and privatisation of the religious, as well as through the clear differentiation of spheres, and the creation of a secular and civil morality over and above any religious tradition.[29] Securing the autonomy of the political sphere was no easy task considering that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholics made up 95% (or more) of the total population in most of the countries. In just four nations, Catholics made up less than 90% of the total population: Colombia (80%), Ecuador (88%), Panama (84%) and Uruguay (61%) (Table 3).

In 1910, 94% of the population of Latin America identified as Catholic, whereas only 1% identified as Protestant. Non-religious persons represented a minor proportion of the population.[30] This indicates that the secularism implemented during the liberal upsurge did not correspond with low levels of religiosity in society as a whole. In fact, a substantial aim of the liberal factions was to promote the pluralisation and secularisation of society, although this effort was sometimes unsuccessful. The return of conservative groups to power diminished secular initiatives, and returned

28 Cruz Esquivel and Mallimaci, "Políticas y Religiones En América Latina y El Caribe: Recomposiciones Históricas, Epistemológicas y Conceptuales."

29 Fortunato Mallimaci, "Catolicismo y Liberalismo: Las Etapas Del Enfrentamiento Por La Definición de La Modernidad Religiosa En América Latina," in *La Modernidad Religiosa: Europa Latina y América Latina En Perspectiva Comparada*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bastian (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 28–29.

30 Pew Research Center, "Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region," Washington, D.C., November 13, 2014, http://pewrsr.ch/1BaP6g0.

the guiding state ideologies to their former conservative orientations. The case of Colombia is an illustrative example of this, as political struggles led to the signing of a more religion-friendly constitution in 1886, which entwined the state with Catholicism, going against the secular framework stipulated in the 1863 constitution. Colombia had a growing Catholic population until late in the twentieth century (Table 3).

Table 3. Percentage of the Catholic population in Latin America, 1910–2014

Country	1910	1950	1970	2014	1910-1970 Diff	1970-2014 Diff.
Argentina	97	95	91	71	-6	-20
Bolivia	94	94	89	77	-5	-12
Brazil	95	93	92	61	-3	-31
Chile	96	89	76	64	-20	-12
Colombia	80	91	95	79	15	-16
Costa Rica	99	98	93	62	-6	-31
Dominican Rep.	98	96	94	57	-4	-37
Ecuador	88	98	95	79	7	-16
El Salvador	98	99	93	50	-5	-43
Guatemala	99	99	91	50	-8	-41
Honduras	97	96	94	46	-3	-48
Mexico	99	96	96	81	-3	-15
Nicaragua	96	96	93	50	-3	-43
Panama	84	87	87	70	3	-17
Paraguay	97	96	95	90	-2	-5
Peru	95	95	95	76	0	-19
Puerto Rico	100	94	87	56	-13	-31
Uruguay	61	62	63	42	2	-21
Venezuela	93	91	93	73	0	-20

Based on Pew Research Center survey *Religion in Latin America. Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region:* "1910, 1950 and 1970 estimates are from the World Religion Database and the Brazilian and Mexican censuses." Note: a grey background across a row indicates that the country had implemented a secular constitution (see Table 1).

In the twentieth century, political, social, and economic crises were also decisive factors in the weakening of the secular norms previously established by liberal regimes in Latin America. The 1929 global economic depression precipitated political instability among national oligarchies, and facilitated a rapprochement with the religious domain. Roberto Blancarte

maintains that this type of crisis revealed that the secular foundations built by liberal groups were not entirely solid, and that Latin American states had not dispensed with religious authority. On the contrary, all the "symbolic power of the Catholic Church" had remained intact and ready to rebuild in the following years.[31] Blancarte cites the period between 1930 and 1980 as one of "Catholic nationalism," with moral concordats signed throughout Latin America, albeit with exceptions in Mexico, Uruguay and Cuba.

In the late twentieth century, despite such concordat agreements, the entire Latin American region saw a decline in Catholic affiliation, the pronounced growth of Protestantism, and the significantly increasing visibility of non-religious people. In 1970, 92% of the region's population identified as Catholic and 4% as Protestant; by 2014, the proportion of Catholics had dropped to 69%, that of Protestants had risen to 19%, and religious disaffiliation had grown to 8%. Other studies, such as the Latinobarometro, show even fewer Catholics (59%), and even more people identifying their religion as "none" (17%) in recent years.[32]

Casanova argues that such religious diversification entails not only a deregulation of religion, but also the emergence of "voluntarism," and the breakdown of the organic unit of social Catholicism in the region. In terms of the process that made these circumstances possible, he points to structural shifts such as urbanisation, migration, and democratisation, accompanied by the willingness of the Catholic Church to "give up its monopolistic territorial claims and its identity as a state church." In that regard, he said:

> What took place in Latin America was the simultaneous occurrence of a double reformation, namely the emergence and growth of a Pentecostal form of Reformed Protestant Christianity and the reformation of Catholic Christianity [Vatican II and the Medellin Bishops Conference]. The most important consequence of this double reformation was the initiation of a process of religious pluralization, which has transformed the culture of Latin American societies and has contributed to the formation of more open and pluralistic civil societies.[33]

31 Blancarte, "América Latina: Entre Pluri-Confesionalidad y Laicidad."
32 Latinobarómetro, "El papa Francisco y la religión en Chile y América Latina."
33 José Casanova, "Parallel Reformations in Latin America: A Critical Review of David Martin's Interpretation of the Pentecostal Revolution," in *David Martin and the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Hans Joas (London: Routledge, 2018), 88.

Casanova also affirms that religious pluralism in Latin America has implied an only limited secularisation, assuming that the critique of religion and the premises of the theory of secularisation principally affected elites, rather than the 'masses.' This assumption seems to be supported by statistics on a few aspects of religious beliefs and affiliation in the various national contexts. Table 4 shows that belief in a God is nearly universal in Latin America (99%), while the average (statistical mode) religious affiliation is lower, at 93%. Despite these figures, however, I disagree that one can say that there is only limited secularisation in the region. There is in fact a growing presence of both a non-religious population, and of individuals lacking a high degree of religious commitment – among whom there tends to be greater adherence to secular values.[34] One can also emphasise the secular notions incorporated as a social ideal in the region, especially in those societies that have historically subscribed to the liberal conception of the state.

Table 4. Official Religious Status and Religious Indicators in Latin America

Country	Official religious status	% Believing in God	% Religious affiliation	% High religious commitment index	% Who say religion should be kept separate from government policies	% Who say religious leaders should have "no influence at all" in political matters
Argentina	*State (Catholic) religion established*	93	89	13	54	24
Costa Rica		98	91	41	47	30
Panama	*Recognition of Catholic Church (constitutionally)*	98	93	28	53	9
Peru		98	96	25	51	19
Paraguay		99	99	21	44	18
El Salvador		99	88	51	43	38
Guatemala		>99	94	62	47	29
Venezuela	*Catholic Church (concordat or legally favoured)*	99	93	17	54	21
Brazil		99	92	31	63	27
Dominican Rep.		99	82	41	41	37
Honduras		99	90	53	54	37
Bolivia	*Secular*	99	96	26	49	25
Colombia		99	94	39	50	28
Nicaragua		>99	93	44	54	49
Mexico		94	93	18	75	38
Ecuador		98	95	26	67	36
Uruguay		81	63	10	76	57
Chile		92	84	13	71	35

Official religious status based on analysis of national constitutions. Religious indicators taken from the Pew Research Center survey *Religion in Latin America. Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region* (2014), given as a percentage of total population.

34 Carlos Nazario Mora Duro, "Población Sin Religión," in *Diccionario de Religiones En América Latina,* ed. Roberto Blancarte (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 475–85.

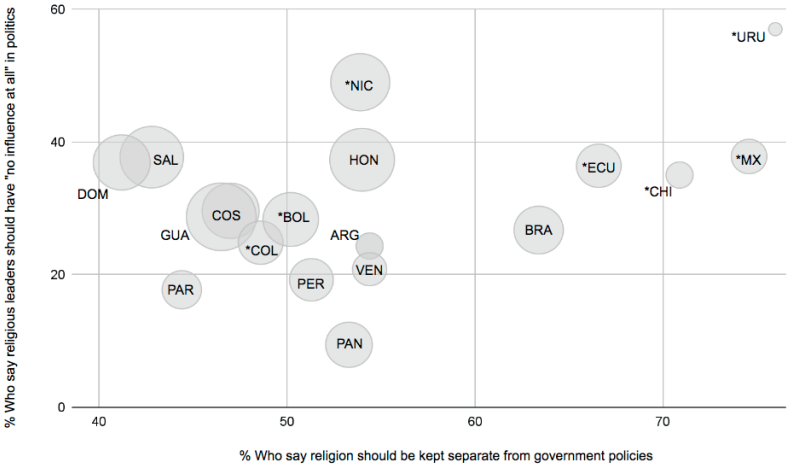
Today, some Latin American countries (Argentina, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, El Salvador, Guatemala, Venezuela, Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Honduras) have agreements with, or have given some constitutional recognition to, the Catholic Church. However, only Argentina and Costa Rica maintain Catholicism as their official state religion. Article 2 of the Argentinian constitution provides that "the Federal Government supports the apostolic Roman Catholic religion."[35] By contrast, there is also a group of secular nations (Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, Mexico, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Chile), which do not recognise any religion, provide for freedom of conscience, and have no (legal) agreements with any church. In particular, Mexico and Ecuador explicitly reference the concept of the secular state in their constitutions (*Estado laico*). Article 1 of the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution affirms that "Ecuador is a constitutional state of rights and justice, social, democratic, sovereign, independent, unitary, intercultural, multinational and secular."[36]

Naturally, the stipulation of secular policies in the legal framework does not mean their automatic assimilation in the public sphere. What I would like to stress, however, is the feedback loop between the secular ideology (secularism) historically implemented by the state, and the adoption of secular values in the contemporary social imaginary (secularity). Figure 2 shows how the autonomy of the religious and political spheres – expressed by the agreement with sentences such as "religion should be kept separate from government policies," and religious leaders should have "no influence at all" in politics – generally resonates more strongly in countries that adopted secular regimes at or after the end of the nineteenth century (Uruguay, Mexico, Chile, Ecuador, and Nicaragua). This effect is lessened in states with high levels of religious affiliation (Bolivia and Colombia).

35 Argentina, "Constitución de la Nación Argentina sancionada en 1853," Información Legislativa, 1995, https://bit.ly/38qb2eO.

36 Ecuador, "Constitución de la República del Ecuador 2008," Organization of American States, 2008, https://bit.ly/3LmJMfY.

