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# The Consecration of Political Suffering: Martyrs, Heroes and Victims in Argentine Political Culture

MARIA SOLEDAD CATOGGIO\*

*Abstract.* This article addresses the various mechanisms by which the religious figure of the Christian martyr became a useful notion in Argentine political discourse. It argues that the process by which the idea of the ‘martyr’ was secularised and politicised was actually initiated by religious agents themselves. The analysis considers how commemoration initiatives devised by religious agents, social movements and political actors have brought ‘Catholic martyrs’ into the pantheon of national symbols. It also deals with the various semantic shifts seen in the public discourses of religious agents themselves, shifts that extend the boundaries of an eminently religious category by associating it with other figures in a more specifically political imaginary, such as that of the hero and the victim. The article shows how the political power of the religious figure of the martyr lay in the way various actors could use it to invoke the image of a legitimate and heroic victim of political violence. It thus allowed those actors to sidestep the vexed public question of whether those being commemorated had had any involvement in armed struggle.

*Keywords:* Argentina, martyr, hero, victim, political violence, social memory, religion

## Introduction

Marcel Gauchet defined the transition to modernity as the passage from religion to ideologies, with the erosion of old dogmas prompting the transfer of the idea of faith into politics. This process of secularisation also allowed religious figures to enter the field of politics.<sup>1</sup> One such figure, the martyr – that is, the faithful Christian who died for his or her faith – was adopted particularly by political movements that suffered the greatest or bloodiest repression. Over time, the same idea, now secularised – that is, of martyrdom as a now *political* phenomenon – was re-adopted by religious

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *La democracia contra sí misma* (Rosario: Homo Sapiens, 2004).

agents in order to give meaning to the lives of those victims in their ranks whom the state had murdered for political reasons.

Freed from the boundaries of the religious world, the category of the martyr became part of the symbolic backdrop for various social, political and religious actors. Different ideological traditions throughout the twentieth century have repeatedly used it, either as a rhetorical resource or as a form of remembrance, to render forms of political suffering sacred and to commemorate their dead. This prompts a series of questions underlying the current paper. How has the figure of the martyr come to predominate in the discourse of various social (political and religious) actors in Argentina in recent years? What is it in this notion of martyrdom that has proved so fruitful in political discourse?

This article focuses on the case of clergy members (bishops, priests, religious and seminarians) who were the victims of state repression during the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976–83), in order to shed light on how the notion of the martyr circulated and was redefined during a specific moment of our recent history. To do so, the paper first examines the process by which the category of martyr was secularised – that is, appropriated by the political discourse of social, political and religious actors. It thus addresses the various initiatives undertaken by religious agents, civil society actors and/or state-political employees to turn victims into national emblems as a means of commemorating them. It further analyses the discursive strategies associating the Christian martyr with the political hero, creating new meanings and a new martyr archetype that can confer new symbolic status on the victims of state terror.

In particular this paper argues that the process of secularising and politicising the idea of the martyr in Argentina was actually started by religious agents themselves. In the 1970s these actors claimed the victims among their number as *political* martyrs who came from a *religious* world. During democracy, this recognition gave rise to a number of moves to commemorate the victims by interweaving the religious and the public spheres in such a way as to allow them to enter the national pantheon. The victims of state terror thus simultaneously acquired a new symbolic status, that of martyrdom, which made it possible to reconcile the apparently mutually exclusive figures of the hero and the victim in commemoration activities. This strategy explains the much greater level of visibility achieved by a small number of religious victims of the dictatorship in proportion to the general and more anonymous universe of state terror victims. In turn, various actors were able to draw on the political power of the religious figure of the martyr in order to invoke a legitimate and heroic victim of political violence, and thus avoid the tricky public question of whether those being commemorated had had any involvement in armed struggle.

*Laying Claim to Political Martyrdom: Twentieth-Century Examples*

Both the figure of the victim and that of the hero have been combined at different moments with the notion of the martyr in struggles by various groups to lay claim to political suffering, commemorate their members and, at the same time, make emotional appeals to other civil society sectors. Sometimes it is the glory of the hero, killed in action for a cause that transcends the individual (for example, the nation or fatherland), that is merged with Christian martyrdom as the ultimate way of bearing witness to a truth and a faith that determines one's own fate. Commemoration of the dead, who have courageously devoted themselves to a higher cause, fuses features of the hero with the role of martyrs in building modern national religions.<sup>2</sup> At other times, the category of martyr has equally been evoked to remember those who were not affiliated to political organisations and were not militants for a cause, yet also ended up the victims of ideological persecution that rendered the entire population suspect, blurring the boundaries between social, political and religious identities.

