The belief in unbelief: Anticlericalism and the sacralization of politics in Spain (1900-39)

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Post-print

Original published in:

Joost Augusteijn, Patrick Dassen and Maartje Janse eds., *Political Religion beyond Totalitarianism: The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013) 231-255.

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Undoubtedly the interwar era was the period in European history when the sacralization of politics reached its apex. Totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union, Italy and Germany perfected their forms of political religion to unprecedented heights, while in most Eastern European countries authoritarian dictators adopted many aspects of it to cement their regimes. In democratic countries in Western Europe, fascist movements, and socialist and communist parties also did their best to gain adherents, causing a fierce ideological competition. One arena where all existing ideologies clashed in an extremely violent manner was Spain during the Civil War (1936-1939). A part of the army had rebelled in July 1936 and rapidly succeeded in gaining control over about half the country. The rebels could count on the support of the small but determined Spanish fascist movement, the Falange, the reactionary Carlists, --who supported a dissident branch of the House of Bourbon– and most Catholic conservatives and monarchists. Under General Francisco Franco the resulting Civil War was presented as a crusade to reinstate order in Spain. During the war, but more so after his final victory in April 1939, Franco blended the various ideological movements that supported his regime into one eclectic, national-Catholic political religion, which was clearly totalitarian in aspiration and which in various gradations would be characteristic of his semi-fascist dictatorship, which lasted until his death in 1975.[1]

The government of the Second Republic received the support of republicans, the regionalist movements in the Basque Country and Catalonia, socialists, communists and the remarkably strong anarchist movement. Although after the first chaotic phase of the Civil War had passed an unstable compromise was reached between these groups to postpone most far-reaching social reforms until after the war, the various parties and

[1] See Zira Box, *España Año Zero. La construcción simbólica del franquismo* (Madrid 2010).

trade unions within the republican camp tried to increase their following during the struggle, while tightening the bonds with their supporters.

The Civil War became a violent clash between left and right with international repercussions. Both camps presented the war as a struggle between good and evil, and many international volunteers flocked to Spain to defend their respective causes. The communists alone succeeded in recruiting more than 30,000 sympathisers from over 50 countries for the International Brigades. And the enthusiasm with which ordinary Spaniards embraced the cause of one of the participating militias or parties was equally overwhelming. However, in order to establish their own land of milk and honey many obstacles had to be removed. Thus, with almost religious zeal political opponents were killed behind the frontline, creating approximately 50,000 victims in the Republican zone and 180,000 in the Francoist sector.[2] As a consequence, the Spanish Civil War offers a tragic, while intriguing case, not only of the sacralization of politics from above but also of the widely felt need to believe from below.

Within the Republican zone – which will be the focus of this chapter – surprisingly the most widespread, and probably the most deeply felt shared political idea, seems to have been the belief in unbelief, the anticlerical idea that the Catholic Church represented an evil that had to be rooted out. Thus among the radical measures that were implemented on a local level during the first few chaotic months after the outbreak of the war, such as the collectivization of businesses, the occupation of farm land and the formation of revolutionary councils, we find the confiscation of almost all church properties. Ecclesiastical buildings were turned into party headquarters, arsenals or horse stables, but most were simply put to the torch, which only rarely happened with manors, factories or barracks. Moreover, clergymen, more than fascists, monarchists, conservatives or capitalists, were the object of fierce attacks by all kind of local militias. Whole areas were almost ritually purged of priests, monks and even nuns. This quasi-religious zeal raises the question whether we should understand the anticlericalism in the Republican zone as a political religion that was imposed from below.

[2] The 180,000 victims in the Francoist Zone include about 50,000 executions in the years immediately after the war. Apart from the killed political adversaries around 250,000 people died directly because of the war, and there were approximately half a million refugees. See Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (New York 2012).

Anticlerical attitudes in Spain have been explained in religious terms before. Thus, Gerald Brenan and Eric Hobsbawm have argued that Spanish anticlericalism had strong millenarian undertones. In his classic study of the Spanish Civil War, Brenan even explicitly compares the anticlericalism of the Andalusian anarchists with iconoclast heretical movements from the Middle Ages or the early Modern Era, such as the Waldenses and the Anabaptists, while the noted British historian Hobsbawm emphasizes the archaic character of their rebelliousness.[3] Other scholars have criticized this focus on the supposed irrational and millenarian character of anticlerical violence by reasoning that the revolutionaries pursued clear political and even rational goals with their supposed primitive means. Although most authors of more recent studies try to be more balanced, they still struggle to find a rationale for this collective outburst of violence.[4] Analysing Spanish anticlericalism in terms of the sacralization of politics could provide an interesting new approach because it sidesteps the dichotomy of rational versus irrational or secular versus religious.

In order to analyse to what extent Spanish anticlericalism can be fruitfully studied as a political religion, we first have to comprehend the origins of this hostility towards the Catholic Church. This chapter will therefore start with a short overview of the development of the transnational conflict between clericalism and anticlericalism since the French Revolution. Then it will address the question why this conflict became so prominent and fierce in Spain. In the last section the outburst of anticlerical violence in the Republican zone will be the object of analysis.

Anticlericalism in Europe, 1789-1905

Modern anticlericalism is primarily the product of the Enlightenment and was therefore not a specifically Spanish phenomenon. Eighteenth-century philosophers such as Voltaire

[3] Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish labyrinth. An account of the social and political background of the Spanish civil war* (1943; Cambridge 1990) 188-92 and Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th century* (Manchester 1971 [1959]) 74-93.

[4] The main critics were Temma Kaplan, *Anarchists of Andalusia, 1868-1903* (Princeton, NJ 1977) and Joan Connelly Ullman, *The Tragic Week: A study of anticlericalism in Spain, 1875-1912* (Cambridge 1968). See for the debate: Richard Maddox, 'Revolutionary anticlericalism and hegemonic processes in an Andalusian town, August 1936', *American Ethnologist* 22/1 (1995) 125-42, there 126-128 and Manuel Pérez Ledesma, 'Studies on anticlericalism in contemporary Spain', *International Review of Social History* 46/2 (2001) 227-55.

heavily criticized the Catholic Church for its pompous ceremonies, the superstitious worship of saints, the low intellectual level of the clergy and the lack of productivity of the monastic orders. Although some enlightened monarchs initiated reforms, the conflict between Church and state would reach a first climax during the French Revolution. On 4 August 1789 the privileges of the Church were nullified by the National Assembly. Shortly afterwards the properties of the Church were 'nationalised'. Since the tithe was also abolished, the Church then had virtually no income, and it was decided that the secular clergy would be paid by the government.[5]

The Revolution thus effectively stripped the Catholic Church of its privileges and most of its possessions. This happened not only in France but also in most of the territories occupied by the French Republic or the subsequent Napoleonic regime. These measures, and particularly the radical anticlerical policy during Robespierre's reign of terror, would continue to frighten many Catholics during the remainder of the 19th century. The Church subsequently fiercely opposed all ideas and currents that smacked of Jacobinism and sought cooperation with groups that had also lost their privileges during the Revolution, such as the nobility and the monarchs. The Restoration Era thus witnessed a renewed alliance between throne and altar. Moreover, because the Church more than ever needed donations and bequests, it came to depend more heavily than before on the rich.