Figure 2. Statements on Religious-State Separation in Latin American Countries



Data taken from the Pew Research Center survey *Religion in Latin America. Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region* (2014). Note: * indicates national states with a current secular constitution. The bubble size is proportional to the percentage that exhibits high religious commitment (praying daily, attending worship services at least once a week, and considering religion "very important" in life).

We must consider that secular ideas in Latin America are mainly supported and reinforced by national elites and the so-called "international intelligentsia"[37] using their repertoire of symbols and the authority of their opinions in public discourse. However, this secularism is also supported in the social imaginary of the population as a whole, which has assimilated principles such as state autonomy as a social and democratic ideal. One can understand the counter-secularising movements advocating for a conservative agenda in the public sphere as an assertive response to this context of a perceived secularity supported by legal policies, national elites, and some segments of the population. Some scholars have suggested that, to gain political traction, conservative activists have incorporated secular

37 Peter Berger, "Secularization and De-Secularization," in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations,* ed. Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, and David Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 339.

rhetoric into their discourse, especially when religious arguments have tended to fall flat.[38]

At this juncture, I would like to reiterate the complex convergence of different elements of the relationship between religion and politics in Latin America: 1) the – in some cases assertive – historical secularism in the political arena, and its reflection in the secularity of the social and public spheres; 2) the emerging context of religious pluralism, which is challenging the status quo, as it involves the coexistence of different religions; in addition to the religious and secular discourses in both individual and collective consciousness; 3) the counter-secularising reaction in the public space, against the (perceived) advance of the secular agenda in the local and the global context; and, 4) the role of conflict in the political arena, which may undermine a stable state authority, and thus lead to a rapprochement between politics and religion.

The next section will explore these factors in the case of Mexico. Particular attention is paid to the historical boundaries between religion and politics during the nineteenth century, as well as the current emerging religious pluralism in the country, and its intersection with social and political conflicts, in addition to the conservative reaction in the public sphere. As per Casanova, it should be assumed that secularisation processes are diverse, and have distinct dynamics and results in different societies and different periods.[39] As such, due caution is needed when extrapolating these findings beyond their stated context.

3 Mexican Historical Context

After the conquest of the American territories, the Spanish monarchy established an agreement with the Vatican, defining the terms of their collaboration through the *Patronato Real* of 1501. In particular, this arrangement included a ban on indigenous rituals and celebrations, with this prohibition extended to the beliefs of the so-called Lutheran heresy,

38 Morán Faúndes, "El Desarrollo Del Activismo Autodenominado 'Pro-Vida' En Argentina, 1980–2014"; José Manuel Morán Faúndes, "Religión, Secularidad y Activismo Héteropatriarcal:¿ Qué Sabemos Del Activismo Opositor a Los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos En Latinoamérica?," *La Ventana: Revista de Estudios de Género* 5, no. 47 (2018): 97–138.

39 José Casanova, "Epílogo," in *Religiones y Espacios Públicos En América Latina*, ed. Renée De la Torre, and Pablo Semán (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2021).

the Islamic religion, and the Jewish faith. This made Catholicism the only confession allowed in the controlled territory.[40]

As in other nations in the area, the independence movement in Mexico began in the early nineteenth century (here, from 1810 to 1821). The subsequent process of state formation led to confrontation between conservative and liberal forces in the political arena, including a reaction of the Catholic Church against changes to the status quo. The first Mexican Republican Constitution was adopted in 1824. This document established the "Roman, Catholic, and Apostolic" confession "permanently" as the national religion (Art. 3).[41] Constitutional revisions in subsequent years (1836 and 1843) maintained this religious orientation until the 1857 Constitution, which, based on liberal ideology, defined boundaries between the state and the religious domain. It has previously been argued that this process occurred because liberals had by then accumulated enough power to establish their political project.[42] Through some historical illustrations, I contend that the strengthening of the liberal position coincided with the rise of anti-clericalism in the public sphere.

Throughout Mexican history, there have been a number of public confrontations between the state and the Catholic Church, which was commonly associated with the nation's colonial past. According to novelist Guillermo Prieto, in 1837, Ignacio Ramírez declared the non-existence of God before a public audience of young intellectuals engaged in literary and scientific discussions, at the Academy of San Juan de Letran in Mexico City.[43] Despite this secular academic framing, his audience would have been educated in the ecclesiastical culture – the only possibility in

40 Carlos Garma, "Laicidad, Secularización y Pluralismo religioso, una herencia cuestionada," *Revista del Centro de Investigación Universidad La Salle* 9, no. 36 (2011).

41 Mexico, "Constitución de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos de 4 de octubre de 1824," Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 1824, https://bit.ly/397RM67.

42 Francisco José Paoli Bolio, *Constitucionalismo En El Siglo XXI. A Cien Años de La Aprobación de La Constitución de 1917*, Colección INEHRM (Mexico City: INEHRM, Secretaría de la Cultura, Senado de la República, IIJ UNAM, 2016).

43 Ignacio Ramírez (1818-1879) was a writer, poet, journalist, and lawyer, who wrote under the pen name *el Nigromante* (the necromancer). He was called the "prophet of liberalism" by Mexican liberal Ignacio Manuel Altamirano. According to Prieto, during the public audience, Ramírez recited various writers and philosophers such as Virgil, Herodotus, François Rabelais, Voltaire and the encyclopaedists.

Mexico's early decades of the nineteenth century – and were shocked by the speech. Among the attendees, one even laid hands on Ramírez's head as if simulating baptism.[44]

A similarly combative attitude among the liberal generation of this period also appears in the political speech of Benito Juárez García, deputy minister of the Mexican Supreme Court in 1840, who a few years later would become president of Mexico:

> You well know, fellow citizens, that Spain subjugated Mexico with the right of the strongest. Its empire, founded on injustice, could only be sustained by injustice. [...] [Spain] mixed politics with religion to confer upon its maxims with a veneration given only to God. It systematised intolerance and fanaticism, and anyone who dared to claim his rights or attack the abuses of power with the weapons of enlightened reason received the scaffold or the stake as the only satisfaction for his claims. Such is the conduct that Spain observed to dominate us. Isolate, corrupt, intimidate, and divide: these were the maxims of its cruel policy. And what was the result of all this? Our misery, our brutalisation, our degradation, and our slavery, for three hundred years.[45]

In 1858, the construction of a street in Mexico City led to a confrontation between political and ecclesiastical powers. The bishop of the city strongly opposed the urban project, as it required the demolition of much of the Convent of San Francisco. On the day of construction, a group of priests displayed crosses, and threatened the construction workers with excommunication. Nevertheless, the governor of Mexico City, Juan José Baz – known as the 'lyricist of Jacobinism' – employed a musical band that played the harangue *Los cangrejos* [The crabs], "Tyranny is dead, nowadays only the exalted majesty of the Constitution will reign. That is why the people shout angrily at those who pretend to rule *ad libitum*: crabs, back off!" In the presence of such musical exaltation, the workers continued their demolition of the sacred site.[46]

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44 Guillermo Prieto, *Memorias de Mis Tiempos. Tomo I: 1828 a 1840* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 1906), 189–91.

45 Benito Juárez, *Miscelánea: Comunicados, respuestas, iniciativas, dictámenes, informes y brindis*, 1st ed. facsimile (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 2009), 7–8.

46 Gabriel Zaid, *Ómnibus de poesía mexicana: La Creación literaria* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1971), 170.

As evident from historical records, clashes between Mexican liberals and the Catholic Church were not uncommon in the nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that the recognition of state autonomy, and the privatisation of religion, were accompanied by the criticism and marginalisation of religious institutions, and the attempted strengthening of a civil religion.[47] The 1857 Constitution contributed to the liberals' objectives, restricting the political participation of religious actors, and proclaiming the authority of the state over religious activities and the control of religious property (Table 1). Despite this, lawmakers stopped short of proclaiming freedom of cult in the nation in view of the still prevalent theocratic spirit, which still sought to impose its values and legislation on the public order.[48] Carlos Monsiváis – called the 'last liberal' in intellectual circles – described the situation of the Mexican nation as follows.

> If religious atmospheres were still very powerful in nineteenth-century Mexico, they no longer had the alliance of the Spanish monarchy and the Pope, and the irrefutable authority of the clergy. God still exists, and powerfully, but priests are no longer divine particles, while secularisation is nourished by transformations in politics, culture, and behaviour. In politics, the liberals of the Reformation set the secular Republic in opposition to fanaticism (theocracy); in culture, the monolithic mentality of the Counter-Reformation was being diluted in the intellectual sector thanks to French culture, socialist texts, liberal or libertarian literature; in behaviour, the reduction of guilt in the area of sexuality was of paramount importance. Of course, the above process is uneven and combined.[49]

The Catholic Church reacted to these social changes in various ways, including the financing of an armed uprising against the Mexican state, and a negative campaign to demonise liberal ideas, through sermons, pamphlets, and newspapers, with the aim of sowing fear among the population. According to Anne Staples, the conservative reaction propagated the idea that secularity and modernity would lead to the end of both religion and the

47 Mallimaci, "Catolicismo y Liberalismo: Las Etapas Del Enfrentamiento Por La Definición de La Modernidad Religiosa En América Latina."

48 Ricardo García Granados, *La Constitución de 1857 y Las Leyes de Reforma En México* (Mexico City: Tipografía Económica, 1906).

49 Carlos Monsiváis, "Notas sobre el destino (a fin de cuentas venturoso) del laicismo en México," *Fractal* 7, no. 21 (2002).

traditional family in Mexico. But beyond the fear of a nation cut loose from religion (and traditional values), the clergy seemed most fundamentally afraid of losing the prerogatives inherited from colonial times, and of the undermining of their authority over political decision-making and moral values in the public sphere. Nineteenth-century Mexico painted a bleak picture for the Church, which not only had to coexist and compete with ideologies such as liberalism, atheism, and Freemasonry, but also had to take refuge in its temples, or face the hostility of governments bent on appropriating its goods and ending its influence.[50]

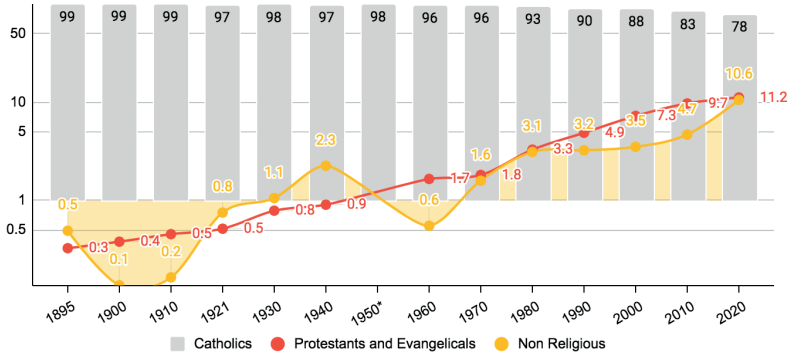
Mexican liberals did not give up on their secular agenda, and in the mid-nineteenth century they reinforced the secularism newly codified in the constitutional legal framework. In 1859, the national administration, headed by President Benito Juárez (1858-1872), enacted the *Leyes de Reforma*. These laws established the nationalisation of Church property, government control of cemeteries, hospitals, and civil registration, as well as the recognition of cult freedom, which indirectly allowed the legal entry of different religious denominations into the country. These policies insisted on a belligerent separation between the state and the Catholic Church. For example, the Nationalisation of Religious Property Law affirmed that the clergy had been a constant hindrance to the quest for peace, as they had openly fought against the "sovereign authority," and squandered the resources that believers had given them to use for sacred objectives. Despite this, according to Galeana, the liberal politicians established an "anti-clerical, but not anti-Catholic" reform."[51] In fact, most of these liberals were Catholics, and they were aware of the weight of religion and religiosity during this period. In the late nineteenth century, Catholicism was near-universal in the nation. This remained practically unchanged until the mid-twentieth century, when both non-belief and other Christian denominations began to take off (Fig. 3).[52]

50 Anne Staples, "El Miedo a La Secularización o Un País Sin Religión: México 1821–1859," in *Una Historia de Los Usos Del Miedo*, ed. Pilar Gonzalbo, Anne Staples, and Valentina Torres (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2009).