For example, early in the twentieth century the anarchist paper *La Protesta*, commemorating Workers' Day on 1 May 1918, recalled Simón Radowsky, who had been imprisoned in Ushuaia for the murder of Chief of Police Ramón Falcón, and tortured and abused by the prison authorities. The paper declared: 'This thousand times damned, abhorred land of crime, of suffering and of hired killers. Under the freezing lash of your hurricanes man moans; anxiety gnaws at the *victims*' souls; the altruists, *the Radowskys*, are dying, *martyrs* of the Mauser rabble, and, over the dreadful concert of sobs, the executioner's sinister roar of laughter can be heard' (emphasis added). Thus *La Protesta* brought together both the (anonymous) victims and those who deserved to be remembered by their own name (the Radowskys) under the common category of martyrs.

Shortly afterwards, the Vasena factory was the epicentre of the so-called 'Tragic Week' events of January 1919, in which police repression took the lives of hundreds of workers. These workshops, located in the San Cristóbal neighbourhood in the city of Buenos Aires, would later be demolished and the place claimed as the Parque Mártires de la Semana Trágica (Park of the Martyrs of the Tragic Week), a name finally replaced by Plaza Martín Fierro.<sup>3</sup>

Other forms of political suffering have also been associated with the religious figure of the martyr. Peronism, for example, resorted to portraying Eva Perón as a martyr to enhance her significance and transcendence. On the very night of her death, the Confederación General del Trabajo

<sup>2</sup> Hugo Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria: memorias y olvidos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2009), p. 153. <sup>3</sup> Osvaldo Bayer, 'La semana trágica', *Página/12*, 16 Jan. 2006.

(General Confederation of Labour, CGT) proclaimed her to be 'A Martyr for Labour, unique and undying in the labour movement of our beloved Fatherland.'<sup>4</sup> In this case, Eva was a martyr because, having the chance to retire from public life on health grounds, she chose to dedicate what remained of her physical strength to the cause of her *cabecitas negras* (literally, 'little black heads') – that is, the working-class masses.

From the 1950s to the present, various sectors of Peronism have come together in the commemorations of the José León Suárez 'martyrs', summoning up the memory of the workers who resisted the so-called 'Revolución Libertadora' and were executed in June 1956. This Peronist lineage of symbol-making reappears in the memoirs of militants from armed organisations such as the Montoneros, during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Gillespie, the Catholic influence on the Montoneros permeated the literature of the guerrilla organisation, which placed those in its ranks who had 'fallen' in the category of 'martyrs'.<sup>5</sup> Thus elements associated with the worship of martyrs coexisted in the origins of the organisation with other values that are more typical of fighters in armed, military cultures, such that the figures of the hero and the martyr merged and became indistinguishable.<sup>6</sup>

This association, however, is not limited to organisations with a strong affinity with Catholicism, as Peronism is widely characterised as having, but is also present both in early twentieth-century anarchist claims and in the memoirs of militants from non-Peronist armed organisations in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> This is in part the result of an all-encompassing way of conceiving and practising Catholicism 'in every aspect of life' that was developed in the early decades of the century and predominated in Argentina during the 1930s. It was also the result of a Catholic culture that dominated civil society and permeated the social fabric, so that meanings were easily transferred from one sphere to the other, even in openly anticlerical spaces.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> José Oscar Frigerio, *El síndrome de la Revolución Libertadora: la Iglesia contra el justicialismo* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1990), p. 78. This image of martyrdom would later be overshadowed in the social imaginary by the powerful iconography of 'Saint Evita'.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Gillespie, *Montoneros: soldados de Perón* (Buenos Aires: Grijalbo, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria*, p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Vera Carnovale, 'Jugarse al Cristo: mandatos y construcción identitaria en el Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores-Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (PRT-ERP)', *Entrepasados*, 14: 28 (2005), pp. 11–26.

