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# The Triad of State, Religious Institutions and Civil Society in Modern Argentina

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## Introduction

1 Analyzing the interrelationships among the state, power groups, religious institutions and civil society is essential to know the significance of believers and beliefs, religious ones in this case, in any given society. Moreover, such interrelationships can be researched in different ways. They can be considered from the point of view of political divisions, and be thus analyzed at the national, provincial and local levels. Convergent and divergent processes reveal similarities and specific features which require close examination. A different analytical perspective is based on taking into account the legal aspect. This kind of analysis involves both elucidating the religious influence on the legal structure and analyzing the dynamics of negotiations and disputes among political, religious and social actors and institutions. In addition, public policies (related to education, housing, health, food, population, etc.) provide another standpoint from which to grasp the depth and multiple forms of the reciprocal demands that the state, religious and social spheres make of each other. Underlying this multiplicity of approaches is the historical configuration of a scene in which politics and religion have been interwoven, specified, and have seen their reciprocal demands met, in a seamless relationship. (Casanova, 1994).

2 Our purpose in this article is to trace the development of the complex relationship among the state, power groups, civil society and religious institutions, groups and individuals in Argentina, with a view to clearly understanding the entrenched processes, modalities and formats which define how our society works and make it similar to, or different from, others. At a time when long-standing subjectivities, dominations and

hegemonies in the state, cultural and economic fields are being brought into question in our country after the 2001-2002 severe crisis, it is fundamental to identify their continuities and breaks.

- **1** It should be clarified that Catholicism involves a complex array of interpretations and ways of beh (...)

**3** Considering that the Catholic Church **1** has played a substantial role in Argentina's institutional fabric and that it has become, in countless opportunities, one of the main sources of legitimacy of political processes, it is inescapable to focus on Catholicism's hegemonic trends, on the stages of its institutionalization and on the wide variety of its relationships with the political world. By understanding the complex ties between politics and religion in modern Argentina from a historical and sociological point of view, we will be in a position to recognize the scope, dilemmas and crossroads of the particular processes of societal secularization and state laicization, processes which do not necessarily take a parallel or predetermined course.

**4** Before we undertake the sociohistorical analysis, we must discuss some theoretical and analytical assumptions and premises. Firstly, we need to make a few distinctions if we are to gain a deeper understanding of any phenomena. Religion can be dealt with as a universal and abstract concept —it should be remembered that, in social sciences, universal definitions do not generally stand the test of contextual analyses—, which is different from the historical experiences and realizations of Judaism, Christianity, Islamism, Hinduism, Confucianism and so on. We shall follow the second approach. In Argentina, Christianity is salient among religious beliefs, Catholicism being the expression with the highest number of representatives. Catholics are an organized group, and have a state, the Vatican —the Holy See, in the UN diplomatic language—, with ambassadors and bishops who represent it at the national and international levels, whose historical and sociological ties to the nation-state, political society and civil society have enabled them to decisively influence concrete situations until today. However, Catholicism is also understood and presents itself as a culture, an imaginary, an ethical system, a modernity which, in the long term, disputes subjectivities, social, symbolic and sacred spaces with other cultures, imaginaries, ethical systems and modernities. Within Catholicism, it is necessary to differentiate among the Catholic institution, its specialists (bureaucrats, prophets, wizards), the Catholic movement in its various (integral, liberal, privatizing, bourgeois, liberationist) forms, the community groups and movements, social and pastoral centers, the individuals who function as significant points of reference, and Catholic individuals. The works by Emile Poulat (1977, 1983 and 2012) are essential to understand this.

**5** Secondly, by "politics", we refer not only to the state, the government or ministries, but also to civil servants, Congress, the Judiciary, political society as linked to civil society, social movements, NGOs and/or the beliefs held by citizens. In Argentina, the connections between the Catholic and the political, the political and the Catholic, pervade, broaden and filter into many different spaces, worlds and spheres which cannot be overlooked by any piece of research. In fact, it is impossible to confine the Catholic and the political only to the fields of Catholicism or politics. Therefore, at present, understanding the religious and how it relates to the political, the economic, the social, the cultural and the symbolic in Latin America involves paying attention to a double process : on the one hand, the diversity of religious people, groups and organizations in various levels and spheres, both public and private ; on the other, to the transfers,

legitimacies and mutual dislocations in what could be called the field of power and symbolic effectiveness, where the religious and the political blend with each other. Both politicization of the religious and religionization of politics are taking place. Although, in the Argentine case, the religionization (Catholicization) achieved through the long forging of a Catholic national and military identity has been much more significant than the weak laicity of some historical periods, Argentina is far from the combination of forced secularization and forced religionization experienced, e.g. by Spain in the 20th century (Díaz Salazar, 1998), and closer—as claimed here—to a situation in which areas of privatization and politicization of the religious exist side by side.

6Thirdly, it is essential to contextualize concepts, which social sciences sometimes attempt to make universal and prescriptive. Both secularization and laicity—which, it should be stressed, are two different processes—are involved in this dilemma. A definition established for a concrete situation is taken as a starting point, it is then universalized, and an attempt is made to determine to what extent other historical experiences come close to/depart from the preconceived conceptualization. Thus, analyses are made in terms of "declines", "evolutions", "delays", "progressive developments", or semantic resources produce an abundance of prefixes: "post-secularization", "de-secularization" and so on. However, it is precisely historical experiences that challenge definitions and actually bring into question the universal character of concepts. To say it in other words, they warn about the complexity of applying an analytical category to quite different historical, political, institutional or cultural configurations. It should not be forgotten that the vast majority of Christian believers live—in their own way—both the Christian and the secularized culture amid multiple cultural processes of readjustment of beliefs and in separate spheres. We could venture that the different Christian individuations in Latin America give rise to different types of secularization, and that these different secularizations cause, rather than the disappearance of the Christian, multiple readjustments of spiritualities and religions. At the same time, the institutional and legitimate processes involving the legal and social connections among state, political society, civil society and the religious groups and movements produce different types of laicity in Latin America. Once again, research must be carried out if we are to understand the degrees and types of the laicities "actually present" in each Latin American country, and the attributes we may ascribe to them. We should remember that we can live—in terms of ideal types—in secularized societies with lay states, in secularized societies with minimum-laicity states, in non-secularized societies with broad-laicity states, and in non-secularized societies with minimum-laicity states.

