
LIBERALISM AND RELIGION: SECULARISATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE AMERICAS

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SUMMARY

The “Liberalism in the Americas: A Digital Library” project, hosted by the Institute for the Study of the Americas, has given rise to a series of events intended to survey and explore the major historiographical debates regarding liberalism in nineteenth-century Latin America in a comparative context. Several research workshops, involving focused discussion amongst a selected group of specialist scholars and advanced graduate students, have examined themes in the history of liberalism through comparative case studies on Mexico, Peru, Argentina, the United States, and elsewhere. The fourth workshop in our Liberalism in the Americas series, on 18 April 2012, focused a critical lens on how liberalism affected Church-State relations, religious tolerance, the development of Freemasonry, and secularisation processes since the nineteenth century.

The workshop was organised by the project leaders, Deborah Toner (ISA), Paulo Drinot (ISA) and Maxine Molyneux (ISA), and attended by 13 participants, of whom a full list can be found at the end of this report. Written working papers were submitted by four paper presentations in advance of the workshop for registered participants to read, and there were no spoken presentations made during the workshop in order to facilitate maximum discussion and debate. On each panel, a commentator discussed two papers for approximately fifteen minutes, suggesting areas for clarification and further comment, before opening the floor for general questions and discussion.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The development of political, economic, scientific and cultural spheres separate to and autonomous from the Catholic Church in Latin America during the long nineteenth century was a central aspect of the secularising agenda of liberalism, which contributed to the reformulation of relations between religious institutions, the state, and public life. But this was neither a linear nor an uncontested process. This workshop explored reformist, laicist, and anticlerical positions towards the Church in Latin American society to highlight the complex processes of negotiation between different groups of liberals and the Church, as well as their effects on the public sphere, examining the emergence of

Masonic movements and the impact of Church-State relations on the evolution of citizenship and political identities. The workshop also reflected on the relationship between modernity, liberalism, and religion, in an attempt to historicise the categories of “religion” and the “secular”.

The discussion-based format of the workshop was designed to facilitate maximum discussion and to provide critical feedback on the working papers submitted by the participants. Several of these working papers will be deposited in ISA’s institutional repository SAS-Space and several will be revised for future publication.

PANEL 1: PAPERS BY DR GREGORIO ALONSO (LEEDS UNIVERSITY) AND PROF. ROBERTO DI STEFANO (IN ABSENTIA, UNIVERSIDAD DE BUENOS AIRES)

The first session began with thought-provoking comments by Dr Austen Ivereigh, co-ordinator of the Catholic media organisation Catholic Voices and author of *Catholicism and Politics in Argentina, 1810-1960* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995). As a preamble to his comments on the two papers under discussion, Ivereigh summarised the historiographical position, common several decades ago, that modernity, modernisation, and secularisation progressed hand-in-hand and in a linear fashion and noted that the questioning and dismantling of this position in more recent scholarship has been a welcome development in the field. Ivereigh suggested that both papers, by Roberto di Stefano and Gregorio Alonso, pointed to the inadequacy of dichotomies between religion and the secular, between religion and modernity, and between religion and liberal freedoms in discussing nineteenth-century Latin America. Indeed, he argued, these categories were inextricably linked in the nineteenth century to the extent that the Catholic Church was viewed and used by state-builders, often of a politically liberal persuasion, as an instrument of nation-building: a means of providing a common basis for identity, and as an established institution for strengthening civil society, in newly independent nations whose populations were otherwise divided by race, ethnicity, class, and regional differences.