<sup>8</sup> As Émile Poulat neatly puts it, 'Catholicism is a world', so we should talk of Catholicisms in the plural, not the singular. Certain features have taken shape throughout the twentieth century and imbued Argentine Catholicism with a character of its own. The all-encompassing way of conceiving and practising Catholicism that held sway after the 1930s actually required adherents to follow a political logic contrary to Jacques Maritain's political doctrine, which advocated the formation of confessional political parties. This unwillingness to set up a specifically Catholic party for political action on the one hand

Throughout the century, a political martyrology developed that had its own contours and was relatively autonomous from the religious world.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, in the 1970s it was Catholic agents themselves who played a key role in secularising the figure of the martyr, by claiming that the victims of state repression among their ranks were not just martyrs of faith but also political martyrs. This local imaginary played out in a wider regional context: in Latin America, victims of state violence, whether under dictatorships or democracies, were re-presented within this ideal-type of religious martyrs persecuted on political grounds. Among others, well-known cases include the Colombian priest Camilo Torres, who had joined the National Liberation Army and was killed in action in 1966; the priest Enrique Pereira Neto, a close collaborator of Hélder Câmara, killed in 1969 during the military regime in Brazil; the Uruguayan priest Uberfil Monzón, residing in Paraguay, who was kidnapped, tortured and deported in 1971 during Stroessner's dictatorship; the 'worker-priest' Juan Alsina, a victim of Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile in 1973; and the Argentine priest Carlos Mugica, assassinated by the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance) in 1974.<sup>10</sup> This roll call of martyrs also includes murdered bishops such as Enrique Angelelli (1976) in Argentina, Oscar Romero (1980) in El Salvador and Juan Girardi (1998) in Guatemala.

The figure of the martyr thus became fixed halfway between religion and politics. Even in the case of religious actors such as bishops, priests, religious and seminarians who were the victims of state terror, claiming them as 'martyrs' would spark a number of disputes to determine whether they were 'real' and 'legitimate' victims. The opposition between 'innocent' and 'guilty' victims, whereby society attributed some level of culpability to victims depending on their connection with armed struggle, often trod a very thin line. In this context the designation of 'martyr' was advocated sometimes in order to claim the victims' 'innocence', and at other times to underscore how

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enabled certain sectors of Catholicism to form alliances with the military – which in effect played the role of a Catholic party, responding to Catholic demands with every coup d'état – and on the other encouraged the pluralist integration of Christians into socially progressive movements, as Emmanuel Mounier proclaimed in the magazine *Esprit*. At the same time, early in the century Catholicism was key to the process of integrating, homogenising and disciplining the immigrant masses. There then occurred a process of symbiosis between Catholic identity and national identity, still in force today. Fortunato Mallimaci, 'El catolicismo argentino desde el liberalismo integral a la hegemonía militar', in M. Cristina Liboreiro et al., *500 años de cristianismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: CEHILA–Centro Nueva Tierra, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> A martyrology is a calendar of martyrs or saints and the dates of their anniversaries.

<sup>10</sup> The Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, known as the Triple A, was a state-financed paramilitary group led by Minister of Social Welfare José López Rega. It carried out illegal repression during the government of María Estela Martínez de Perón.

the victims exemplified the 'true martyr' who dies carrying out God's will, even if he or she uses violent means to do so.

This latter definition was construed by repression and security agents as an extreme position that required the individual's religious status to be challenged and expunged. Clergy accused of 'subversive activities' were the targets of a number of strategies aimed at discrediting their religious identities, as they were denounced as 'heretics' and/or 'bad priests'. Once their religious status was destroyed, they vanished into the anonymous mass of 'disappeared' (missing) persons. This process of deconsecration operated in tandem with another tactic: the justification of the repressive action of the state as the defence of the sacred. The messianism adopted by the armed and security forces during the last dictatorship was grounded in a long process of symbiosis between the military and Catholicism and the citizenry, the persistence of which gives a shared meaning to the history carved out by the Argentine dictatorships. In this context the symbolic struggle over the definition of 'martyr' produced tragic results within the Argentine variant of Catholicism, which encompassed both victims and victimisers.<sup>11</sup>

With the return to democracy, these 'martyrs' of Catholicism were reclaimed by various political and social actors and assimilated into the wider set of state terror victims.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the narratives produced in the broad field of human rights agencies and various memory spaces, which fluctuated

