

How the Church Got Rid of Persecution: A Critical Analysis of Famous Cases

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We talk a lot about how to oppose religious persecution; we don't talk as much about the possible unintended consequences of our efforts. This article analyses three well-known episodes where Christians worked to end persecution, along with the sometimes complicated long-term results of those apparent successes.

Persecution has been a major theme throughout church history. Individual Christians and entire Christian civilizations have been subject to great tribulations at different moments in time. But history is also filled with important victories for the church and for religious freedom. Indeed, there are episodes in which the church successfully got rid of persecution, or at the very least achieved substantial religious freedom.

We need to know the great periods of persecution, but we also need to celebrate religious freedom in church history. These positive examples show very clearly that cultures can move toward a greater respect for religious freedom. What does it take to achieve greater religious freedom, and at what price? Is it really worth having? In this essay, I critically assess three historical examples of successful struggles: Constantine's embrace of Christianity, the struggle for religious rights in the West and Mexico's fight with anticlericalism.

Constantine's embrace of Christianity

The Roman persecution was one of the most violent in church history. However, it ended not with the total or partial annihilation of the church, as with the Mongol or Muslim persecutions,¹ but with Christianity becoming the state religion, after the emperor Constantine allegedly became a Christian himself and transformed his empire into a religious state. This remarkable turnaround meant that after intense persecution, Christianity began to thrive.

With Constantine's turnaround, suddenly the church went from a small, marginal, persecuted sect to 'owning' the state. But was it really that sudden? In the

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¹ See Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, 'Does Persecution Always Bring Growth? Global Persecutions Suggest Otherwise!' *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 12, no. 1/2 (2019): 181–92.

fourth century, the church wasn't a marginal sect anymore. And did the church really end up taking over the state, or was it more the other way around? Was it really an improvement in terms of religious freedom? Let's first look at how this groundbreaking event happened before evaluating its legacy.

The exact reasons for Constantine's embrace of Christianity remain a mystery to historians. Some, using arguments rooted in political economy, assert that Constantine's decision to recognize the Christian religion was motivated mainly by political pragmatism. Under this interpretation, seeing that the persecution of Christians was not working and that Christians were growing in numbers, Constantine adopted the 'if you can't beat them, join them' approach. Some believe that Constantine needed the Christians for a wide variety of reasons, such as to pay taxes to fund his civil service, to serve as civil servants themselves (because they happened to be more literate than others, having learned to read the Bible), or because of their exemplary submission to authority. Constantine is also believed to have wanted Roman society to develop and move away from archaic pagan customs.

Besides factors of power politics, it is very possible that Constantine did experience a genuine conversion. The historian Eusebius records that on a military march, Constantine looked up at the sun and saw a cross of light, which he later understood to be a sign from God. Some believe he converted because his mother, Helena, did (and sometimes women do have a lot of influence on powerful men!), while others think he never converted at all or only on his deathbed.

At any rate, we can trust that the God of history accomplishes His will through historical events. Whether Constantine's conversion was genuine is not of much interest here. What matters is that for some (supernatural?) reason, Constantine became convinced that religious rights should be granted to Christians. Our concern is to try to understand what brought about this major political shift, along with its legacy.

Constantine's embrace of Christianity could not just have happened out of the blue. There must have been a sequence of events that led to this result; otherwise Constantine would never have considered making Christianity the imperial religion, nor would it have been accepted by Roman society. Moreover, there must have been substantial support for the decision, since Constantine's successors decided to continue his policy.

Let's go back in time a few centuries. Ever since the church's founding, many Christians bore witness to their faith and were persecuted for it. This ongoing process must have gradually raised awareness in Roman society about the positive message of Christianity. After all, Paul had taught the church, 'Let your gentleness be evident to all' (Phil 4:5). If Christians stood apart from others as honest and hard-working citizens, this must eventually have had some impact. By consistently displaying good behaviour and showing their service to society, Christians may gradually have debunked the widely believed lie that they were a dangerous sect that worshipped a donkey head and sacrificed children.