51 Patricia Galeana, "A 150 Años de La Creación Del Estado Laico En México," *Archipiélago: Revista Cultural de Nuestra América* 17, no. 66 (2009): 20.

52 "Censo de Población y Vivienda 2020," Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2020, https://bit.ly/37Pa0cA.

Figure 3. Catholics, Protestants and Evangelicals, and Non-Religious Persons in Mexico, 1895–2020 (%)



Based on national censuses (INEGI). Note: Non-religious and Protestants and Evangelicals were not registered in 1950. Figure has a logarithmic scale.

Mexico managed to maintain its secular political outlook in the face of struggles such as the second French intervention of 1864 – an invasion launched by the Second French Empire – encouraged by the Catholic Church as a move against the liberal Mexican government. Some scholars have noted that, by the twentieth century, the political interventions of the Catholic Church had even become a factor in Mexico's combative secularism.[53] An illustration of this was the Catholic support for Victoriano Huerta's counter-revolutionary government (1913-1914), which overthrew president Francisco I. Madero, and was held responsible for his execution. This act triggered a more violent phase of the revolution, radicalising its anti-clerical character.[54] After these confrontations, the 1917 Constitution reformed the previous legislation, extending secular measures such as freedom of belief, and abolishing any religious reference within the text. Article 24 affirmed that "every man is free to profess the religious belief of his choice, and to practise the ceremonies, devotions or observances of the

53 Enrique Canudas Sandoval, "El Conflicto Iglesia-Estado Durante La Revolución Mexicana," *Biblioteca Jurídica Virtual IIJ-UNAM*, 2012, 141–74.
54 Galeana, "A 150 Años de La Creación Del Estado Laico En México," 20.

respective faith, in temples or in his private home, provided that they do not constitute a crime or infraction punishable by law."[55]

Some researchers maintain that the 1917 Constitution represented the most extreme case of state control over religion in Latin America, with Mexican liberals establishing the ideological dominance of assertive secularism. This political ideology, as described by Kuru,[56] is a common feature of countries where there is a hegemonic religion (such as Catholicism in Mexico), a monarchical background (Spanish colonialism), a perceived alliance between these two actors, and a successful republican movement against them (such as that of the nineteenth century). It was not until the government of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), however, that the Mexican anti-clerical agenda was aggressively and practically applied, leading to the religious rebellion *La Guerra de los Cristeros* in the late 1920s.

In 1926, President Elías Calles, who had been a general in the Mexican Revolution, began enforcing the anti-clerical clauses of the 1917 Constitution. The Church responded by banning Catholic mass in the country for three years. Against this background a rebellion broke out, with a guerrilla movement fighting for the glory of "Christ the King," allied with rural elements fighting for agrarian reform. The insurgency ended in 1929, when the episcopate negotiated a truce with the government, on the understanding that anti-clerical legislation would be more leniently applied. According to Gill, "the Cristero Rebellion once again demonstrated the mobilizing power of religion and reminded politicians that the total subjugation of religion to the state was not possible."[57]

After this episode, over the course of the twentieth century, the federal government's stance morphed from one of direct confrontation with the Catholic Church, to a *modus vivendi* relationship, characterised by a more conciliatory implementation of secular policies. As Blancarte emphasises, "[this] conciliation led to the episcopate slowly regaining some of its power in certain places. Then, as the regime was weakened, the Church passed from a justificatory to a critical or supervising institution of the

55 Mexico, *Texto original de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos de 1917* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, 1917), 150, https://bit.ly/3yxAcDl.
56 Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion*, 24.
57 Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, 153–54.

revolutionary regime, recovering part of its influence."[58] This situation contributed to a convergence of the state and religion, especially in the context of legitimising government decisions. To illustrate this point, when, in 1938, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) – one of the most anti-clerical rulers of the post-revolutionary period – nationalised the oil industry, he did so with support of the Catholic Church. Scholars postulate that political elites in Mexico understood that, beyond the secular agenda, *de facto* cooperation with religious actors paid greater dividends for their interests, as long as secularism remained intact *de jure*. Goodrich describes an episode related to these accommodations:

> In 1979, for example, when Pope John Paul II made his first pilgrimage to Mexico, priests were still legally banned from wearing clerical collars in public, owning property, or voting. Incredibly, government officials claimed that the Pope violated Mexican law by wearing his habit. (But in a gesture that exemplifies the complex relationship between the Mexican church and state, then President Jose Lopez Portillo himself offered to pay the 50 pesos fine.)[59]

This ambivalent governmental entanglement with religion persisted until the 1992 constitutional reforms (known collectively as *Ley Reglamentaria*). In 1988, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari came to power amid accusations of electoral fraud, and the support of Pope John Paul II was an important legitimising factor for his regime.[60] His *Ley Reglamentaria* implied a turning point in Mexican secularism, insofar as it recognised religious associations, and the Church's possession of goods and property, whilst still maintaining the separation between the state and the Church. In fact, from 1917 to 1992, the Catholic Church and other confessional institutions had no formal existence within Mexico's legal framework. To some extent, the 1992 reform allowed the state to reassert its dominance, and, with a more accurate registration of religious associations, the regime was also able to mediate conflicts between religious groups and individuals. For some authors, this legal change challenged the simulation

58 Blancarte, "América Latina: Entre Pluri-Confesionalidad y Laicidad," 202.
59 Luke Goodrich, "Mexico's Separation of Church and State," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2010, https://on.wsj.com/3N5vFfq.
60 Mauricio Torres, "1992: El año en que Juan Pablo II y Carlos Salinas 'hicieron clic'," *Expansión*, April 21, 2014, https://bit.ly/3akj2io.

that the state and church had no agreements at all and, in fact, led to the legal recognition and visibility of more religious associations,[61] resulting in increased religious freedom. Anthony Gill states:

> Through patience and persistence, the Catholic clergy finally emerged from under such onerous burdens. In the process of securing their freedom, they also opened the door for other denominations, namely Protestants who had been almost invisibly creeping into Mexican society, to gain a foothold in the country.[62]

In the twenty-first century, Mexico has consolidated its democracy, as evidenced by the transfer of power to political parties that must find *new* forms of legitimacy. In 2000, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost the presidential election after more than 70 years in power, transferring the administration (for two terms, between 2000 and 2012) to the National Action Party (PAN), which is associated with a Catholic base. PAN leaders exhibited various confessional expressions, and promoted legal amendments in favour of the Catholic Church.[63] In 2011, President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), supported by the clergy and political forces from PRI and PAN, proposed reforming Article 24 of the constitution, on religious freedom. The originally proposed wording of the amendment involved substantial concessions to the Church, in communication, politics, and education, while stating that "the democratic constitutional state is secular, and therefore should not disregard or ignore personal or religious convictions."[64] After the political debate, in which national secularism was reaffirmed, the amendment incorporated only the freedom of ethical conviction and conscience into its legal wording. Some experts say, this may contribute to legal uncertainty, insofar as "ethical conviction" could be used to deny civil rights to social minorities.

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61 José Galindo, "Las reformas en la relación Iglesia-Estado durante el periodo del presidente Salinas," *Biblioteca Jurídica Virtual IIJ-UNAM* 27747, 2012, 465–75.

62 Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, 116.

63 Bernardo Barranco, "Laicidad del Estado en Felipe Calderón," *Milenio Diario*, April 24, 2019, https://bit.ly/3t9vfgF.

64 Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión, "Decreto Por El Que Se Reforma El Artículo 24 de La Constitución Política de Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos," DOF- 19-07-2013 § Comisión de puntos constitucionales (2013), 2, https://bit.ly/3GMN0YK.

> Article 24. Every person has the right to have freedom of ethical convictions, of conscience and of religion, and to have or to adopt, as the case may be, the one of her preference. Such freedom includes the right to participate, individually or collectively, in both public and private ceremonies, worship or religious acts of the respective cult, as long as they are not a felony or a misdemeanor punished by law. No person is allowed to use these public acts of religious expression with political ends, for campaigning or as means of political propaganda. Congress cannot dictate laws that establish or abolish any given religion. Ordinarily, all religious acts will be practiced in temples, and those that extraordinarily are practiced outside temples must adhere to law.[65]

In the twenty-first century, one can note that the use of confessional tones in the political sphere frequently triggers alarm bells in the Mexican public sphere, and calls to protect the sacred tradition of secularism. I deliberately use the adjective 'sacred' here, referring to an object or space (within the civil religion) that must not be disturbed, being founded on the *blood of our ancestors*. Galeana suggests, in this vein, that the religious sympathies of the transitional governments have violated "the Mexican secular state," and revived the conflict that "cost so much blood 150 years ago" with its consequent effects on democracy and on the "peaceful coexistence of society."[66] Considering this secular spirit, Article 40 of the Mexican Constitution was again reformed in 2012, adding the attribute of secular (*laica*) to the legal definition of the Republic.