<sup>11</sup> The state terror apparatus did not operate in a void but exacerbated to a certain extent existing tensions in the Catholic world. During the decade before the last dictatorship there were countless clashes between Church authorities, the military clergy and members of the armed forces whose indeterminate status led to extreme solutions such as, on the one hand, the military claim to defining Catholic 'orthodoxy' and, on the other, the involvement of the clergy in the apparatus of repression. The same decade witnessed a whole series of confrontations between ecclesiastical authorities and their own ranks over what conciliar 'renewal' should look like. These confrontations occurred at the same time that government propaganda was alleging 'subversion' and 'infiltration' within Catholicism itself. In the early 1970s, such accusations led to state violence and repression. The tensions built up then are still evident in the trials for crimes against humanity that have been reopened since 2003, when the 'Obediencia Debida' (Due Obedience) and 'Punto Final' (Full Stop) laws were declared null and void. For a deeper analysis, see María Soledad Catoggio, 'Contestarios, mártires y herederos: sociabilidades político-religiosas y ascesis altruista del catolicismo argentino en la dictadura y la posdictadura', unpubl. doctoral thesis, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> The transition to democracy, formalised by the election of Raúl Alfonsín in December 1983, had a strong religious dimension of legitimacy from the beginning. By 1981, the Catholic episcopacy had publicly declared its support for the democratic system in a key document, *Iglesia y comunidad nacional*, implying a change in its public discourse that put it at odds with the military junta. This support, symbolised by the slogan of 'national reconciliation', was used by political parties, from the Multipartidaria (1981) to the debates around the Full Stop (1986) and Due Obedience (1987) laws, often with contradictory arguments and effects. See Juan Eduardo Bonnin, *Génesis política del discurso religioso: Iglesia y comunidad nacional (1981) entre la dictadura y la democracia en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2012).



between claiming the dead as victims, as heroes and as both, were very often resolved by resort to the notion of the martyr, which functioned as a common denominator of both victim and hero.

*Turning Catholic Martyrs into National Emblems*

The number of commemorations of clergy members who were the victims of state repression during the last military dictatorship is out of all proportion to their small number in the total universe of victims.<sup>13</sup> The process by which religious agents themselves, regardless of their intentions or practical motivations, acted as entrepreneurs in this secularisation of the religious figure of martyr can be traced through different routes. Sometimes, the careers of clergy members, once they had become memory activists, facilitated their access to public positions, from which they advocated policies of state recognition of Catholic martyrs. At other times they served in the voluntary sector, building bridges with both the state and social organisations of various kinds. These paths did not necessarily imply leaving the clergy, and often such individuals managed to lead these processes as the legitimate bearers of the memory of these martyrs – that is, they played simultaneously the role of religious actors and of state advisers and/or civil servants. At other times, they sought to build wider networks with legislators, political figures and/or social leaders who, identified with the martyred individuals in question, pushed different actions aimed at commemorating them. Whether driven by the state or civil society, such initiatives extended the boundaries of the religious figure of martyr, incorporating it into the ethical-cultural heritage of the nation.

The overlap of these strategies can be seen in the case of Mauricio Silva, a Uruguayan priest born in 1925. His ecclesiastical training career began in the regular clergy, within the Hijos de Don Bosco congregation. He arrived in Argentina in 1945, where he completed his ecclesiastical training and was ordained in 1951. Later he left the congregation and entered the lay clergy for a short time, while he looked after his sick mother in Uruguay. After his mother's death he returned fully to his ecclesiastical life and participated in the fevered debate about conciliar renewal, where he discovered the *Fraternidad del Evangelio* congregation.<sup>14</sup> He decided to prepare his entry into this

<sup>13</sup> According to the *Nunca Más (Never Again)* report by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, CONADEP), religious victims of state terror account for 0.3 per cent of the universe of victims.

