

Mysterious Way: Protestant Reformation in Nineteenth Century Mexico



Author: Daniel Kirk, South American Missionary Society, Chile

Introduction

This article has a different focus to the others in this edition of Encounters, taking a historical rather than a missiological approach. It looks specifically at a historical event in just one Latin American country with the hope that we can deepen our understanding of Protestant missions there and across Latin America by examining one of the multiple ways that God works in different circumstances, all with the purpose of drawing people to himself.¹

In a continent where the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter RCC) has traditionally maintained religious hegemony across all sectors of society there has been a long held suspicion that Protestant groups were alien invaders. Their presence in Latin America was often seen as an expression of one wing of North American foreign policy, whose aim was to destabilise the status quo in the region, rather than an expression of genuine spiritual development aided by overseas missionary activities.

It is here that the formation of a National Mexican Church in the second part of the nineteenth century is fascinating as it shows how the development of a radically liberal indigenous movement, without more foreign influence than philosophical ideas and imported bibles, moved away from the RCC to explore new religious possibilities which resulted in some congregations adopting the Protestant faith.²

Historical Context

After Mexico became independent from Spain in 1821 an internal political battle began to decide along what lines the new country would be developed. This struggle reflected a similar process across Latin America between conservatives and liberals.³ The conservatives, whose most powerful bloc comprised the landed aristocracy, mine owners and the remaining Spanish mercantile elite, wanted to keep alive the basic structures of colonial society, such as the RCC, fearing that the awakening of the masses during the war of independence threatened their status quo. Mexican liberals, mainly made up of the urban middle classes, in contrast, wanted to transform the remains of colonial society in order to bring Mexico into the 'modern' world and create a society, preferably a federal one, that would break the control of the traditional hierarchies and benefit their own social position. These opposing groups identified themselves with two distinct Masonic lodges which provided networks of personal alliance: the conservatives with the Scottish rite enjoyed the support of the British minister in Mexico, whereas the liberals' Masonic home was with the York rite which had originated in New York and was introduced by the first consul of the United States.⁴

1 This essay is based on a dissertation completed in Mexico in 1999: Daniel Kirk Crane, *La Formación de una Iglesia Nacional Mexicana 1859-1872*, Tesis de Maestría en Estudios Latinoamericanos, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999, p.160. Chapter two was later published in *Religiones y Sociedades*, Año 4, número 9, mayo-agosto 2000, Secretaría de Gobernación, p.105-120.

2 Footnotes have been kept to a minimum. For those wanting more research background please contact the author.

3 Unless otherwise defined the word 'liberal' in this essay refers to a political liberalism rather than a theological one.

4 Tulio Halperin, *The Contemporary History of Latin America*, Duke University Press, 1993, p.94-99.

Spurred by a loss of prestige and the liberals' populist appeal to anti-Spanish sentiment, the conservatives became increasingly intransigent and appealed to the church as the only force capable of countering the liberal influence over the Indian and *mestizo* masses.⁵ This saw several decades of conservative ascendancy in Mexico where any advances in religious toleration or church reform were tenaciously resisted. Governments changed regularly, often with the General Santa Anna presiding, imposing centralist control which weakened the outlying provinces. This provided the expansionist United States with easy targets to pick off, such as first Texas and then finally the territory that became the states of California, Arizona and New Mexico. On losing half of its national territory, resentment against the conservative governments inevitably grew, and although the conservatives managed to hang onto power for almost another decade, the middle of the century saw a backlash against them which swept the liberal elite to power.

The Formation of a non-Roman National Church

Cracks had developed in the monolithic structure of the RCC in Mexico during the period of independence, where between five and ten percent of the church leadership had supported the rebels in their fight against Spain. They were all from the lower clergy, priests who struggled to make ends meet and who resented the huge wealth the RCC had accumulated over centuries as well as their immense political power to which the lower clergy had limited or no access.

The hierarchy of the church eventually saw that their interests lay with deserting Spanish rule and they supported the plan of Iguala which established the independent state of Mexico. The second fundamental principal of their political plan, however, was to continue to support the exclusivity of the RCC: 'The religion of the Mexican nation is and shall be for ever Roman, Apostolic and Catholic. The nation will protect it with wise and just laws and prohibits the practice of any other.'⁶ Although the position of the RCC seemed to have not only survived but even been strengthened, it had two major issues to face. The first was that of the Royal Patronage: control over all church appointments and structures had been granted to the Spanish throne by the Pope, but it was now up for grabs. The second was the huge moral and spiritual decline within the church which cried out for reform. The liberal faction had tried to reform the Roman Catholic Church for decades, especially during the government of Gómez Farías in the late 1820s & early 1830s. This manifested itself particularly in a struggle for the Royal Patronage with the belief that through the control of the ecclesiastical structures the church's moral and spiritual state could be redeemed. Although ultimately unsuccessful these attempts and the thinking beneath them by such leading liberal writers as José Luis Maria Mora⁷, provided the foundations for renewed action against the church by the triumphant liberals in the 1850s.