Some Christians may even have undertaken what today we would call lobbying efforts. We know that Paul requested to be taken to 'Caesar', one of Constantine's historical predecessors. Paul did not witness only to the emperor. Along the way, he had the opportunity to testify at different levels of government (Governor Felix, his

successor Porcius Festus, and various others on his long journey to Rome). Paul must have repeated the same advocacy message over and over to his audience: 'We Christians are not dangerous, we are good people. You have nothing to worry about and you should respect our rights.' For example, to Felix, 'Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come' (Acts 24:25). He was trained to make this argument compellingly, based on his extensive knowledge of Roman law.

Paul wasn't the only early advocate for religious freedom. Peter and other apostles attempted the same thing. Maybe the influential people who converted, such as the Roman centurion in Luke 7 whose faith impressed Jesus, Cornelius (to whom Peter ministered in Acts 10) and Paul and Silas' jailer in Acts 16, also became advocates for the religious rights of Christians. Much later, Constantine's mother could have been not only a witness of Christ but also a particularly effective advocate for religious rights.

Although Paul, Peter and others exercised their ministries centuries before Constantine and ended up being crucified, their pleas, together with the positive testimony of the growing number of Christians, likely had a lasting impact on the imperial institution. At some point, the Romans must have realized that Christianity was no threat to their political power. (Or perhaps they realized that it was such a powerful force that they had to get control over it.)

There is no way to know for sure how much influence such Christian advocacy efforts had, but we know that Christianity started growing rapidly in numbers. As it did so, it also evolved. Christianity in the fourth century looked very different from what it was in the first and second centuries. By the second century, Christianity became established as an independent religion from Judaism, a process that continued through the next century. The gradual emergence of an 'orthodoxy' led Christianity to become a more homogeneous faith, organized around a uniform body of doctrines with centralized leadership structures.²

As Christianity's internal organization started to improve, so did its internal solidarity networks. More than the numerical growth of Christianity, this probably worried the Roman rulers most, as they perceived it as a threat to the reigning social order. But although persecution intensified during the third century, the church remained more united, better organized and generally more resilient. So resilient, in fact, that the Romans ultimately failed to crush Christianity.

One important question Christians needed to figure out in this period was their relation with the authority of the state. A theology of government started to emerge. One aspect that Constantine may have liked was the inclusion of the Old Testament in the biblical canon, with its stories about King David and the other kings of Israel, which he would later try to embody, conveniently using theology to consolidate his power and geographically expand his empire.

We can already see the contours of a political deal in the making. In exchange for their recognition of Constantine's political authority, the Christian bishops obtained not only the legalization of their religion, but also state funding to run their institutions. Constantine's power was strengthened, but he also took upon himself

2 Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *Jewish Insights into Scripture* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

the duty to help the church define and maintain orthodoxy. He sponsored high-level meetings such as the Council of Nicea to solve theological disputes. He also aggressively set out to persecute other religions and other Christians who were viewed as heretics, such as Gnostic Christians.

To summarize, two parallel sets of interpretations exist for the victory of Christianity over persecution. The first is spiritual. This interpretation argues that the consistent witness and pleas of Christians convinced Roman society that Christians were not a threat but a force for good. The second is political, emphasizing how Christianity's growth and organization led it to become a political force that could force a deal with the emperor. Both interpretations have their place.

Constantine will forever be known as the Roman emperor who put an end to the persecution of Christians. But was his legacy really positive? Constantine effectively renounced his godly imperial status in favor of Jesus, but at the same time he took control of the religion and definitely held a very strong hand in pushing for the adoption of a set of doctrines that were not always generally accepted at the time.

With Constantine's turnaround, the most intense persecution of the church stopped. The crucifixions and the throwing of Christians to the lions were halted. The political expansion of Constantine's empire also allowed an expansion of the gospel that would otherwise have happened much more slowly. State funding became available for the reproduction of Bibles on a larger scale and for the building of ambitious basilicas. And Western culture as a whole became thoroughly Christian, diffusing its influence through institutions and traditions.

Meanwhile, it cannot be considered positive that Constantine's political system perpetuated the early church's obsession with 'orthodoxy', as it violently eradicated dissenting voices and perspectives. Paradoxically, what brought a halt to the persecution of the church rapidly became an instrument of persecution. Indeed, Constantine started immediately by outlawing any religion other than Christianity, and the empire became very sectarian in its view of heresy.

