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The Role of Religion in the Mexican Drug War

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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28 October 2011

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Abstract

The Global War on Terror has highlighted the importance of understanding the cultural aspects of the operational environment. One of those critical cultural aspects is religion: the role religion plays in society generally, how religion relates to both the protagonists and antagonists in the conflict, and how religion fuels or tempers the fight. With regard to the violent drug war ongoing in Mexico there is the question of the role that religion plays in combating the drug cartels and/or drug-related violence in Mexico. After careful study the inescapable conclusion is that religion is a growing battleground in this fight. Religion permeates Mexican society. Religion has already become a front in the war between the drug cartels and society, and while religion will not be the critical factor in winning the war, it is an important battleground in the war against the drug cartels.

Introduction

The events of 9/11 and the Global War on Terror have dramatically highlighted the importance of understanding the cultural aspects of the operational environment. One of those critical cultural aspects is religion: the role religion plays in society generally, how religion relates to both the protagonists and antagonists in the conflict, and how religion fuels or tempers the fight.

At first it may not be as clear that religion has a role to play in the ongoing drug war in Mexico as it was with the attacks on 9/11. The tenets of operational design suggest that we should ask the question: what role does religion play, if any, in the ongoing drug-related violence in Mexico, and what role might religion play in combating the drug cartels and/or drug-related violence there?

In “Dealing with Absolutes: Religion, the Operational Environment, and the Art of Design”, Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez has written on understanding the role of religion when planning military operations. His interest is in the “...role religion plays in motivating and justifying actions...” in the operational environment.¹ His article and the current Global War on Terror clearly highlight the fact that religion plays a role in understanding the operational environment and motivations of the actors. Religion is a key element within Mexican society and a growing element within the war on drugs. While religion will not be the critical factor in winning the war on drugs in Mexico, it is an important battleground in the war against the drug cartels.

¹ Lieutenant Colonel Prisco R. Hernandez, Ph.D., U.S. Army Reserve. “Dealing with Absolutes: Religion, the Operational Environment, and the Art of Design.” *Military Review* (November-December 2010), 25.

Background

It would be useful at this point to define what we mean by the term “religion”. In “Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion” Ronald L. Johnstone discusses two possible roots for the term, one meaning “to bind together” and the other meaning “to rehearse, to execute painstakingly”.² It is clear that both potential roots have validity, especially if one considers the sense of community and ritual commonly associated with the Catholic Church. Johnstone goes on to discuss the characteristics of religion, including religion being associated with groups, its moral aspects, and the relationship to things considered “sacred”.³ Some characteristics that he discusses that are central to this discussion include the following:

- Groups consist of members who share goals, ways of communicating, and behavioral norms. Members have well defined roles, they function within a system related to member status, and members express identification with the group.
- Members of a religion share certain beliefs and practices. Johnstone points out that “All major world religions, and some minor ones, have their sacred book or books that spell out or at least provide the basis for determining the beliefs the group holds.”⁴
- Religion espouse morals, identifying ideas that are “good and worthwhile”, while also identifying “actions, thought, and ideas <that> are bad, harmful, and to be rejected by the faithful.”⁵

² Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 8.

³ Ibid., 8-12.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 12.

In summary, Johstone defines religion as follows:

“Religion is a set of beliefs and rituals by which a group of people seeks to understand, explain, and deal with a world of complexity, uncertainty, and mystery, by identifying a sacred canopy of explanation and reassurance under which to live.”⁶

While this is a good general definition of religion for our purposes, the definition needs to be extended to distinguish between religions traditionally recognized as such within modern Mexican society, and those that are not. The former will be referred to as “organized religions”.

Religion: Not A Critical Factor, But An Important Battleground

There are four main points that support the two ideas that religion will not be a critical factor in winning the war on drugs, but is an important battleground. The first point to understand is the historical relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and government within Mexico, and how it has changed over time. The second point is the current secularization of Mexican society resulting from this relationship. The third point involves the co-opting of religion by some of the drug cartels, and the final point to understand is the degree to which drug cartels are using religion as a weapon.

