

Center for European Studies

Working Paper No. 88

**The Marian Apparitions in Fátima as Political Reality:
Religion and Politics in Twentieth-Century Portugal**

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Abstract

The reaction of the Catholic faithful to the supposed miraculous events at Fátima serves as an illustration of how religion can influence the political life of a country. In this instance the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to three ordinary Portuguese country children over a six-month period starting on 13 May 1917. During these visits the children reported that she asked them to pray for the souls of sinners, for the soldiers in World War I, and for Russia. During and immediately after the Marian apparitions in Fátima, powerful conservative players in Lisbon seized on the symbolism of the event to discredit the anticlerical First Republic. As the situation unfolded, this religion-politics dynamic took the form of popular Catholic resistance in the countryside to an urban-based elite-driven secularization, setting the stage for the subsequent emergence of the Salazar regime. Some political scientists and historians have treated these events only as a case of popular reaction against modernity, without any enduring consequences. In this view, Fátima was not much more than a useful symbolic tool of conservative resistance to the First Republic, and it set the groundwork for the subsequent dictatorship. This paper, in line with recent scholarship offered by David Blackbourn, William Christian, Ruth Harris, and others, will suggest that social scientists need to treat the consequences of wide-scale popular religiosity more completely—not as a theological reality, but as a political one. Certainly, some cases have taken on more lasting political life than others, but all cases of popular devotion offer a revealing window into the political culture and life of a country.

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I. Introduction

The relationship between religion and regime transition to or away from democracy has not received much scholarly attention given the leading role of the political and military elite during those periods of change. As a background element, however, the religious faith of a people can be important to a political outcome: it can exercise influence on the political leadership, call for protests and demonstrations, resist governmental authorities, and communicate popular concerns to the elite. As such, religion plays an important role in the political life of a nation.

The reaction of the Catholic faithful to the supposed miraculous events at Fátima serves as an illustration of how religion can influence the political life of a country. In this instance the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to three ordinary Portuguese country children over a six-month period starting on 13 May 1917. During these visits the children reported that she asked them to pray for the souls of sinners, for the soldiers in World War I, and for Russia. During and immediately after the Marian apparitions in Fátima, powerful conservative players in Lisbon seized on the symbolism of the event to discredit the anticlerical First Republic. As the situation unfolded, this religion-politics dynamic took the form of popular Catholic resistance in the countryside to an urban-based elite-driven secularization, setting the stage for the subsequent emergence of the Salazar regime.

Some political scientists and historians have treated these events only as a case of popular reaction against modernity, without any enduring consequences. In this view Fátima was not much more than a useful symbolic tool of conservative resistance to the First Republic, and it set the groundwork for the subsequent dictatorship.¹ This work, in line with recent scholarship offered by David Blackbourn, William Christian, Ruth Harris, and others, will suggest that social scientists need to treat the consequences of wide-scale popular religiosity more completely—not as a theological reality, but as a political one. Certainly, some cases have taken on more lasting political life than others, but all cases of popular devotion offer a revealing window into the political culture and life of a country.

Such is the case of Fátima, which has exercised a lasting and significant political impact on Portuguese politics since 1917. At the time of the Marian apparitions, the percentage of Portuguese who identified themselves as Roman Catholic hovered at around 99 percent of the total population. In time, a majority of this population came to believe that Mary did appear in Fátima, and that belief has since contextualized popular religiosity in Portugal and influenced the country's subsequent political beliefs and activities.² Drawing from the conceptual model David Blackbourn developed in his analysis of the Marian apparitions in Marpingen, Germany, this paper will assess the impact of Fátima on twentieth-century Portuguese political life.³

Blackbourn notes that Marian apparitions in the post-1789 period have been most likely to occur in settings where there is a general atmosphere of anticlericalism, political instability, and war. Such apparitions may lead believers to transform this generalized feeling into proof of divine anger against the secular authorities—a link, Blackbourn suggests, between perceived, creed-based political persecutions and an apparition.

1. For instance, see arguments by Walter C. Opollo, Jr. *Portugal: From Monarchy to Pluralist Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991) and by David A. Birmingham, David, *A Concise History of Portugal* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

2. Howard J. Wiarda, "The Society and Its Environment," in Eric Solsten, ed., *Portugal a Country Study*, 2nd edition (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), pp. 63-112.

3. David Blackbourn, *Marpingen, Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth Century Germany* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), William A. Christian, Jr. *Visionaries: The Spanish Republic and the Reign of Christ* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) and Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Viking Press, 1999).

For instance, the action of a local police magistrate could provoke an almost spontaneous popular movement of Catholic resistance, turning the apparition into a weapon against secular, and even ecclesiastical, authority.⁴

Based on Blackbourn's observations, we can generate four interlocking clusters of questions. The first cluster looks at the European setting: What of significance was happening in Europe at this time? When do apparitions take on a political character? What is the nature of popular Catholic resistance to elite-driven secularization? The second cluster focuses our attention on the national setting: What was going on in Portugal at this time? Did the secular government react with alarm to this popular phenomenon? The third cluster of questions deals with questions related to the apparitions themselves: What is said to have happened in Fátima? Are there ongoing questions about the reliability of Fátima? The fourth cluster examines the aftermath of the apparitions: What happened religiously or politically in the aftermath of Fátima? What is the relationship between political change and popular perception of that change? Is there a link between real or perceived political persecution of Catholics and the type and incidence of apparitions? Taken in aggregate, the answers to these questions may provide clues to better understanding the political influence of the Fátima apparitions. Indeed, once we set aside the question of whether Mary actually appeared to the children in Fátima, it is reasonable to suggest that the story of the apparitions became an important source of dynamism in Portuguese political life, and was at the core of conservative political activism throughout the twentieth century.