Things did not end there. The political dominance of the Vatican that started to emerge after Constantine's turnaround allowed very dark episodes in church history, including the Inquisition, the practice of obscurantism, and later the European wars of religion. It installed a system in which either the state controlled the church or the church controlled the state, always imposing its version of the truth. No room was left for any form of pluralism, and it would remain that way for centuries.

Constantine's turnaround also initiated a complex, intricate relationship between the church and the state that was comprehensively addressed only much later in history. At times, the state had the upper hand and at other times the church had it, but this symbiosis between church and state became a defining element of the post-Roman period and the Middle Ages, which can hardly be viewed positively. It allowed despotism to thrive, because monarchs could claim they had received their sovereignty directly from God while conveniently forgetting the biblical command to use their power to pursue social justice.

The struggle for religious rights in the West

During the Middle Ages, there was no religious freedom in Europe. The European nations were ruled by theocratic regimes, government systems that based their legitimacy upon divine sovereignty but were in reality autocratic and despotic in nature. Flowing out of humanism (not to be confused with the modern-day pseudo-religious group), an intellectual movement called the Enlightenment began denouncing the injustices to which European societies were subjected. In time, these denunciations inspired popular uprisings all over Europe, of which the French Revolution was the most visible expression.

Parallel to the Enlightenment, and in many respects as a precursor to it, the Reformation started in Germany under the leadership of Martin Luther (1517), followed by John Calvin in France and Switzerland and others such as Huldrych Zwingli and John Knox. Martin Luther's points of argument were theological and doctrinal in nature, but he also denounced the abuse of power in the church. As the Reformation took off, more and more people, mainly in northern Europe, declared themselves Protestants and abandoned the Catholic Church.

At this point, religious freedom became a major social and political issue. The growth of Protestantism led to bloody European wars of religion that would last throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. Eventually, religious freedom found its way into various Enlightenment manifestos, including article 10 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen³ and the works of influential philosophers such as Voltaire and John Locke. The American Revolution crystallized the notion of religious freedom even further.

An important historical milestone was the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which put an end to the wars of religion and started to disenfranchise politics from the influence of the Vatican. This did not mean there was religious freedom, especially for religious minorities, because national rulers were allowed to impose an official religion on their citizens, but it did start a process in which states were no longer subordinate to religious institutions. Europe continued to be embroiled in various wars, which required a definitive settlement. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 provided some matter of stability and peace in Europe until the outbreak of World War I in 1914, and it explicitly recognized the critical importance of religious toleration for peace and stability. Although many challenges regarding respect for religious rights remained, the Congress of Vienna marked the beginning of a gradual acceptance and enforcement of religious freedom in the West.

The timid recognition of religious toleration in the early 19th century was the culmination of a political and intellectual process that started with the Reformation and was included in the Enlightenment's agenda. Protestants and other religious minorities started to adopt the language of the Enlightenment philosophers to formulate their claims for religious freedom. Some religious minorities, including the Jewish community, even sent 'lobbyists' to the Congress of Vienna to advocate for their rights.

3 Article 10 stated, 'No one may be disquieted for his opinions, even religious ones, provided that their manifestation does not trouble the public order established by the law.'

Complementary explanations for the gradual acceptance of religious freedom can be mentioned. It was also motivated by political pragmatism, because it became obvious that this was the only way to accommodate the deeply entrenched religious cleavages in European nations. Furthermore, the American Revolution and some smaller-scale, albeit imperfect, experiments in Transylvania and the Netherlands had already demonstrated that the acceptance of religious pluralism could work to defuse social tensions. The development of travel literature also accounts for an increased acceptance of religious differences, because it allowed ordinary Europeans to become acquainted with other religious practices.

The movement leading to the political acceptance of religious toleration, which later expanded to religious freedom, is generally considered an important democratic advance and part of a broader movement towards respect for civil and political rights. Although it was still very imperfectly applied at the turn of the 19th century, it created the necessary conditions for many (though not all) Christian and non-Christian groups to worship freely, develop training facilities and implement missionary programs. It also gradually reduced the state's interference in the internal affairs of religious communities. Finally, it ended the greater part of religious violence in Europe, although it could not prevent anti-semitism from developing as it did. Yet its legacy is impressive. The international order established after World War II included religious freedom as a human right, and religious freedom is now an integral part of the foreign policy of many democratic nations.

