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In *For God and Liberty: Catholicism and Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1790-1861,* Pamela Voekel presents an intriguing argument that the Age of Revolutions in the Iberian world should be viewed as “a transatlantic Catholic civil war” (p. 1). Voekel asserts that the political divide between liberals and conservatives, which dominated the political landscape of newly independent Latin American countries throughout much of the nineteenth century, originated from the clash between reforming and ultramontane Catholics. This conflict, which began in the region in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was part of a broader global struggle between two factions that Voekel, drawing on the work of Dale K. Van Kley, terms the Reform Catholic International and the Ultramontane International. Ultramontanes were staunch advocates of papal power, while Reform Catholicism promoted an antipapal ecclesiology that emphasized the authority of bishops and secular rulers.[1]

Except for a few forays into Greater Colombia and peninsular Spain, *For God and Liberty* primarily focuses on Mexico and the United Provinces of Central America, which included Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. However, Voekel’s argument carries significant implications for historians of the revolutionary era writ large, regardless of their geographical specialization. First, it challenges the secularization thesis that long dominated the historiography of the period. To be sure, Voekel is not the first historian to question the secularization thesis, which has faced increasing scrutiny over the past decades.[2] Nonetheless, the substantial evidence Voekel gathers and meticulously analyzes demonstrates that any reading of the nineteenth century as a time of religion in retreat is untenable, and that any study of nineteenth-century Latin American political history that overlooks religious cultures is incomplete. Second, *For God and Liberty* convincingly argues for the religious origins of nineteenth-century liberalism. In this respect, Voekel follows in the footsteps of recent scholarship on the emergence of liberalism, especially in Spanish-speaking countries on both
Voekel contributes to this historiography by detailing how eighteenth-century reformist ideas about church governance and state intervention in religious affairs provided a blueprint for the emergence of liberal doctrines about democracy, freedom of conscience, legal equality, and property. Far from being the godless secularizers portrayed by their foes, Spanish American liberals were driven by a sincere commitment to religious reform.

While the hostility between ultramontane and reforming Catholics in Spanish America dated back to the mid-eighteenth century, it was in the aftermath of Napoleon’s invasion of Spain in 1808 that tensions escalated. The power vacuum that followed the fall of the Bourbon monarchy and the convening of the Cortes in Cádiz, where delegates gathered from across the Spanish Empire, brought preexisting religious tensions to the forefront. In the Yucatecan town of Mérida, which is the focus of chapter 1, conflict erupted between the reform-minded sanjuanistas, who supported the Cortes’s 1812 constitution and envisioned a Catholic Church where the authority of bishops and councils trumped that of popes, and the ultramontane rutineros, the local defenders of both papal and monarchical absolute power. Similar tensions, as explored in chapter 2, surfaced in the Kingdom of Guatemala (the future United Provinces of Central America). Here, religious and political hostilities were compounded by the economic rivalry between El Salvador’s reform-minded indigo planters and the Guatemalan mercantile elites, who sought to preserve existing social and political hierarchies.

That supporters of conciliar authority in the church would also oppose royal absolutism might seem a foregone conclusion, but this was far from true in Spanish America. The system of the royal patronato, established at the onset of Spain’s overseas expansion, placed the church of the American colonies almost entirely under royal, not papal, control. In return for the monarchs’ promise to promote evangelization in their new territories, popes granted them the rights to appoint bishops and collect the tithe, among others. Regalist doctrines thrived in early modern Spain, and for most of the eighteenth century, Bourbon kings protected and patronized reforming Catholics. Reformers provided a rationale for consolidating royal power at the pope’s expense; conciliarist and episcopal visions of church governance aligned with support for Bourbon absolutism, achieving their greatest success in 1773 with the suppression of the Society of Jesus, the most significant symbol of papal power. It took the reversal of a long-standing alliance for reform-minded Catholics to become critics of royal authority. Voekel notes that “in the decades leading up to independence, ... reformers throughout the Spanish Empire transformed the Reform Catholic but decidedly regalist doctrines of earlier reformist Catholics into a transnational movement hostile to monarchical absolutism” (p. 251). However, how and why this transformation occurred—how and why committed regalists who had advocated for expanding the king’s power became opponents of absolutism—is a question deserving further investigation. One cause of this reversal, around the turn of the century, was likely the impact of the French Revolution, which discredited Reform Catholicism in the eyes of monarchs and fractured their alliance with reformers.