The overall thesis of this paper is that Marian apparitions can and do matter to the political life of a country. This paper will proceed from the general to the particular. It will first examine the political situation in Europe at the time of the apparitions, then look at the national scene in Portugal, and finally examine the local events in Fátima. It will then proceed to an analysis of the impact these apparitions have had on Portuguese politics from 1917 to the present.

II. The Political Context

The European political background of the Marian apparitions at Fátima featured widespread societal anxiety, foreign war, and conflicts over church-state issues. In 1917 Europeans were dealing with material distress, unemployment, anticlericalism, and the specter of foreign enemies. The apparitions took place at the same time that Portugal was confronting bread riots in protest of the war. Specifically, World War I and the Russian Revolution caused great fear and consternation throughout the continent. Soldiers started to return home to Portugal from the Western Front with stories of horror, which, of course, played into the already heightened fears and anxieties of the people. Fátima became a potent symbolic weapon for forces opposed to the secular authorities that had plunged the country into World War I, and it subsequently provided much political capital to the Salazar dictatorship.

Portugal's involvement in World War I is a complicated issue; it hardly seems logical for a small country so removed from the war zone to involve itself. The official justification the Portuguese government offered was that the country had no option but to fight the Germans, given the terms of its 1386 Treaty of Windsor alliance with England. Although technically true, the actual reasons for Portugal's involvement were more complex; let us suggest four. First, the First Republic was fraught with internal divisions, and this foreign event enabled the political elite to finally agree on a policy matter. Second, the government managed to connect with civil society during the war—even if only in a limited way—by proclaiming this to be a national struggle against a terrible enemy. Third, the First Republic wanted to solidify its relationship with the leading European democratic nations, especially France. With the decision to join the allies, the Portuguese sought to maintain a foreign posture similar to the French. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the Portuguese also wanted to protect their African colonies from German expansionism. So, although the immediate reason

4. Blackbourn, p. 327.

given for Germany's declaration of war against Portugal on 9 March 1916 was Portugal's seizure of thirty-six German merchant ships in the port of Lisbon, the actual reason may be found among those discussed above.⁵

After the German declaration of war, Lisbon put together a force to fight on the Western Front that departed in January of 1917. Other forces were dispatched to defend the African colonies from possible German incursions. Once in place these troops soon began to feel neglected, even abandoned, by their government. Needed replacements and supplies were slow to arrive, and it became clear that a well-equipped and well-trained German army overmatched the Portuguese. During the *Battle of La Lys*, also known as *Operation Georgette*, on 9 April 1918, four German divisions managed to break through the Portuguese lines and kill more than 7,425 soldiers in a single day; those Portuguese soldiers who managed to return home carried tales of horror to a shaken nation.

Russia also suffered terribly during World War I. It was unprepared both militarily and industrially to fight the Germans, and its people suffered from horrible conditions, including food shortages and economic collapse. By February of 1917 mutinies and riots were breaking out all over the country. Throughout this period the Bolsheviks were gaining more support and power.⁶ Given this string of tumultuous events, a generalized anxiety among the population served as a fertile backdrop for the Marian apparitions at Fátima.

Portugal was going through its own domestic turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century. The protectors of the old Portuguese order (i.e., the crown, the military, the old aristocracy, and the Roman Catholic Church) were under attack. The young Republicans' overthrow of King Manuel in 1910 paved the way for the inauguration of the country's First Republic. This was a great victory for the Portuguese republicans, who had often been frustrated by having to deal with a powerful crown, aristocracy, and a conservative Church. Once in power they all but declared war on the Catholic Church.⁷

Not wasting any time, Prime Minister Afonso Costa steered a number of the most restrictive anticlerical laws in Portuguese history through the National Assembly, including the Lei de Separação of 1911. Influenced by the French example (the 1905 law of separation), this new Portuguese law not only juridically separated Church and State, but it placed the Church under the control of the State as well.⁸ It also terminated the theology program at the University of Coimbra, closed many seminaries, eliminated the national observance of holy days, secularized cemeteries, and nationalized some Church property. Even some old anticlerical laws, dating back to Marques de Pombal's expulsion of the Jesuits from Portugal in the eighteenth century, were brought back into effect.⁹

The virulent anticlericalism of the First Republic triggered the formation of many Catholic opposition groups. One of these groups, the *Centro Acadêmica da Democracia Cristão* (CADC, or the Christian Democracy Academic Center), played a big role in the creation of the pro-clerical dictatorship in the 1930s. Students at the University of Coimbra founded it in 1912; two assumed important political roles: Manuel Gonçalves

5. See Douglas Wheeler, *Republican Portugal, A Political History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

6. There are also several excellent websites that deal with this topic. See, for instance <http://www.interknowledge.com/russia/rushis06.htm> and <http://www.worldwar1.com/france/portugal.htm>

7. For more information, see useful website on Russian history at http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/_history.html. Also see Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), pp. 139-41.

8. See the fine discussion on church-state relations in post-1789 France in Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 214-59. Also see Ralph Gipson, *A Social History of French Catholicism, 1789-1914* (London: Routledge, 1989).

9. Thomas Gallagher, *Portugal: A Twentieth Century Interpretation* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1983).