7Finally, in this work, we shall focus particularly on Catholicism, one of the most prominently public religions, not because it is the only expression of the religious, but because it is the most significant one, the one that has concentrated the most power, and which has radiated its imaginaries and visions to both other religions and to the state and political society. For our analysis, we will suggest a division in four main historical periods—Catholicisms without Church, Catholicisms with Church, Catholicism and state terrorism, and Church without Catholicisms—which refer to ideal categories in concrete historical terms. This typification is based on cycles of our history that have been "*artificially grouped in a rational unit*" (Weber, 1984; 527). In this regard, although each period is identified by the description of its distinctive features, these periods are still ideal types, and sediments of one are present in others. We shall focus on elements abstracted from many different empirical data and present them as a consistent referential system to provide a historical and sociological understanding of

the enduring features of a relationship that has shaped the Argentine political, cultural and social matrix until the present.

## Catholicism without Church, and the Liberal State

8The establishment of Catholicism in the territory that would later become Argentina was marked by the juxtaposition of the patronage regime and the Christendom paradigm. On the one hand, successive papal bulls gave the Spanish monarchs the right to create ecclesiastical positions, appoint their holders, collect the tithe of worship and authorize the publication of the papal acts. The rulers, in return, fostered the dissemination of religion in the occupied territories and committed to building temples and monasteries, as well as to watching the performance of the religious agents. The Pope rewarded the Spanish Crown for the conversion of the peoples that inhabited the conquered lands with the power to control the churches that were being founded. The conquest of new markets and lands meant, for Catholicism, the conquest of new souls.

9In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *colonial Christianity* would complete its transition to the building of the *Argentine Church*. This process was not linear, but was marked by a number of conflicts which manifested different state and Catholicity projects. Such projects were, in turn, defined in mutual confrontation or collaboration, and originated a matrix which has since then shaped the relationship among the state, political society and religious actors.

10When the 1810 Revolution broke out, the Christendom regime started to crack. However, this slow process would come to an end only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The different revolutionary governments did not relinquish the power of patronage — abolished only in 1966, when the Concordat was signed— and tried different ways to relate with the ecclesiastical authorities and to regulate the life of the Church depending on the demands of each stage (Di Stéfano and Zanatta, 2000).

11The interpenetration between politics and religion —a clear continuity with the colonial period— emerged as a constitutive and foundational characteristic of the new country. During the independence wars, religion was used to legitimize the actions of both sides. Their central figures insisted on the religious dimension of their undertaking. Catholicism was viewed as a necessary moral force to unify and give cultural cohesion to a nation in its initial stages.

- 2 These two rules were repealed through the 1994 constitutional amendment.

12The 1853 Constitution accurately reflected the power structure of the time. Decidedly liberal, it guaranteed freedom and economic openness. However, this contrasted with the regulations on religious matters. The Constitution granted freedom of worship — thus encouraging the arrival of immigrant masses from multiple European countries, with diverse cultures, religions and languages— but not religious equality. Catholicism was awarded a privileged status, even though it was not explicitly declared the "official religion". Article 2, still in force today, compelled the state to financially support the Catholic religion. Also salient were the requirement to be a Catholic to become

president (Article 75) and to promote the conversion of native peoples to Catholicism (Article 67)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>13</sup>In this way, the state safeguarded the predominance of Catholicism and, through history, it would use the necessary legal, financial, cultural and symbolic resources to secure its privileged status. Countless examples confirm today the prevalent role which the civil power granted to the Catholic Church : in addition to financial support for Catholicism by the state, we should mention the subsidies which religious schools started to receive in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the exclusive religious assistance to the armed forces and law enforcement agencies, the management of state funds for social programs by the Catholic Church charities, the granting of diplomatic and official passports to bishops and archbishops, the presence of Catholic iconography in state agencies and so on. (Esquivel 2009).

<sup>14</sup>The reciprocal legitimation between the state and the religious fields —the latter being understood as only the Catholic— would become a constant feature in the form of their relationships. Far from establishing autonomy between the state and the Church, the law created a more complex scene. The porous fabric of the relationships between the political and the Catholic has made it difficult, from an analytical approach, to draw the boundaries between them. Such boundaries have become mobile, vague and, at some points in history, nonexistent.

<sup>15</sup>From its very inception, then, the Argentine state was not laic but was not confessional either. Intermediate degrees along a laic-confessional continuum should be considered in order to understand how shifts between these two ends have occurred throughout history. The modernizing spirit that came with the 1880s brought with it a sequence of secular laws. In 1881, the Civil Registry Act, and three years later, Act No 1420, which provided for religious teaching but outside school hours in public schools, and set the foundation for compulsory and free education, were passed. In 1888, civil marriage was established. With that set of laws, *"births, deaths and marriages ceased to be the exclusive competence of the Church. Actually, at least from the legal point of view, the distinction between being a citizen and being Catholic was introduced"* (Zanatta, 1996 : 367).