> Article 40. It is in the will of the Mexican people to constitute into a representative, democratic, secular, federal, Republic, made up by free and sovereign States in everything related to its domestic regime, but united in a federation established according to the principles of this fundamental law.[67]

In the view of several analysts, the secular state (*estado laico*) in Mexico was "at risk" from the convergence of the Catholic Church and the PAN governments, necessitating the 2012 reform as a defensive manoeuvre.[68]

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65 Mexico, "Mexico 1917 (Rev. 2015) Constitution," trans. M. Fernanda Gomez Aban, Comparative Constitutions Project, 2015, https://bit.ly/3PZ5LMs.
66 Galeana, "A 150 Años de La Creación Del Estado Laico En México," 20.
67 Mexico, "Mexico 1917 (Rev. 2015) Constitution."
68 Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa, "Laicismo indispensable," *El Siglo de Torreón*,

Goodrich, by contrast, suggests that the amendment was, in reality, one of the latest attempts "to suppress the Catholic Church's ability to engage in public policy debates."[69] Interestingly, this sense of alarm appears with regard to the public influence of not only the Catholic Church, but also of other Christian denominations, such as Protestants and Evangelicals, who in 2021 represented 11.2% of the Mexican population (13.31 million people).[70] Indeed, scholars such as de la Torre note that these "Christian minorities" are now more active in claiming their space in public discussion. She believes that this activism could hinder "a healthy secularism" and a "pluralistic culture," when religious groups partner with confessional parties and conservative civil associations, in order to deny or inhibit the rights and freedoms of other social minorities.[71] Other researchers, however, criticise this representation of non-Catholic Christians as a threat to social coexistence and secularism. They see this view as blurring individual agency, characterising believers as alienated and subordinate actors – exemplified in expressions such as "the Christian brother votes (for) the Christian brother" – when, in fact, Christian communities are not homogeneous, and most of them do not identify with religious organisations active in the political arena.[72] There are even some tenets of secularism, such as the autonomy of the state, that are also core values for both adherents and leaders of Protestant and Evangelical churches.[73]

February 9, 2010, https://bit.ly/3GFsCZs.

69 Goodrich, "Mexico's Separation of Church and State."

70 Protestants and Evangelical Christians is a category of the Mexican census that aggregates 28 different non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Catholic denominations such as Mennonites, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, *Luz del Mundo*, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Protestants. See: "Clasificación de religiones 2020," Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, Obras complementarias publicadas por el INEGI sobre el tema: Clasificación de religiones 2010 (2020), https://bit.ly/3GyHBUU.

71 Reneé de la Torre, "Alianzas Interreligiosas Que Retan La Laicidad En México," *Revista Rupturas* 9, no. 1 (2019): 162.

72 Carlos Garma, "Religión y Política En Las Elecciones Del 2018: Evangélicos Mexicanos y El Partido Encuentro Social," *Alteridades* 29, no. 57 (2019).

73 Perla Rocío Inclán Padrón, "No ruego que los quites del mundo, sino que los guardes del mal: La creciente participación política de los líderes evangélicos en Querétaro" (Master Thesis. Querétaro: Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, 2020), 242, https://bit.ly/3wV6iXj.

I suggest that the presence of these various religious groups represents a challenge to the (assertive) secularism, constructed to control the economic and political power of religion (originally meaning the Catholic Church), as these organisations seek to reinforce their own influence in the public space. This does not mean, however, that these churches represent a counter-secular force in a more general sense, since believers in these denominations may agree with the secular values established as social codes. Broadly speaking, identification with certain secular values is characteristic of contemporary Mexican society, associated with the influence of secularism on the imaginaries of the social sphere.

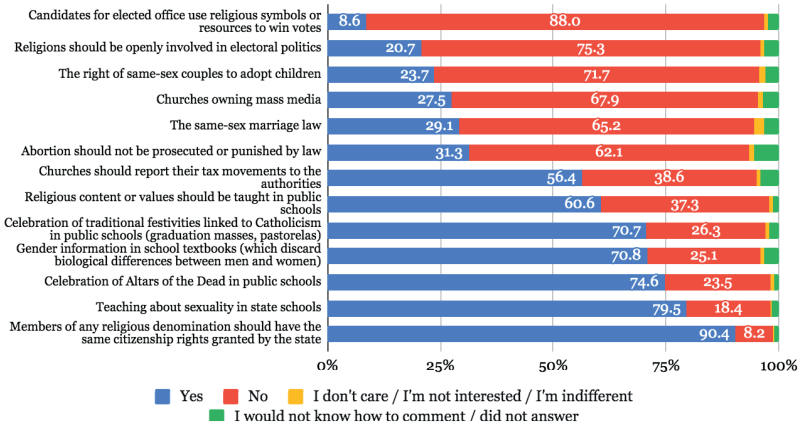
On perceptions of Church-state relations, the 2016 National Survey on Religious Beliefs and Practices in Mexico (Encreer) revealed that the majority of the population strongly rejects some key forms of intersection between politics and religion. Specifically, 88% disagree with the use of religious symbols and resources by electoral candidates, while 75.3% disagree with the open participation of religions (or their actors) in electoral processes.[74] One can interpret these results as a corroboration of state-defined secularism. De la Torre explains that "citizens want a secular state" that controls aspects such as religious access to the media, and the supervision of secular education.[75] We cannot, however, ignore the popularity of opinions in favour of the presence of religion in public spaces (Fig. 4). According to Encreer (2016), 70.7% agree with the celebration of religious festivities (mainly Catholics) in public schools, and 60.6% with the teaching of religious subjects in state education. A similarly mixed picture can be found in the results of the 2015 National Survey on Religion, Secularisation and Secularism. Here, 65.7% were found to disagree (to an extent) with the idea that religious ministers should discuss politics during religious services, but, at the same time, 63.8% were found to agree (to an extent) that politicians who do not believe in God should be unable to hold public office.[76]

74 Renée de la Torre, Alberto Hernández Hernández, and Cristina Gutiérrez Züñiga, *Encuesta Nacional sobre Creencias y Prácticas Religiosas en México: RIFREM 2016* (Mexico City: Red de Investigadores del Fenómeno Religiosos en México, 2016), 50.

75 Reneé de la Torre, "Alianzas Interreligiosas Que Retan La Laicidad En México," 171.

76 Pedro Salazar, Paulina Barrera, and Saúl Espino, "Encuesta Nacional de Religión, Secularización y Laicidad," (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de

Figure 4. Perceptions on Church-State Relations, Sexual Rights, and Religion in the Public Sphere



Source: ENCREER 2016. Question: Do you agree or disagree with the following?

The above observations indicate that Mexican state secularism has affected cultural and social secularity, e.g. in the acceptance of the values of separation of religion and politics or the state, without being incompatible with some religion-friendly views. As Berger proposes, in a pluralistic scenario, it is normal for people to "cope with reality in both secular and religious terms, and […] find ways (not necessarily coherent theoretically) of applying the two discourses in different parts of their lives."[77] It is possible that the imaginaries that welcome both secular and religious manifestations in the public sphere may promote this viewpoint in discussions of Mexican secularism, with the aim of fostering a passive secularism, i.e. a political ideology where the state plays a passive role, allowing the public visibility of religion.[78]

Figure 4 also represents views on key policies and sexual rights in Mexico. We can observe that a significant proportion of the population disagrees with the adoption of children by same-sex couples (71.7%), with the same-sex marriage law (65.2%), and with the decriminalisation of

México – Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, February 2016), 188.

77 Peter Berger, "The Hospital: On the Interface between Secularity and Religion," *Society* 52, no. 5 (2015): 410.

78 Kuru, "Assertive and Passive Secularism," 410.

abortion (62.1%). It should be noted that in Mexico, equal marriage is not allowed in several states, despite the fact that the Supreme Court of Justice declared in 2015 that local laws preventing it were unconstitutional. The legal termination of pregnancy has so far only been approved by 10 out of 32 states (October 2022).

Demonstrations by conservative organisations, including ecclesial bodies, have increased in recent years across different Latin American nations, under the pretext of defending traditional values, taking a stand against liberal policies and sexual rights. An example of this advocacy in Mexico is the National Front for the Family, a movement formed in 2016 in response to President Enrique Peña Nieto's (2012-2018) plan to recognise same-sex unions. This movement brought together leaders of the Catholic Church and other denominations, along with various conservative organisations, politicians, and, especially, a mass of demonstrators, all sharing demands such as the defence of the so-called "natural" family, and the right of parents to educate their children based on their own moral values, without the influence of state ideologies. In its description, the organisation emphasises its civil and religious character, and its popular support as a mass movement.

> The National Front for the Family (FNF) represents, in its own words, a mobilisation of "millions of parents and more than a thousand institutions of organised civil society" in Mexico, for the promotion and defence of "marriage, formed between a man and a woman, and the natural family" [...] "in Mexico 'the family be like that of Nazareth'."[79]

Conservative activism has even incorporated secular rhetoric into its discourse, to gain political traction, especially when religious arguments have tended to fall flat.[80] The concept of "strategic secularism" describes how conservative sectors combine secular and religious discourses to serve their own interests, based on supposedly scientific and rational evidence.[81] I would

79 Mora, "Tensiones de la laicidad en el espacio público," 56–57.

80 Morán Faúndes, "El Desarrollo Del Activismo Autodenominado 'Pro-Vida' En Argentina, 1980–2014"; Morán Faúndes, "Religión, Secularidad y Activismo Héteropatriarcal:¿ Qué Sabemos Del Activismo Opositor a Los Derechos Sexuales y Reproductivos En Latinoamérica?"

81 Juan Marco Vaggione, "Entre Reactivos y Disidentes: Desandando Las Fronteras Entre Lo Religioso y Lo Secular," *La Trampa de La Moral Única,*

maintain that this civil ecumenism on the defence of so-called 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' values constitutes the main counter-secularising reaction against the implementation and acceptance of progressive and secular policies in the social sphere of Latin American countries such as Mexico.

In summary, the separation of politics and religion in Mexico has led to the configuration of an assertive secularism – usually invoked as a sacred principle – in the political arena. Proponents of this view hold that religion should continue to be excluded from the public space at all costs, encouraging the immediate condemnation of any confessional statement, or relationship with religious actors, especially within the political sphere. Despite this, a convergence between the state and the church(es) does occur, especially when political actors require legitimisation in the context of political, social or economic conflicts, and as religious groups seek to increase their influence and presence in the public sphere. Some secular postulates, such as the separation of religion and state, are relevant in the wider social imaginary beyond political secularism. However, Mexican secularism has to coexist with counter-secularising reactionary movements, and prevalent religion-friendly views. In the next section, I analyse some discussions on secularism in Mexico during the government headed by President López Obrador (AMLO). Despite widespread criticism of AMLO's closeness to religious figures and the moral-religious character of his speeches, I will argue that the actions of his government ultimately appear to maintain and reaffirm the sacred precepts of Mexican secularism.

4 Secularism in the López Obrador Administration

The Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is often described as a political leftist and an economic nationalist.[82] He was a candidate in the 2006 and 2012 presidential elections, with strong popular support, but lost both elections in controversial circumstances: the ruling party (PAN) were accused of electoral fraud.[83] Suspicions of electoral fraud have been

Argumentos Para Una Democracia Laica (Lima: Línea Andina, 2005), 56–65.