Cerejeira became the Cardinal of Lisbon, and Antonio de Oliveira Salazar became the country's dictator from 1933 to 1968.¹⁰

At the popular level, although there is a tradition of vehement and impassioned anticlericalism in Portugal—related to rent disputes with the land-owning Church—as well as a generalized negative view of the clergy, popular anticlericalism was not a main feature of the First Republic. There are many reasons for this; perhaps the most compelling explanation is that popular sectors were so adversely affected by the elite-directed, unstable political and economic situation that many people took refuge in their faith if not in their Church. It appears that popular anticlericalism surged when the Church was in power, and subsided when the Church was under governmental attack.

The warm reception and subsequent political influence popular sectors gave the Marian apparitions were, in part, a function of the political dynamic of the 1917 Portuguese world. The pressures from a Lisbon-dominated anticlerical discourse led many people to interpret the Marian apparitions as an answer to their prayers.

III. The Apparitions

The story of the apparitions is part of a larger story about the difficult life people faced in rural Portugal in the early twentieth century. Many from the rural areas close to Fátima started to immigrate to the United States, Brazil, and elsewhere during this time in order to escape the material distress. The Dos Santos and the Marto families remained in Portugal, and faced a daily life of great hardship. They lived in Aljustrel, a town close to the village of Fátima, and the stress of this life expressed itself in many ways. Blackbourn accurately describes the father of Lucia Dos Santos, the principle seer, as “a drunken small holder who had recently lost some of his land.”¹¹

The Dos Santos’ youngest child, ten-year-old Lucia, was responsible for taking the family’s sheep to pasture in a small tract of land her father owned in Aljustrel near a place called *Loca do Cabeco* and the *Cova da Iria*. Her four older sisters had left home, and so she had begun spending more time with two of her younger cousins, Francisco Marto, who was nine years old, and seven-year-old Jacinta Marto. As was common practice for rural children in Portugal at that time, the children would take the sheep out to graze, say the rosary together, and then play. This routine, and their lives, were dramatically altered by what they described as a series of supernatural visitations beginning in 1916.¹²

The children claimed they first experienced three visits in 1916 from an angel who called himself “the Guardian Angel of Portugal.”¹³ In her memoirs Lucia states that she does not remember any specific dates for

10. Ibid.

11. Blackbourn, p. 327.

12. Their supernatural story actually dates to 1915, when Lucia reports that she and her playmates saw a hovering image in the fields, but decided not to speak of it. One of her playmates did speak of it when they returned, and Lucia’s mother dismissed it as childish nonsense. See Sandra Zimdars Swartz, *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 73. Also, John J. Delaney, editor, *A Woman Clothed with the Sun* (New York: Image, 1947), pp. 150-51. Delany’s work, although devotional, offers excellent background information and a chronology of the events.

13. Some Catholic scholars who believe in the Fátima apparitions have suggested that this was the Archangel Michael. A good example of devotional scholarship is Thomas W. Petrisko, *Fátima’s Third Secret Explained* (McKees Rock, PA: St. Andrew’s Productions, 2001), pp. 79-82. Petrisko notes that in the year 1147, St. Michael reportedly appeared prior to the Christian king’s victories against the Moors. This work does not reach any standard of serious research, but it contains good information about Fátima. Petrisko’s agenda is to

these visits. She reports that the first apparition occurred one day as they were tending to their sheep. The children had been playing and when they looked up they saw an angel.¹⁴ The angel told them not to be afraid, and introduced himself as the angel of peace. He asked the children to pray with him, told them that the hearts of Mary and Jesus were attentive to their prayers, and asked that they pray with the words “My God, I believe, I adore, I hope, and I love You. I ask pardon for those who do not believe, do not adore, do not hope, and do not love You.”¹⁵ They later understood these visits to be preparation for the subsequent Marian apparitions.¹⁶

The first Marian apparition occurred on 13 May 1917 as the children were tending to their sheep. They had had their lunch, and, as was their habit, had started to pray the rosary when they heard “lightning in a clear sky.” Fearing a storm was approaching, they decided to head home. As they prepared to leave, a strange light in the sky moved toward them. The children reported that, although astonished, they felt no fear. They claimed a beautiful lady appeared before them, “above the holm oak tree, wearing a pure white mantle, which was edged with gold, which went to her feet. In her hands the beads of a rosary shone like stars, with its crucifix the most radiant gem of all.”¹⁷ During this first visit the apparition told the children not to be afraid, that she came from Heaven. She asked them to pray the rosary and to return to the same spot on the thirteenth of every month. Then the apparition returned the same way it had come.

The next four apparitions followed the same general pattern as the first one. The children claimed to have received messages for all of humankind during these visits. These messages became known as the “Three Secrets.” Lucia’s memoirs have made known the nature and content of each secret—the most famous of which is the so-called “Third Secret,” whose contents were released in 2000.¹⁸

prove the truth of the apparitions.

14. For detailed information, see <http://www.ewtn.com/fatima/apparitions/angel1.htm>. This Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) website, although devotional and uncritical, does include a useful chronology and other information.

15. There are scores of excellent devotional books on the Fátima story, and Marian apparitions more generally. Two noteworthy ones are John J. Delaney, editor, *A Woman Clothed with the Sun. Eight Great Apparitions of Our Lady* (New York: Image Books, 1960) and John de Marchi, *Fátima from the Beginning* (Fátima: Missões Consolata, 1950).

16. de Marchi, *Fátima from the Beginning*, pp. 49-50.