The issue of the patronato gained in importance after independence. Reforming Catholics claimed that the patronato now belonged to the new states, while ultramontanes countered that it was a right specifically bestowed upon the kings of Spain; following independence, the powers once granted by the popes to the monarchy reverted to Rome.[4] This issue remained unresolved for decades, but while the Holy See had previously been minimally involved in the administration of Latin American churches, which were under Spain’s jurisdiction, popes now had a reason to assert control over them. Ultramontane ideas spread. In this context, the Salvadoran authorities'
decision to appoint priest and independence leader José Matías Delgado as bishop in 1826 without Rome’s approval sparked a new wave of conflicts, which unfolded in the context of the Central American civil war of 1827-29 and are the focus of chapter 3. Delgado’s appointment also caused a diplomatic crisis. As detailed in chapter 4, Central American authorities tried in vain to resolve it by sending an emissary to Rome. Voekel rightly emphasizes how Pope Leo XII ignored the Salvadoran envoy, viewing him as the representative of a movement hostile to papal authority. However, it is also worth mentioning that diplomatic caution prevented the pope from receiving the emissary of a state the Holy See did not officially recognize—and could not recognize until Spain relinquished its claim on Latin America years later. Despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations, though, papal collaborators devised strategies over the following years that allowed Rome to maintain informal relations with Latin American churches, thus preventing a full-fledged schism. The conservatism of Roman prelates always coexisted with a dose of pragmatism, which allowed them to informally engage with their ideological foes.[5]

The liberals’ victory in the civil war brought reform-minded Catholics to the forefront for a few years. Blending social and intellectual history, chapters 5-7 provide a detailed analysis of how hostilities unfolded in Central America, and describe the attempts of liberals to implement their reformist agenda once in power. Chapter 8 then shifts focus to Mexico’s War of Reform (1857-61), which followed the introduction of “reform laws” and a new constitution that curtailed ecclesiastical court jurisdiction, mandated the sale of church property, and proclaimed religious freedom. Under Benito Juárez’s leadership, the liberals emerged victorious, although their triumph was swiftly followed by a French invasion. Voekel, however, also remarks that the liberals’ penchant for austere religiosity enjoyed limited appeal among the population, particularly the indigenous majority.

In these final chapters, Voekel offers a meticulous description of the two Internationals—Reform Catholic and Ultramontane—that faced each other in nineteenth-century Central America. The term “International” may occasionally be misleading, as Reform Catholicism was not a close-knit organization but rather a loose coalition of laypeople and clerics united by shared intellectual influences and correspondence networks. Voekel accurately details how extensive letter writing and the circulation of texts by authors like Pietro Tamburini, Joaquin Villanueva, Juan Antonio Llorente, and Henri Grégoire fostered a sense of unity among reform-minded Catholics on both shores of the Atlantic. However, references to the “campaign[s]” (pp. 13, 91) or “branch[es]” (pp. 79, 148, 232) of the Reform Catholic International may exaggerate the movement’s coherence. The boundaries of Reform Catholicism are also difficult to determine if among the movement’s influences we include the French journal *L’Avenir* (1830-31) and its editors Félicité de Lamennais and Henri Lacordaire, who combined liberal ideas with staunch ultramontanism, vehemently opposed the intellectual traditions of Jansenism and Gallicanism, particularly popular among reform-minded Catholics, and pilloried a standard-bearer of Reform Catholicism such as Grégoire (p. 233; Lamennais later renounced his ultramontane views). Nonetheless, the significant influence of Reform Catholicism on mid-nineteenth-century Central American liberalism is undeniable.

Ultramontanes, backed by the institutional network of the church hierarchy, perhaps resembled an International more than their opponents. Figures such as Ramón Casaús y Torres, the scheming archbishop of Guatemala, mobilized their subordinates in defense of church privileges and traditional forms of devotion. As Voekel shows, ultramontanes were not simply sworn enemies of all things modern; they engaged with
their rivals in the public sphere and employed many of the same strategies. However, more can be said about the ultramontanes’ ultimate goals, which extended beyond merely maintaining the status quo. For instance, as Pablo Mijangos y González has recently shown, ultramontanes such as Mexican archbishop Clemente de Jesús Munguía criticized the liberals’ embrace of reformist ideas as a ploy to establish state control over the religious sphere, and advocated for the separation of church and state to preserve the autonomy of the church. [6] Francisco Javier Ramón Solans’s excellent recent survey of Latin American ultramontanism has reached similar conclusions. [7]

The transatlantic Catholic civil war that Voekel describes pitted two movements with competing visions of the modern world against each other.

_For God and Liberty_ is a valuable addition to a burgeoning field of study. Scholars interested in the Age of Revolutions, nineteenth-century Latin America, and the interplay of religion and politics in the modern world would be well advised to procure a copy.

Notes


[2]. The literature on this theme is extensive. See, for example, Brian F. Connaughton, _Clerical Ideology in a Revolutionary Age: The Guadalajara Church and the Idea of the Mexican Nation, 1788-1853_ (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2003); and Pedro Rújula and Javier Ramón Solans, eds.,_El desafío de la revolución: Reaccionarios, antiliberales y contrarreaccionarios (siglos XVIII y XIX)_ (Granada: Comares, 2016).

[3]. For example, José María Portillo Valdés, _Revolución de nación: Orígenes de la cultura constitucional en España, 1780-1812_ (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2000); Jaime E. Rodríguez O., ed., _The Divine Charter: Constitutionalism and Liberalism in Nineteenth-


[5]. The relevant documentation is in Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Segreteria di Stato, Esteri, folders 592, 593, 599, 600.


[7]. Francisco Javier Ramón Solans, _Más allá de los Andes: Los orígenes ultramontanos de una Iglesia latinoamericana (1851-1910)_ (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2019).

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