<sup>14</sup> Conciliar renewal was a process undertaken at the time of the Second Vatican Council, held between 1962 and 1965, which transformed Catholicism and its relationship with the modern world.



congregation, and returned to Argentina to practise a radical ministry, combining religious work with manual labour. After working with various impoverished communities in the interior of the country, devoting himself to manual labour and to union organisation of workers in the area, he settled in the city of Buenos Aires in 1973. From then on he worked as a street sweeper, and he was actively involved in union activities when, under the military dictatorship, he disappeared during working hours. The date of his kidnap, 14 June 1977, has been commemorated since 2003, when the Buenos Aires City Legislature passed Law No. 1032 declaring the date 'Street Sweepers' Day'. The bill was put forward by then congressman Luis García Conde, who also championed the commemoration of priest Pablo Gazarri, disappeared on 27 November 1976, which was held in the City Legislature in 2002. In 2007 the case of the street-sweeper priest was also the subject of the tribute book *Gritar el Evangelio con la vida: Mauricio Silva, barrendero*, edited by Alicia Vázquez, then head of worship of the city of Buenos Aires. The book was launched at a lumberyard in the Floresta neighbourhood, located at 4660 Gaona Street, where Silva had worked. The event was attended by a large number of local residents. That same year, the Comisión por la Memoria y la Justicia (Commission for Memory and Justice) of the La Paternal and Villa Mitre neighbourhoods placed a paving stone on the corner of Terrero and Magariños Cervantes streets, where Silva had been kidnapped. Finally, former priest Patrick Rice, Silva's colleague in the Fraternidad del Evangelio congregation, helped found the Asociación Civil Hermano Mauricio Silva in honour of his work.

The case of Mauricio Silva highlights the various ways through which the religious connotations encapsulated in the figure of martyr acquired new meanings through the actions of the state and civil society. It also shows the intermingling of these spaces, where different actors associated with such historical characters in the past and/or identified with their experiences in the present built bridges and began to compete over how best to encourage and implement different forms of commemoration. Along the way, the meaning of martyrdom was expanded and became part of a common currency that went far beyond the religious realm.

At least four types of initiatives interlinked the religious and the public spheres around these figures: (1) commemoration dates, (2) signs erected in public spaces (names of streets, parks and neighbourhoods, and placing of monuments), (3) civil society networks and associations, and (4) memory artefacts (documentaries, books, brochures, blogs and so forth). To illustrate these categories, this article focuses on four representative and well-known cases: the murders of the priest Carlos Mugica, on 11 May 1974, and of Bishop Enrique Angelelli, on 4 August 1976; the massacre of the Pallottine community that occurred on 4 July 1976; and the abduction of the French

nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet from the Iglesia de la Santa Cruz on 8 and 10 December 1977.<sup>15</sup>

### *Commemoration dates*

The enactment of the 'Obediencia Debida' (Due Obedience, 1987) and 'Punto Final' (Full Stop, 1986) laws closed off the channels of litigation against human rights violations during the last military dictatorship and reinforced among different civil society actors and groups the need to fulfil a 'duty of memory'. One of the most common initiatives was to establish ritual calendars, with set dates intended to keep the memory of victims 'alive'. Accordingly, during the 1980s and 1990s, the national meetings held by the Seminarios de Formación Teológica (Theological Training Seminaries),<sup>16</sup> led by the Asociación Civil Nueva Tierra, became the central point for adding new commemorative dates to the calendar, providing a meeting space for those Catholics who were gradually converting their public survival and/or resistance strategies under the dictatorship into 'memorialising strategies'

<sup>15</sup> For ten years, the murder of Carlos Mugica was the subject of controversy as the Montoneros opposition guerrilla group and the Triple A anti-communist death squad accused each other of having committed the crime. In 1984, Juan Carlos Juncos, the bodyguard of the minister of social welfare, confessed to Judge Eduardo Hernández Agramonte that he was the perpetrator. After that, Human Rights Secretary Inés Pérez Suárez ruled that, as a victim of state terror at the hands of the Triple A, Mugica's case should be covered by Law No. 24411 regarding reparations. See Horacio Verbitsky, *Doble juego: la Argentina católica y militar* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2006), p. 375. The murder of Bishop Angelelli was disguised as a traffic accident. Since the criminal file has been reopened, the court has prosecuted senior officers of the military regime for the crime. See 'La justicia confirmó el procesamiento de Videla, Menéndez y Harguindeguy por la muerte del obispo Angelelli', *Página/12*, 28 July 2012. Their deaths intended as a lesson to others, priests Alfredo Leaden, Alfredo Nelly and Pedro Duffau and seminarians Salvador Barbeito and Emilio Barletti were murdered in the San Patricio church on 4 July 1976, prompting unprecedented condemnation by the Argentine episcopacy. Some 36 years later, the reopening of the criminal file and the canonisation of the victims are still in progress. Finally, the French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet were seized during a police operation targeting the families of disappeared people who used to meet at the Santa Cruz church, in December 1977. The sisters were held captive for about ten days at the notorious Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics, ESMA) and later disappeared. Léonie Duquet's remains washed ashore and were buried in 2005 at the same church. Their cases were part of the so-called mega-suit regarding the ESMA, which saw 12 perpetrators sentenced to life imprisonment and another four to imprisonment periods of between 18 and 25 years. See 'Prisión perpetua para Astiz, uno de los símbolos del horror de la dictadura', *Clarín*, 26 Oct. 2011.