17. Ibid. Also Delaney, *A Woman Clothed with the Sun*, p. 153. Lucia is the seer who has played the major role in “defining the character and the meaning” of the Fátima apparition. Sandra L. Zimdars-Swartz notes, in *Encountering Mary: From La Salette to Medjugorje* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 73-74, that shortly before these extraordinary visitations had started, Lucia’s family situation had deteriorated, and she was upset over the fact that she could not attend school. When Lucia was around the age of nine, her father had come upon hard financial times. He drank too much, and her mother, who was very stern, kept the family together. After two of her sisters were married, Lucia was given the responsibility of taking care of the sheep. This was something she regretted, and it is interesting that she reported that the Virgin Mary requested in one of her apparitions that Lucia learn how to read and write to become an instrument of God’s work. It is certainly true that, on both a micro and macro level, Lucia’s life had been turned upside down even before the apparitions started. One can only imagine the joy she felt when Mary spoke to her; did it actually happen, or did she need it to happen? To some degree this disquietude casts doubt on the reliability of Lucia’s witness.

18. The contents of the Third Secret are published in Petrisko, *Fátima’s Third Secret Explained*, pp. 41-49. The Third Secret captivated people for years, especially after John XXIII decided not to release it in 1960. Briefly, these three secrets are as follows. The first secret

The sixth and most renowned apparition took place on 13 October 1917, and merits some detailed discussion. Mary had promised the children she would offer a sign during her last visit so people could believe she had indeed spoken to the children; this sign became known as the “Miracle of the Sun.” It took place on 13 October, and was witnessed by some 70,000 people. Word about these Apparitions had spread throughout the countryside, and people wanting to see Mary had gathered at the Cova in the middle of a torrential rainstorm, starting the night of the twelfth. The next day just before noon, the children arrived and made their way through the crowd to their usual spot. They started to say the rosary, and after a few minutes a light appeared in the sky, moved to the children, and hovered about the tree. The gathered crowd witnessed a cloud above the children and heard a sound like the buzzing of a bee. Only the children were able to see and converse with Mary, however. They later reported that the Apparition introduced herself that day as the Lady of the Rosary, and asked them to continue to pray the rosary daily.¹⁹

involved a vision of hell. Mary had previously assured the children that she would take them to Heaven one day. That was a good thing, according to Lucia, because otherwise the hellish images of burning bodies and incredible suffering would have scared the three children to death. Mary asked the children to pray for all souls, especially those of the suffering, that they may be accepted into the Kingdom of Heaven. The second secret prophesied the future role of Russia, and the steps needed to block that nation from “spreading her errors.” They were told that the present war would soon come to an end, but a new and even more terrible war loomed on the horizon—which could be avoided if humankind were to heed the Apparition’s words, pray, and live according to God’s commandments. Failure to do this would result in a horrible war, which God would use as a punishment for the sins of the world. Great lights in the sky would foreshadow the beginning of that war. Many nations would be annihilated, and Russia would turn her back on God, and then spread her errors. At the end of all of this, the Apparition promised that God would permit a long peace. There was much controversy about the nature of the Third Secret for many years. Lucia wrote it down, and sent it in a sealed envelope to the Bishop of Leiria, Jose Correira da Silva, in 1948, with the instructions that it not be revealed to the public until 1960. He posed with the sealed envelope for *Life* magazine in 1948, but never opened the letter, and sent it unread to Pope Pius XII in Rome. It is not a known fact, but it appears that Pius, and each succeeding Pope, read the contents of the envelope, and each decided not to release it. Stories started about how Pius fainted in his study after reading the Third Secret, and all sorts of apocalyptic claims were started about the nature of this hidden secret from Mary. Pope John Paul II, with Lucia’s assent, decided to reveal the Third Secret on 26 June 2000. In his commentary on the Third Secret, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger notes that “those who expected exciting apocalyptic revelations about the end of the world or the future course of history are bound to be disappointed.” The fact that so many people expected such horrific end-of-the-world prophecies does speak to the larger political context in Fátima. The Third Secret offers strange and bizarre images—it contains imagery of an angel with a sword shooting down flames on the world, and calling for the world to make penance. These flames are blocked by a light, which the children knew to be God. Mary, enveloped in the light of her Son, has outstretched hands over the world, and her Immaculate Heart is visible. Mary is looking below to a scene of war and destruction on earth. Also below her is a bishop, dressed in white, followed by other members of the church, making their way up a hill to a cross. All around them are the houses of a city in ruins, as they make their way among corpses. Seraphim are all about, collecting the blood of the dead, and offering it at the foot of the cross as a sacrifice to the Lord.

19.Delaney, 165.

Just before she left the Apparition pointed to the sun, prompting Lucia to call to the crowd to look up. Something then happened, but we do not really know what. Even the secular, anticlerical press reported that something very unusual occurred that day. *O Século*, a pro-government, anticlerical Lisbon paper, reported a “man-on-the-street” eyewitness testimonial as follows:

From the road, where the vehicles were parked and where hundreds of people who had not dared to brave the mud were congregated, one could see the immense multitude turn toward the sun, which appeared free from clouds and in its zenith. It looked like a plaque of dull silver, and it was possible to look at it without the least discomfort. It might have been an eclipse which was taking place. But at that moment a great shout went up, and one could hear the spectators nearest at hand shouting: “A miracle! A miracle!” Before the astonished eyes of the crowd, whose aspect was biblical as they stood bareheaded, eagerly searching the sky, the sun trembled, made sudden incredible movements outside all cosmic laws—the sun “danced” according to the typical expression of the people. Standing at the step of an omnibus was an old man. With his face turned to the sun, he recited the Credo in a loud voice. I asked who he was and was told Senhor Joao da Cunha Vasconcelos. I saw him afterwards going up to those around him who still had their hats on, and vehemently imploring them to uncover before such an extraordinary demonstration of the existence of God.²⁰