As demonstrated in Gregorio Alonso’s paper, “Prolegomena to Atlantic Catholic Citizenship”, Catholicism was a key element in the development of Spanish nationalism and in the development of a more liberal political identity in Spain starting with the creation of the Cadiz Constitution in 1812. Central to Alonso’s argument was his concept of Catholic citizenship, as it developed out of the constitutional tradition begun in Cadiz. This model of Catholic citizenship referred to a broadly liberal plan to combine modern freedoms and institutions with the historical legacy and perceived unity of the Hispanic world lent by the Catholic religion. Within this vision, there was no opposition between liberalism on the one hand, and Catholicism on the

other, since in this historical context, religion was widely viewed as fundamentally important to the “common good” and Catholicism was very important to Spain’s political identity as a nation. Alonso’s paper also contained a fascinating section where he detailed how liberal political practices, as codified in the Cadiz constitution, overlapped with, and even reinforced, the importance of the Catholic Church to Spanish political life. In particular, the electoral process itemised in the constitution revealed the overlapping interaction of political and religious spheres in nineteenth-century Spain: the parish was the smallest unit of electoral organisation; elective meetings were held on Sundays; the parish priest was to assist the civil officials in overseeing the electoral meetings “to give the greater solemnity to the occasion” (p. 6); a Mass was conducted for attendant citizens immediately after such meetings; priests were obliged to address constitutional issues in their sermons; larger, district-level meetings were accompanied by Mass in the Cathedral; and the oaths of allegiance sworn by citizens, electors, representatives, and even the Monarch, combined a promise to uphold the constitution with a promise to preserve and defend the Catholic Church.

Several participants in the workshop drew on this aspect of Alonso’s work, which revealed how intricately linked liberal political practices could be with religious spaces and practices, to discuss the need for more scholarship on how the relationships between liberalism and Catholicism were negotiated at a local level. Fiona Wilson, for instance, suggested that the transfer of responsibilities for the administration of cemeteries from Church to State authorities in Mexico could be a lucrative avenue of investigation, since priests and civil officials worked together in overseeing them without, seemingly, much conflict despite their overlapping jurisdictions, and despite the implied difference in “liberal” and “Catholic” understandings of the cemetery as a space. Paulo Drinot noted that cemeteries in Peru could also provide interesting insights into this relationship, as there was some conflict between Church and State authorities over the burial of suicides – with Archbishops even ordering the exhumation of the remains of suicides from Church grounds in the early twentieth century. Moreover, separate burial grounds were established in nineteenth-century Peru for people of different faiths, for, although the private practice of non-Catholic religions was permitted, their public practice was not. In the sphere of public education too, it was noted that priests and civic mayors often served together on the councils of local schools, and this could provide an additional local case study for the interrogation of relations between liberalism and Catholicism in practice.

In a more general sense, Roberto di Stefano’s paper, “Liberalismo y religión en el siglo XIX hispanoamericano. Reflexiones a partir del caso argentino,” made a strong case for conceptualising the effect of liberalism on religion’s place in society as a reconfiguration, rather

than a replacement of one by the other. Indeed, his paper stressed the overlap in agenda of liberalism and Catholicism in seeking the moral reform of the populations of Latin America. Di Stefano's paper provided a comprehensive overview of Argentine church history from the colonial era, identifying as important features: the operation of essentially discrete regional bishoprics in Córdoba and Buenos Aires, as opposed to a coherent unity; the relative lack of land and other assets controlled by the Church in Argentina; and the sizeable presence of Protestant residents in Argentina from an early stage in the independent era. Although the latter feature led to a greater acceptance of the need for religious tolerance in Argentina, compared to elsewhere in Latin America, for much of the nineteenth century liberal state-builders viewed the Catholic Church as an important instrument for the integration of the rural population into national life, for the solidification of an Argentine national identity, and for the stability of the socio-political order under construction. While other faiths were allowed, only the Catholic Church had juridical status, and the government had the power (known as the *patronato*) to appoint religious authorities, leading to a situation in which calls for the complete separation of Church and State were rare, and even more rarely heard, for much of the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, greater conflicts arose over the *Leyes laicas*, a set of legislation designed to introduce compulsory secular education, civil marriage and a civil register, although a compromise was reached by the early twentieth century, when the Argentine government ceded the Church a continuing role in public education.