The Catholic Church

The first point is that while the Roman Catholic Church is an important aspect of Mexican society it does not command direct power and has limited influence within official Mexican society. During the colonial period in Mexico there was a close relationship

⁶ Ibid., 14.

between religion, in the form of the Roman Catholic Church, and the government.

Traditionally the Church was very supportive of both the status quo and the colonial government, and was very conservative.⁷ In general, the Church's role was to assist the government in subjugating Mexico by converting the local populace to Christianity. In doing so the Church was surprisingly respectful of local religious practices, even adopting some local religious traditions. This unwritten policy may have acted as a precedent and contributed to the unintended consequence of people later adopting additional saints and folk heroes of their own, as we shall see later.

The end of the colonial period also saw the end of the strong ties between the Church and the state. Since independence in the first half of the 19th century Mexico has a long history and tradition of formal and legal separation of organized religion and the state. The Roman Catholic Church was removed as the official religion of Mexico in the 1857 Constitution and was not allowed any official role in political matters.⁸ This was re-affirmed in a revision to the Constitution in 1917, and it was only in 1992 that the Constitution was modified to provide some relief for the Church. Some specific restrictions and second-order effects include the following:

- The Mexican Constitution of 1917 did not allow any public role for organized religion;
- Religious values are not discussed in the media;
- The Constitution refers to “freedom of belief” rather than “freedom of religion”;

⁷ Nora Hamilton, "Mexico", in *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game, 2d ed.*, edited by Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 302.

⁸ Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden, eds. *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game, 2d ed.* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 128.

- Religious orders were not allowed to own property or operate schools (this was revised in a change to the constitution in 1992);
- Priests and bishops of the Roman Catholic Church were not allowed to “speak publicly about society, politics, or the state without fear of imprisonment.”⁹

Johnstone describes a spectrum of the relationship between religion and government.¹⁰

On one end of the spectrum lies theocracy, which literally means that God (or some deity) actually rules society. On the other end of the spectrum lies totalitarianism, where religion is controlled by the government or is prohibited entirely. Johnstone assess that the United States, with its concept of separation of church and state, is representative of “partial separation” between the two. While he does not address the case directly, Mexico likely lies closer to “total separation” than the United States does, as we have seen where the Roman Catholic Church is restricted from certain rights and activities, and where “freedom of beliefs” but not “freedom of religion” is provided for. In summary, religion is part of society, it is officially allowed for, but it is also restricted in what it can do.

Separation of Church and State

The second point is that official separation of church and state within Mexico has led to secularization of Mexican society. This is despite the fact that Mexicans identify themselves with organized religion to a great degree: based on the 2000 census, over 76% of the population identifies itself as Roman Catholic, with another 6.3% identifying themselves as

⁹ Joseph M. Palacios, *The Catholic Social Imagination: Activism and the Just Society in Mexico and the United States* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13-14.

¹⁰ Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, 147-148.

Protestant; “unspecified” garners 13.8% and “none” only has 3.1%.¹¹ Johnstone discusses the concept and manifestation of religious socialization, and specifically the “religiosity” of society. Christianity, especially as it is manifested by the Catholic Church, is focused more on personal salvation and executing the rituals of the Church, more so than in the day-to-day behavior of its members. While the Church certainly preaches morals associated with daily behavior (thou shalt not kill, steal, etc.), a person can be considered a “saved member of Christ’s Church” by regular participation in rituals prescribed by the Church.¹² Furthermore, a person who declares himself to be penitent can be absolved of their daily sins through the Sacrament of Penance¹³. This combination of the focus on ritual requirements and absolution of sins has the unintended consequence of limiting the direct influence of the Church in some members' daily lives.

The nature of this apparent contradiction between a society that identifies itself as members of organized religion and one that has enforced a long-standing official separation of Church and state has helped to reinforce secularization within Mexican society. Secularization is more than the formal restriction of an active role in the state by organized religion. In “A Sociology of Religion” Michael Hill discusses six forms that secularization can take within a society:¹⁴

1. The influence of religion is reduced over time – a case where religion loses its prestige and influence within society.

¹¹ United States. *Background Notes: Mexico*. (Lanham: Federal Information and News Dispatch, Inc., 2011), 1.