Another anticlerical Lisbon daily, *O Dia*, also gathered eyewitness accounts from individuals present. Here is one of theirs:

At one o’clock in the afternoon, midday by the sun, the rain stopped. The sky, pearly gray in color, illuminated the vast arid landscape with a strange light. The sun had a transparent gauzy veil so that the eyes could easily be fixed upon it. The gray mother-of-pearl tone turned into a sheet of silver which broke up as the clouds were torn apart and the silver sun, enveloped in the same gauzy gray light, was seen to whirl and turn in the circle of broken clouds. A cry went up from every mouth and people fell on their knees on the muddy ground. . . . The light turned a beautiful blue, as if it had come through the stained-glass windows of a cathedral, and spread itself over the people who knelt with outstretched hands. The blue faded slowly, and then the light seemed to pass through yellow glass. Yellow stains fell against white handkerchiefs, against the dark skirts of the women. They were repeated on the trees, on the stones and on the serra. People wept and prayed with uncovered heads, in the presence of a miracle they had awaited. The seconds seemed like hours, so vivid were they.²¹

These newspaper accounts did not suggest a church conspiracy or a case of mass hysteria was behind the Miracle of the Sun. That fact alone was surprising and suggests that something out of the ordinary happened that day. Press reports claimed that thousands of people present reported that the sun seemed to tremble and dance in the sky, with many swirling colors, until it finally moved downward toward the earth, as if to fall in a burning ball. The sun finally returned to its proper place in the now clear sky, and the clothes of the people—which had been soaked—were completely dry. Some stated that all the clothes were dried, whereas others stated that only those people in the pathway of the sun had their clothes dried. As all of this was going on, the children saw Jesus in the sky, then Mary as “Our Lady of Sorrows,” then Mary dressed in the brown

20. *O Século*, reprinted at <http://www.ewtn.com/fatima/apparitions/October.htm>

21. *O Dia*, reprinted at <http://www.ewtn.com/fatima/apparitions/October.htm>

robes of “Our Lady of Mount Carmel.” Following that, Saint Joseph appeared with the Child Jesus, who blessed the gathering.²²

The people who believed the Three Secrets carried valid political prophecies soon developed a special devotion to “*Nossa Senhora de Fátima*.” David Blackbourn observes that “the message to the seers warned of war, starvation, and persecution, and they were told to recite the rosary daily ‘in order to obtain peace for the world and the end of the war.’”²³ Devotees also interpreted the Miracle of the Sun as a warning that the world could end if Mary’s words were not heeded. Among the many political lessons believers claimed are the following three:

- *Russia would soon “reject God” and spread war throughout the world.* At the time of the Marian apparitions in Fátima, Russia was indeed suffering from food shortages and economic collapse. Czar Nicholas had lost all support, and abdicated the throne on 2 March in favor of his brother Michael, who proceeded to renounce the throne. Finally, a few weeks following the Miracle of the Sun, on 25 October 1917, the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, deposed the Kerensky government and established a Communist regime. The Fátima message seemed to anticipate events in Russia, causing many to believe in these messages.

- *World War I would soon end, but a new and more terrible war would follow.* Believers have attributed the aurora borealis of 25 January 1937, which took place one month before Hitler started his aggressions against Austria, as proof of Mary’s prophesy that lights in the sky would announce the new and terrible war.

- *The Holy Father and Christians would be persecuted and suffer for the sins of humankind.* This prophecy claimed that God was going to punish the world with more wars, hunger, and persecution, and that many nations would be annihilated. Russia would be God’s “instrument of chastisement,” and Portugal, for its part, would always keep the faith. All of this would be followed by an era of peace.²⁴

Clearly, these are simplistic interpretations of a complex set of events and images.²⁵ Given the apparently prescient nature of the Fátima prophecies, however, many have come to consider the town a site worthy of pilgrimage, an appropriate place for the veneration of Mary. In many ways the children were on their own, introducing a new form of popular religiosity which, although deferential to the parish priest, communicates directly with God. These events eventually claimed many believers among the religious population of the center and northern regions, and even attracted some from the traditionally anticlerical Alentejo region. In the aftermath of the Miracle of the Sun, the liberal media hesitated, and the devout were full of religious zeal. Significant numbers of people came to believe a miracle had happened that day, thereby turning Fátima into a political reality in Portuguese politics, which reality we will now address.

IV. The Aftermath

22. Delaney, p. 165.

23. Ibid.

24. See Thomas W. Petisko, *Fátima’s Third Secret Explained* (McKee’s Rocks PA: St Andrew’s Productions, 2001), pp. 37-38.

25. Sandra Zimars-Swartz, pp. 73-74. She suggests that the prophecy that war is a punishment for sin can perhaps be connected to Lucia’s fear that her only brother would be sent to the war against Germany. He was almost drafted, and it is possible that Lucia so dreaded the thought of her brother dying in a faraway war that she reasoned such horror must be a punishment for sin. As it turns out, her brother was spared that fate because he was the family’s only male child.