82 George W. Grayson, "Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador: 2006 versus 2012 and Beyond," Newsletter, Hemisphere Focus (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012), https://bit.ly/3Q61tTu.

83 Irving Cortes-Martinez, "Mexico: Neoliberalism, Popular Grievances, and the Rise of Andrés Manuel López Obrador," Honors Theses 2279 (2019): 164. https://digitalworks.union.edu/theses/2279.

a feature of most electoral processes in Mexico since the late twentieth century, however.[84] In 2018, López Obrador won the election with a clear majority (30.11 million votes, 53% of all voters).

During his 2018 election campaign, AMLO formed the broad coalition *Juntos Haremos Historia* (Together We Will Make History), made up of left-wing political parties such as the PT (*Partido del Trabajo*), and MORENA (*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*), as well as other political and social forces such as the PES (*Partido Encuentro Social*), founded by a neo-Pentecostal pastor,[85] and the CONFRATERNICE (*Confraternidad Nacional de Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas*), which claims to unite some 7,000 Evangelical churches. López Obrador founded MORENA in 2014, notably choosing a name that evokes the religious image of the *Morena Virgen de Guadalupe* – the main Catholic image in the nation – as well as referencing the predominant *moreno* (dark) skin of the Mexican population.[86]

According to some literature, AMLO's 2018 victory was the result of a loss of public confidence in the governing classes' ability to respond to major national problems, such as organised crime, corruption, poverty, and inequality. 70 years of revolutionary party (PRI) governments, and two six-year terms (2006 and 2012) of the PAN, were seen to have failed to address these issues.[87] Against this background, López Obrador proposed a new regime based on social justice and the fight against corruption, using a discourse of moral government to solve structural issues. He defined his administration as the "Fourth Transformation" (4T) of public life in Mexico, after independence in 1810, the Reform Period in the nineteenth century (when secular policies were established), and the Revolution in 1910. A slogan used throughout his political campaign was, "don't steal, don't lie, and don't betray the people."

AMLO's entanglements with the religious sphere, and the orientation of his political discourse, have been severely criticised in the media and by the

84 Andrew Reding, "Mexico at a Crossroads: The 1988 Election and Beyond," *World Policy Journal* 5, no. 4 (1988).

85 Garma, "Religión y Política En Las Elecciones Del 2018."

86 Raymundo M. Campos Vázquez and Carolina Rivas Herrera, "El tono de piel de los mexicanos y su interacción con factores socioeconómicos," *Coyuntura Demográfica* 17 (2020), https://bit.ly/3nKM26y.

87 Hernán Gómez Bruera and Blanca Heredia, eds., *4T Claves para descifrar el rompecabezas* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2021), 17–34.

intelligentsia. Critics have defined his style as moralistic, populist, messianic, and a transgression of Mexican secularism (*Estado laico*),[88] insofar as his governmental actions could be linked to his personal beliefs. In the following section, I address some of these discussions, which involve a tension between the assertive secularist imaginary and the search for legitimacy in the political arena, the growing plurality of the religious field, and some counter-secularising tendencies looking for space to influence decisions in the public sphere.

4.1 What is the Religion of the Mexican President?

Sociologist Bernardo Barranco states that the faith of the president is a major point of discussion in Mexico's political sphere.[89] Indeed, the religious and moral beliefs of López Obrador were highlighted even before he became president. Different media and intellectuals have tried to decipher what AMLO's confession is, sometimes on the understanding that religious expressions represent a disadvantage in a political career. During the 2018 election campaign, journalist Riva Palacio wrote in his column *Andrés el Cristiano*[90] (Andrés the Christian):

> For much of post-revolutionary public life [in Mexico], presidents were atheists or Freemasons [...], López Obrador has systematically hidden his beliefs. In the 2006 presidential campaign, he even declared that he was a Catholic [...]. López Obrador belongs to the Seventh-day Adventist Church [...]. There is no way of knowing what the impact of the evangelical vote will be in the presidential election, but it is possible to say, based on the percentage of Catholics, that if López Obrador becomes president, it will be with Catholic support at the ballot box, which would imply that they [Catholics] will be handing over power to the representative of those [Protestants] who are destroying them.

Contradicting this idea, Martí Batres, former president of MORENA (2012-2015), tweeted, "Back in 2006, when asked by a journalist, #AMLO replied:

88 Enrique Krauze, "López Obrador, El Mesías Tropical," *Letras Libres* 8, no. 90 (2006). Roberto Blancarte and Bernardo Barranco, *AMLO y la religión: El estado laico bajo amenaza* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2019), 193, and "Me irrita el tono sacerdotal de AMLO en las mañaneras: dice el escritor Silva-Herzog," *La Octava*, August 15, 2020, https://bit.ly/3ztNyPK

89 Blancarte and Barranco, *AMLO y la religión*, 94.

90 Raymundo Riva Palacio, "Andrés el cristiano," *El Financiero*, March 20, 2018, https://bit.ly/3nUwU6M.

'I am Catholic, with an emphasis on the work of Jesus Christ'." This tweet was shared by the poet and activist Javier Sicilia, who related his own encounter with Obrador in 2011: "you invited me to dinner at your flat, you confirmed your Christian faith. When I asked if you belonged to the Christian tradition of Protestantism, you answered you were Catholic."[91]

One can observe an eagerness to define the president's religious beliefs (and practices) in both public opinion and the media. Given this insistence, AMLO has declared he is a Christian because he follows the thought and work of Jesus Christ. He has recurrently called Jesus, the most important social fighter on earth. I would argue that this ambiguity is a political strategy, given that accepting any particular religious affiliation could be seen as going against Mexican secularism, and could reduce votes from other religious groups. In fact, when AMLO describes his faith, he generally also espouses his perspective on secularism. "We are in favour of the secular state, and we will always defend freedom of religious belief, and as far as I am concerned, as Ignacio Ramírez *El Nigromante* used to say 'I kneel where the people kneel, I respect the people's religion.'"[92] In 2012, he stated:

> My position is outspoken. I have always thought that the exercise of religious practices should be guaranteed, that there should be freedom for all churches, for the Catholic Church, for Evangelical churches, for other religions, and also respect for the rights of non-believers. A secular state is that: freedom of conscience and guarantees without limitations for citizens to practise their religion, and also that free thinkers should be respected.[93]

91 Javier Sicilia, "Carta abierta a AMLO sobre la amnistía," *Proceso*, January 3, 2018, https://bit.ly/3IslyQG; Martí Batres, "Dice Raymundo Riva Palacio en su columna de hoy que #AMLO es protestante y 'que los católicos le estarían entregando el poder'. Esto es por lo menos inexacto. Ya en 2006, a pregunta expresa de un periodista, AMLO respondió: 'Soy católico, con énfasis en la obra de Jesucristo' [Tweet]," Twitter, March 20, 2018, https://bit.ly/3Rno1jr.

92 Ana Laura Vázquez, "Buscará AMLO diálogo entre religiones," *El Norte*, December 18, 2017, https://bit.ly/3yQVTwT; Ezequiel Flores Contreras, "AMLO se declara cristiano y dice: hay quienes son seguidores de Cristo, pero no siguen su ejemplo," *Proceso*, June 4, 2021, https://bit.ly/3IsaxyU.

93 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Democratizar a los medios de comunicación servirá para que el Estado garantice el derecho a la información, asegura AMLO," speech transcript, AMLO, April 16, 2012, https://bit.ly/3asCjP8.

The Mexican president's vision of the secular state frequently invokes the nineteenth-century historical processes of defining the boundaries between church and state. This narrative strengthens the sacred secularism linked to the nation's founding past. It is also worth noting the repeated mention of "free thinkers" or "non-believers" as a substantive audience in AMLO's speech, alongside his insistence on the freedom of religion, which some actors have interpreted as an intention to weaken secularist policies, through possible compromises with religious groups. Indeed, during the 2018 presidential campaign, López Obrador promised to engage in a dialogue with religious actors, to promote a "moral document" designed to purify Mexico's public life, and hinted that (Protestant) churches would gain concessions to operate television services. Interestingly, in practice, television in Mexico already has a variety of religious content, even though this is not legally permitted.[94]

Beyond political strategy, some studies suggest that there was no evidence of a "religious vote" in the 2018 election. According to Díaz Dominguez, AMLO was brought to power not only by Catholics, but also by a large majority of religiously unaffiliated people, who may have been attracted by the left-wing orientation of his political coalition. For their part, Protestants and Evangelicals were less likely to vote for him. This was possible because, despite his moralising discourse and friendliness to religion, AMLO did not position himself clearly enough in favour of conservative statements, especially with regard to so-called 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' policies. In fact, Protestant and evangelical groups have, on other occasions, supported political parties such as the PRI, the direct heir to the Mexican Revolution, and a proponent of assertive secularism during the twentieth century.[95]

4.2 From the Foundations for a Loving Republic to the Ethical Guide for Mexico's Transformation

President López Obrador has stressed his belief that the fundamental root of Mexico's crisis is the corruption produced by the moral decadence and absence of values during the three decades of neoliberalism prior to his

94 Blancarte and Barranco, *AMLO y la religión*, 144.

95 Alejandro Díaz Domínguez, "¿Votó La Ciudadanía Religiosa Por AMLO En 2018?," *Política y Gobierno* 27, no. 2 (2020).

own presidency. He also terms this period "*neo-porfirista,*" in reference to Porfirio Díaz, the president who governed for more than 30 years, until the Mexican Revolution led to his exile to France in 1911.[96] Based on this diagnosis, AMLO assured the public that a key priority of the 4T would be the "moralisation" of national public life, by means of a new "moral ideal" in society, and through his own conduct, as he believes that "the good example above [in the government]... will permeate below."[97] To this end, in 2011, AMLO described *Los fundamentos para una república amorosa* (The Foundations for a Loving Republic), as a guest columnist for the left-wing newspaper *La Jornada*:

> The present crisis is due not only to the lack of material goods, but also to the loss of values. It is therefore essential to promote a new school of thought, in order to achieve a moral ideal, whose precepts exalt love of family, fellow man, nature and country. Social decay and the ills that afflict us must not only be countered by development and welfare and coercive measures. Material things are important, but they are not enough: moral values must be strengthened. Building on the moral and cultural reserve that still exists in the families and communities of deep Mexico, and supported by the immense goodness that exists in our people, we must undertake the task of exalting and promoting individual and collective values. It is urgent to reverse the imbalance that exists between the dominant individualism and the values of doing good for others.[98]

Based on this premise, during his second presidential campaign in 2012, together with a group of sympathetic intellectuals, López Obrador proposed the conception of a "moral document," based on the 1952 *Cartilla Moral* by Mexican philosopher Alfonso Reyes. This project stalled with his electoral defeat by PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto. However, following his victory in the 2018 election, the *Cartilla* plan was resurrected under the name of *Constitución Moral* (Moral Constitution). According to its formation committee, the project did not constitute an authoritarian

96 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Neoporfirismo: Hoy como ayer* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2014).