¹² Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, 96-97.

¹³ Edward Hanna, "The Sacrament of Penance" *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 11. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911.). <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11618c.htm>.

¹⁴ Michael Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 228.

2. Involves “the shift from ‘other-worldly’ to ‘this-worldly’ orientations within religious groups themselves.”¹⁵ This involves a shift in motivation within the religion itself from a future life or ethical tradition to more earthly, or immediate, motivations.
3. “The ‘disengagement’ of society from religion”.¹⁶ This type of secularization involves the replacement of religion as the primary source of legitimation for the society, and instead becomes a matter of personal choice. In this form religion loses any public role, and its influence is felt the most by those that willingly participate in it.
4. Involves “the transposition of beliefs and activities” from divine sources to more worldly ones.¹⁷ An example of this might be replacing religious beliefs with belief in some “ism”, such as Marxism, naturalism, humanism, etc.
5. “The world is gradually deprived of its sacral character”, “a world emptied of supernatural meaning and one in which ‘mystery’ no longer played a part.”¹⁸ In this form of secularization mystery, superstition, and faith are replaced exclusively by scientific and empirical explanations.
6. Society changes from the ‘sacred’ to the ‘secular’. In a sacred society there is a high degree of resistance to cultural change, while in a secular society there is much more willingness to change culturally.¹⁹

Of these six forms of secularization, Mexico most closely exhibits the first, third, and sixth forms. With regard to the first form of secularization, the reduced influence of religion over time, this specifically applies to the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico. As we have

¹⁵ Ibid., 234.

¹⁶ Ibid., 238.

¹⁷ Ibid., 243.

¹⁸ Ibid., 245.

¹⁹ Ibid., 247-248.

seen, the Church has been officially excluded from having a direct influential role in Mexican society. This has led to a general “secular philosophy of *laicismo* (“layness”) in Mexican society.²⁰ Despite being a very Catholic country, official policy towards the Church has led to an erosion of political and concrete influence of the Church within Mexican society. The third form of secularization, disengagement of religion in society, is also exhibited in Mexico, again because of the legal restriction of a role for the Church within society: while statistically speaking most Mexicans are Roman Catholics, Catholicism is not central to power and influence in Mexico. The sixth form, society moving from the sacred to the secular, signals the reduced influence of traditional religious beliefs and the willingness of new beliefs to take hold. Evidence of this is the willingness of relatively large segments of the population to adopt new folk heroes and false saints, and to adopt the cult-like beliefs of groups like LFM and Knights Templar (discussed below). The net effect of the specific types of secularization exhibited in Mexico is that organized religion, and specifically the Catholic Church, has little real power within Mexican society.

Co-Opting of Religion

The third point is that religion has been co-opted and employed by ultra-violent criminal organizations in a number of ways. La Familia Michoacana (LFM) and the offshoot organization, Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar), are disturbing examples of how religion in Mexico can be co-opted and employed by ultra-violent criminal organizations. George W. Grayson describes LFM as “a perverted fundamentalist Protestantism”.²¹ LFM

²⁰ Palacios, *The Catholic Social Imagination: Activism and the Just Society in Mexico and the United States*, 13.

²¹ George W. Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican Security* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 60.

became widely known in 2006 when they stormed a disco and threw the severed heads of five men on the dance floor, along with a sign that read "La Familia doesn't kill for money, doesn't kill women, doesn't kill innocents. Those who die deserve to die. Let everyone know, this is divine justice."²² LFM paints itself as the savior of its home state of Michoacana (coincidentally, also the home state of the current President of Mexico, Felipe Calderon). They have largely replaced the Catholic Church in providing social and community benefits, and work to provide a sense of community to young people: they profess to protect young people from drugs, while also being the region's largest producer and exporter of methamphetamine. They attend church, carry and distribute Bibles, and as we have seen above justify their murders as "orders from the Lord." They are also identified with the iconic figure Jesus Malverde, discussed later.²³