There have been at least four distinct phases in the relationship between Fátima and Portuguese politics since 1917. The first phase, which lasted from 1926 to 1960, featured Fátima as a tool of political legitimacy for the Salazar dictatorship. The second phase, from 1965 to 1974, witnessed a distancing of Fátima from the dictatorship. Fátima serves as a rallying point against the leftist revolutionaries during the third phase, from 1974 to 1976. In the fourth phase, from 1976 to the present, a cohabitation between secular and religious forces in Portugal under the new democratic constitution has developed. Throughout these phases the traditional weakness of Portuguese civil society confirmed the role of the Catholic Church as civil society's dominant institution, and the Catholic community as the wielder of great influence. Fátima has been a major unifying element of that community.

Phase One: Fátima and the Estado Novo

A military coup overthrew the First Republic on 28 May 1926. The regime's effort to limit Church influence was but one of several factors in the former's eventual downfall, which also included political instability and a weak economy. When the military decided to return to the barracks in 1933, it offered to support the conservative Catholic Antonio de Oliveira Salazar as the new Premier. Salazar accepted, and established a new order, called the *Estado Novo*, or New State. Once in charge Salazar constructed an anti-modern, anti-liberal corporatist state.²⁶

Fátima played a key role in Salazar's justification of why Portugal needed to have such a government. Many believed God himself sent Mary with stark warnings about the direction of human history. Salazar argued that his 1933 Constitution of the *Estado Novo* was intended to put Portugal back on the straight and narrow. It declared Portugal a corporatist and unitary republic, and structured society according to a conservative conception of traditional values that considered the family and the Church principal constituent elements.

Salazar ensured that Catholicism was recognized in the Constitution of 1933 as the "religion of the Portuguese Nation,"²⁷ used Catholic theories of corporatism to justify the *Estado Novo*, passed statutes against Protestantism, assisted with the development of the Church radio station (Radio Renscença), and permitted the creation of the Catholic University in Lisbon.²⁸ Supplementing Salazar's efforts on behalf of the Church was the fact that the Cardinal of Lisbon from 1930–71, Father Gonçalves Cerjeira, had also been one of Salazar's classmates at the University of Coimbra. The Constitution also ascribed civil status to Catholic marriages, and forbade divorce.²⁹

26. See Payne 1980, p. 158.

27. De Sousa Franco, A. "A Igreja e o Poder em Portugal, 1974–1987," in *Portugal: O Sistema Político e Constitucional, 1974–1987* (edited by Mario Baptista. Lisbon: Instituto de Ciencias Socias, Universidade de Lisboa, 1987), p. 405.

28. A. H. de Oliveira Marques, *History of Portugal*, Second Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), p. 206.

29. Jacques Georgel, *O Salazarismo* (Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1985), pp. 42-43; de Sousa Franco (1987): 405. In particular, Salazar was influenced by two papal encyclicals: *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor* in 1891, authored by Pope Leo XIII, and by Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno: After Forty Years* (see Hollenbach 1979). Salazar sought to create a corporative system of government and societal organization in Portugal that he believed represented a third alternative to the models of democratic liberal capitalism and state-run communism. Corporatism, he argued, would avoid the excesses of individualism and materialism, and result in the common good.

Although Salazar was vocal about his personal devotion to *Nossa Senhora de Fátima* and to his religion, none of this devotion translated into a powerful Church role in his government. The Catholic Church was one of the foremost organizations of civil society in the absence of other non-state-controlled organizations, and did manage some influence during the *Estado Novo* for at least two reasons. First, it could sway the attitudes of the population. Most of the population considered itself Catholic, and Mass attendance was quite high throughout his rule. Second, even citizens without strong religious beliefs have historically turned to the Church for help, given the chronic weakness of other institutions in civil society. There were limits on Church behavior, and Salazar did not hesitate to punish anyone—including clergy—who defied his rule.³⁰

Salazar's troubles with Oporto's Bishop Antonio Ferreira Gomes in 1958 illustrate this point well. At that time (which was before both the start of the colonial war and Vatican II), the bishop wrote a poignant letter to Salazar that criticized the *Estado Novo*'s record on human rights in Portugal and in the African colonies. Salazar's response to this overt act of defiance was, first, not to allow Ferreira Gomes back into Portugal following a 1959 trip abroad, and, second, to demand that the Vatican name a new Bishop of Oporto. The Pope refused Salazar's request, and a stalemate ensued: Ferreira Gomes was not allowed to return to Portugal for ten years. Salazar took advantage of this situation to warn other clergy that he would not tolerate any further dissent among Catholics, and took steps to keep power away from Church officials.³¹

Whether or not Salazar was genuine in his devotion, he understood the political uses of claiming Marian legitimacy to office in Portugal.³² He sought to concentrate actual power in his own hands, and was wary about sharing it. Although he was more than happy to appear with the Cardinal of Lisbon and other Church officials in photo-ops, and to support proclerical legislation, the *Estado Novo* ultimately belonged to Salazar and to no one else.