As a consequence, in most Catholic countries anticlericalism was clearly on the rise among more progressive groups. Their criticism was directed at the Church, the clergy and sometimes even religion itself, and during the 19th century such criticism was generally of a rational and enlightened nature. The underlying argument was that religion belonged to the private sphere and that the Church should play no role in the political debate or public space. The power of the state should prevail and the freedom of conscience of every individual should be respected. In practice, the resulting conflict was often fought out over the control of education. Other areas of conflict included marriages and funerals. In Catholic countries cemeteries generally were administered by the Church or contained a Catholic section. This situation could result in unpleasant conflicts, as the

[5] See: Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the people of Western Europe, 1789-1989* (Oxford 1997 [1981]) 1-15.

priest could refuse to bury someone – for immoral behaviour – in the Catholic cemetery, even if the family possessed a family tomb there.

Some anticlericals were not satisfied with the removal of the Church from the public domain and also fiercely criticized the clergy. Priests, friars and nuns were often accused of being unproductive and of not living according to the teachings of the Church. They were seen as vain, vindictive, sneaky, fanatical and cruel. Moreover, many did not keep the vow of chastity, which was seen as problematic, particularly for male members of the clergy, as this could lead to sexual intercourse with married and unmarried women, orgies with nuns, unnatural sex and paedophilia. In books, magazines, songs, caricatures and stories such activities were frequently and graphically depicted. Priests were also portrayed as parasites, criminals, perverts and even as infectious diseases. The authors of these tracts did not merely condemn individual behaviour but above all chided the malign influence exerted by the clergy. This criticism could also induce individuals or groups to attack the clergy or to disrupt public expressions of religiosity, such as processions.[6]

A third form of anticlericalism was directed at religion itself. We find examples in satirical writings and parodies but also in word and gesture. Many Catholic dogmas, such as the Trinity and the virgin birth were ridiculed as absurd, primitive and unscientific. Collecting bones and old rags as relics was denounced as unhygienic and more suitable for primitive tribes. A Frenchman jokingly claimed to have found a tear of Judas in a Swiss glacier. As long as a large part of the people continued to believe in such nonsense, progress based on reason would be impossible, it was argued. Catholic holidays were also desecrated. In 1868, the French literary critic Sainte-Beuve organized a banquet on the occasion of Good Friday. This was a day that Catholics had to refrain from eating meat. So at the banquet there was meat in abundance. For a variety of associations of freethinkers this would even become an annual tradition. Eating lamb at such an occasion was especially popular, as it was a symbol of Christ.[7]

During the second half of the 19th century, progressive politicians in most Western European countries succeeded in restricting the influence of the Catholic Church on the public sphere, Spain being the main exception. Developments in Italy, where the relations

[6] The three different forms of anticlericalism are discussed in Jacqueline Lalouette, 'El anticlericalismo en Francia, 1877-1914', *Ayer* 27 (1997) 15-39, here 29-33.
[7] Lalouette, 'El anticlericalismo en Francia', 34-6.

between the Church and the state began to worsen as a consequence of the wars of Italian unification, would have a particularly strong impact. When in 1848 many Italians called for a war to liberate Lombardy and Venice from Austrian occupation, Pius IX refused to rally the Papal State. As a consequence the Pope was briefly driven out of Rome by a popular uprising. When between 1859 and 1861 a new unified Italian kingdom was created, Pius lost most of the Papal State, while in 1870 even Rome was conquered by the army of King Victor Emmanuel II. He offered the Pope control over the Vatican and the corresponding part of Rome, but Pius IX turned it down and even refused to recognize the new Italian state or to set foot outside the Vatican.[8]

Responsibility for the deteriorating relationship between the Church and the new authorities could not be fully attributed to the Italian state. After his flight from Rome in 1848, Pius IX repudiated his earlier sympathies for liberalism and began a counteroffensive. In 1854 he declared the popular belief in the Immaculate Conception of Mary an official dogma, while in 1864 he published the Encyclical *Quanta Cura* which rejected various liberal principles, such as religious toleration, freedom of speech and the separation of Church and state. As an appendix he included the *Syllabus Errorum* wherein he condemned rationalism, liberalism, socialism, nationalism and secularism. On top of this Pius summoned the first Vatican Council in 1869, which proclaimed Papal infallibility in matters of faith, while he also forbade Catholics to actively participate in the national politics of the new Italian state.[9]

Italy, however, was not the only state that collided head-on with the Catholic Church; conflicts also occurred in the newly unified German Empire, where Bismarck launched his *Kulturkampf* and in the French Third Republic. In both countries the government limited the political influence of the Church, prohibited a number of monastic orders and particularly curtailed the role of the Church in primary and secondary education. In France, cemeteries were also secularized and crucifixes were

[8] Martin Papenheim, '*Roma o morte*: Culture wars in Italy', in: Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds), *Culture wars: Secular-Catholic conflict in nineteenth-century Europe* (Cambridge 2003) 202-27.
[9] Christopher Clark, 'The new Catholicism and the European culture wars', in: Clark and Kaiser, *Culture wars*, 11-47.

removed from schools, hospitals, courts and other public buildings, while processions in the open air were forbidden.[10]

Pope Leo XIII, who took office in 1878, modified the politics of the Vatican. Instead of confrontation, he sought cooperation with the key European states. So in 1892, he urged French Catholics to accept the republic and to give up their fight for the restoration of the monarchy. Even more influential was his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* from 1891. In it Leo XIII showed his concern over the fate of the working classes. He called on Catholics to form their own trade unions and other organizations to address the interests of Catholics in general and the workers in particular. This meant in fact that the Pope was no longer looking back nostalgically to the privileged position of the Church under the Ancient Regime but was confronting the modern political realities in Europe, while urging Catholics to accept the rules of the parliamentary system and try to use them for their own benefit.