These improvements are extremely valuable and should be celebrated. On a global scale, the new respect for religious freedom meant that Christianity could spread and grow considerably. At the same time, some aspects of the Enlightenment's legacy in terms of religious freedom may not have been so positive. I will highlight four negative aspects of this legacy.

1. **The Holocaust and religious repression in European colonies.** Of course, the Enlightenment did not cause the Holocaust; on the contrary, the Holocaust very clearly contradicted essential Enlightenment ideals. But this is the most glaring evidence that religious violence in Europe did not end in 1815. Furthermore, in the overseas colonies of European nations, there were several serious incidents of religious repression.

2. **Beyond the separation between church and state.** The Enlightenment promoted the institutionalization of the principle of separation between church and state, implying that the church should not interfere in government and the state should not meddle in the internal affairs of religious institutions.⁴ Although this correction of the unhealthy symbiotic relation between church and state that had developed since Constantine's embrace of Christianity was a good thing, some Enlightenment actors went further. In France, an extreme form of church-state separation, known as *laïcité*, was adopted in 1903. In practice, *laïcité* is anti-religious, outlawing any form of religious expression in the public sphere. Even though other European nations have milder models of separation, a growing discomfort with public expressions of religion has been observed throughout the 20th and the early

4 Rowan Williams refers to this as 'procedural secularism'. See Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012).

21st centuries.⁵ More and more often, the principle of separation between church and state is mistakenly understood to mean a separation between faith and politics. As a result, it is becoming increasingly less acceptable in modern society to base one's political positions on religious convictions.⁶

3. A door to secularization? The opening up of the religious market as a result of the Enlightenment allowed many persecuted religious groups to worship freely, but it also opened the door to a steady process of secularization, with ever larger numbers of people abandoning Christianity altogether.⁷ Of course, secularization is a complex sociological phenomenon that deserves a more thorough analysis,⁸ but it is certainly true that the regime of religious toleration created the legal possibility for people to abandon the church.⁹ The Dutch historian and legal scholar Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer goes even further in his seminal collection of lectures, *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847). There he argues that the Enlightenment did not lead to secularization; rather, in his view, this revolutionary wave was itself the result of the presence of unbelief in society.¹⁰

This item is controversial, because, of course, we cannot force people to believe in God. But the end result of the Enlightenment process is that Christianity in the West is now much smaller than it used to be. Does this mean that more religious freedom ultimately weakens religion?

4. A door to secular intolerance? In Groen van Prinsterer's line of thought, there are a number of core fallacies in the Enlightenment's program, to which he refers as 'Revolution'. One of them is that divine sovereignty as a foundation of government was replaced by popular sovereignty. Although Groen van Prinsterer does not approve the despotism of the monarchs of earlier times who based their authority on their claim of divine sovereignty, he asserts that popular sovereignty is equally problematic. This is because, in his view, political sovereignty does not belong to the people; it belongs to God alone.

Groen van Prinsterer's analysis does not imply that we should reject democratic governments in favor of autocratic rulers, but we should heed his warning that the language of rights promoted through the 'Revolution', although it seems positive on

5 Rowan Williams calls this 'programmatically secularism'.

6 In *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847), Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer compellingly argues how absurd this is. Everyone bases their political positions on something, whether it's an ideology or a set of religious beliefs. Neutrality in politics and in life in general is impossible. Moreover, a correct understanding of Christianity implies responding to the biblical call to reform culture.

7 Debilitating the significance of secularization theory, Philip Jenkins argues that the penetration of Christianity in Europe during the Middle Ages was not as deep as we may think. See Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

8 See the various articles included in the 2020 special issue of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom* on 'Responding to secularism' (edited by Janet Epp Buckingham, available at <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46408>).

9 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

10 We could debate whether Groen van Prinsterer's interpretation of the origins of the Enlightenment is correct. Maybe the Enlightenment really did start off on good principles, such as the biblical understanding of the dignity of all human beings that flowed out of the Reformation. After all, many Enlightenment thinkers were committed Christians. On the other hand, arguably at some point the Enlightenment was 'hijacked' by progressive thinkers with an anti-Christian agenda.

paper, carries within it the germ of great injustices.¹¹ In the same vein, one could argue that the non-discrimination and hate speech legislation being adopted in the West, although it may seem positive on paper, constitutes limitations of freedom of religious expression. When Enlightenment ideals are taken to an extreme, they can actually become a source of persecution.