97 "Con seis años nos va a alcanzar: AMLO," *El Informador*, June 9, 2018, https://bit.ly/3IDOvJt.

98 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Fundamentos para una república amorosa," *La Jornada*, December 6, 2011, https://bit.ly/3aCgm0e.

imposition or a religious programme. "It is not a citizens' commandment. It is not a catechism. We live in a secular, democratic, sovereign state, which must guarantee the legal protection and freedom of people to choose and decide on their own behaviour and beliefs."[99]

López Obrador's administration began on 1st December 2018, and nine days later, the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) was asked to print 10,000 copies of Alfonso Reyes' book. The president wrote an introduction to the reissue of the *Cartilla Moral*, describing his world-view through a quote – somewhere between biblical and secular – from a Cuban intellectual, "Human beings need well-being, but man shall not live by bread alone. To achieve happiness, one needs material well-being and well-being of the soul, as José Martí said."[100] In January 2019, the SEP and organisations such as the congregation of Evangelical churches (CONFRATERNICE) began distributing the *Cartilla Moral* throughout the country. Religious actors circulated the publication through their temples, as well as in universities, prisons, hospitals, and other public places. According to their statements, this endeavour was a form of commitment to the "spiritual renewal" of the country.[101] This cooperation, however, provoked particularly combative criticisms, especially from defenders of Mexican secularism, who considered that "religious issues in Mexican politics were historically in the shadows until President Andrés Manuel López Obrador unequivocally claimed to be a 'follower of Jesus Christ' [...] and has now allowed Evangelical churches to work with his government."[102]

The final result of the *Constitución Moral* project was the federal administration's publishing of the *Guía Ética para la Transformación de México* (The Ethical Guide for Mexico's Transformation) on 26 November 2020. Some commentators claimed that this publication was a form of state intervention by a "preachy government that seeks to interfere in the way its

99 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "López Obrador Convoca a Los Mexicanos a Participar En La Elaboración de La Constitución Moral Para Una Nueva República," speech transcript, AMLO, November 26, 2018, https://bit.ly/3P3pMkr.

100 Alfonso Reyes, *Cartilla Moral* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2018), 3.

101 Bernardo Barranco, "La polémica distribución de la Cartilla moral," *La Jornada*, July 10, 2019, https://bit.ly/3uQVHwp.

102 Yussel González, "'Bienaventurados Los Pobres,'" *Chicago Tribune*, August 2, 2019, https://bit.ly/3z9hqCg.

governed citizens live and understand their lives."[103] Against this background, the formation committee emphasised that the guide was a "voluntary project," carried out with the participation of 7 institutions of higher education, 130 civil organisations, and 18 churches, as well as experts and other actors who contributed 461 documents and 39 interviews. Notably, the final title of the guide omitted the words constitution and moral; additionally, the first axiom of the document, "On Respect For Difference," makes clear that "Secularism is a fundamental principle of the Mexican state," translated "in daily coexistence, into respect for the beliefs of all people and their freedom to profess the religion of their choice or not to profess any religion."[104]

The ethical guide, promoted by the state, establishes recommendations for strengthening values,[105] and for the material and spiritual "well-being of the soul," in accordance with the president's vision that the "ultimate goal of government" is "to achieve the happiness of the people." It is noteworthy that the most used words in the text are *life*, *liberty*, and *people* (*vida*, *libertad*, *personas*), while other expressions that are common in López Obrador's political rhetoric have been kept to a minimum. For example, despite the fact that AMLO's presidential conferences constantly feature the words *moral* and *pueblo*, with special emphasis on "*el pueblo bueno*" (the good people), these notions appear only sparingly in the guide. The president confirmed that the government would print 8 million copies, for distribution among the beneficiaries of the state pension programme, "we

103 Antonio Salgado Borge, "Guía Ética: una defensa crítica," *Aristegui Noticias*, November 28, 2020, https://bit.ly/3aKxAZ9.

104 Mexico, *Guía Ética Para La Transformación de México* (Mexico City: Mexican Government, 2020), 9.

105 The precepts of the document can be summarised as follows. Respect "difference"; "take care of your life and the life of others"; "defend your dignity" and respect the dignity of others; "exercise" your freedom; "be a loving person"; enjoy without harming and "do not be fond of pain"; "cultivate understanding of the past" and "building the future"; be grateful; "ask for forgiveness and forgive"; redemption, given that "every person is a product of his circumstances"; "effective equality"; "do not lie, do not steal, do not betray"; "be fraternal"; justice according to "laws and regulations and in accordance with your conscience"; power "in the service of others" or "to command by obeying"; "to work and enjoy it"; richness "with respect for the laws" and with the awareness that "it must be distributed"; search for fair agreements; the family as the main "institution of social security"; care and protection of animals, plants, and "things."

are going to start with the elderly, who can voluntarily help us to discuss these issues within the family, with the children, with the grandchildren."[106]

For various opinion leaders, intellectuals, and opposition politicians, the *Cartilla Moral* and the *Guía Ética* both represent a violation of Mexican secularism, and a confirmation of the translation of AMLO's morality into public policy. Figure 6 summarises these criticisms: a religious president, transgressing the separation between church and state, ignores Benito Juárez, the "crucified martyr" of the country's sacred secularism. Conversely, a few others have argued that it was appropriate to "bring ethics and moral values to the table in public affairs," in view of the serious excesses of corruption and impunity at the national level.[107] A few optimists have stressed that the ethical guide represents a compendium of minimum principles and values, which can be perfected post-hoc, and which should be appraised independently of its governmental origin. I would argue that the final document was a guide distilled through the filter of assertive secularism. The Mexican government has stopped actively promoting the ethical guide after its celebrated launch in 2020. Instead, the president's critics have been able to use it to denounce acts of probable corruption and impunity in his administration.

106 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Presidente presenta la Guía Ética para la Transformación de México," speech transcript, AMLO, November 26, 2020, https://bit.ly/3o3iZLJ.

107 Carlos Alberto Martínez, "Guía Ética Para La Transformación de México y La Economía," *El Economista*, December 2, 2020, https://bit.ly/3IKhM5w.

Figure 5. ***Estado Laico, gracias a Dios*** (Secular state, thank God)

By Rocha. Source: La Jornada. Speech bubble reads "It is like the time of Christ, except instead of multiplying bread and fish, I deliver social programmes."[108]

4.3 Corruption and Moral References as a Political Strategy

The fight against corruption has been a Leitmotiv throughout López Obrador's political career, however, his emphasis on the moral purification of public life is a more recent phenomenon, forming part of his political (and electoral) strategy only in more recent years. Between 1986 and 2019, AMLO published 18 books on historical figures, corruption, and political conflicts in both his home state of Tabasco and the nation as a whole. In 2004, two years before his first political campaign at the federal level, he published *Un proyecto alternativo de Nación. Hacia un cambio verdadero*

108 Rocha, "Estado laico, gracias a Dios," *La Jornada*, October 28, 2019, https://bit.ly/3SkR7QT.

(An Alternative Project for the Nation. Towards a Real Change). The word *moral* appears in this document on very few occasions, although he already mentions here that the "great challenge" of "transforming" Mexico "can only be faced with a team of men and women with principles and with moral and political authority."[109]

In his 2019 book, *Hacia una Economía Moral* (Towards a Moral Economy), by contrast, morality takes centre stage, not only in the title, but also in multiple references to "moral sense," "moralising," "immorality," "moral economy," "public morality," "moral and spiritual values," "moral regeneration," "moral reserve," "moral duties," and "moral constitution" throughout the text.[110] It cannot be said, however, that AMLO's moralisation plan represents a project unprecedented in contemporary politics. In France, President Macron came to power in 2017 with the mission of "'moralizing public life' in a political system rife with nepotism and conflicts of interest," and before him, Hollande expressed the same intention for his government, in the face of bank corruption cases.[111] It would be interesting to analyse the regularity of (significant) public moralisation in countries with assertive or passive secularism, compared to those with religious regimes.

As mentioned, AMLO has argued that the moral example of the president lies at the heart of the fight against corruption. This exemplary behaviour is then replicated or assimilated by public employees and citizens. This supposed purifying force evokes the principles of magic outlined by Frazer, according to which "the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it" or by contagion.[112] In this sense, López Obrador has insisted on a governmental work ethic comparable to Protestant asceticism, especially in terms of its rejection of

109 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Un Proyecto Alternativo de Nación* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2004), 135.

110 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *Hacia Una Economía Moral* (Mexico City: Planeta México, 2019).

111 "Hollande Announces Sweeping Measures to 'moralize French Public Life' and Banks," *Merco Press*, April 10, 2013, https://bit.ly/3cm4jEx; James McAuley, "France's Macron Makes 'Moralizing' Public Life a Priority," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2017, https://wapo.st/3PtOIB6.

112 Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (Temple of Earth Publishing, 1920), 1:19b.

"consumption" and "worldly ambitions,"[113] but also its basis in "sacrifice" in favour of community well-being. This community-mindedness is not only a moral or political ideal, but also a traditional organisation in Mexico, such as the *faena* or the indigenous *tequio*. In some indigenous towns, there is also a *cargo* system, in which the community can assign a public function – usually unpaid – to its inhabitants. This period of work can mean, for some individuals, the temporary suspension of their religious affiliations, as if their political task requires a kind of postponement of private values, for the benefit of the collective.[114]

AMLO's political rhetoric often recombines moral ideas with other religious and historical references. This form of communication is particularly effective when the president describes the corruption and impunity of his predecessors and political opponents, whom he has referred to as "the mafia of power," the "*fifís,*" "the oligarchy," or "the conservatives."

> We are not going to allow corruption. It is a process of cleansing, of public life purification that has begun [under AMLO] [...], as Hidalgo [historical leader in the Mexican War of Independence] said, "the only god of the powerful oligarchs is money." It is incredible that they [oligarchs] are so alienated, that they reach such levels of ambition and that they don't care [...] about the welfare of the people and even with the addition that they go to mass on Sundays, and go to confession and communion to leave the score at zero, and come back the next Sunday to do the same, the same thing. It is a lot of hypocrisy. So, we have to put an end to this corruption.[115]

113 Reviewing Weber's, Berger argues that some key features of the Protestant ethic are a disciplined attitude towards work and other spheres of social life, notably the family; a deferral of instant consumption; disenchantment of the world; a strong interest in the education of children; and a propensity to create voluntary associations of non-elite people. See Berger, "Max Weber Is Alive and Well," 4.

