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Review of Maria Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931-1936*

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Maria Thomas. *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931-1936*. Eastbourne, UK and Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2013. 272 pp.

Is it possible to explain violence without justifying it? Does violence automatically delegitimize any political goals it aims to advance? It's a question Spain has been struggling with more than most other European nations, and it continues to shape public discourse in the country. In December 2013 Rosa Díez, party leader of UPyD, made headlines when she demanded that the Spanish government file a complaint against the English-language version of Wikipedia because its article on the Basque conflict considers ETA a participant in an armed struggle among states. The Díez case is silly, but it represents a trend that goes beyond Spain. Perceptions and interpretations of politically motivated violence have changed. Historians' work has not been unaffected. The rise of human rights as a dominant paradigm on the Left after the disavowal of armed struggle; the "war on terror" unleashed in the wake of September 11, 2001; the emergence of the victim as a central category in historical memory and in a newly ethics-inflected kind of historiography: all have made it more challenging for historians to narrate violence, particularly when it is committed by non-state actors. In this sense, Maria Thomas's book on acts of anticlerical violence committed in Spain during the years of the Second Republic and the Civil War is as courageous as it is welcome.

The topic of violence has of course always been among the most controversial among historians of the Spanish Civil War. The level, nature, and motivations of the brutalities committed have been the subject of heated and continuing debate. From the outset, both Republicans and Nationalists had a strong political investment in very particular representations of the violence committed by their enemies, while often attempting to justify or explain away the acts of killing, torture and repression on their own side. Central in these debates have been the acts of aggression aimed at representatives of the Catholic Church and its property.

The largest outbreak of anticlerical aggression occurred in the six months following the failed Nationalist coup, when scores of churches were burnt, monasteries and convents raided, and some 7,000 religious personnel lost their lives. These incidents proved as appalling to global public opinion as the targeting of innocent civilians by the Nationalist forces. But if Francoist historiography portrayed the Spaniards who set fire to churches and killed priests and nuns as bloodthirsty animals, the Republican authorities at the time – as well as, later, historians sympathetic to the Republican cause – did not stray very far from the

Francoist line. For them, anticlerical violence was above all an embarrassment: “the work of ‘uncontrollable’ mobs of criminals – a ‘stupid destruction’ carried out by the ‘enraged pueblo’” (14).

The Faith and the Fury – which is based on Thomas’s 2012 dissertation directed by Helen Graham – sets out to nuance this image in three principal ways. First, by carefully analyzing anticlericalism in Spain going back at least to the late nineteenth century. Second, by reconstructing complex profiles of anticlerical activists in Madrid and Almería through archival research, in particular of judicial records. And third, by looking at the acts in question through a versatile set of social-historical lenses that take into account factors ranging from the economic and material to evolving notions of gender and political identity. Thomas is interested in “the motives, mentalities and collective identities” from which the violence sprang.

Thomas argues that Spanish popular anticlericalism changed in major ways during the first three decades of the twentieth century, which were marked by rapid social, cultural, and political change. As time went on, acts of violence against the Church took on a much more explicitly political character, a process that was further fueled by the Church’s own radicalization in the 1930s and the failed coup of July 1936. The destruction of the Church was seen by many as a necessary step in the construction of a new, secular Spain – a struggle over political as well as literal space. Anticlerical acts were at least in part spurred on by modernizing, progressive aspirations.

Thomas’s compelling and well-written account leads to several interesting and surprising conclusions. For one, she shows that the participation in anticlerical violence was much more diverse than the dominant stereotype of the perpetrator – a young working class male with Anarchist leanings. Not only were the political affiliations and economic class of the activists more diverse, but a small number of women who, through their participation, asserted their right to a more public role. Thomas further argues that anticlerical violence was anything but “illogical and irrational.” Those committing anticlerical violence – which not infrequently took on ritualistic or sacralized forms – often manifested a belief in the power of what was being destroyed. “[M]any anticlerical actors,” for example, “treated statues and icons not as inanimate, powerless lumps of wood or stone, but *as if they were people*” (168). This belief sprang from a continued faith in a Church that was seen to have betrayed the people by allying itself with the wealthy and powerful, and abandoning the poor. Finally, Thomas shows that the repression of the Church in Republican territory was not always indiscriminate: not only was anticlerical violence “a fragmented, decentralized phenomenon

which, unlike the repression unfolding in the rebel zone, did not respond to a coordinated plan” (157), but “at a local level, priests’ lack of ‘individual guilt’ (or, more specifically, the individual profiles, actions and histories of religious personnel) could often function to save them from violence” (18).

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