<sup>16</sup>The dominant liberal imaginary was based on an agro-exporting and raw material production model, on a restricted citizenship political regime and on secularized cultural forms which confined religion to the private sphere. Catholicism, on the defensive, fluctuated between adopting a conciliatory attitude towards liberalism or mounting opposition, but lacked the institutional structure from which to fight such a battle.

## Catholicism with Church and the Interventionist State

- <sup>3</sup> The creation of the Latin American Pius College in Rome, in 1858, was the starting point of a consi (...)

<sup>17</sup>In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the middle of the crisis of the liberal and positivist ideals that heralded unlimited progress, Catholicism intensified its fight for ideological and moral hegemony, and for establishing a new horizon of meaning from which to permeate the state and political culture, as well as that of Argentine society at large. The confinement

of Catholicism to the private realm was categorically rejected. The Catholic Church, which in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had started its romanization process<sup>3</sup>, being reluctant to restrict itself to the sacristy and the individual's conscience, set out to Christianize society and to become active in the public arena.

18In the face of the alternative imaginaries which arose with the decline of liberalism — communism, fascism, corporatism—, Catholicism consolidated a representation of itself as integral to the origins of the nation and, therefore, at the base of Argentine identity. Recognized as the national religion, Catholicism merged and blended with the homeland. So, in the context of a "Catholic Argentina", it would promote the Catholicization of the state, the ruling classes, the armed forces, political parties, and Argentine society at large (Mallimaci et al., 2006).

- <sup>4</sup> Between 1933 and 1939, eleven dioceses, as many as the ones that existed till then, were created, w (...)
- <sup>5</sup> The social presence of the Church has taken different forms throughout history, but has never relin (...)

19In fact, since becoming firmly established during the 1930s<sup>4</sup>, the Catholic Church deployed a number of strategies to ensure a pervasive public presence. Its influence on the highest echelons of government and its strong action in the field of social assistance<sup>5</sup> were two key tools for spreading Christian values over all areas of social life. Additionally, the network of Catholic educational institutions, which had grown exponentially since the arrival of new religious orders in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, consolidated itself during this period, becoming a structure which could not be overlooked when it came to organizing the educational system in Argentina.

20The religious institution set out to *Catholicize* the state and society by getting its members appointed to government positions and using the state apparatus to spread its pastoral action all over the country. Its purpose was explicit : "to reconquer the entire society for Christ" and to irradiate a Catholic culture over all domains of social life. Since then, the state, political society and civil society would start to become rearranged in a way that differed from that of previous decades. For the ruling classes, Catholicism would function in the public space as a recurrent source of legitimacy. For the poorer classes, it would serve as a source of national identity and as a substitutive nationalism.

- <sup>6</sup> Émile Poulat (1983) defines this type of Catholicism as "*roman, intransigent, integral and social*". (...)

21This integral Catholicism<sup>6</sup> did not seek to create Catholicism's own participation bodies, but rather promoted Catholic penetration in all areas of society. Instead of starting a political party, Catholics preferred to disseminate themselves among the existing ones. Catholicism's inroads into government decision-making positions and society organizations were part of a project for society that intended to "*re-Christianize Argentina, restore everything in Christ, permeate Catholicism into all aspects of individual and social life, establish Catholicism's public presence and the social reign of Jesus Christ*" (Mallimaci, 1992 : 259).

22This intransigent and reforming Catholicism blended the social with the political, the cultural and the doctrinal. To that end, it used the system of specialized branches of

Catholic Action, which combined the multiple areas of social life with the territory-based forms of organization. This led to the emergence of the Young Catholic Workers (JOC) in 1941, the Young Catholic Students (JEC) in 1953, and the Catholic University Youth (JUC) and the Rural Catholic Action Movements (MRAC) in 1958.

23 While the Church made progress organizing its institutional network, the governments of that time were receptive to Catholic demands. Actually, government decrees in several Argentine provinces allowed religious teaching in public schools within school hours during the 1930s and 1940s.

24 The presidency of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955) —especially during his first term in office— evidenced the high degree of complementarity between the political and ecclesiastical powers. These were times of mutual understanding and convergence between Peronism and integral Catholicism. The elective affinity between their shared movement-based cultures and their common rejection of communists and liberals took the form of a mutual dislocation between a Catholic Peronism and a Peronist Catholicism.

25 The political movement viewed it as its mission to continue advancing Christianity's bimillennial objectives and the Church's social doctrine recommendations, embodying the rejection of communism and capitalism alike, promoting social harmony and the "organized community" (a Peronist conception of a community in which individual and collective interests do not collide) (Mallimaci et al., 2006).

26 In response to the president's and vice-president's attendance to the Church official masses, religious celebrations were held at government commemorations of "Peronist dates". Whenever a school, neighborhood, hospital or community center was inaugurated, it received the blessing of some Catholic authority. Every railway station in the country featured an image of the Virgin of Luján, object of national devotion. The creation of the National Registry of Religions, in 1946, strengthened Catholicism's predominance over all other faiths. The newly-created entity compelled all religions, except the Catholic one, to register with a state agency as a requirement to gain legal status. As a result of the handsome state financial contributions received by the Church, a national clergy emerged and a new seminary was built in Buenos Aires.