114 In my doctoral thesis, I interviewed an indigenous authority who defined himself as a non-religious person, although he later said that when he left office and returned to his place, he would be "punished" and would "repent" for "not having religion" in the community government. See: Carlos Nazario Mora Duro, "Creer sin iglesia y practicar sin Dios: Población sin religión en el contexto urbano y rural de México en los albores del Siglo XXI" (PhD diss., El Colegio de México, 2017), 236.

115 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Conferencia de prensa matutina del presidente," speech transcript, AMLO, October 13, 2020, https://bit.ly/3zkykwx.

Of course, it is possible to understand the moralisation of public life as a mission rooted in the president's genuine personal beliefs, and in a desire to propagate his values in society. Many opinion leaders from both academic institutions and the media share the position of Mexican writer Jesús Silva Herzog, who claimed that the president "sees the world in a religious way," and expresses religious references with a "preacher's tone," passing them off as civic duties.[116] However, rather than guessing at the personal beliefs of government leaders, it would be more analytically fruitful to consider political acts and symbols as persuasive strategies, with primarily pragmatic objectives. Thus, we can understand that the Mexican president's Manichean view of the 'immoral' political practices of others, and his 'purification' mission, have led to support from both secular thinkers who disapprove of corrupt political institutions, and religious believers who subscribe to AMLO's moral values.

4.4 Religious Figures in the Presidents Communication

Since his first day in office, López Obrador has offered a morning conference (around 2 hours a day) as a form of dialogue with the people, and as a strategy to counteract information critical of his government. These conferences provide information on the 4T national project, but also include historical, moral, and religious references, as well as the use of colloquial language to generate discussion in the public sphere.[117] While some analysts see in these expressions a populist connecting with the masses, or a priest holding worship services, others highlight the president's effective connection with his people. I agree with the second group, and consider this form of political communication to be relevant in explaining the president's high popularity during the first half of his administration.[118]

While dialogue with the social base is important for government stability, AMLO's religious references have also served as a bargaining chip

116 *La Octava,* "Me irrita el tono sacerdotal de AMLO en las mañaneras: dice el escritor Silva-Herzog."

117 At a political rally, AMLO said "*el pueblo se cansa de tanta pinche transa*" (the people are tired of so much fucking corruption), rejecting institutional impunity. See: Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "No es mal humor social, 'el pueblo se cansa de tanta pinche transa': AMLO," speech transcript, AMLO, May 28, 2016, https://bit.ly/3d1ENoD.

118 Carin Zissis, "Approval Tracker: Mexico's President AMLO," American

with other political leaders. During his 2021 online meeting with President Biden, the US leader began his speech with a reference to the Virgin of Guadalupe. "During my visits, I got to know Mexico a little bit and its people, and paid my respects to the Virgin of Guadalupe. As a matter of fact, I still have my rosary beads my son was wearing when he passed." In his response, López Obrador both spoke of the Virgin and alluded to the separation of state and religion in Mexico by mentioning Benito Juárez, one of the founding fathers of Mexican secularism:

> President Biden, I would like to start by thanking you for your confession regarding your devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. We, as Mexicans, respect and admire two symbols. They might be different; however, they call to the plurality of our country. One is the Virgin of Guadalupe, as you said, and the other one is Benito Juárez, a liberal president, the best one we have ever had — a Zapotec indigenous that we are very proud of.[119]

As mentioned, when AMLO makes a religious reference, he generally accompanies it with a secular one. If political rhetoric clearly represents the world-view of the politician, as AMLO's critics claim of his religious beliefs, one could equally argue that the president is a deep believer in Mexican secularism. A secularism not of the assertive kind, however, but one friendly to the convergence between state and religious actors that are already operating in the public space, in collaboration over the 4T project of nationhood. *Believing in secularism* is not an antinomy in the Mexican public sphere, indeed, the left-wing politician Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, defined López Obrador as "a mystical character, a crusader, an enlightened one"; an "authentic *secular son-of-God*, and servant of the homeland."[120] I argue that 4T supporters recognise in the president much more of a secular prophet than a priest, and this dichotomy does not represent a contradiction, as Peter Berger has noted.[121]

Society/Council of the Americas, 2023. bit.ly/3jSsP4t.

119 Excerpt translated by The White House. See: "Remarks by President Biden and President López Obrador of Mexico Before Virtual Bilateral Meeting," The White House, March 1, 2021, https://bit.ly/3p797Bb.

120 El Universal editorial staff, "AMLO es un 'iluminado', dice Porfirio Muñoz Ledo," *El Universal*, December 3, 2018, https://bit.ly/3OY4lQB.

121 Social networks, however, have pejoratively called AMLO's supporters "pejezombies" or "chairos." These terms in Mexican Spanish imply the

On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that AMLO's political communication, particularly his religious expressions, has not been exempt from establishment reactions and institutional sanctions. In an August 2020 video to promote his government programmes, López Obrador claimed that helping the "unprotected" was "unselfish humanist behaviour," because "only by being good can one be happy."

> We have a good conscience and the enormous joy of helping poor people, those most in need, the dispossessed. Conservatives argue that we are leading the country to communism. Pope Francis has said that helping the poor is not communism; it is the heart of the gospel. That is to say, *tengan para que aprendan* [slang, meaning "learn from this" – a boastful expression].[122]

Right after the broadcast of the video, the National Electoral Institute (INE) censored the president's message, which displayed a proselytising and defensive logic, following accusations from various public voices that define the 4T as a "communist" or "atheist" regime. INE ruled that the video had to be restricted, as allusions to Pope Francis and the Gospel are "expressions that contravene the principle of secularism" in the country. Various actors in media and academic circles supported this position, asserting that AMLO was "dismantling the secular state,"[123] and called for a tightening of the secular legal framework to penalise religious expressions in the political sphere.

Interestingly, when a religious reference appears in the public or political sphere in Mexico, the national intelligentsia generally presages the end of the secular state. For example, during papal visits to Mexico, the Pope being welcomed by politicians routinely triggers magazines and newspapers to predict, with an apocalyptic tone, the destruction of the secular state.[124] I see the narrative of this activism in defence of the secular

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reduction of the agency of individuals, first, as a creature without volition and, second, as a person without ideological commitment. See: Diccionario del Español de México, s.v. "Chairo," accessed August 1, 2022, https://dem.colmex.mx/Ver/chairo.

122 Forbes Staff, "INE veta spot de AMLO por hablar del papa y el evangelio," *Forbes Mexico*, September 1, 2020, https://bit.ly/3JoUpi0.

123 Rodrigo Vera, "AMLO destruye la laicidad del Estado," *Proceso*, April 16, 2020, https://bit.ly/3P038Z8.

124 Proceso editorial staff, "Con la visita del Papa Francisco México renunció al

state – against its desecration by the religious sphere – as reinforcing the notion of secularism as a sacred principle. Analytically, I suggest that *sacred secularism* can be identified by: 1) its untouchable character, 2) its link to blood spilled in the nation's past, 3) a prophecy of crisis and the future end of the secular state, and 4) the condemnation of the religious and political actors who disrupt the established division between religion and state.

Mexican secularism rests on its sacred character. Hence, its parishioners perceive it as an inviolable order on the verge of collapse due to the intervention of counter-secular forces. It also has a legal basis, enshrined in various articles of the Mexican constitution, to ensure state power over Catholic ecclesiastical power and other churches. Despite the societal acceptance of separation principles, the staunchest advocates of sacred secularism in Mexico are an intellectual elite with extensive media reach to propagate dogma against any trace of religion in the public sphere. These groups also hold legitimacy within the national educational sphere, where they continuously convene through forums and seminars to defend the secular state. However, in practice, Mexican secularism embodies a baroque form that interplays with the interests and practices of religious actors and institutions to compensate for the shortcomings of political forces.

4.5 From Rhetoric to Governmental Actions

Following his rhetoric of morality and asceticism, López Obrador implemented various governmental actions. To begin with, he sold several official planes, deciding to instead travel on economy class airlines or in a compact Volkswagen car. He also rejected the protection of bodyguards, and converted the former presidential residence into a cultural centre open to the public. Additionally, he cancelled some state prerogatives, such as the pension of former presidents, and the payment of private health insurance for state employees. To set an example, he also reduced his salary, and legally established the precedent that no official can earn more than the president. Thus, while the previous president of Mexico earned about $159,000 per year, López Obrador had a salary of about $86,000 in 2019.[125] This policy was also accompanied by the removal of several federal

Estado laico: investigador," *Proceso*, February 18, 2016, https://bit.ly/3BBZ7qQ.

125 Obed Rosas, "Esto Es Lo Que Ganará AMLO En 2019 y Cuánto Ganaba Peña," *Expansión*, December 15, 2018, https://bit.ly/3vDsrcC.

government ministers, and the elimination of some budgets, on the basis of "saving money" and "fighting corruption." According to the president, this strategy is in line with the logic of "Franciscan poverty," akin to that of President Benito Juárez in the nineteenth century. This, he declared, meant "tightening the belt," because "there cannot be a rich government when the people are poor."[126] Some analysts have argued, nevertheless, that these measures represent a danger to the institutional life of the nation, insofar as they imply a dismantling of the state.

Meanwhile, AMLO's administration has largely focused on redirecting social spending in favour of the most disadvantaged or vulnerable people, through scholarships for disadvantaged students, the young unemployed, rural workers, people with disabilities, and indigenous groups, as well as pensions for the elderly. According to recent reports, social spending in 2021 amounted to 3.3% of Mexico's gross domestic product, the highest in the last decade.[127] The president also set up the *Instituto para Devolverle al Pueblo lo Robado* (Institute to Return to the People What was Stolen), whose primary task is to re-invest capital in the social budget through auctions and raffles of confiscated assets. These actions can be understood under López Obrador's political precept: "For the Good of All, Above All the Poor" which, according to Grayson, is a modern rendering of the Biblical saying: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Luke 6:20).[128] It does not take much imagination to link AMLO's rhetoric with religion, as the president himself has stated that "power only makes sense and becomes a virtue when it is rendered in the service of others. [...] Imagine the great satisfaction of serving others, your fellow man, Mexicans, and especially the most humble people, the poor. That is my religion! It is something very human. It is an apostolate."[129]

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126 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Conferencia de Prensa Matutina Del Presidente," speech transcript, AMLO, May 6, 2020, https://bit.ly/3JuMe3C.

127 "En 2021 se destinará el mayor presupuesto a programas sociales en la última década: cuáles son las implicaciones," *infobae*, January 4, 2021, https://bit.ly/3OXPIgq.