Second Phase: Fátima in Opposition to the Estado Novo

Tensions between the Church and the *Estado Novo* became visible in the 1950s and intensified in the 1960s. Ultimately, the Second Vatican Council doomed this relationship. By the 1960s the Vatican was moving away from its advocacy of a “third way” of fascism-corporatism social organization—embraced by Pope Pius XI’s social encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*—although this system was still being used by Portugal at that time.³³ Among other issues, the new realities of the Cold War and the threat of the spread of atheistic communism worldwide led to the development of several new documents at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, including *Gaudium et Spes*: A Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World; and *Dignitatis Humanae*: A Declaration on Religious Freedom. These two documents seek to distance the Church from any political regime that does not guarantee and protect human rights and religious freedom. For instance, *Gaudium et Spes* states that

Great care must be taken about civic and political formation, which is of the utmost necessity today for the population as a whole, and especially for youth, so that all citizens can play their part in the life of the political community. . . . With integrity and wisdom, they must take action against any form of injustice and tyranny, against arbitrary domination by an individual or a political party and any intolerance. . . . It is very important, especially where a pluralistic society prevails, that there be a correct notion of the relationship between the political community and the Church, . . . The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is

30. Marques 1976, p. 193.

31. Ibid.

32. See Georgel, pp. 42-43.

33. See Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1992).

not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.³⁴

These documents sent Salazar a clear message that the days of the Vatican-*Estado Novo* Concordat were over, and that Rome was prepared to accept a new and democratic Portugal. Furthermore, these documents assert that governments should protect the rights of free assembly, of common action, of expressing personal opinions, and of professing a religion both privately and publicly.

Vatican II took place as Portugal was waging its colonial war in Africa. Pope Paul VI had urged the Portuguese leadership to reach a political settlement with the African nationalists. The regime's refusal to seek a political settlement led to a distancing from the Church. Eventually, Pope Paul VI decided to alter the Church's relationship with the *Estado Novo*. In 1967 he visited Fátima, and expressed his devotion to *Nossa Senhora*. He later incensed Salazar's successor, Marcello Caetano, when he received the leaders of the liberation movements from Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde at the Vatican in 1970. With these acts the Pope managed to express his solidarity with the Portuguese, and signal his desire for a change of policies in Lisbon. Therefore, although Fátima was a useful legitimising tool in the beginning, Pope Paul VI turned it into a point of resistance to the regime after 1967. This point should not be overstated; suffice it to say that the allure of Fátima wore thin for the dictatorship after Vatican II.

Third Phase: Fátima and the Revolution of 25 April 1974

An alliance of junior officers from the four branches of the military, calling themselves the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), had also opposed the prolonged thirteen-year (1961–74) colonial war in Africa. When their requests that a political settlement be reached with the African liberation movements were rejected, they finally decided to overthrow the civilian-run Salazar/Caetano dictatorship in a coup on 25 April 1974. The immediate reasons for the rebellion predominantly concerned the military as an institution and Portugal's foreign policy, in particular the ongoing colonial wars in Africa. The MFA's political program included democratization of the political structures and social changes to achieve social equality and justice for all, and promised improvements in the living conditions especially of the previously underprivileged.

Although at first the MFA offered what appeared to be an intelligible political program that promised democracy, decolonization, and development (the famous "three d's"), the MFA swiftly factionalized over its political objectives, with reformists, Communists, Socialists, and third-world utopians all trying to gain an upper hand. After being ruled by only one regime and two leaders from 1933 to 1974, Portugal experienced six provisional governments, two presidents, a failed right-wing coup attempt, a failed left-wing coup attempt, and three elections from 1974 to 1976. A political-military elite committed to a democratic system prevailed and crafted a democratic constitution in 1976.

These discontinuities on the level of leadership were mirrored by discontinuities on the popular level, where instances of mass mobilization and polarization indicated massive social and economic changes. Portugal had not experienced any large-scale mobilization prior to the coup; interest representation had remained weak; and few preexisting organizations were able to channel effectively the newly surfacing interests. The fall of the dictatorship and the abrupt introduction of democracy met the Portuguese society without any effective political or economic associations that organized mass interests on a national level, and civil society had to be newly created.

During that time some far-left members of the MFA started a cultural dynamism program designed to eradicate civil society of religious, and replace it with revolutionary, consciousness. Such anticlerical activities, and the possibility of a Communist regime in Lisbon, prompted a powerful reaction against the Communists and

34.

http://www.saintmike.org/Library/Church_Councils/Vatican_II/Gaudium_et_Spes.html

other leftist groups in the deeply religious Northern areas and in the Islands. During this same period the legend of Fátima took on powerful symbolism for many people. In 1975 the possibility of a Communist regime in Lisbon led many people to believe they had not been praying hard enough. Believers prayed, therefore, for the Salvation of Russia, as well as for that of Portugal. Some members of the MFA argued that right-wing reactionary forces, since the time of Salazar, had simply exploited the population's simple faith to make them fear communism. Consequently, the MFA leadership—with the notable exception of Prime Minister Gonçalves—tended to downplay the significance of Fátima.

Many viewed the MFA's plans for Portugal as an affront to Catholicism and traditional values. As the political dynamic heated up, Fátima began to stand as a bulwark against anticlericalism, atheism, liberalism, republicanism, socialism, and communism for many people. More and more Portuguese looked to Mary rather than to Marx.

Prior to the 25 April 1975 elections for a Constituent Assembly, Portuguese bishops, meeting in Fátima, issued a decree asking all Catholics to vote for any party that would guarantee the values of family, education, and liberty, and warned the people not to accept at face value the easy promises of any party that pledged the creation of a "utopia-on-earth" program.³⁵ Church officials greeted warmly the moderate results of the 25 April 1975 election combined with the politico-military victory of the moderate "Group of Nine" MFA officers in November 1975. The Church also supported the democratic Constitution of 1976, which provided for freedom of religion as well as separation of Church and State.³⁶

Fourth Phase: Fátima and Portuguese Democracy

Tensions over Fátima have calmed in the years since the adoption of the 1976 Constitution. For many Portuguese today Fátima, along with the beloved national soccer team, has become an important part of the national identity and a source of great pride. In some ways Fátima and football capture the essence of contemporary Portuguese society—they are both intermingled with a sense of destiny, importance, and uniqueness. Of course, the national soccer team lost in its bid for the World Cup championship in 2002, but the story of Fátima remains strong in the hearts of Portuguese.