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the dynamics of the theological training seminaries in the Catholic world, see Verónica Giménez Béliveau, 'Carreras militantes: comunidades católicas y formación de sujetos en la Argentina', *Ciencias Sociales y Religión/Ciências Sociais & Religião*, 9: 9 (2007), pp. 31–58.

under democracy.<sup>17</sup> The ‘martyrs’ march’ became a mandatory event in the schedules both of survivors and of new generations of Catholics who were lured by these figures. Some Catholic actors and groups sought to ensure a greater degree of institutionalisation and scope in this ritual calendar. The Servicios Koinonia network created a canon of ‘Latin American martyrology’ that brought together events as diverse as Bishop Enrique Angelelli’s murder and the massacre of the Ledesma sugar mill workers (17 July 1976).<sup>18</sup> Several human rights organisations also incorporated the anniversaries of Catholic figures into their memory calendars. Thus, for example, for Nora Cortiñas, a key founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (Founding Line), every 11 May strengthens the symbolic convergence between martyrs and disappeared people as it is both the date of her disappeared son’s birthday and the anniversary of priest Carlos Mugica’s murder.

Some of these figures gave rise to national commemoration dates. In the aforementioned case of Mauricio Silva, Street Sweepers’ Day folds his religious status into his manual worker identity, making him a part of a series of commemorations recalling the world of labour. Similarly, the declaration (by Law No. 26582, enacted by the National Congress on 28 December 2009) of 4 August as the date commemorating the work done by Monsignor Angelelli incorporates him into the nation’s pantheon, highlighting his individual life course rather than his role as a Catholic bishop.

### *Signs in public spaces*

Jelin and Langland have called this process of erecting public signs ‘territorialised memory’. These territorially anchored memories seek to encapsulate remembrance to different degrees through rituals and monuments in places that are socially significant and are properly recognised by the state.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, the range of initiatives has been varied, including naming streets, parks and monuments, an honour historically reserved for illustrious characters from national politics and cultural life – such was the case for priest Carlos Mugica, Bishop Enrique Angelelli and the French nuns Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet, who disappeared and were killed by the military regime. This contrasts with the anonymity of the thousands of other individuals who

<sup>17</sup> Andreas Huyssen, ‘Pretéritos presentes: medios, política y amnesia’, in Huyssen, *En busca del futuro perdido: cultura y memoria en tiempos de globalización* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001), pp. 13–41.

<sup>18</sup> The Servicios Koinonia document can be viewed at [www.servicioskoinonia.org/martiologio/](http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/martiologio/).

<sup>19</sup> Hugo Achugar, ‘El lugar de la memoria, a propósito de monumentos (motivos y paréntesis)’, in Elizabeth Jelin and Victoria Langland (eds.), *Monumentos, memoriales y marcas territoriales* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2003), pp. 191–216.

have been victims of state terror. However, the renaming of Sancti Spiritu Alley, located between Estomba and Plaza streets, as Mártires Palotinos (Pallottine Martyrs) is an exception to the individual acknowledgment of victims, as it recognises the victims as a group with a shared identity. The initiative was instituted in July 1996, two decades after the massacre, by Buenos Aires Ordinance No. 50507, under Decree No. 627 (*Municipal Gazette* no. 20334). The collective designation of 'martyrs' here emphasises the event of the massacre over the victims' proper names and individual life histories. It is no coincidence that in this case the street forms part of a wider set of symbols within the same territory, so that street and monument form a meaningful whole. Mártires Palotinos is located just a few metres away from the San Patricio parish church, in the Belgrano neighbourhood, where the three priests (Alfredo Leaden, Pedro Dufau and Alfredo Kelly) and two seminarians (Salvador Barbeito and Emilio Barletti) were killed. This proximity between street and parish church becomes an extension of the parish bounds that so powerfully sealed the 'innocent' status of the victims at the height of the dictatorship. The discovery of their dead bodies in the parish church, murdered in their sleep on the night of 4 July 1976, prompted widespread condemnation.