- <sup>7</sup> Tomas E. Martinez, *Santa Evita*, Planeta, Buenos Aires, 1995. The author says : "*Goddess, queen, lad(...)*"

27 However, Peronism's encroachment upon fields that the Church considered key for Catholicizing society caused conflicts between both to appear on the scene. The "Peronization" of education, as well as the "politicization" and "modernization" of social assistance, usually displaced the Church from its "natural" areas of competence. Even if Peronism and Catholicism shared societal models, each one proposed itself in its own way as a "totalizing" and "integral" identity, with different constructions of sacred elements which were bound to collide sooner or later. The degree of Church concern was in direct proportion to the greater weight gained by the state and the Peronist movement in matters traditionally subject to the influence of religion. At the same time, Peronist culture, rooted in the working and low-income social groups, dislocated the Catholicism of well-to-do sectors, caused a crisis in the Catholic movement (members and militants of the Young Catholic Workers massively joined Peronist trade unions and militants of the Argentine Catholic Action discovered the

experience of belonging to a majority political party) and became increasingly closer to a vague Catholicism, rooted in the poorer sectors, which started to merge Catholic and Peronist sacred elements (the case of Eva Perón would be paradigmatic : the "worship" of, and "extraordinary" devotion for, the President's wife, who passed away in 1952, by extensive poorer sectors who viewed her as Saint Evita<sup>7</sup> contrasted with the attitude of other social segments, for whom she was the "incarnation" of absolute evil).

28In this context, during the last years of Perón's term, the Catholic movement and the Church structure explicitly positioned themselves in the opposition, at the same time as conflicts with Peronism escalated, to the point that violence broke out : militants of the political movement set fire to several churches and to the Ecclesiastical Curia of Buenos Aires, and some of the highest officials of the Catholic hierarchy were expelled from the country.

29The Corpus Christi procession held on June 11, 1955 gathered demonstrators who were dissidents and opposed to Peronism. As the ceremony developed, a group of Catholics placed the Vatican flag instead of the Argentine one in front of the National Congress as a declaration of war. On June 16, 1955, as a prelude to the *coup d'état* that would occur in September that year, May Square was bombed from the air, with a toll of 300 dead civilians. On the aircrafts of the armed forces, an inscription read "Victory is Christ's".

30Simultaneously, the interests of the Catholic Church were affected by several government decisions, such as the elimination of the Directorate for Religious Teaching, the passing of the divorce act, the suspension of Religion as a school subject, and the repeal of the religious teaching act. These measures were taken by Peron's government between the end of 1954 and the beginning of 1955.

31The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s witnessed continuous interruptions of constitutional governments. These militarization processes went together with an increasing view of Catholicism as the foundation of nationality, the safeguard of national interests and a pillar of governance. Catholicization and militarization started to march side by side, both in political society and the state. For many decades, the Catholic nation model, with its Hispanicist and authoritarian matrix, imposed itself (Mallimaci, 1988). In that context, the ecclesiastical elite reproduced its traditional strategy of tightening its bonds with the political, military, economic and trade union power groups.

32However, the internal structure of the Catholic institution did not reflect the gains thus obtained. In a context of social effervescence, sharp disagreements arose within the Church as a result of the reading and implementation of the documents of Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

33The reinterpretation of the Council reforms from the Latin American and Argentine reality, rather than pointing to a single path to set them in motion, sparked many different proposals. At stake were the interpretation and the kind of changes to be made. Opposing the liberationist trends, which advocated revolutionary pastoral action and challenged the connections between the Church elite and the dominant power, there was a Catholic hierarchy which resisted any *aggiornamento* of the Church. Amid intensified conflicts with the authorities and a politicized social context, the Church lost large numbers of Catholic laypersons to the ranks of political parties.



- **8** Regardless of the movement's disagreements with the highest Church authorities, certain modes of ac (...)

34The politicization of society gave even greater encouragement to the sectors of Catholicism actively engaged with the poor and deepened the rifts within Catholicism. The Movement of Priests of the Third World —MSTM— gave an organic structure to the liberationist project within the Church**8**. This movement, created in 1968, intended to materialize the expressions of the Second Vatican Council and the conclusions of the Conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín (1968).

35The radicalization of its announcements and denunciations led the movement to direct confrontation with both the military and the Church, although a formal rupture was not reached. With many of its leaders murdered by the military and many of its militants being under constant persecution, the organization dismembered, to such an extent that it ceased to exist after the military *coup d'état*.

## Civil-Military-Catholic State and State Terrorism

- **9** Actually, the murder of the slum priest Carlos Mugica, on May 11, 1974, foreshadowed the strategy t (...)

36Once the democratic regime was interrupted in 1976, the military dictatorship took different actions towards the diverse sectors of Catholicism**9**. With its view of the ecclesiastical institution as a space of conflict, it set out to purge its structures. To this end, it strengthened the role of the highest Church authorities, giving them the mission to legitimize military action and turning them into the guardians of the essential Argentine values. At the same time, it launched an offensive to isolate and annihilate the pro-Third World groups. These actions were legitimized by a discourse that ascribed disagreements within the Church itself to "Marxist infiltration" and to a "conspiracy against true Catholicism".

37The repression started by the military dictatorship was unprecedented in its magnitude : tortures, kidnappings, disappearances, pregnant women murdered, babies stolen, clandestine detention centers and other forms of systematic violation of human rights left a deep mark in Argentine society, making every subsequent social articulation tinged with fear and distrust. In the meantime, the "subversive" threat continued to be the ideological justification that legitimized the extermination of the other.

38In that context, priests, members of basic ecclesial communities, nuns, laypersons and even bishops who identified with the defense of human rights were successively detained. They were persecuted, exiled, kidnapped, tortured and murdered. However, the expressions condemning the military for the illegal nature of their actions and the enquiries on the whereabouts of catechists and other members of the Church never resulted from an institutional positioning, but rather from purely individual initiatives.

- **10** Homily delivered on 9/23/1975, in the funeral of a member of the military murdered by the guerrilla (...)