Knights Templar is a drug cartel that appeared in the state of Michoacana a few months after the federal police allegedly killed Nazario Moreno, the leader of LFM. Inspired by the medieval Christian knights of the Crusades, the Knights Templar promised the public "...to safeguard order, avoid robberies, kidnapping, and extortion, and to shield the state from rival organizations".²⁴ While espousing a very similar message to LFM they have been engaged in a violent and bloody turf battle with the remnants of LFM, and seem to be getting the upper hand with the capture of Jose de Jesus Mendez Vargas, the number two leader of LFM after Moreno, in June 2011 by the Mexican authorities. The Knights Templar have gone so

²² Dudley Althaus, "Mexico Catches Reputed Leader of La Familia Cartel." *Houston Chronicle*, June 21, 2011. <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Mexico-catches-reputed-leader-of-La-Familia-cartel-2078363.php>

²³ Grayson, *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican Security*, 5, 35-37, 46, 101.

²⁴ Ioan Grillo, "Crusaders of Meth: Mexico's Deadly Knights Templar," *Time*, June 23, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,2079430,00.html>

far as to have published and distributed a 22-page “Code of Conduct” booklet that lays out the religious basis for a campaign to “defend the values of a society based on ethics”.²⁵

With regard to the earlier discussion of the definition and characteristics of religion, we can clearly see that these two groups have essentially created their own religions through a corruption of Catholicism. Members that display all of the characteristics of a group practice these “religions”; they have moral aspects with which they use to justify their actions; they have sacred elements; they have published texts that explain their doctrine; and they follow rituals. These organizations have co-opted religion because they see the value in having an ideology to bind their membership to the group in a spiritual way that is more powerful than simply defining membership criteria.

Another example of the corruption of religion, and specifically of the teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church is the worshipping of folk heroes and false saints. Jesus Malverde was reputedly a bandit killed by the Mexican federal police in 1909. Although the Catholic Church does not recognize him as such, many worship him as a saint and there are a number of shrines to him in Mexico.²⁶ Others view him as a Robin Hood-like folk hero. He is especially popular within the drug culture, either as a criminal folk hero or as a saint with mythical powers to protect.

Santa Muerte (“Saint Death”) is an even more disturbing example of the corruption of religion and its patronage by members of the drug culture. Santa Muerte is a “grim reaper”-like icon that is worshipped as a holy saint. Not recognized by the Catholic Church, Santa Muerte has a strong following not only within the criminal and drug societies, but also with

²⁵ “Patterned After the Knights Templar, Drug Cartel Issues ‘Code of Conduct’”

²⁶ Matt Davis, “Our Blessed Saint of Narcotics? Who Is Jesus Malverde, and Can He Really Make Drugs Invisible?” *Portland Mercury*, 15 March 2007, <http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/Content?oid=276901&category=34029>

the poor. Worshippers visit or maintain small chapels or altars to the saint, and bring it offerings, believing that the saint is more responsive to their entreaties than Catholic saints.²⁷

Religion as a Weapon

The final point to understanding why religion may not be the critical factor in winning the war on drugs but is an important battleground in combatting the drug cartels is the issue of religion being used as a weapon, in this case by the drug cartels. In addition to discussing the motivational role of religion, Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez also talks about the two conditions necessary for religion itself to be used effectively as a weapon.²⁸ The first is a community of believers. This community of believers must be willing to take some sort of action based on their shared belief. The second condition is that this community of believers must see their belief as a liberating force that can deliver them from some form of oppression. Hernandez stresses that these two conditions are not guarantees that religion will be used as a weapon, only that their presence creates the possibility. He goes on to discuss fundamentalism and proselytism as being two characteristics that help to serve as a catalyst to the use of religion as a weapon.

In both LFM and its splinter group Knights Templar we can clearly see the presence of these two elements. First, both LFM and the Knights Templar indoctrinate their followers into their beliefs. Nazario Moreno Gonzalez, co-founder and religious leader of LFM, produced a motivational pamphlet, “The Sayings of the Craziest One”.²⁹ Similarly, the

²⁷ Kevin Freese, “The Death Cult of the Drug Lords Mexico’s Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed,” last modification unknown, <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Santa-Muerte/santa-muerte.htm#fig1>

²⁸ Hernandez, “Dealing with Absolutes,” 28.