128 George W. Grayson, "Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador: 2006 versus 2012 and Beyond." One should note here that Grayson misquotes Luke 6:20, which reads "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Matthew 5:3 references the kingdom of heaven: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

129 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Presidente Celebra Triunfo de La Voluntad Ciudadana En Elecciones Intermedias," speech transcript, AMLO, June 7,

Regarding public security, which is one of the issues that most concerns Mexicans, AMLO has used military forces for security tasks – as well as in other areas such as the construction of federal works – while creating a national guard to cover the entire territory. However, unlike previous governments, the administration has avoided confrontation with drug cartels or other criminal groups, under the president's oft-repeated slogan "*abrazos no balazos*" (hugs not bullets). This slogan has echoes of the biblical excerpt: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also." (Luke 6:27-29).

As part of his security strategy, the president has engaged religious leaders, especially in communities with a history of violence and conflict. As an illustration, during the February 2019 launch of a social programme to support rural producers in Michoacán, one of the states most affected by organised crime, AMLO welcomed spiritual leaders, pastors of evangelical religions, and freethinkers; "all together to achieve the transformation of the country."[130] Rather than an integration of religious actors, I see in this strategy a search for legitimisation and support for government actions. This pursuit can also be found in the "act of unity" called for by López Obrador at the beginning of 2019, in response to President Donald Trump's threat to increase taxes on Mexican exports. The rally was held in the border city of Tijuana and was attended by politicians, businessmen, and religious figures, such as the Catholic priest Alejandro Solalinde, and Arturo Favela, the evangelical leader of CONFRATERNICE. Given that Catholics and Evangelicals represent a large part of the Mexican population, the president usually meets with these two figures as emissaries of their respective denominations. These private meetings have been criticised by academics and the media.

4.6 Conservative and Counter-secular Reaction

Despite AMLO's moralising rhetoric and religious references, as well as his overtures to religious leaders, various conservative groups and promoters of "traditional family" values have positioned themselves at odds with

2021, https://bit.ly/3BGn6W4.

130 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Entrega de apoyos Producción para el Bienestar en Huetamo, Michoacán," speech transcript, AMLO, February 8, 2019, https://bit.ly/3BHU20b.

the federal government's policies. Despite the intelligentsia's fears about the end of the secular state in Mexico, López Obrador's administration has used secular policies, and reaffirmed the status of secularism, in the face of backlash from counter-secular groups. Such groups fear the encroachment of so-called "gender ideology" into Mexican society, and are therefore organising to influence public policy on issues such as the legalisation of abortion and the use of certain drugs, as well as educational policy. In early 2020, at least five state congresses in Mexico presented legal reform initiatives on education and the rights of children and adolescents, promoted by conservative associations such as the National Front for the Family (FNF). These reform proposals sought to hand over control of children's education to their parents (*Pin Parental*), in situations in which the parents consider any educational content to be against their ethical, moral, or religious values. In response, the Ministry of the Interior declared that any such approval would be unconstitutional, and in violation of the "secular and scientific" education governed by the Mexican state.[131]

As mentioned, so-called "pro-life" and "pro-traditional family" groups have, in a show of unprecedented ecumenism, joined forces with other actors and social organisations to influence political decisions in recent years. During their demonstrations, these collectives have used posters of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and have mentioned the family of Christ as a model for Mexican society. Politically, some of them are even openly promoting a coup d'état against AMLO, as they consider the 4T project to be "the greatest risk to life, family, and liberty."[132] In this vein, during the 2021 midterm elections, the FNF declared that they would only support candidates who signed a statement in defence of traditional values.[133] According to the movement's leaders, López Obrador's government has

131 Secretariat of the Interior, "Las reformas estatales conocidas como 'Pin Parental' vulneran los derechos de niñez y adolescencia," Mexican Government, July 5, 2020, https://bit.ly/3zVw6VG.

132 Luis Petersen Farah, "Gilberto Lozano, el hombre que quiso dar golpe de Estado a AMLO," *Milenio*, September 24, 2020, https://bit.ly/3cRiLon.

133 Frente Nacional por la Familia, "CRITERIOS ELECCIÓN 2021. 1. La 4T/MORENA es el mayor riesgo contra la vida, familia y libertades. 2. Combina la mayor posibilidad de triunfo sobre MORENA con la mayor definición posible a favor de vida, familia y libertades. 3. Usa la plataforma," Twitter, June 5, 2021, https://bit.ly/3PVqXm5.

been fostering the decriminalisation of abortion at the national level, as well as implementing so-called "gender ideology" in public schools.[134] The Mexican president has, ambiguously, stated that a popular consultation is necessary to either legalise or penalise abortion, possibly in an effort to avoid confrontation with counter-secular activists. However, since the arrival of his government in 2018, nine states of the republic have legislated in favour of voluntary abortion, as a result of pressure from various social forces, and the votes of local Morena legislators and their allies.

4.7 Concluding reflections

López Obrador's presidency has seen continuous, effervescent, and controversial discussion on the relationship between the state and religion, no doubt heightened by the president's use of moralising discourse and religious references. However, rather than attributing this to his underlying personal values, or any attempted imposition of a confessional state (desecularisation of the state), this paper notes that, by these actions, AMLO mainly sought to legitimise his political project. Both in the run up to the election, and in office, AMLO has used the rhetoric of moral purification, to communicate and legitimise the transformation of the state. He considers such a transformation should be based on the fight against corruption, a more equitable distribution of wealth, and a focus on social justice. Accordingly, the moral state project sets itself against the "neoliberal regime," although in reality its policies are not at all anti-neoliberal. In fact, one could argue that principles such as "republican austerity," and AMLO's governmental work ethic that mirrors Protestant values, are favourable to a free-market economy and development projects.[135]

Conflicts to preserve state power in Latin America are also an important backdrop to López Obrador's political actions. Assuming that domestic and international oligarchies might undermine the 4T regime, the president has tried to shore up the basis of his authority on various fronts,

134 "Promueven Agenda por la Familia," *El Heraldo de Aguascalientes*, April 24, 2021, https://bit.ly/3QiDhN4.

135 In this sense, Mario Campa hypothesises that the 4T is developing a "moderate anti-neoliberalism," with mixed policies such as austerity and equitable distribution of wealth. See: Mario Campa, "Política económica: Bases para una prosperidad compartida," in *4T Claves para descifrar el rompecabezas*, ed. Hernán Gómez Bruera, and Blanca Heredia (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2021).

such as gaining popular support, and fostering the cooperation of religious actors and organisations. According to Barranco, no Mexican politician had ever successfully "turned faith into a political asset." The president has sought to take advantage of the "ethical-religious reserve of the churches and their social penetration" to rebuild the social fabric.[136] He has also sought to strengthen his popular base by appealing to the spirituality of the Catholic and Protestant Mexican population, to the "moral reserve" of the indigenous communities, and to the secular values of non-believers. Of course, these groups do not universally and homogeneously identify with AMLO's discourse, but some religious figures and organisations – already operating in the public sphere – have intensified their collaboration in the political arena, with the aim of furthering their own agendas.

The findings of this article underline how the entanglements between state and religion in Mexico produce a reaction in the public sphere, especially on the part of intellectuals, politicians, journalists, and other activists supporting assertive secularism. Whilst this ideology theoretically promotes the exclusion from the public space of any religious expression, in practice, religion is present in the political sphere, especially when authorities require legitimacy. Recognising that secularism is a fundamental principle and expectation of established civil religion in Mexico, I have proposed the analytical concept of sacred secularism, identified by: 1) its untouchable character, 2) its link to blood spilled in the nation's past, 3) a prophecy of crisis and the future end of the secular state, and 4) the condemnation of the profane forces who disturb the established separation between religion and politics.

In my view, AMLO's rhetoric hints at a reformulation of Mexican secularism, which could imply a move towards a more permissive model. However, this has not translated into any effort towards actual structural change, and, in fact, AMLO has reaffirmed his conformity to the status quo of the secular state several times. In 2019, when a legislator from the political party MORENA proposed a reform allowing concessions for churches to operate television services, the president commented that the issue of secularism "should not be touched," because it had already been "resolved

136 Blancarte and Barranco, *AMLO y la religión*, 185.

for more than a century and a half."[137] On another occasion, when asked by a reporter, "would you tell them [the religious] not to get involved in politics?" López Obrador replied, "No, I don't give such recommendations, and it's not with me [the issue], it's with the Constitution."[138]

Some analysts have used the term messianism to define AMLO's character, criticising his salvific discourse.[139] Grayson defines him as a secular messiah, who combines leftist, populist, nationalist, and corporatist elements. However, Grayson also argues that populism per se is an inadequate descriptor of the relationship between López Obrador and the public. Rather, the Mexican president sought to embody the project of mass redemption; with a trajectory displaying several similarities with the path of Jesus Christ, such as the role of spiritual liberator, a frugal lifestyle, confrontation with the beneficiaries of neoliberalism, and the emulation of speaking in parables.[140] In my opinion, several of these analyses are written in the vein of militant liberalism or secularism, and, consequently, assume that the "masses" accept the messianic leader's message uncritically. Yet, the Mexican case shows that moralising and religious rhetoric is first and foremost a political strategy, one that is not positively assimilated by the entire population. I have emphasised the existence of opposition groups, such as so-called "pro-life" and "pro-family" collectives, who have partnered with other actors and organisations to promote their values in the public space, and who appear to represent a latent counter-secular force.

During his political campaigns, Obrador gave assurances that, in the face of any controversy on secular matters, the response would be "dialogue," but also the unrestricted application of the constitution. This reaffirms my position that AMLO is a deep believer in Mexican secularism. The case analysis has described the complex interaction of historical secularism and secularity, the conflict in the political sphere, the pluralisation of the religious field, and the counter-secularising tendencies.

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137 Aristegui Noticias editorial staff, "Tema Iglesia-Estado no debe tocarse; 'está resuelto desde hace más de siglo y medio': AMLO," *Aristegui Noticias*, December 18, 2019, https://bit.ly/3d34Zzk.

138 Andrés Manuel López Obrador, "Democratizar a los medios de comunicación servirá para que el Estado garantice el derecho a la información, asegura AMLO."

139 Krauze, "López Obrador, El Mesías Tropical," 14–25.

140 George W. Grayson, *Mexican Messiah: Andrés Manuel López Obrador* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State Press, 2007), 3.

At least in Mexico, the feared desecularisation of the state has not taken place, but rather, one is led to question the idea of secularism as a purely immovable principle trapped in its nineteenth-century conception. In contrast to the nineteenth century, secularity and the separation of church and state are today sustained not only by the ideology promoted by the state, but also by societal attitudes. Any change of orientation towards religion-friendly policies would undoubtedly face a reaction from not only secular intellectual elites, but also people's ingrained ideas about the separation of spheres.

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