39During the 1976-1983 dictatorship, the interpenetration between the armed forces and Catholicism —the Catholicization and militarization process— reached its highest degree of symbiosis, with the idea of uniting meanings and destinies, now that "the homeland was under the threat of the subversive". Adolfo Tortolo, president of the Argentine Episcopal Conference, voiced his endorsement of the *coup d'état*, expressing his support for the actions aimed at restoring the national spirit. Except for a few bishops, religious authorities chose to coexist with, rather than to confront, the *de facto* government. In 1975, one year before the *coup d'état*, deputy army chaplain Victorio Bonamín had asked himself if maybe Christ "*wants the armed forces to someday step beyond their role ?*", and had concluded the following : "*The army is atoning the impurity of our country. The military have been purified in a River Jordan of blood to take the lead of our country*"<sup>10</sup>.

40In parallel, chaplains and priests were present in detention centers as a matter of routine at the time. The assistance provided to the agents of repression or the moral coercion used during the interrogations of those who would later be shot dead, showed the degree of understanding between the Catholic authorities and the military regime. Fundamentally, the military chaplains undertook to provide spiritual support to the torturers and to make captured civilians give in emotionally. The National Committee on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), in its *Nunca Más* (in English, "Never again") report, attested to these and other actions by members of the Catholic Church. The Record of the Trial to the Military Junta stated that torturers used rosaries in detention centers, and quoted a statement uttered by Captain Acosta (called "the Tiger") in the clandestine center of the Navy, which bore witness to the Catholic-military accord : "*This is a just war, Jesus Christ is on our side*".

- <sup>11</sup> Various testimonies certify that, when Angelelli died —while traveling from the town of El Chamental (...)

41The number of those who voiced their demands and accusations against the repressive system was very small. Out of over eighty bishops, only four made the decision to confront the military regime. They were : Enrique Angelelli, bishop of La Rioja, murdered by the armed forces, although officially reported to have died in a car accident in a motorway on August 4, 1976<sup>11</sup> ; Jaime de Nevares and Miguel Hesayne, bishops of Neuquén and Viedma respectively, members of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights, and Jorge Novak, bishop of Quilmes and member of the Ecumenical Movement for the Rights of Man.

42As the dictatorship entered its final stage, several civil society organizations had recovered certain public visibility. Both trade unions and political parties put pressure on the military in order to bring the *de facto* government to an end. In the meantime, the episcopate took the task of reconciliation upon itself, now that the battle against "the subversive" had been left behind.

43Precisely, the main issue under discussion at the time was the retreat of the armed forces. Attitudes of negotiation, mediation or intransigence regarding this process led to different behaviors in most institutions, the Catholic Church among them. Its authorities propounded forgetting the past and resuming democratic life without any bitter feelings. To that end, they legitimized the Self-Amnesty Act with which the military exonerated themselves of the crimes committed so as to neutralize any attempt to take them to court.

44Antonio Quarracino, who would become president of the episcopate in the early nineties, put the blame for the events occurred during the dictatorship on society at large, so he deemed it unnecessary to judge only one sector. He proposed an "Oblivion Act" as a way to end a painful stage and begin a new one based on social peace.

45The discursive strategy of the ecclesiastical authorities consisted of promoting the evangelical attitude of forgiveness as the way to reconcile society with its armed forces. The documents issued by the episcopate from 1980 contributed to creating opportunities for dialog among the military, political parties and trade unions, and played a role in the national pacification policy.

46The behavior of the Church during the dictatorship showed that it continued to use the same methodology as in other periods of Argentine history. However, the magnitude of the events experienced under the state terrorism gave rise to a retrospective analysis from which the Catholic Church did not emerge unharmed. Several notions of memory were activated, just like in the rest of society : one of them understood memory as the trial of those responsible for crimes against humanity and the search for truth ; the other posture proposed "complete memory" and was expressed by the so called "two-devil theory", advocated by military and Catholic sectors.

## Church without Catholicism, and Plural and Democratic state

- **12** In the religious field, the proliferation of many different groups —the case of Evangelicals is the (...)

47When the rule of law was restored in 1983, society was culturally and socioeconomically different. On the one hand, the structural adjustment policies increased social heterogeneity and inequality. On the other, once the rigid controls on social relationships were liberalized as a result of the fall of the dictatorship and the advent of democracy, multiple organizations with different degrees of institutional status sprang and started interacting in the field of social representations and senses of belonging<sup>12</sup>. This reduced the power of a single institution to monopolize the production and transmission of values and rules of behavior. The possibility to uphold and demand that a body of rules be imposed as the organizing principle of society was limited. The Catholic Church would face a crossroads which it has been unable to work out till today.

48Nevertheless, the restoration of democracy in the 1980s did not change the traditional *modus operandi* of the ecclesiastical authorities. The influence on the upper echelons of government continued to be central in the Church's behavior. The Church became close to, or confronted, each government according to how much influence its highest officers could exert on those areas that they saw as their "natural" competence, mainly education, social assistance, and family and sexual moral. Thus, the relationship between the Church and the administrations of Raúl Alfonsín and Néstor Kirchner was conflictive, while that with Carlos Menem's government was one of mutual legitimation.

- **13** As a reaction against the condom distribution policy for the prevention of sexually transmitted dis (...)

49The appointment of ministers of education without the ecclesiastical authorities' consent, the organization of the National Pedagogic Conference, and the passing of the Divorce Act during President Alfonsín's term, and the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the sexual education act and the policies promoting sexual and reproductive rights during President Kirchner's term<sup>13</sup>, relatively displaced the Catholic Church from its position as a privileged stakeholder in the definition of policies deemed as highly sensitive by the institution.

50At both historical times, a distant relationship was built, fraught with mutual distrust and suspicion. However, that conflictive scene has not resulted in a reciprocal autonomy which could point to the nature of the institutional relationship in the long term, and which would serve to draw more accurate boundaries between both spheres. The initiatives mentioned above, implemented during Alfonsín's and Kirchner's presidencies, have more to do with the **position** of a government—or, more precisely, of some particular officials—, rather than with a **conception** of the state that is rooted in the political class.