Mexico's fight with anti-clericalism

During colonial times, Catholicism was the hegemonic religion in Mexico, but the Church was under the domination of the political rulers through a figure called the *patronato*. Resulting regulations on church life implied severe limitations on church autonomy. After the country gained its independence in 1810, the rights of the *patronato* were initially transferred to the new Mexican Republic, much to the dislike of the Vatican.

Because of the social influence of the Catholic clergy and the potential of Catholicism to establish a single cultural identity in the early years of the struggling Mexican nation, the post-independence rulers agreed to give the Catholic Church a hegemonic status. Catholicism became the state religion, and the Church was granted vast privileges. (Similar arrangements occurred in other Latin American countries.) Restrictions were also placed on the first Protestant missionary movements in the middle of the 19th century.

Throughout the 19th century, anti-clericalism gradually became stronger. During a phase in Mexico's political history known as *La Reforma* (1855–1876), anti-clericalism was paramount and led to the elimination of church privileges, seizures of church property and other violent attacks on the church. The Mexican revolution (1910–1920), inspired by the French revolution, gave the reform laws (*Leyes Reformas*) constitutional status and even expanded them.¹²

As was chronicled by Graham Greene in *The Lawless Roads* (1939), persecution of Catholic Christians (there were hardly any Protestants in Mexico until halfway through the 20th century) was severe during that time. With the proclamation of an anti-clerical Constitution in 1917, acts of religious worship were outlawed, churches were desecrated and confiscated, and priests were pursued, with many of them being killed. As a reaction to these anti-clerical policies, which increased even further in 1924, a civil war between Catholic rebels and the anti-clerical Mexican government broke out, known as the Cristero War (1926–1929). The persecution had a devastating effect on the church. According to one count, the total number of priests dropped from 4,500 in 1926 to 334 in 1934.

After 1934, the most violent forms of oppression diminished, but repression of the church continued. Only in 1940 did the persecution decrease when the newly elected president, Manuel Ávila Camacho, agreed to relax some of the anti-clerical provisions in exchange for the church's support for peace.

11 Groen van Prinsterer has later been credited for having foreseen the rise of totalitarian governments during the 20th century, such as Nazism and fascism, which were rooted in legality but justified atrocious crimes.

12 Anthony Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

This strict secularism instituted after the Mexican revolution was (and is) atypical for the region, as Mexico is by far the most extreme case of state control over religion. From the 1917 Constitution onwards, the state exercised more regulatory power over religion than ever. Catholics were officially outlawed, but since all religious organizations were denied the right to exist, Protestants suffered as well. Over the years, religious regulations were relaxed somewhat but still hung above the country's religious groups like a sword of Damocles.

A major turning point occurred in 1992, when the most anti-clerical articles of the Constitution were amended. The political weakening of the hegemonic PRI political party had already started, and the increasing social activism of Catholic organizations, encouraged by two historic visits by Pope John Paul II to Mexico in 1979 and 1990, accelerated the momentum for a constitutional revision. Among the changes, religious organizations were finally legally recognized, registered religions were granted equal protection before the law, and clergy were given full citizenship rights. Religious organizations gained the right to own property, access to public broadcasts of religious groups, and permission to hold religious services in public.¹³

The new situation created in 1992 benefitted Protestant churches as much as it benefitted Catholics, and it was an historical milestone for the country's Protestant community. Under the radar, Protestants had increased in numbers since the first Protestant missionaries arrived in the 1910s, in spite of restrictions on visas, evangelism and Bible distribution. Cirilo Cruz, president of the *Confraternidad Evangélica de México* (Evangelical Confraternity of Mexico), commented, 'When the 1992 changes were implemented and all Protestant denominations registered, we found out for the first time how many we were.'¹⁴

How did Mexican Catholics manage to recover their religious rights? Let's look at two possible explanations. The first is offered by Anthony Gill in *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (2008). Gill argues that political interests explain the regulation of religion to a considerable extent. Under his model, politicians expand religious freedom only if this serves their interests—maintaining power, maximizing government revenue to promote economic growth, minimizing civil unrest and minimizing the cost of ruling. The degree of religious freedom is thus determined by the feasibility of restricting or not restricting the rights of religious groups. His analysis of the Mexican case study shows that religious freedom was expanded for the Catholic Church only once the revolutionary actors felt confident enough that their political power would not be threatened.¹⁵