There followed a number of liberal laws all attacking the privilege of the RCC. *Ley Juárez* (1855) removed the Catholic Church's privilege of separate judicial courts, *Ley Lerdo* (1856) forced the church to sell many of its rural and urban properties at a low price, and *Ley Iglesias* (1857) limited parish charges especially for marriages and burials. These laws became known in Mexican history as 'The Reform'. When they produced a backlash from the church the country was plunged into a bloody three year civil war from which the liberals

5 Halperin, op. cit. p.97. *Mestizo*: people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent.

6 Gustavo Santillán, "La Secularización de las creencias." En: *Estado, Iglesia y Sociedad en México, Siglo XIX*, Alvaro Matute et. al. México, Porrúa/UNAM, 1995, p.178.

7 His most important religious writing was 'Disertación sobre bienes eclesiásticos' in *Obras Completas de José Luis Mora*, Vol. 3, Mexico, SEP/Instituto Mora, 1986. Mora's interest in improving the spiritual life of his country was also seen in his collaboration with the Bible Society and James Thomson one of the early bible *colporteurs* who worked to provide bibles for those in every level of society.

eventually emerged triumphant. It was then, in 1859, when the liberal government had given up any hope of reforming the RCC, that they decided to encourage the formation of a new national church and invited an already established group of Catholic priests to head it up.

The Constitutional Fathers

Melchor Ocampo, a leading liberal in the new government, wrote a formal letter on behalf of President Juárez to the group of liberal priests who became known as the Constitutional Fathers because of their support of the new liberal constitution. The letter shows how the liberal elite's anticlerical ideology focused in particular against the 'high' *ultramontano* clergy, who were blamed for most of the country's problems. Under the new arrangements, the church would be subject to Caesar, that is the State, especially the new civil laws of the liberal government, and would support the liberals in the ideological war being fought in the minds of the Mexican people. To this end the new church, which would be national in extension, would show that the 1857 Constitution and the Reform laws did not oppose Christianity. This was intended as a source of liberal propaganda to combat the RCC and thus enable the country to live in peace.

The constitutional clergy were mainly from Mexico City, the state of Mexico and Oaxaca and were led by Rafael Díaz Martínez. They were given three churches to begin with in Mexico City: La Merced, La Santísima and San Hipólito. Later Ignacio Ramírez, the justice minister gave them four more: la Jesús María, Santo Domingo, Bethemitas and la Profesa. The Constitutional Fathers were all from the lower clergy and were made up of priests who had fought in the liberal ranks during the Reform War, those who had decided not to attack the new anti-clerical laws, and others disillusioned by the hierarchy of the RCC in Mexico. They were known as 'liberal', 'evangelical' or 'illustrated' clergy before the name 'Constitutional Fathers' stuck.

Beliefs of the Constitutional Fathers

These priests were liberal in political matters, catholic in belief and supported the Reform laws. They advocated the marriage of priests, attacked ecclesiastical censure and would only take voluntary offerings for the sacramental services they undertook (which included up to 400 church blessings of civil weddings!). They believed that the reformation of the church began with the clergy and fought a campaign in the liberal press to promote morality amongst church clergy, attacking in particular their superstitious and irrational practices. They believed the object of religion was to be beneficial to society by not opposing the development of civilization and progress. Rather it should promote the democratic and Christian virtues of unity, fraternity and equality (here the influence on them of liberal thought could not be more obvious) and hospitality.

Perhaps the most important novelty that they offered the Mexican Church, and one which they argued the longest and most vociferously for, was clerical marriage. Many of the evils within the church were due to either the enforced celibacy of the clergy or their poorly hidden concubines. Civil marriage was strongly advocated, based on the division of the church and the state in the time of the European Reformation, along with arguments marshalled from Hus, Luther, Calvin and Savonarola. The personal importance of this issue for them was seen in the sudden appearance of a number of their women and children who were legitimised under the new Reform laws.

Various documents and articles also revealed a new view of Church authority. This was founded they claimed, on Holy Scripture, Apostolic precedent, early church custom, the great councils, the early fathers, the theologian canonists and sane philosophy. As a good reformer their main writer Juan Nepomuceno Enríquez Orestes believed that Scripture overrode tradition, as it was the mission of the Christian priest to 'teach the faithful evangelical truth'. While 'evangelical' certainly referred to the early practices of the primitive church, when it came to what factor took final precedence in establishing the beliefs of the church, it seems that sane philosophy held the trump card. The reformers were obviously children of the Enlightenment. Divine revelation was no longer necessary as reason could judge Christian doctrine and belief; those who exhibited mere irrationality or superstition, could be discounted. As well as Roman Catholic traditions such as auricular confession and purgatory being attacked, the orthodox belief in hell was rejected as a clerically invented fiction. Modern and pluralistic in regards to the acceptance of other faiths, at heart the reformers' gospel was a nationalistic and liberal one.