The Church also attempted to defend its position and influence by increasing its visibility. Thus, pilgrimages to Rome and new pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes were strongly encouraged by the Church. Moreover, new, conspicuous churches were built, such as the Sacré-Coeur in Paris, which was meant as atonement for the sins committed during the Commune of 1871. The Jesuits, in particular, promoted the veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which symbolized God's love for mankind, and Catholics were encouraged to hang a small medallion of the Sacred Heart at the entrance of their house.

This new sacralization or Catholization of the public sphere and the simultaneous advance of Catholic organizations, trade unions and political parties caused discontent in the progressive, anticlerical camp. In France matters came to a hard confrontation when in 1901 a left-wing government determined that all monastic orders should receive official recognition. The subsequent government refused this recognition based on the argument that the orders were subordinate to a foreign power: the Vatican. It therefore closed down 12,000 Catholic private schools, and 50,000 monks and nuns left the country.

[10] See James McMillan, '"Priests hits girl": on the front line in the "war of the two Frances"' and Manuel Borutta, 'Enemies at the gate: the *Moabiter Klostersturm* and the *Kulturkampf*: Germany', in: Clark and Kaiser, *Culture wars*, 77-101 and 227-55.

In 1905 a law that radically separated Church and state was introduced, and as a result the government stopped paying the salaries of the secular clergy.[11]

Since in Italy, Germany and France the state thus succeeded in diminishing the public role and influence of the Church as an institution, the urgency to combat clericalism in all its aspects slowly diminished. However, this was not the case in Spain. Here, the state failed to diminish the public role of the Church, and as a consequence anticlericals stepped up their efforts.

Anticlericalism in Spain, 1833-1931

In Spain relations between the state and the Church were not free from frictions during most of the 19th century. Because the Napoleonic occupation of Spain – which began in 1808 – never succeeded in pacifying the entire country, the first major wave of secularization of church properties would begin only in the 1830s. When King Ferdinand VII died in 1833 he was succeeded by his infant daughter Isabel II. This succession was, however, contested by Ferdinand's younger and extremely reactionary brother Carlos, who received support from those parts of the country, especially Navarre, the Basque Country and Catalonia, where the abolition of feudal rights and privileges during the French occupation had been widely resented. In order to gain the support of her subjects the queen mother had no option but to introduce liberal reforms, while embarking upon a massive scheme of ecclesiastical confiscations in order to finance the war against the Carlists. Many members of the clergy consequently sided with Don Carlos, and the Church excommunicated those who participated in the confiscations or who bought former church lands.[12]

The relations between the state and the Church settled down only with the Concordat of 1851. The Pope recognized the expropriations, while the state agreed to pay the secular clergy. Moreover, it was recognized that the Catholic religion was, to exclusion of all other faiths, the religion of the Spanish nation and that all education should conform to its doctrines.[13] This new-found balance between a moderate-liberal constitutional monarchy and the Church was shattered with the fall of Isabel II in 1868. A

[11] See also Jacqueline Lalouette, *La libre pensée en France, 1848-1940* (Paris 1997).
[12] William James Callahan, *Church, politics and society in Spain, 1750-1874* (Cambridge 1984) 145-85.
[13] Ibid., 190-5.

military coup forced her into exile, and the new regime introduced a more progressive constitution in which for the first time freedom of religion was recognized. The new regime even began to anticipate many anticlerical reforms which in the following decades would actually be introduced in the German Empire and France. However, after the short-lived republican experiment ended in total chaos, a new military coup restored the monarchy, thus bringing the so-called *Sexenio Democrático* to an end.

Under the restored Bourbon king, Alfonso XII, a new constitution was to provide broad support for the parliamentary regime of the Restoration (1875-1931). A compromise was found for the religious question, proclaiming that Roman Catholicism would be the religion of the state, while permitting the private practice of other faiths. Although the re-established dominance of the Church in educational matters was fiercely contested by the left, both Pope Pius IX and the Spanish bishops refused to accept this toleration of other religions, which they regarded as a recognition of error and heresy. Nonetheless, under Leo XIII the Vatican took a more moderate stance, urging the Spanish Catholics to accept the political system of the Restoration and even to participate actively in political and social matters.[14]

In general, the Catholic Church prospered under the Restoration regime. There was no separate Catholic political party as in Germany, but the Conservative Party in particular defended the interests of the Church. Moreover, the state lacked the money to counteract the growing importance of Catholic schools for primary and secondary education, even when moderately anticlerical liberals formed the government. The clergy even taught religion classes at state schools. Moreover, the number of secular clergy, largely dedicated to education, trebled between 1887 and 1900, rising to about 44,000 nuns and 13,000 monks.

The Church also kept a dominant role in the field of private ceremonies, such as weddings and burials, and in many cases received support from the state to impose a virtual monopoly. In 1903, for instance, the Guardia Civil arrested the pall-bearers of a girl who on the expressed wish of her father received a civil burial in the Basque village

[14] Frances Lannon, *Privilege, persecution, and prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875-1975* (Oxford 1987) 119-22.

of Gallarta.[15] Unlike what happened in Italy, Germany and France, the public role of the Church therefore increased after the attempts to curb its influence during the Sexenio ended in failure. Furthermore, as the Church now lacked independent sources of income, it became increasingly dependent on wealthy patrons in order to fund its many charitable and educational establishments, while at the same time it failed to develop effective measures to relieve the miserable conditions of the industrial and agricultural working classes.[16]

In this context a new enlightened anticlericalism prospered and at times of crises could combine with a more popular anticlerical attitude that had much older roots and can be associated with the archaic forms of social protest studied by Hobsbawm. In the Middle Ages dissatisfaction with the Church and the behaviour of the clergy was already widespread. Since the Church claimed to have access to higher powers and that God could bring prosperity, it was also held accountable in times of misfortune or natural disasters, which sometimes led to explosions of violence. Originally, these were spontaneous riots, rather than politically motivated revolts, but from the French Revolution onwards anticlericalism would become ever more politically charged, as the Church began to reject all kinds of political innovations, such as parliaments, constitutions, religious tolerance, elections and secular education, while it openly supported reactionary monarchs.