²⁹ “Patterned After the Knights Templar, Drug Cartel Issues ‘Code of Conduct’”

Knights Templar has their “Code of Conduct” which is professionally printed and is being distributed by the cartel. Second, both organizations have as one of their core missions to protect their home state of Michoacana from incursion by outside organizations; that is, from rival drug cartels from outside the region, specifically the Zetas. Finally, both organizations claim divine guidance, or justification, for their actions, clearly tying their groups’ criminal activities to religious belief or inspiration. It is clear that both LFM and Knights Templar seek to employ religion as a weapon.

Summary and Counter-Arguments

In summary, we have seen how the historical separation of church and state has led to specific manifestations of secularization in society that limits the role of religion within society. We have also seen the co-opting of religion by the drug cartels and the use of religion as a weapon. These arguments support the two ideas that while religion will not be the critical factor in winning the war on drugs in Mexico, it is an important battleground in the war against the drug cartels.

Potential counter-arguments to these ideas exist on the ends of the spectrum of possible conditions. One counter-argument to this thesis might be that religion is not important in the war on drugs; that the drug industry is based on greed, economic hopelessness, and supply and demand and religion is ill equipped to combat these forces. Another counter-argument is that religion is the central weapon in the war on drugs; it is a powerfully influencing force that should be fully enlisted in fighting the drug war.

In support of the idea that religion is not important at all in the war on drugs, drug-related violence is rampant in Mexico despite the fact that religion, and the morals it espouses,

permeates Mexican society. After all, one of the central teachings of Christianity, as well as Judaism, is that “Thou shalt not kill”³⁰. Since the federal government declared its war on drugs in 2006, more than 35,000 Mexicans have been killed through drug violence.³¹ This extreme level of drug-related violence appears to repudiate the notion that the high level of religious observance and self-identification within Mexican society has a mollifying effect on violent crime. It may be that the rate of violence would be even higher if Mexican society did not practice as much religion as it does. In addition, the idea that religion is not important is belied by the fact that criminal elements are quick to adopt and worship false saints and folk heroes, and drug cartels have found it advantageous to create new religions to form an ideological basis for their actions. Clearly religion and religious beliefs have some importance and influence within Mexican society and specifically the drug culture.

With regard to the counter-argument that religion is the central weapon in the war on drugs there is some evidence that religion can play a role in reducing violence. Colin J. Baier and Bradley R.E. Wright conducted a meta-analysis of scientific studies focused on the effect of religion on crime, in an effort to understand what the effect might be. Their analysis indicated that overall religion had a “moderate deterrent effect” on the criminal behavior of individuals.³² Unfortunately, the authors do not quantify what “moderate deterrent effect” might be, especially with regard to violent drug-related crime. Therefore, while it is clear that religion has some effect on crime, it is not likely to be the critical component in combatting crime.

³⁰ Exodus, 20:13 (*The Holy Bible*, King James Version)

³¹ “Patterned After the Knights Templar, Drug Cartel Issues ‘Code of Conduct,’” *Fox News Latino*, 20 July 2011. <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2011/07/20/patterned-after-knights-templar-drug-cartel-issues-code-conduct/>

³² Colin J. Baier and Bradley R.E. Wright, “‘If You Love Me, Keep My Commandments’: A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Religion on Crime,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* Vol. 38 No. 1 (February 2001): 3.

Recommendations

If religion is already a battleground in the drug wars, how might the anti-drug forces enlist religion in this fight? Both Mexico and the United States have a long history of separation of church and state, in Mexico maybe even more so than in the U.S. It is unlikely that the Mexican government would want to work directly with or through the Catholic Church, or other organized religion, in combatting the drug cartels. Despite these concerns there exist at least two lines of effort that might be pursued involving religion.