The End to the Mexican National Church Project

Why should this be of any interest to those involved in Protestant missions? After all the Constitutional Fathers summed up their beliefs in the following slogan: 'Catholic but not Roman, Evangelical but not Protestant'. Their figure of Jesus Christ appears to be that of a nineteenth century liberal philosopher rather than that of a first century Jewish itinerant preacher with messianic pretensions. The reason is because of the radicalisation of these leaders and their congregations after the failure to establish a truly national church. A number of factors caused these religious groups to fall short of the objectives that they and the liberal government had aimed at. Although there were some Roman Catholic priests who criticised those who slandered them, the church hierarchy launched a fierce counter-attack against them and their beliefs, managing to obtain several public recantations. There was also persecution, ex-communications and a refusal to see in the Constitutional Fathers anything other than supporters of a liberal state who wanted the destruction of the entire church.

Embracing Protestantism

The greatest political factor in the failure of this national church project was the French intervention, which, with the support of the remaining conservative forces in Mexico, established the second Mexican Empire, this time with the foreign Habsburg prince Maximilian. The liberals were forced back out of Mexico City and had to take up arms once again. There was no further opportunity for a bankrupt state to make good any of its promises to support the new religious venture. Ironically the conservative backed empire began to dictate liberal laws which included religious toleration, probably because of the many non-Catholic foreigners who entered the country with the French. At this time some Protestant services were held in Mexico City, more bibles were distributed, and the ex-priest Manuel Aguilar Bermúdez, who led the congregation of the Santísima, came to the fore. He was the first constitutional father who openly argued for Protestant beliefs.

Manuel Aguilar tried to revive the idea of a national church by founding the Apostolic Mexican Catholic society and attempted to persuade a Mexican bishop to join them. He declared that they were 'true Catholics, true to Christ, and evangelical in faith and hope'.⁸ After this failed he first approached the London Bible Society asking for experienced men and more bibles with the aim of helping the reform movement in Mexico, so that the 'Gospel

8 *Spirit of Missions*, Rev. Dr. Julio Nicholson's Report, Julio 1865, p.259.

can be taught and preached and that the whole church in Mexico should be entirely reformed and free from the errors of the Church of Rome.⁹

Although continuing with echoes of the liberal philosophy previously noted amongst the Constitutional Fathers, Manuel Aguilar and his followers then got in touch with the Rev. Angel Herreros Mora in the States and began to use the rubric of the Episcopal Protestant church of the United States and England, along with the Thirty Nine Articles. Enriquez Orestes, Rafael Díaz and Francisco Domínguez travelled to the States looking for a friendly bishop. The latter two were consecrated by a bishop there, whilst Enriquez Orestes visited several churches and met the Rev. Henry C. Riley. There was a 'Macedonian'¹⁰ call to the neighbour of the north to help in the work of evangelisation in Mexico but the then Secretary of State William, Henry Seward, advised missionary boards to reject the invitation.

Unfortunately Manuel Aguilar died in 1867, but Rafael Díaz Martínez, the first leader of the Mexican National Church, was nominated bishop of the reformed church. Díaz Martínez however, was never actually consecrated, and Henry Riley, who arrived in 1868, later became the church's first bishop. At the beginning of the 1870s a leading Catholic priest Manuel Aguas was given the job by the RCC of countering the reformed church (he managed to get some priests to return to the RCC). Through reading their leaflets, however, he converted to Protestantism, joined the new movement and became its leading pastor and spokesman. When the first wave of missionaries arrived in 1872, they were surprised to find some thirty congregations openly sympathetic to Protestant beliefs. Although some congregations and leaders, such as Enríquez Orestes, moved towards a more nationalistic, even socialist position, the majority formed the foundations for the establishment of new Protestant denominations in Mexico.

Conclusion

This religious movement shows that whilst neither the liberal government in Mexico nor the government in the United States looked to encourage Protestant missionary groups to go and work in Mexico, the Constitutional Fathers from within the liberal political stream in nineteenth century Mexico looked for an autonomous religiosity that eventually found itself most at home within Christian Protestantism. This gave huge hope to the first Protestant missionaries in Mexico who clearly saw that God had already been at work there long before their arrival.

It can also give hope to us in the twenty first century when we remember that we follow a God who is many steps ahead of us when it comes to the evangelisation of those who as yet do not know him.

9 *Spirit of Missions*, Vol.32, 1867, p.804.

10 See Acts 16.9

Biography of the Author

Born in Argentina to SAMS' missionaries, after finishing university Daniel lived in Mexico for six years where he met his wife Ellelein. He worked in the area of recruitment and placement in Latin Link for four years and after completing an MA in Biblical Hermeneutics at the London School of Theology left for Chile in 2005 where he is working with SAMS as a theological facilitator and lay pastor.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the Encounters website (www.redcliffe.org/mission). Alternatively, you may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the Encounters discussion board.