A first outburst of anticlerical violence in the modern era took place in 1834. Traditional elements, such as the belief in the supernatural powers of the clergy that could also be applied for evil purposes, were mixed with more modern political elements. The fight against the Carlist uprising that had received the support of many priests obliged the government to call upon new recruits and raise taxes, both rather unpopular measures. When on top of this a cholera epidemic broke out in Madrid, the situation in the Spanish capital became critical. Rumours that the Jesuits had deliberately poisoned the city's drinking water led to widespread riots. A mob that apparently held the Jesuits responsible both for making common cause with the enemy and for bringing disaster to

[15] Mary Vincent, *Spain 1833-2002: People and State* (Oxford 2007) 102.
[16] Lannon, *Privilege, persecution, and prophecy*, 146-70.

the city first attacked their convent and lynched those friars that could not escape. Within a few hours other monasteries were sacked as well and their inhabitants killed, ending the day with 78 casualties.[17]

Later in the century, especially in politically unstable times, anticlerical outbursts continued to occur, but most were minor incidents without fatalities. At the same time, a more intellectual, upper- and middle-class anticlericalism developed, which found expression in plays, novels, newspaper articles and caricatures. Anticlericalism, moreover, became the common denominator of the moderate and radical left, and anticlerical remarks could be found in most progressive periodicals. There were even a few specialized journals, whose pages were filled with stories about lascivious priests, greedy monks, lazy nuns and hypocritical Catholics. There were also a few attempts to found private secular schools, while in freethinking societies, republican clubs and freemason lodges inflammatory speeches were given, and, in imitation of Sainte-Beuve, festive banquets were organized on Good Friday.[18]

Nevertheless, the rival positions only radicalized around 1900. This was primarily caused by the fact that both Catholics and progressive groups were increasingly trying to mobilize a mass audience while sacralizing their cause. Politics was no longer a matter of closed meetings and preaching to the converted but moved to the streets. Mass manifestations were partly a response to large-scale and well-organized processions and pilgrimages.[19] Two specific developments caused further growth in anticlericalism. In 1898 Spain lost its last major colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines after a short but disastrous war against the United States. This outcome was at least partly the result of the discontent of the population of these colonies, and as the Church had played a major role in converting, educating and controlling the population, especially in the Philippines, it was seen as one of the culprits for the military defeat. Moreover, progressive Spaniards argued that a drastic modernization of the country was needed in order to escape being overrun and maybe even occupied by one of the Great Powers, and

[17] Juan Sisinio Pérez Garzón, 'Curas y liberales en la revolución burguesa', *Ayer* 27 (1997) 67-100, there 81-3.
[18] Julio de la Cueva Merino, 'Los intelectuales, el clero y el pueblo (España, 1900)', *Foro Hispánico* 18 (2000) 31-43; Enrique A. Sanabria, *Republicanism and anticlerical nationalism in Spain* (Basingstoke 2009).
[19] Julio de la Cueva Merino, 'Católicos en la calle: la movilización de los católicos españoles, 1899-1923', *Historia y Política*, 3 (2000) 55-80.

therefore the influence of the Church should finally be curtailed. The separation of state and church in France functioned as another stimulus for the Spanish left. As a consequence of its new anticlerical laws many French clerics had moved to Spain where they hoped to realize their dream of a totally Catholic society, in which the state protected the Church. This influx of large numbers of clerics only served to underline the need for a fresh anticlerical counter-offensive.[20]

This counter-offensive found its first expression when the celebration of the Jubilee of Christ the Redeemer in 1901 was met with the anticlerical Jubilee of Liberty, which commemorated the confiscation of most Church properties by the state 65 years earlier. Various other opportunities were seized for public manifestations during which anticlerical songs were sung. Sometimes these demonstrations turned into riots in which the windows of churches, convents, Catholic schools and seminaries were smashed. Anticlericals also tried to disrupt processions by whistling or yelling, sometimes even resorting to beating up participants with clubs. At other occasions doors were blocked to prevent processions leaving church. In a few cases these actions led to injuries and deaths since the Catholics did not respond passively and sometimes even brought guns to defend themselves. Civil marriages and funerals were also opportunities for anticlericals to express themselves publicly. Increasingly mimicking religious forms, they invented civil ceremonies for the baptism of a child, which sometimes included a parade, preceded by an orchestra, to the Registry Office. Preferably, this took place on a day when there was a Catholic procession that could be disrupted. Children were given names that referred to progressive ideals instead of to biblical personages or saints, like *Paz*, *Libertad*, *Aurora*, *Progreso* or *Emancipación*. Good Friday dinners were opened to the poor, and in some cities during Holy Week an Anticlerical Week was organized, with all kinds of festivities.[21]

A new populist anticlericalism

[20] Julio de la Cueva, 'The assault on the city of the Levites: Spain' in: Clark and Kaiser, *Culture wars* , 181-201.
[21] Julio de la Cueva Merino, 'Movilización política e identidad anticlerical, 1898-1910', *Ayer* 27 (1997) 101-26, here 111-19.

In this way an enlightened, intellectual anticlericalism became increasingly connected with its traditional, more popular counterpart. Around the turn of the century, it was primarily radical republican populist politicians who deliberately tried to link the two movements by sacralizing both their rhetoric and political forms, thus transforming anticlericalism into a broad, progressive mass movement. The best-known and most successful exponent of this new anticlerical populism was Alejandro Lerroux (1864-1949), who succeeded in mobilizing the lower social classes in Barcelona and winning some resounding victories in local elections with a populist, vaguely socialist and strongly anticlerical republican programme. Therefore, as shown by the foremost Spanish historian José Álvarez Junco, Lerroux created a Manichaean contrast between a basically good and morally elevated people and a thoroughly corrupt clergy. The Church thus acted as his scapegoat.[22] Apparently a rational plea to remove the Church from the public sphere was not enough anymore, and he resorted to fiercely criticizing the immoral behaviour of the clergy and the detrimental effects of Catholic religious teachings, while converting his own ideals into political absolutes.

The vilifying of the clergy happened in different ways. Among Lerroux' favourite targets were the values promoted by the Church. According to him, clerics were work-shy parasites, who wanted to keep the people ignorant. Their activities had ensured that Spaniards had become a lazy and impotent population of beggars and vagrants addicted to the poor relief of the Church. The clerics preached obedience and a slave morality and in this way had converted the Spaniards into a submissive people who could be easily controlled by the government. Progress, rationality, modernity and a functioning democracy in which the people had the power were not possible, according to Lerroux, as long as the Church maintained its leading position.[23]

Another favoured issue was the unnatural attitude of the clergy towards sexuality. The male clerics who dressed as women were expected to abstain from any sexual activity. Opponents argued that this abstention was a denial of human nature and could

[22] José Álvarez Junco, *El Emperador del Paralelo. Lerroux y la demagogia populista* (Madrid 1990). See also: Ramiro Reig, 'Entre la realidad y el fenómeno blasquista en Valencia, 1898-1936' in: Nigel Townson (ed.), *El republicanismo en España (1830-1977)* (Madrid 1994) 395-425 and Ferran Archilés i Cardona, *Parlar en nom del poble. Cultura política, discurs i mobilització social al republicanisme de Castelló de la Plana, 1891-1909* (Castellón 2002).