51During President Menem's interregnum, the Church recovered the privilege to affect decisions on the matters that it viewed as its competence. To quote only a few examples, the Church elite specifically influenced the appointment of ministers of education, the definition of reproductive health policies and the drafting of the new Education Act. On the other hand, the official delegation in international fora took up as its own the defense of life from the moment of conception, a traditional banner of the Catholic Church (Esquivel, 2004).

52From the very beginning of Menem's presidency, the way in which the Catholic Church was addressed contrasted sharply with that during the governments of Alfonsín and then Kirchner. Menem's speeches constantly recognized the Catholic influence on Argentine society, as well as the moral and spiritual legitimacy of the Catholic Church.

53Regardless of the wayward relationship between the state and the Catholic Church throughout history, some enduring features show certain imaginaries that are shared by hegemonic political and religious actors.

- <sup>14</sup> By political culture, we mean the imaginary and the collective representations which are realized b (...)

54On the one hand, political leaders continue to entertain a set of concepts which view the religious institution as a safeguard of national identity and a source of legitimacy. The prevailing political culture<sup>14</sup> views the presence of the Church in political society as natural, since the actors themselves strongly believe that they can gain an extra-political advantage by being linked to ecclesiastical authorities. This culture is part of the integral matrix, according to which the Catholic, the political and the national form a seamless tripod without boundaries.

55In this context, governments of different political parties have resorted to support by the Church as a main source of legitimacy. To that effect, they have rid themselves of a large part of their government duties, directly or indirectly delegating to the Catholic Church the design, formulation and even implementation of certain public policies, especially in educational, family planning and social matters. Of course, these processes

are not uniform throughout the entire country. Historical, religious and institutional factors affect how the relationships between politics and religion develop in each province.

56In addition, the Catholic Church deploys a strategy to preserve its institutional power, based on its broad public presence and on the attempt to influence the design and implementation of certain state policies and regulatory frameworks. Its men act *as if* the population's culture were integrally Catholic and, from that position of power, make demands of the political system.

- **15** Examples of this are the laws which deal with the financial support for the Catholic religion, pass (...)

57The continuity of laws that give Catholicism a privileged place over all other faiths<sup>15</sup>, the presence of political leaders in the Church's official masses, the fact that the *Tedeum* (a religious service, usually attended by the president, held on the dates when the country's independence is commemorated) continues to be celebrated to this day, the broadcast of Catholic ceremonies by the state media, all point to a relationship in which both those in charge of the government, whatever their political party, and the leaders of the Catholic Church consider a number of practices as natural. It should be added that the Catholic Church is the only religious institution with a public character. The attempts to amend the Civil Code are inspired by the recognition of new rights in a plural society, but they reinforce the legal status of the Catholic Church.

58However, at present, the reproduction of this blend between the political and the religious, in which roles and areas of competence overlap and both spheres legitimize each other, occurs in a society where volatile senses of belonging, lack of attachment to institutions and a drift from traditional frames of reference are increasingly prevalent (Bauman, 2003).

59If in the 20<sup>th</sup> century an individual's world of meaning and social belonging could be understood on the basis of macro-entities such as the Catholic Church, able to provide a view that imposed order on the world and to fully respond to the population's identity demands, a more plural and heterogeneous society has emerged today, in which the universal principles which intended to regulate social behavior in the political, religious, familiar and sexual spheres have become blurred. When even Catholics themselves have pre-marital sex, get divorced, support euthanasia, do not attend mass every Sunday and approve of the death penalty, among other postures, it becomes evident that the official norms are increasingly losing effectiveness *vis-à-vis* the behaviors adopted by individuals themselves (Esquivel, 2009).

60The institutional strategies of the Catholic Church, which finds it extremely difficult to impose its meaning coordinates on modern societies, seem to target the political society and the state. Its long-standing public postures about various issues of the national agenda are disseminated and highlighted by the media. The insistence on, and continuity of, this methodology has allowed the Church to consolidate its role as a relevant actor in the national public scene, and to present itself as a legitimate, authoritative and indispensable political actor, outside and above the party system. Fundamentally, education, policies related to family and sexual matters and the social issue are a set of themes which the Catholic authorities have not abandoned their attempts to model according to their doctrine. It is in these areas where tensions arise

between the greater visibility and defense of citizen rights, on the one hand, and the ecclesiastical insistence on universalizing the religious moral of the Church, on the other, in the context of a society that becomes increasingly diverse from the cultural and religious point of view.

## By way of conclusion

61The situation actually "experienced" in our country shows the tight bonds between religious institutions and the (executive, legislative or judicial) state decision-makers, whose political culture still gives a central and influential role to religion. This culture consists of collective imaginaries and representations which translate into in a number of naturalized practices, very often not motivated by laws in force or by the implementation of a certain government agenda, but rather by an instituted *habitus*. While militarization —the dream of having a "colonel friend"— has been left behind, Catholicization (imitated today by other religious groups, especially Evangelicals), carried out during decades of civilian, military and ecclesiastical dictatorships, has not ceased.

62This contrast leads us to make a necessary distinction between secularization and laicity. By "secularization" we mean the long process of cultural readjustment of religious beliefs in our capitalist societies, which goes together with the declining power of Christian institutions and the emergence of other domains of social life. In turn, the term "laicity" can be specially analyzed from a "political-religious" viewpoint, since it immediately evokes the concept of, and the role played by, the state, especially a nation-state in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, in terms of how it relates to the political, civil and religious society when searching for sources of legitimacy. The state may guarantee separation, freedom of worship, privileges, plurality, monopolies or freedom of beliefs and religions, totally, partially or not at all, for one, more than one, or no public expression of religion or beliefs.