In contrast, the case of Carlos Mugica (among others) was controversial within the Catholic world because of his well-known political adherence to Peronism.<sup>20</sup> The tension between 'the political activist and the priest' can be seen in the various moves to associate the figure of Mugica with a specific place. This is the case, for instance, with the Padre Carlos Mugica Park, located between Gerchunoff, Rogelio Yrurtia and Carlos E. Pellegrini streets, in the Saavedra neighbourhood of the city of Buenos Aires, as set forth by Law No. 411 (2000). This park is next to the parish church San Juan Bautista el Precursor, created on 10 November 1949 by the Fundación Eva Perón as part of a working-class housing policy. This history meant that the church became known as the 'Peronist temple' (Templo Justicialista). Here, the location underscores the identification of the priest with the Peronist movement, of which he was an official during the 1970s. However, the urban renewal project in Villa 31, located in the Retiro neighbourhood, which will now be called Barrio Padre Carlos Mugica under Resolution No. 888/09 of the Buenos Aires City Legislature, highlights another aspect of the priest's life: his social commitment to the slum population, which he turned into his religious identity.

<sup>20</sup> María Soledad Catoggio, 'Intelectuales orgánicos del catolicismo frente a la represión en sus filas: el asesinato de Carlos Mugica en Criterio y la revista del CIAS', in *XXVII Congreso ALAS 2009*, Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2009.

Likewise, the renaming of so many public spaces demonstrates the degree of local competition to appropriate these martyr figures. This largely explains how Bishop Angelelli's name has been given to neighbourhoods located in the provinces of Córdoba and La Rioja.<sup>21</sup> His work in both places gave rise to a symbolic contest – revisited every year on the anniversary of his death – to claim his legacy for each territory. Far from commemorating the bishop as a national figure, common to everybody, there has been an effort to anchor his career at a local level of belonging, and thus capture his symbolic legacy, associated with the typical features of charismatic leadership: revelations, personal contact and the community built around him.

Finally, a small square located between Moreto, Medina and Cajaravilla streets (in the Floresta neighbourhood of Buenos Aires) which was renamed after Sister Alice Domon and Sister Léonie Duquet shows how meanings are transferred between those being commemorated and the memory site: the site acquires a new sense due to the demarcation of the space at the same time that it confers new meaning on the inhabitants' identity. The choice of site also enhances a unique aspect of the figure concerned. City councillor Dora Barrancos' comment as the Buenos Aires city council was voting on her bill shows this mutual resignification:

These sisters are remembered now, once again. A very small square in my neighbourhood, Floresta ... now bears their names. Alice Domon used to take refuge in the Floresta area in the days when her life was about to be shattered. We have all the evidence that it was so. Therefore, it is highly significant that Floresta should be the neighbourhood that remembers, in this small square, her honourable and exalted life.<sup>22</sup>

Councillor Barrancos was claiming this martyr for her own neighbourhood, Alice Domon's 'place of refuge'; this in turn evokes the nun's key attribute, her 'honourable and extolled life', which was ripped away from the place by her murder. As noted in the case of Bishop Angelelli, a myriad of local identities related to the 'French nuns' have flourished, each based on an attempt to lay claim to, and thereby start its own lineage based on, the charismatic power attributed to the martyr figure. This fragmentation is

<sup>21</sup> In Córdoba, Angelelli served as diocesan archbishop and rector of the Main Seminary between 1960 and 1968. His key role in the events related to the CGT's strategy for political struggle (*Plan de Lucha*) in 1964 caused him to be overlooked for promotion to the position of diocesan bishop, even though, as auxiliary bishop, he was the natural candidate. The newly elected diocesan bishop, Raúl Primatesta, reinstated Angelelli in his role as auxiliary bishop, from which he had been suspended, but moved him out of the rector's office in the seminary. In 1968, Angelelli was finally appointed diocesan bishop in La Rioja, where his innovative, hard-line style developed and became more radical.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of the 12th Ordinary Meeting of the Buenos Aires City Legislature, 1 June 2000, shorthand version, p. 142.

undoubtedly proportional to the intensity of the influence of such figures on multiple spaces and groups.