With the advent of the Cold War, Fátima's influence has extended beyond Portuguese politics. Devotional cults have developed to *Nossa Senhora de Fátima* in many countries. A zealous so-called "Blue Army" of devoted Fátima followers prayed for the salvation of Russia and for the healing of the world.³⁷ The cult of Fátima was intensified with the emergence of the Cold War after 1947. As Stalinist Russia spread its ideology around the world, Catholic faithful hearkened Fátima's messages and prayed in the 1950s. Curiously, the assassination attempt on the life of John Paul II occurred on 13 May 1981—the seventy-fourth anniversary of the first apparition. Many, including the Pope himself, took the coincidence as a sign. He became personally devoted to Fátima, and the Apparitions developed into a contemporary pilgrimage site. He credits the hand of Mary as deflecting the assassin's bullet away from his heart, and offered the bullet in thanksgiving to our Lady of Fátima. Local ecclesiastical authorities decided to place it in the crown of Mary's statue. The country organized three important and national mobilizations for Pope John Paul II's visits to Fátima in 1982, 1991, and 2001. Each of these visits moved the nation. Many Portuguese have taken pride in Fátima's important role in the life of the Church.

35. See Paul Christopher Manuel, *Uncertain Outcome: The Politics of the Portuguese Transition to Democracy* (Landover: University Press of America, 1995).

36. See Paul Christopher Manuel, *The Challenges of Democratic Consolidation in Portugal: Political, Economic and Military Issues* (Westport CT: Praeger, 1996).

37. For more information on the "blue army," click on <http://www.bluearmy.com/>

Fátima outlived the First Republic, the *Estado Novo*, the 25 April 1974 Revolution, and the Cold War, and has peacefully coexisted with the democratic regime. A large piece of the Berlin Wall has been placed on its grounds, and the Holy Rosary is recited daily from Fátima to all of Portugal on *Radio Renasença*. Plans are in the works for the construction of a new Basilica on the grounds in time for the hundredth anniversary celebration of the Apparitions in 2017. All indications are that Fátima will remain an important pilgrimage site for years to come.

V. Conclusion

There is no question that Fátima has influenced the beliefs and political behavior of many people in Portugal. Popular sectors believe the Virgin Mary was sent to the Portuguese with messages from God, in a sense turning the traditional, absolute “divine right of the King” model on its head. In this case God sent important messages to three of His most humble creatures, granting to them—and, by extension, to all the country people—a sort of popular absolutist model of political legitimacy; in other words, a belief that one need not worry about the ballot box. The recitation of the Holy Rosary can solve all political problems.

The rational-faith polemic over Lourdes in the nineteenth century featured many of the same elements as Fátima. According to Ruth Harris this French case involved a wider debate about science and religion, modernity and superstition, and anticlericalism and clericalism. In her work, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in a Secular Age*, she is concerned with the role of the religiosity of a small rural community within a secularizing France at the mid-point in the nineteenth century. Or, in her words, “Lourdes in the early decades is a story about France, about the struggles of Catholicism in the aftermath of revolutionary turmoil.”³⁸

Harris’s insights apply perfectly to Fátima as well. This Portuguese case of Marian apparition had elements of a larger debate between science and religion, modernity and superstition, anticlericalism and clericalism, and the role of the religiosity of a small rural community in a secularizing Portugal at the beginning of the twentieth century. Likewise, E. Ann Matter has noted that the key “mythical” elements of the Lourdes story are almost identical to those of Fátima, as follows in Table 1.³⁹

Table 1: Comparing Lourdes and Fátima

Key ‘Mythical’ Elements	Lourdes, 1854	Fátima, 1917
Occupation	Bernadette the shepherdess	Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco, the shepherds
Relationship with Civil Authority	Bernadette under interrogation	Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco under interrogation
Relationship with Ecclesiastical Authority	Bernadette and the priests	Lucia, Jacinta, Francisco, and the priests
Relationship with Popular sectors	Bernadette and the awe-struck crowd	Lucia, Jacinta, Francisco, and the awe-struck crowd

38. Harris, p. 11.

39. E. Ann Matter, “Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the Late Twentieth Century: Apocalyptic, Representation, Politics.” Forthcoming in *Religion*.

In light of these striking similarities, Matter has observed that the two stories are about “the persistence of the powerless and marginalized . . . in the face of the disapproval of those in power.”⁴⁰ Fátima’s uniqueness, Matter contends, is in the political realm:

What Fátima adds to the story, however, is a twentieth-century political component, for these children had to face the displeasure of the secular state of Portugal as well as if the Church. This became significantly difficult when the children repeatedly reported that the Lady demanded the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in return for world peace and the conversion of Russia. Consequently, the prayers of the “Blue Army,” the sodality of the devotees of Fátima, focused their attention on the “godless Communism” of Russia.⁴¹

Matter is certainly correct to assert that Fátima is a Marian apparition with a political character—indeed, perhaps, the archetype of a political apparition. This case clearly demonstrates that the relationship between popular religiosity and regime transition deserves scholarly attention precisely because the religious faith of a people can be important to a political outcome: devotees of Fátima influenced political leadership, resisted governmental authorities, and communicated popular concerns to the elite in the years following the 1917 apparitions. As such, the reaction of the Catholic faithful to the supposed miraculous events at Fátima is an important and telling element of twentieth-century Portuguese political life.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

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