- **16** It should be remembered that the "Social Contract" by Jean Jacques Rousseau was disseminated in Lat(...)

63However, even if these two phenomena are not the same, both share certain fields which should not be overlooked by any long-term research or comparison. In Latin America, there is a dominant matrix—which runs very deep historically in the entire region— which has tied religion, politics and the market for centuries. The sociability networks that connect politicians, businessmen, social, cultural and media central figures with the religious world have created a field, space or social-political-religious sphere which runs through all social classes, sectors and fields. The question is not whether any ties exist, but what the manner, form and content of such social and symbolic ties has been since independence from Spain in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century**16** to the present (Martínez, 2009).

64Laicity should be thought as having degrees and limits, instead of being considered in progressive or evolutionary terms, particularly if we are to analyze and grasp its ups and downs, and the steps back and forth of a process that is inherent to democracy and which has developed differently in each nation-state and point in history. Hence the importance of talking about "laicities" (Bauberot, 2007).

65The latest work by Casanova (2011) is in line with the kind of comparative analyses that our research groups (Mallimaci, 2008) have been conducting based on the recognition of multiple modernities, secularizations and religions within global capitalist modernity. This enables social sciences to become de-centered, de-Westernized and de-ethnicized, while compelling them to make rigorous comparisons, avoiding a normative rather than scientific point of view.

66Multiple modernities entail the existence of multiple and diverse laicities. As suggested by Bauberot and Milot (2011), in analyzing our countries we can consider four principles which are to be understood and related both synchronically and diachronically : freedom of conscience, equality among beliefs, state neutrality, and separation between religious groups and the state. Various combinations of these principles are found at different points in time and space, that is, depending on the historical moment and the social relationships in a specific country. In addition, each society shows more or less interest in some particular laicity principle around which political debate and the "actual" power relationships revolve. These authors differentiate among six kinds of laicity : separatist, authoritarian, anti-clerical, civil faith-oriented, recognition-oriented and collaboration-oriented. This work is a great contribution that avoids any "essentialist" or "reductionist" approaches.

67We believe that none of these six types actually mirrors the key features of the situation found in Argentina or in most of the countries characterized by the Latin American hybrid modernity, which combines tradition and modernity, or modernity with pre- and post-modernity, in one and the same fact, event, family, city, district, country and region. Besides, the concept of "state neutrality" calls for a deeper analysis, since it consists of an approximation or attempt at a description, given that each different type of state that has historically dominated or hegemonized a national or imperial society has tried to impose its own definition of neutrality. Moreover, such neutrality is related to other power spheres —like the economic, educational, financial, military and artistic ones— which are also related to religious groups, religious beliefs and the sacred elements produced, none of which should be overlooked by research.

- **17** It should be remembered that today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all Latin American states have an embassy (...)

68In our country (like in others in Latin America and the Caribbean), the dominant trend was what we could call *subsidiary laicity*, strongly suggestive of the Catholic doctrine which does not separate but merges powers, spheres and worlds : the religious, the political and the social ones. This type of laicity results from the fact that Latin American modernity was organized to include tight bonds between the political and the Catholic (as analyzed in this article) and that, since independence, it forged a link between the Christian and the political, between the state and religious groups. This kind of laicity —in its liberal (1853-1930), anti-liberal (1930-1983) and plural (1983-2012) variants— is the one we have experienced in a large part of Latin America, where the political and the religious go hand in hand, whether political society views the religious actor as another "political, non-partisan" actor, or whether the state seeks to broaden, complete or almost "naturally" recognize its social and symbolic credibility, presence and legitimacy by collaborating with religious groups' social action (education, health, charity) and sacred action (which goes from accepting the figures of Abraham's God, Jesus or the Pacha Mama to longing for recognition by the Vatican through concordats)**17**.

69 Celebrations to thank God, prayers for the country and its leaders, mediation in internal or external conflicts, patriotic *Tedeum* celebrations in commemoration of the country's independence, patriotic-religious prayers, religious celebrations in memory or recognition of some specific individual, group or social event are not seen as an intrusion or invasion into political life, but rather as another way to politicize, legitimize and create symbolic power, to "make it look as if I have power" (Bourdieu, 2009). Political parties and social movements seek to have "policies for religious groups" and religious groups seek to have "socio-religious pastoral ministries" for the state, political society and civil society.

70 This web of relationships is found in most of the political-religious imaginaries that have prevailed for decades in Latin America and the Caribbean, from Mexico to Argentina, and from Brazil to Ecuador, reinforcing a modern political-religious matrix. It is these processes that give new life to the debate about the necessary legitimacy of, and limits to, public participation by religious institutions. The current political influence of the main religious actors, who are clearly central in the public scene, gives new relevance to the debate in social theory and nurtures new empirical research efforts.

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Notes

**1** It should be clarified that Catholicism involves a complex array of interpretations and ways of behaving, which make it necessary to study it as a real historical movement, and in specific situations. It contains numerous dynamic memories with various internal and external

relationships. Without ignoring the actions of its multiple agents and movements, our main focus here will be the behavior of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

2 These two rules were repealed through the 1994 constitutional amendment.

3 The creation of the Latin American Pius College in Rome, in 1858, was the starting point of a consistent formation of the clergy. At the same time, seminaries, religious schools and other teaching centers (the Colegio del Salvador, among them) were opened in Argentina. The romanization of Latin American Catholicism involved placing a strong emphasis on doctrinal formation and sacramental practice, as well as strict obedience to Vatican authorities. The *Cuanta Cura* encyclical, by Pope Pius IX, and the 80 propositions of the 1864 *Syllabus* were the start of the Roman doctrinal influence on the positions of Latin American Catholicisms. The First Vatican Council (1870) and the Latin American Plenary Council (1899) would, in keeping with the papal posture, endorse an intransigent position towards liberal modernity values. The need emerged, thus, to build a Rome-centered, anti-communist and anti-liberal modernity.