[23] This and the following paragraphs are based on: Álvarez Junco, *El Emperador del Paralelo*, 401-14.

lead to only deviant or unnatural behaviour. Many stories and jokes circulated about priests who lived in concubinage with their housekeeper, confessors who lustfully touched penitents, and chaplains who eagerly took advantage of their free access to convents where they enjoyed all sorts of excesses with nuns and novices. Moreover, priests had intimate interviews with married and unmarried women out of sight of their husbands, fathers and brothers, and they managed almost certainly to get all kinds of sexual favours, which were sometimes even withheld from the spouses. Lerroux and other anticlerical politicians took advantage of these stereotypes by often making explicit or implicit references to them.

A major point of criticism – which was also used against other typical scapegoats such as Jews, ethnic minorities and freemasons – was the mysterious character of the clergy. Everything was done in secret, in the confessional or behind the walls of an enclosed monastery. The Jesuits, in particular, were accused of operating clandestinely. They formed an uncontrolled but extremely powerful and wealthy sect that exerted an enormous influence behind the scenes, especially in the highest circles of society. The Church was thus like a spider or an octopus that stretched its tentacles everywhere. Lerroux also metaphorically compared the Church to an infectious disease that had fatally weakened the people and had to be eradicated.

In this diatribe against the clergy and religion Lerroux often resorted to religious imagery. Science was a magic potion that the people needed to defeat the dragon (Church) that lived in the cave of darkness or to exorcise the devil. The nation was compared to Christ; she was an innocent lamb sacrificed to save mankind. But one day the people would be resurrected and win the final battle against evil. The people were like Moses, who guided the nation through the Red Sea and the desert and led her to the Promised Land. In the form that Lerroux gave to his political activities religious elements can also be identified, which it can be argued conferred upon his ideology many of the characteristics of a political religion (including using violence against political opponents). It is obvious that this was largely done to attract a poorly educated and often even illiterate audience. Therefore, the sacralization of politics seems to be inextricably linked with the emergence of mass politics around 1900.

Lerroux regularly organized mass meetings, which were not meant only to highlight the party ideology, to rationally discuss points of view and proceed with votes on certain issues or candidates. He wanted, above all, to strengthen the unity among his following by appealing more to the heart than to the mind. He positioned himself as a kind of messiah, who was persecuted and misunderstood but who eventually would bring salvation. Supporters killed by police violence were proclaimed martyrs and venerated as secular saints. These martyrs had served as good examples, sacrificing their lives for the republican cause, and this act also charged those left behind with a huge responsibility because these sacrifices could not remain without consequences. Carrying flags and banners and the communal singing of hymns strengthened the feeling of community and made these meetings into surrogate church services, where one went to fortify the soul. Lerroux also came up with an alternative to the popular local pilgrimages in the form of 'democratic picnics'. His followers and their families marched to a hill outside Barcelona to eat and drink together, sing revolutionary songs and listen to uplifting speeches. The message was clear in all this: salvation came not from Christ or the Church but only from the revolution.[24]

That revolution seemed to arrive in 1909. This was the consequence of a Spanish defeat in Morocco after which a large number of reservists were forced to re-enlist in the army. They consisted mostly of married workers who now gathered in Barcelona to be transported to Morocco on ships owned by the marquis of Comillas, an arch-conservative Catholic. Patriotic ladies from the wealthy classes distributed medallions of the Sacred Heart to the recruits. Most of them, however, radically opposed the war, and many threw the religious objects into the harbour. On 26 July a general strike was proclaimed to protest this imperialistic war. Riots broke out, the force of which initially was directed against the state as embodied by tax offices, busses and police stations. On the first evening a Catholic school went up in flames, and during the following days 80 monasteries, churches and seminaries followed, destroying half of all Church buildings in Barcelona.[25]

[24] Ibid., 252-9 and 389-96.
[25] Ibid., 375-8. See also Ullman, *The Tragic Week*.

The insurgents submerged the city in chaos, while trying to drive the Catholic Church from it. Desecrating churches and monasteries and burning them down was to produce – as had been preached by Lerroux – a catharsis. The rioters also went looking for evidence of clerical debauchery. Thus, tombs in convents were opened to see if there were foetuses or dead bodies of babies – of nuns who had become pregnant – and cells were examined for perfumes, pornographic attributes and titillating lingerie.[26] Apparently, the mob was hoping that demolishing the church buildings and providing the clergy with a heavy-handed lesson would be sufficient since only three priests lost their lives during this so-called 'Tragic Week'.

After a week the army restored order with an iron fist. The eruption of popular violence during Tragic Week probably frightened off the more well-to-do anticlericals. Even Lerroux, who for a short time fled the country, moderated his anticlerical rhetoric after he resumed his political career in Madrid. And after a social-liberal government, led by José Canalejas, failed to curtail the influence of the Church, the struggle between Catholics and anticlericals lost its intensity. However, the Church in response tried to increase its presence in the public realm.[27] This Catholic counter-offensive had considerable success after World War I, especially after the atrocities of the Russian Revolution became clear to the Spanish upper classes.

This became particularly evident when in 1919, at the geographical centre of Spain, on a hill just south of Madrid, a megalomaniac monument of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was unveiled. On this occasion King Alfonso XIII – who until 1914 had given his support to a social-liberal modernisation programme – officially dedicated Spain to the Sacred Heart. This gesture once more confirmed that for a growing segment of the political establishment Spain continued to be a Catholic state. The Church would even increase its influence during the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, which began in 1923. Although the socialist trade unions would prosper in the new corporatist state, for many supporters of the left the military, the wealthy employers and the Church all seemed to collaborate to exclude them from political influence. A Jesuit who by that time worked in a poor suburb of Madrid recognized that for a labourer society was divided

[26] Álvarez Junco, *El Emperador del Paralelo*, 403.
[27] Julio de la Cueva Merino, 'Democracia liberal y anticlericalismo durante la Restauración' in: Manuel Suárez Cortina (ed.), *La Restauración entre el liberalismo y la democracia* (Madrid 1997) 229-73.

into two: 'rich and religious bourgeois on the one hand, and poor and irreligious workers on the other'.[28]