An alternative explanation for the successful removal of anti-clerical policies could be that the persecution simply failed, in a very similar way to the Roman persecution. Indeed, the Mexican revolutionaries were unable to legislate the church out of existence, nor did they manage it through violent oppressive tactics. For some reason, a majority of Mexicans had sufficient resilience, possibly thanks to their

13 Anthony Gill, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2008).

14 Dennis P. Petri, *The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities* (PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2020).

15 Marcelo Bartolini, 'Toward the Effective Protection of Religious Freedom in Mexico', *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 12, no. 1/2 (2019): 165–80.

international connections with the Vatican and other governments, to endure the persecution just long enough.

Was enduring anti-clericalism worth it? That question is hard to answer at this stage, and in fact the fight may not be quite over. The Catholic Church did suffer some very important blows during the 20th century from which it has not yet recovered. Although most of the historic anti-clerical provisions are no longer in force, some elements of Mexico's anti-clerical heritage can still be observed. In many respects, Mexico's religious regime remains more extreme than even France's *laïcité*. Christians continue to have restricted access to the media, confessional education still faces restrictions, and religious ministers are forbidden from making any political statements.¹⁶

More importantly, an important legacy of Mexico's religious history is that its society is characterized by a very strong suspicion of and discomfort with anything religious, including ministry activity or faith-based social work.¹⁷ Although the Mexican population is majority-Christian, both religious observance and religious literacy are at a very low level, and religious actors have little moral authority to express and promote Christian values, particularly in relation to organized crime.¹⁸

President Lázaro Cárdenas (who served from 1934 to 1940) famously said, 'I am tired of closing churches and finding them full. Now I am going to open the churches and educate the people and in ten years I shall find them empty.' This strategy may have worked better than persecution!

Moreover, many challenges for religious freedom remain in Mexico, particularly in rural and indigenous territories and in areas with a strong presence of organized crime.¹⁹ In addition, a new persecution engine is increasingly making itself felt: secular intolerance, which draws on the old anti-clericalism in combination with a growing intolerance of conservative Christian views on the sanctity of life and marriage.²⁰

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have reviewed three historic examples of how the church successfully got rid of persecution. I selected these cases because I happen to be quite familiar with them, but it would be very interesting to analyse similar cases from other geographical areas and time frames.

I have tried to demonstrate two things. First, it is possible to get rid of persecution, and the church has been quite successful at it on some occasions. The

16 Bartolini, 'Toward the Effective Protection'.

17 Dennis P. Petri (ed.), 'Perceptions on Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the "Chilling Effect", Case Studies on France, Germany, Colombia and Mexico' (Vienna: OIDAC/OLIRE/IIRF, 2022), <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46409>.

18 Dennis P. Petri and Marlies Glasius, 'Vulnerability and Active Religious Behavior: Christians and Crime Syndicates in Mexico', *Human Rights Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2022): 514–36; Dennis P. Petri, 'The Regulation of Religion by Organized Crime: Conceptualization of an Underexplored Phenomenon Through a Case Study in Northeast Mexico', *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 14, no. 1/2 (2021): 123–41.

19 Petri and Glasius, 'Vulnerability and Active Religious Behaviour'; Petri, 'The Regulation of Religion by Organized Crime'.

20 Petri, 'Perceptions on Self-Censorship'.

specific tactics used in the cases I reviewed, but also in other cases, can serve as encouragement and inspiration for Christians who are currently undergoing persecution. They also provide templates of possible responses to persecution that could be replicated in other contexts. In particular, they highlight the importance of resilience and the role of political advocacy.

At the same time, I have also indicated that persecution, even when it is overcome, can have a lasting effect on the church. Constantine's embrace of Christianity allowed the growth of Christianity but also entangled it with political power. The implementation of the ideals of the Enlightenment introduced the notion of religious toleration but also paved the way for the twin processes of secularization and secularism. Mexico's historic anti-clericalism, although it has weakened recently, has created a culture of suspicion toward public expressions of religions, especially Christianity.