Overall, di Stefano's paper raised some provocative questions regarding the workshop topic of liberalism, religion, secularisation, and the public sphere. With respect to secularisation in particular, he cautioned against teleological narratives that represent secularisation as a linear, modernising process of liberals gradually triumphing over the Church. Rather, he argued, it is more appropriate to think of secularisation as a reformulation of religion's place in society. Rather than removing religion from public life, liberalism led to the creation of differentiated spheres for religion, politics, economics, and science, and to the transfer of religious referents out of some spheres into others. In terms of contextualising Argentina's history of co-operation between liberals and the Catholic Church in terms of its state and nation-building projects, di Stefano suggested that this was connected to the fragmented nature of the Church in colonial Argentina, to the extent that the state actually helped to create a "national" Church as a means of integrating the population better into the new political institutions and relationships of the nation. In contrast, the Catholic Church in colonial Mexico had been very coherent, rich, and powerful and nineteenth-century liberals viewed the Church as a greater obstacle, fighting to disentail Church lands and to curtail the Church's influence in the political and economic realms.

Ivereigh asked the workshop participants to consider the potential of this speculative comparison regarding the power and size of the Catholic Church, and the extent of its role in civil society by the end of the colonial era, to explain the extent and nature of future Church-State conflict within a given region. Di Stefano himself noted in his paper that there was no simple causality here, citing the counter-example of Uruguay. Nevertheless, this question led to much interesting discussion. Natalia Sobrevilla Perea noted that Peru was a further obvious counter-example. The Catholic Church had become very important, politically, economically, and socially by the end of the colonial period, as it had in Mexico, but, unlike in Mexico, where Church-State relations were extremely conflictual for a large part of the nineteenth century, there was little similar conflict in Peru until the middle decades of the twentieth century. Chile was a similar case to Peru, where a strong Church did not lead to significant Church-State conflicts in the nineteenth century. Given these cases, Sobrevilla wondered if Mexico was actually the exceptional case in experiencing a protracted, and bitter, Church-State rivalry, and if the common pattern, whether the Church had been weak or strong before independence, was actually co-operation, of varying degrees and kinds, in the state and nation-building project.

Other participants noted that factors other than the cohesion, economic and political power, and social influence of the Church in the late colonial period, may have influenced these different trajectories of co-operation and conflict. Kevin Middlebrook, for instance, asked whether the breadth of the liberal attack on the Church could explain conflicts. Several agreed that the extent and degree of liberalism's challenge to contested areas of authority – including issues such as taxation, the ecclesiastical *fueros*, land disentailment, the *patronato*, religious freedom, education, public morality - affected the level of conflict between Church and State. For instance, in the Cadiz constitutional debates, Alonso noted that a compromise situation was possible regarding ecclesiastical reform - abolishing the Inquisition in particular - because, on the one hand, many figures within the Church were in favour of modernisation, and, on the other hand, liberals did not go too far in their demands: few voices, for instance, were raised in favour of religious freedom, and the protection of the Catholic Church was written into the constitutional oath of allegiance. Matthew Butler, meanwhile, suggested that the escalation of the conflict in Mexico was also related to the increasing strength of the Church's claims to authority over civil society: in the mid-nineteenth century parishes and vocations were expanding at the same time as more radical liberal voices were calling for the separation of Church and State. Although, perhaps more detailed work would be needed to establish what was the chicken and what was the egg in this situation.

But across the Hispanic World, accommodations and negotiations between liberalism and Catholicism became more difficult from the 1860s, during a time when the transnational nature of the Roman Catholic Church was provoking tensions with emerging nationalisms in Europe and Spanish America. The counter-revolutionary impulse of the Catholic Church during the German Kulturkampf, the Italian Risorgimento, and the French Third Republic, created an international sense of opposition between “Liberalism” and “Catholicism” that the co-operative and collaborative relationships between many Spanish American liberals and their Catholic Churches had hitherto defied. This change in the international situation, together with expanding ambitions of certain liberal groups over contested issues and the relative historic strength of the Church in different regions, helped to explain rising levels of Church-State conflict in different parts of Latin America towards the end of the nineteenth century.