Second Republic and Civil War (1931-1939)

Only after the King and the dictatorship gave way to the Second Republic in 1931, did the government manage to introduce laws that effectively separated Church and state. In the new constitution freedom of religion was guaranteed and civil marriage and divorce were introduced. Other measures included the removal of the influence of the Church on public schools, expelling the Jesuits from the country and the proscription of religious manifestations in the open air. Thus about 60 years after Italy, Germany and France, Spain finally succeeded in restricting the influence and presence of the Church in the public realm. However, with the regime change, anticlerical feelings also resurfaced. In May 1931, even before the new constitution was adopted, anti-monarchic riots in Madrid escalated into an attack on churches and monasteries. The wave of anticlerical violence moved to the east and south and reached a climax in Málaga, where all monasteries and churches were set ablaze. A few months later the celebration of our Lady of Victory, commemorating the expulsion of the Moors from Málaga in 1497, was replaced by a parade of local beauties and the election of a Miss Republic.[29] The new legal provisions were also abused by many left-wing municipalities to show their power over the church. A priest was, for instance, fined for saying mass outside after lightning had destroyed the roof of his church, while another was penalized for monarchist propaganda when churchgoers sang hymns that spoke of the Kingdom of God.[30]

Right-wing parties won the elections of 1933, in which for the first time women were allowed to vote. The new conservative government decided to freeze both the measures against the Church and land reform, thus confirming the close relationship between the political right and the clergy. The turn to the right was best visible in the return of the Catholic Church to the public realm as processions reappeared on the streets.

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[28] Francisco Peiró as quoted in J. Albertí, *La Iglesia en llamas. La persecución religiosa en España durante la guerra civil* (Barcelona 2008) 67.

[29] Julio de la Cueva Merino, 'El anticlericalismo en la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil' in: Emilio La Parra López and Manuel Suárez Cortina (eds), *El anticlericalismo español contemporáneo* (Madrid 1998) 211-303, here 218-19 and Vincent, *Spain*, 120.

[30] Manuel Delgado Ruiz, 'Anticlericalismo, espacio y poder. La destrucción de los rituales católicos, 1931-1939' *Ayer* 27 (1997) 149-81, here 171.

As a consequence anticlerical eruptions became more violent. Thus during the revolutionary strike in Asturias in 1934 about 60 church buildings were destroyed and 34 clergymen were killed.[31]

However, the real explosion of political violence began only after a group of right-wing army officers, including Franco, staged a military coup on 17 July 1936 against the left-wing Popular Front Government that had won the elections a few months earlier. In the following days weapons were handed out to those who supported the legitimate government or were confiscated by workers' and party militias. Thanks to the loyalty to the Republic of part of the armed forces and the enthusiastic support of a considerable section of the population, the military rebels did not succeed in overthrowing the government altogether initially, but they did take control of most of the western and southern half of the country. In the Republican zone, which contained the major towns like Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Bilbao, the authority of the central government nevertheless largely collapsed, and power fell into the hands of local revolutionary committees and workers' militias. It took the government about six months to restore order and to create a centralized military command in the area they controlled. This first turbulent period, in particular, would witness an unprecedented outburst of anticlerical violence.

Although the strict separation between Church and state had by then already been introduced five years before, republicans were apparently still not entirely reassured that legal regulations would be sufficient. Their distrust was fuelled by the fact that the vast majority of the clergy, just like the rest of Spanish conservatives, sympathized with the military rebellion or even openly supported it. Although there was no central coordination, sentiments in almost the entire Republican zone – the main exception being the thoroughly Catholic Basque Country that had remained faithful to the government because it was granted regional autonomy – turned against the clergy and often even against the Catholic faith. Actually, the anticlericalism of the Republic was mirrored by the clericalism of the Nationalist camp. Thus, from about October 1936, Franco's

[31] Julián Casanova, *República y guerra civil* Historia de España vol. 8 (Madrid 2007) 84-5, 119-20 and 131.

uprising to save 'Spain from Marxism at all costs'[32] was baptized a national crusade and received the open support of the overwhelming majority of Spanish bishops and cardinals. The defence of religion became a common denominator for the nationalist camp, even for some rather secular or freethinking generals and Falangists.[33]

However, it was not so much the measures against the Church but the almost religious ardour with which the clergy was persecuted and killed and the ritual forms that were used that linked the anticlerical fury with the sacralization of politics. Virtually everywhere in the Republican zone priests, monks and even nuns were arrested, imprisoned and in many cases murdered. During the Civil War a total of 6832 members of the Catholic clergy were killed, most of them in the first six months, including 13 bishops, 4172 priests, 2364 monks and friars and 283 nuns.[34] In many areas this constituted around 40 per cent of the clergy, while the rest, of which the great majority generally consisted of nuns, were left unharmed, fled or went into hiding. Among the victims of political repression in the Republic the clergy formed the most important professional group representing around 20 per cent of the total. The actual political sympathies or reputation of individual clergymen – some of whom supported Catalan regionalism or had shown a positive attitude towards working-class demands – did not matter in most cases; they were murdered because they belonged to the clergy. Young novices were in some cases released as they could possibly better their lives, but this was never the case with older priests. There might be a kind of court hearing, but in most cases the priests and monks were simply shot, and occasionally hanged, drowned, burned, or even buried alive. Many were picked up from prison and 'taken for a ride', as it was called euphemistically, and then executed in a remote area. In many cases they were first humiliated and tortured. For example, they had to curse or to undress and sometimes they were castrated or forced to run as bulls to a red rag, after which they were killed like a beast.[35] It seemed a revolutionary duty to exterminate the clergy. In some areas groups of

[32] Interview by Jay Allen from July 1936 as quoted in: Paul Preston, *Franco: A biography* (London 1994) 153.
[33] Anthony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London 2006) 106-7 and 269-70 and Albertí, *La Iglesia en llamas*, 277-86 and 408-14.
[34] Figures are originally from Antonio Montero Moreno, *Historia de la persecución religiosa en España, 1936-1939* (Madrid 1961) 761-4.
[35] Julio de la Cueva, 'Religious persecution, anticlerical tradition and revolution: On atrocities against the clergy during the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Contemporary History* (1998) 355-69, there 356; De la

revolutionaries went around villages to verify that the priest had been murdered. Many villagers explained later that they had killed the priest because 'what else could we have done to carry out the revolution'. Or 'what does revolution mean? Had we not agreed to kill them all?'[36] A militia member exclaimed that a priest was detained 'because you [the clerics] are to blame for everything that is happening'.[37]