One potential line of effort on the religious front in the war on drugs in Mexico would be to combat the mutations of the Catholic Church and the false saints and idols worshipped by the drug cartels. Direct action in trying to achieve this goal would be, as discussed above, problematic: the Mexican government would be unlikely to want to ally itself directly within the Catholic Church. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez talks about the moral aspects of religion, and suggests that they may have more influence in fundamentalist or theocratic societies.³³ As we have seen, Mexico is a religious but not a fundamentalist society, and certainly not theocratic. Lieutenant Colonel Hernandez also cautions that the ethical issues associated with countering the use of religion as a weapon can be significant.³⁴ In fact, this point has already been demonstrated: when the Mexican government bulldozed chapels and shrines erected to Malverde and Saint Death, followers promised to rebuild them and accused the government of “religious intolerance”.³⁵ To be successful this type of campaign should be pursued across all aspects of worship. For example, in addition to

³³ Hernandez, “Dealing with Absolutes,” 31.

³⁴ Hernandez, “Dealing with Absolutes,” 32.

³⁵ George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2010), p. 126.

bulldozing chapels and shrines, the government should outlaw the sale of religious icons related to Jesus Malverde and Saint Death. The government should impose an official ban on all things related to the worship of images associated with the drug cartels and criminal activity. While stamping out the worship of these icons will not end drug violence and trafficking in Mexico, associating these icons with criminal activities rather than religion does two things. First, it supports the rule of law by identifying these items as being criminal, not religious, in nature. Second, it supports reputable religious practices and the positive ethics and morals they promote by separating these icons from any religious association. These actions run the risk of alienating many non-criminal elements that believe Jesus Malverde and Saint Death are legal and have ethically moral powers, but only an all-or-nothing approach can undermine the associative power of these icons with criminal influences.

These direct actions should be complemented with additional “soft power” methods. For example, a prominent Mexican social commentator has said that the role of the Church is to “...form sound judgments in the light of the Faith and of Christian Morality”.³⁶ Therefore, an effective strategy might be to generally support organized religion in an information operations campaign to try and counter the negative teachings of the drug cartels. This might involve official recognition for religious celebrations, holidays, etc., that are sanctioned by organized religion, but refusal to recognize similar pseudo-religious activities and celebrations associated with figures such as Jesus Malverde and Saint Death. In addition, the government should support the positive social roles of organized religion, such as elementary and secondary education, as well as to strengthen social outreach programs. This would have

³⁶ Jesus de Orbe y Urquiza, *Accion Catolica* (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Patria, 1950), quoted in Williams, Edward J. *Latin American Democratic Parties* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 493.

the added benefit of strengthening the moral underpinning of positive religious values within Mexican society.

The common theme of these recommendations – direct attack on “religions” and religious icons associated with crime, and the “soft power” support for organized religions - is to show that, while not an arm of government, organized religion is at least on the side of the rule of law. One of the cornerstones of President Calderon’s presidency is the “rule of law and public security”, and his administration has made an effort “to strengthen laws and the institutions of security and justice to make the state’s actions for dealing with crime more effective.”³⁷ Every effort should be made to look for ways to identify organized religion, especially the Catholic Church, with the rule of law; to show that it, and by extension its teachings, are on the side of law and order. This has the attractive feature of not requiring the state to recognize or endorse any single religion over any other: if the religion supports the rule of law it is free to practice its beliefs.

Conclusion

In summary, the conclusion is that religion is a growing battleground in this fight. Religion permeates Mexican society. While officially restricted in its secular role within society through the Constitution of Mexico, most Mexicans believe in some religion, with the majority of those being practicing Roman Catholics. This devotion to religion likely explains why some of the drug cartels have adopted their own religious ideology. Even beyond the two examples presented here of religiously-oriented drug cartels we see the widespread “worshipping” of folk heroes and false “saints” not part of any organized religion.

³⁷ Presidencia de La Republica, Estados Unidos Mexicanos, last modified 2011, <http://en.presidencia.gob.mx/presidency/president/>

Mexico has decided since its independence from Spain in the early 1800s that it wants a limited role for organized religion within society. No solution to the scourge of the drug cartels is likely to lead to inclusion of religion within government, or the establishment of an official state religion. However, it is clear that religion has already become a front in the war between the drug cartels and society, and while religion will never be the determining factor in this struggle, ignoring its role is not an option the government of Mexico should entertain.

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