PANEL 2: PAPERS BY PROF. RICARDO MARTÍNEZ ESQUIVEL (UNIVERSIDAD DE COSTA RICA) AND DR TREVOR STACK (ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY)

Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, Head of Hispanic Studies at the University of Kent, opened discussion in the second session with thoughtful comments on two very different papers, “Modernity and Freemasonry in Nineteenth-Century Central America” by Ricardo Martínez Esquivel, and “Scholasticism, Liberalism, Revolutionary Nationalism, and Neoliberalism in Mexico” by Trevor Stack. Both papers brought to light how Church-State relations, whether consensual or conflictive, were extremely formative in the creation of nations in Latin America, thus establishing a continuing thread from the first session.

Martínez’s paper drew out the tensions between the public and private spheres in which Church-State relationships and conflicts were involved in nineteenth-century Latin America. He traced the origin and development of Central American Freemasonry from the 1860s to the late nineteenth century, and sought to challenge and debunk what he referred to as “myths” regarding the historical study of Freemasonry. One of the central tenets of Martínez’s argument was that Freemasonry developed in Central America as a result of the expansion of the public sphere brought by modernity. From the 1840s in Costa Rica, the establishment of a university broadened the space for secular debate, and liberal ideas about the freedoms of association, religion, speech and the press became more prominent in political discourse. At the same time, there was a significant reformist and modernising presence within the Catholic Church in Costa Rica. In a similar situation to that in Argentina outlined by Roberto di Stefano, in Costa Rica the state employed a co-operative relationship with the Catholic Church as a means of strengthening connections with, and control over, the population. Together, these factors

helped to make a fertile environment in which the Central American Freemasons was established in 1865 in Costa Rica's capital city, San José, by Francisco Calvo, a Catholic priest. Contrary to popular misconception, Martínez argued, the Central American Freemasons was not an anti-clerical organisation, but, instead, it was established with a sense of ecumenical sociability and religious tolerance, with the majority of members being Catholic and featuring a large quota of foreign members, including Germans, Spaniards, French and English. Recalling aspects of the discussion from the first session, Martínez's paper noted that a more antagonistic relationship between the Central American Freemasons and the Catholic Church began to develop in the 1870s and 1880s, partly as a consequence of the international sharpening of liberal-Catholic tensions, and partly as a result of the political rivalries within Costa Rican society.

Sobrevilla raised several questions, seeking to clarify the relationship between liberalism and Freemasonry in Central America, and the typicality of Central American Freemasonry: to what extent could Martínez's argument about the supposed anti-clericalism of Freemasonry being a myth be extended to other Latin American countries? How exclusionary were Masonic societies? And how did Lodges relate to the State in Costa Rica, or in Central America more generally; did they have any influence over politics in the region? Martínez outlined a view of Costa Rica politicians using their affiliation with Freemasonry as a symbol, or "badge", to associate themselves with liberalism and modernity, and also noted that the Masonic societies operated as a space in which political identities could be forged and solidified. As civil society expanded as the nineteenth century progressed, politicians left the Lodges, as they were able to engage with alternative spaces such as literary societies, social clubs, and educational associations that better served their particular purposes. In relation to the comparability of the Central American case to other parts of Latin America, Martínez suggested that more research needed to be conducted to rectify misconceptions about masonry and anti-clericalism. Referring specifically to the Mexican groups in the 1820s known as "*escoseses*" and "*yorkinos*", he argued that these were rival political groups who debated contentious issues in the press, but they were not Freemasons. The enduring association between Latin American "Freemasonry" and anticlericalism, Martínez contended, was born of a lack of critical interrogation over what it meant to be a Freemason, and from a series of anti-Masonic texts produced by Catholic writers, especially during the later nineteenth century when the Catholic Church felt increasingly threatened by liberalism, thus creating a lasting image of anticlericalism and Freemasonry going hand-in-hand.