The destruction of Catholic buildings and symbols was often the most obvious sign that a new era had begun. The only buildings that in many regions were destroyed or set on fire were churches and monasteries. Sometimes the population limited itself to removing the statues of saints and other religious paraphernalia and giving the church buildings a new function as garage, storage room, hospital, dance hall, barracks or party headquarters. More often, however, it was believed that a real purification could take place only through fire. Desecrating liturgical objects also belonged to the often spontaneously invented rituals. Members of militias trampled on hosts and put on chasubles and other religious garments to celebrate mock masses or processions. The Spanish historian Julio de la Cueva seems to agree with Brenan and Hobsbawm when he refers to the almost millenarian aspects of the anticlerical violence. He concludes that the aggressive behaviour towards sacred images and devotional objects seemed to 'reveal a basic, almost magical belief in their might and the necessity to escape from their influence at any cost'. In the Andalusian village of Lepe, for instance, the inhabitants attacked the formerly adored patroness saint of the village with an unprecedented ferocity, pulling out her eyes, stripping her from clothes and jewels, shooting her, chopping her to pieces and throwing the remains into the river.[38]

The prominent American historian of religion Bruce Lincoln proposes a slightly different and more utilitarian interpretation of these anticlerical atrocities. According to him, they should be seen as acts of iconoclasm, as 'the deliberate and public shattering of sacred symbols with the implicit intent of dissolving all loyalty to the institution which

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Cueva Merino, 'El anticlericalismo en la Segunda República', 260-85 and Mary Vincent, '"The keys to the kingdom": Religious violence in the Spanish Civil War, July-August 1936' in: Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (eds), *The splintering of Spain: Cultural history and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Cambridge 2005) 68-93.

[36] Julio de la Cueva Merino, '"Si los frailes y monjes supieran…": La violencia anticlerical', in: Santos Juliá (ed.) *Violencia política en la España del siglo XX* (Madrid 2000) 191-233, there 229-30.

[37] Quoted in: Albertí, *La Iglesia en llamas*, 474.

[38] De la Cueva, 'Religious persecution', 365-6.

employs those symbols, and, further, of dissipating all respect for the ideology which that institution propagates'. In this he seems to emphasize the atheistic convictions of those who perpetrated these acts, but even for the most radical anticlericals these actions probably also contained an element of breaking the spell that the Catholic religion had cast over the population at large and maybe even over themselves. Lincoln actually gives various examples in which the long-buried corpses of priests, monks and nuns were exhumed and publicly displayed, sometimes for several days. As these bodies were decomposed, it became manifest that even the members of the clergy were subject to death and decay. Many people who went to see the 'spectacle' laughed and jeered at them, as if they experienced 'joy or liberation at the degradation of the mighty'. In this way the anticlericals tried to demonstrate 'the *powerlessness* of the icon'.[39]

Lincoln also acknowledges that these humiliating displays of corpses and other iconoclastic acts had a strong millenarian flavour. By fiercely rejecting the old rules the revolutionaries attempted to 'create a new morality'. And he concludes:

> But prior to the attempt at establishing the 'new rules', there was an ominous, violent and profoundly shocking phase of 'no rules' in the summer of 1936, during which political enemies were ruthlessly murdered, churches burned, and disinterred corpses were placed on public display. In part, these may have been practical steps aimed at demolishing what was left of the *ancien régime*, but they were also the spontaneous dramatization of *absolute* liberation from all bonds of the past, even from those of common decency.[40]

Illustrative of the anticlerical attitude in the Republican zone was the highly symbolic 'execution' on 7 August 1936 of the monument of the Sacred Heart, that 18 years earlier had been inaugurated by King Alfonso XIII with so much pomp. After the fusillade the monument was blown up. Fighting the enemy on the battlefront apparently only made sense if first the republican part of Spain was liberated from the Catholic yoke under

[39] Bruce Lincoln, 'Revolutionary exhumation in Spain, July 1936', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27/2 (1985) 241-60, here 255-8.
[40] Ibid., 251-2.

which the country had suffered for so long, and for this task some bullets and explosives could certainly be expended.

De la Cueva describes other symbolic acts perpetrated in the first months of the Civil War. Thus, crucifixes and statues of saints along public roads were destroyed. In a graveyard in Aragon a man even tried to remove all religious references from the tombs with a chisel. The common *adiós* as a farewell salute was abolished. Cursing came into fashion and became a way to make clear that one was on the correct side. In some companies blaspheming contests were held. The author also makes clear that this purification was not limited to the public sphere but invaded the private sphere as well. In many villages a large-scale collection of private religious objects was held, including images of saints, devotional pictures, dolls of the child Jesus and medallions of the Sacred Heart. These were lumped together and set on fire.[41]

These events might provide a better understanding of the anticlerical fury of this period. One could argue that the clergy and the Church made easy targets. Rich landowners, right-wing politicians and large employers knew that they could become a victim of the workers' militia and immediately took measures to escape or to defend themselves, but this was much less the case with the Church and its servants. But by attacking clergymen left-wing militants did not so much target the Church's political but its moral and symbolic power. And this 'soft power' was more pervasive and therefore more dangerous than the hard power of the military insurgents, right-wing politicians and their supporters. The latter could conquer only the public space, whereas the Church entered the homes and private lives of the great majority of the population. The totalitarian ambitions of the anticlerical firebrands also aimed to reach into the private sphere and therefore primarily targeted the clergy. They probably did not so much fear the influence of the Church on themselves, but they wanted to protect their children and wives from it. The anticlerical fury thus had a clear gendered aspect as well. Those opponents who could most easily penetrate the female sphere – the priests and confessors – should thus be physically eliminated, while the religious objects should be radically purged from each home. This in a way is confirmed by an old lady from Barcelona who did not want her image of the

[41] De la Cueva, 'Religious persecution', 362-3.

Virgin Mary to be removed and hoped to protect it (and herself) by attaching an ensign of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica (FAI) to it, exclaiming 'this is the virgin of the FAI! This is one of ours!'[42] Although the lady vainly hoped that a compromise was still possible, she clearly understood that the main issue was the spiritual domination of her own living space and in the end her mind and her heart. In this sense the almost totalitarian anticlericalism that expressed itself in the Republican zone seems to be a political religion that was imposed from below.