4 Between 1933 and 1939, eleven dioceses, as many as the ones that existed till then, were created, which means that as many ecclesiastical jurisdictions were established in six years as from 1570 to 1933.

5 The social presence of the Church has taken different forms throughout history, but has never relinquished its prevalent role. At present, this can be seen, fundamentally, in the social assistance provided by *Cáritas*, and in the mediation role that bishops strive to play in social and/or diplomatic conflicts which prove difficult to manage.

6 Émile Poulat (1983) defines this type of Catholicism as “*roman, intransigent, integral and social. First, Roman : the papacy is its head and heart. Intransigent, in opposition to liberalism and communism, as ideologies of modern society. Integral, or in other words, rejecting confinement to cultural practices and religious beliefs, and intent on building a Christian society according to the teachings and the behavior of the Church. Social, in several senses : because it traditionally penetrates all of public life ; because it has gained an essential people-based dimension ; basically, because modern society’s economic liberalism has caused the social issue, the solution of which demands a broad mobilization of Catholic forces*”.

7 Tomas E. Martinez, *Santa Evita*, Planeta, Buenos Aires, 1995. The author says : “*Goddess, queen, lady, mother, benefactor, arbiter of fashion and national role model. For some, Saint Evita ,while for others, a resentful, illiterate social climber, a crazy and vulgar woman, the president of a dictatorship of beggars*”.

8 Regardless of the movement’s disagreements with the highest Church authorities, certain modes of action make it possible to understand the reach of the integral matrix that was shared by the different sectors of Argentine Catholicism. The movements which identified with the option for the poor, and even with national socialism, reproduced the same political-religious web of meaning as the integral and nationalistic Catholic culture, although they gave it a different orientation and another source of legitimacy. They were far from promoting differentiation or autonomy between the Catholic and the partisan spheres.

9 Actually, the murder of the slum priest Carlos Mugica, on May 11, 1974, foreshadowed the strategy to be followed by the military power.

**10** Homily delivered on 9/23/1975, in the funeral of a member of the military murdered by the guerrillas.

**11** Various testimonies certify that, when Angelelli died —while traveling from the town of El Chamental to the city of La Rioja—, he was carrying documents related to the deaths of priests which seriously implicated high officers of the military dictatorship.

**12** In the religious field, the proliferation of many different groups —the case of Evangelicals is the most significant and prominent one— put an end to the Catholic monopoly. During the 1960s, over 90 % of Argentines claimed to be Catholic, whereas at present, only one out of four identifies with that religion.

**13** As a reaction against the condom distribution policy for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, on February 17, 2005, Monsignor Antonio Baseotto, head of the military bishopric, sent a letter to the Argentine Minister of Health stating that *“those who cause the little ones to sin deserve to have a millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the sea”*. This statement by the prelate brought the memory of the so called “death flights”, in which the military dictatorship threw the detained-disappeared into the sea. On March 18, by means of Presidential Decree No 220, President Néstor Kirchner annulled the agreement given by the Argentine state to the bishop’s appointment, and suspended the payment of his wages. In practice, the Church official lost his role as a public authority, but continued to be the head of the military ordinariate, since the Holy See did not accept the unilateral annulment of the agreement signed with the Argentine state in 1957. On April 04, 2007, Baseotto resigned from his post as a military bishop due to having turned 75, the age limit established by the Catholic Church for all prelates to tender their resignation. The position has been vacant since then.

**14** By political culture, we mean the imaginary and the collective representations which are realized by a series of entrenched habits and customs, in this case, the *modus operandi* of the political class.

**15** Examples of this are the laws which deal with the financial support for the Catholic religion, passed during the last military dictatorship (Act No 21.950, monthly allowance for bishops and archbishops ; Act N° 21.540, monthly allowance for prelates emeritus ; Act No 22.162, monthly allowance for parish priests in the country’s border areas ; Act No 22.950, monthly allowance for the clergy’s formation), Decree No 1.131, which includes cardinals among those entitled to a diplomatic passport (archbishops and bishops receive the official passport, like governors, federal legislators and members of the Supreme Court) and Act No 21.745 (National Registry of Religions), which requires all religious entities developing worship practices in Argentina, except the Catholic Church, to register and obtain official recognition as a previous condition to perform their activities.

**16** It should be remembered that the “Social Contract” by Jean Jacques Rousseau was disseminated in Latin America due to its translation, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by an Argentine, Mariano Moreno, who suppressed from the text all the Genevan thinker’s criticisms of religion.

**17** It should be remembered that today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all Latin American states have an embassy in the Vatican, while there were points in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when these ties were severed, with nuncios expelled, diplomatic relations broken and the appointment of ecclesiastical authorities rejected. The political imaginary views the signature of agreements with the Holy See as a positive element that provides new grounds for government legitimacy.

At present, out of the approximately 210 independent states in the world, 173 maintain relationships with the Vatican (Pontifical Yearbook, 2012).

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Fortunato Mallimaci et Juan Cruz Esquivel, « The Triad of State, Religious Institutions and Civil Society in Modern Argentina », *Amerika* [En ligne], 8 | 2013, mis en ligne le 16 août 2013, consulté le 08 octobre 2013. URL : <http://amerika.revues.org/4098> ; DOI : 10.4000/amerika.4098