Trevor Stack's paper was based on an ethnographical analysis of concepts of citizenship in contemporary Mexico, in the western states of Michoacán and Jalisco. In seeking to understand the centrality of "sociality" within his informants' conceptions of citizenship, Stack outlined a speculative argument regarding the melding of strands of scholasticism through various incarnations of Mexican political discourse, from the colonial era to the present day. In her opening remarks, Sobrevilla cautioned that the intertwined historical development of religious and political identities in Mexico could not be reduced to a single "scholastic" tradition, but the entangled histories of Catholicism with liberalism could certainly help to explain Stack's ethnographic findings. Indeed, Stack emphasised that his intention was not to explain such a complex process with the singular influence of scholasticism through the ages, but instead to add the scholastic tradition as one underexplored contributor to a broader, multifaceted milieu of ideas, constantly being reshaped through interpretation and practice. In a similar vein to Gregorio Alonso's earlier discussion of Catholic nationalism in nineteenth-century Spain, Sobrevilla reminded participants of the importance of clerical figures and the Virgin of Guadalupe devotional tradition in the independence movement and amongst early liberals in Mexico. Moreover, as Stack noted in his paper, liberal citizenship was promoted through the use of civic catechisms, again drawing a similarity with Alonso's observations regarding the overlap and transfer of sacral spaces to the political sphere. More importantly for Stack's argument regarding the scholastic tradition, his paper pointed to the existence within such catechisms of a definition of citizenship that depended on the sociality of man as a natural law. This was related to the nineteenth-century state's desire to create not only citizens, but virtuous citizens, illustrating a broad similarity with the aims (if not the methods) of the Argentine State that Roberto di Stefano's paper discussed.

The civics textbooks promoted by the Revolutionary Nationalist State in the first part of the twentieth century also enshrined the importance of civil society and the importance to citizenship of contributing to public life in numerous social rather than political ways. And, in spite of attempts by more recent government administrations to limit the discourse of citizenship to the arena of legal rights and obligations, Stack's ethnographic research pointed to the continued existence of a social definition of citizenship, dependent on the observance of social norms, as well as legal norms. Gregorio Alonso questioned if the prevalence of a form of citizenship defined with little or no reference to the State was more of an indicator of the failure of the State to alter the populations' stronger forms of identification to, for instance, their province, their locality, their neighbourhood, and so on. Stack acknowledged that distrust of government bureaucracy and strong identifications with localities and local religious traditions

were particularly important contributing factors to the conceptions of citizenship he encountered in western Mexico. In relation to this point, Matthew Butler noted that Zamora – one of the localities on which Stack’s ethnographic research focused – had historically been the most prominent centre of the scholastic tradition in Mexico, although further investigation would be required to understand precisely how this affected the sociality-oriented conception of citizenship that Stack’s research revealed. Fiona Wilson further suggested that migration patterns back and forth across the United States border had been a particular feature of the localities Stack studied, offering another possible explanatory factor in the shaping of particular attitudes towards citizenship.

The discussion also focused on Stack’s interesting postscript, which drew attention to the category of “religion” and its construction as part of the liberal state-making project. Stack echoed di Stefano in arguing that the nineteenth century saw the demarcation of separate domains for religious and political practices and concepts, even as they continued to be intertwined in reality, as all the papers discussed in the workshop revealed. In this analysis, the modern liberal state sought to define religion as both something which helped to shape social integration and public morality, and also something that supported political conservatism in opposition to what became defined as liberal progress. As Kevin Middlebrook noted, this broad interpretation could help to explain some of the longer-term consequences of Church-State conflicts in the nineteenth century; for instance, in giving rise to the political party system in Chile and Colombia.

Overall, the workshop was very productive in several ways: producing ideas for future studies into how the relationship, by turns co-operative and conflictive, between liberalism and religion operated within local political and social institutions; consolidating an interpretative framework that deconstructs the oppositional nature of liberalism and Catholicism in the context of modern Latin American state-building; considering the overlapping and intertwined spaces within the public sphere that gave rise to both liberal Catholicism and Catholic liberalism in the nineteenth century Hispanic World; and using comparative analyses to think about the larger origins and consequences of Church-State conflicts across the region in terms of political discourse, institutional structures, and social identifications.

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