However, there are a few aspects that call into question this conclusion. First, it is necessary to take a closer look at the specific anticlerical character of the rear-guard repression. A substantial number of the executions of clerics were in retribution for murderous actions, particularly against civilians, by Franco's troops. For instance, after Gijón was bombed in August 1936, anarchist militias went to the local prison where they killed a large number of supposed sympathizers of the nationalist cause, including 12 clergymen. Similar killings by left-wing militiamen took place in Bilbao between October 1936 and January 1937 as revenge for victims of aerial attacks. Many priests were also among those supposed members of the fifth column – a term introduced by General Mola, who maintained that right-wing supporters of the rebelling army officers would help in the conquest of Madrid – killed just behind the front line, especially when a Nationalist advance was imminent. Thus, when in November 1936 Madrid came under siege and it was decided to evacuate a large number of the prisoners, communist and anarchist militia took matters into their own hands by executing the human cargo of many vans carrying prisoners out of the city, and inevitably many who died were members of the clergy.[43]

It is also doubtful whether most of the other anticlerical killings were totally spontaneous. In many cases it was militias from elsewhere that took the lead in purging the villages so those who arrested or killed the members of the clergy were often not members of their community. Thus, in the Aragonese town of Barbastro, where in the end 88 per cent of the clergy succumbed, workers' militias from Barcelona and other

[42] Quoted in: Albertí, *La Iglesia en llamas*, 438.
[43] Ibid., 300, 304-5 and 272-4.

parts of Catalonia – on their way to the nearby front – killed most of the local monks.[44] It is also unclear whether the destruction of church buildings and the killing of members of the local clergy were spontaneous acts, inspired by examples from neighbouring places, or whether militias received instructions to burn down the churches and go after the priests. In general, the incidents were not caused by a mob suddenly going out of control but by a small number of hotheads that took the lead. Nonetheless, in many instances a large number of people participated or looked on more passively.

The Catalan historian Albertí argues that we have to distinguish between the various ideological currents. Most republicans and moderate socialists opposed the anticlerical outbursts, while anticlericalism was not part of the core ideas of the more revolutionary socialists and communists either, which focused on the class struggle against capitalism. For them, dead priests were merely collateral damage that could be justified in the context of the war. This was different for the anarchists, for whom the elimination of the Catholic Church was an integral part of their strategy to bring about a true and lasting social and moral revolution. Demolishing the buildings was not enough, the Catholic religion itself had to be rooted out completely before a new and truly free society could come about. Although in many cases it is difficult to establish exactly who was responsible for the destructions and killings, it is clear, according to Albertí, that the anarchists had the upper hand and that most acts of transgressive behaviour were committed by them.[45]

Conclusion

We can now conclude that the fierce anticlericalism that developed during the first decade of the 20th century and came to a dramatic outburst during the Spanish Civil War should be understood – through its use of ritual forms and postulating its own ideals as absolutes – as a form of sacralization of politics. The realization of the progressive political dreams was possible only if the constricting ties of Catholicism were broken, and if that could not be done voluntarily, it had to be realized forcibly by physically

[44] Ibid., 353-6.
[45] Ibid., 237-54. See also Gonzalo Álvarez Chillida, 'La actitud del movimiento libertario ante la religión durante la II República (1931-1936)' in: Julio de la Cueva and Feliciano Montero (eds), *La izquierda obrera y religión en España (1900-1939)* (Alcalá de Henares 2012).

eliminating the Church and its representatives. The belief in disbelief also clearly contained a religious element. A brief, but thorough purification by ritual, iconoclastic violence would, in the eyes of many, bring a new dawn, a new society, and a kind of secular heaven on Earth.

Spanish anticlericalism gained traits of a political religion when in the early 20th century the earlier enlightened and elitist variant was abandoned and a more populist course was chosen by Alejandro Lerroux. He consciously mixed a rational and secular outlook with elements of an older popular anticlerical tradition, and in order to reach a mass audience he adopted symbols, images and forms taken from Catholicism, with which his audience was still very familiar. Pilgrimages became democratic picnics, saints were replaced by republican martyrs, and processions with banners and psalms were turned into demonstrations with republican flags and revolutionary anthems. Moreover, he frequently used terms and concepts derived from the Christian faith, portraying himself in a messianic way while his adversaries were demonized and the revolution was promoted as eventually leading the nation to the Promised Land.

It has also been shown that the Spanish Civil War should not be seen – not even partially – as an archaic religious war. While in other major Catholic countries in Europe the state had succeeded in restricting the influence of the Church in the public sphere during the second half of the 19th century this had not been the case in Spain. As a result, the increasing political polarization between left and right – which happened almost everywhere in Europe during the interwar years – became enmeshed with a maybe even more intense struggle between clericals and anticlericals. What was at stake was not merely the power over the state and the public space but the almost totalitarian dominance over the private sphere and over the hearts and minds of the population.

Although it is clear that the fierce anticlerical preaching of politicians and intellectuals such as Lerroux had prepared the ground for the anticlerical violence of 1936, anticlerical rhetoric had proven to be a successful strategy to mobilize the masses and unite all revolutionary forces. However, the outburst of anticlerical violence in 1936 was not coordinated from above but was a spontaneous response by the public to this rhetoric. Apparently, there was a large demand from below for ideologies that gave an all-encompassing and absolute solution to all human problems and sufferings, and this

certainly proved to be the case in Spain. As a result the rise and 'success' of political religions cannot be attributed only to irrational but charismatic politicians, such as Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin.

There are, nevertheless, some limits to the applicability of a political-religion approach to Spanish anticlericalism. In the first place it was a quite ephemeral phenomenon and did not become an integrated and institutionalized part of a totalitarian regime. When in the spring of 1937 the government regained control over the republican territories public order was more or less restored. As a consequence anticlerical violence subsided and – except for the last days of the war when acts of vengeance became frequent again – rapidly lost its appeal. Furthermore, it is also possible to criticize the presumably spontaneous character of the anticlerical outbursts. Eradicating the Church from Spain seems to have been a primordial element of the anarchist revolutionary strategy, but although most of their anticlerical ideals were shared by at least part of the other left-wing militia and their sympathisers, it is not entirely clear if the violence was produced by a few determined fanatics or radical hotheads who profited from the passive attitude of a large mass of bystanders or if substantial parts of the public voluntarily decided to participate in the anticlerical violence.

However, by interpreting anticlericalism as a form of sacralization of politics it has also become clear that Spanish developments were not very exceptional. The anticlerical violence should not be seen as an atavistic outburst of millenarian beliefs or archaic forms of protests nor as a more rational reaction to centuries of political oppression and economic exploitation but as a phenomenon that was quite typical of the difficult transition to the age of mass politics that took place all over Europe during the first half of the 20th century.