Monuments, as a means of converting memories into objects, add another level of representation to public naming.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the Pallottine martyrs and the ground where Sister Léonie Duquet's remains are buried, both sites were established within the parish bounds thanks to a state grant received by the parish church itself.<sup>24</sup> In the first case, Law No. 1667 (*Official Gazette* no. 2186) – passed on 14 April 2005, during Aníbal Ibarra's term as head of government of the city of Buenos Aires – granted a subsidy (CE no. 19,762/05) for AR \$60,000 to the San Patricio parish, to be used for a monument.

Architect Roberto Frangella, in charge of the works, explained ... that the 'Camino de los Palotinos' [Way of the Pallottines] – the name the monument will bear – consists of stone blocks making up 'five silhouettes recalling them and reminding us that following Jesus is not undertaken lightly, but is a commitment' ... 'As a community we wish this path to be a symbol of forgiveness, memory and unity, for all those victims of violence during our fatherland's fateful years', stated San Patricio's Pallottine clergy in their call.<sup>25</sup>

Far from fixing a single meaning, representation allows different possible meanings to coexist. While Frangella strove to give a religious meaning to his artistic work, members of the clergy try to imbue all state terror victims with a secular, universalisable character.

In the second case, a gravestone became a form of monument. In May 2008, the Buenos Aires City Legislature granted the Santa Cruz church, governed by the Pasión de Jesucristo (Passionists) congregation, under Decree No. 619/08 (*Official Gazette* no. 2948), a subsidy of AR \$50,000 to restore the ground where the bodies of Ángela Auad, Sister Léonie Henriette Duquet, and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo María Eugenia Ponce de Bianco and Esther Ballestrino de Carriaga are buried.

For a long time, the 'issue of the disappeared' was defined by the *absence* of the body and the impossibility of identifying the specific place where the death occurred. The immediate consequence of the lack of graves where a remembrance ritual could be established was that countless original, alternative symbols (photos, scarves, silhouettes) were deployed instead as signs

<sup>23</sup> Achugar, 'El lugar de la memoria'.

<sup>24</sup> Two parish churches have been declared historical sites by the Buenos Aires City Legislature. The Santa Cruz parish church has held this status since November 2007, under Law No. 2494 (*Official Gazette* no. 2823). San Patricio parish church was declared such more recently, under Section 4(a) of Law No. 1227 of 22 June 2010. This status makes these churches part of the nation's cultural heritage.

<sup>25</sup> 'Monumento a los padres palotinos', *Clarín*, 16 Sep. 2005.

of disappearance.<sup>26</sup> The discovery of disappeared people's remains and the opportunity to restore their identities made it possible for the first time to ascertain the circuits of clandestine repression. The remains washed ashore, and identified by the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, EAAF), opened up a whole new set of disputes about how to grant privileged status to these bodies. The burial of the remains in the grounds of the Santa Cruz parish church created a dual effect: it both consecrated the victims and deconsecrated the site. On the one hand, it conferred a religious significance on individuals regardless of whether they had identified or not with the Catholic tradition. On the other hand, even though the practice makes reference to special cemeteries for priests and religious used in the past, today it actually secularises the parish space as an ethical-political site which transcends a specific religious content while granting a privileged visibility to Catholicism in memory commemorations.

*Networks, non-profit associations and neighbourhood endeavours*

Such initiatives are not only targeted at the state, but are also orientated towards, spring up around and/or echo various demands by civil society actors and groups.<sup>27</sup> Mugica's personage has been appropriated by the Carlos Mugica soup kitchen, located at 2,388 Santa Teresa, in Morón, Province of Buenos Aires; by the street music and dance (*murga*) band Los Guardianes de Mugica, in Villa 31, Retiro neighbourhood, city of Buenos Aires; and by the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Sociales Padre Carlos Mugica (Father Carlos Mugica Centre for Political and Social Studies), also called La Mugica, a branch of the Peronist Youth, in Avellaneda, Province of Buenos Aires. Similarly, Bishop Angelelli's name has been given to the Centro de Participación Popular Monseñor Enrique Angelelli (Enrique Angelelli Popular Participation Centre) network of community centres in the municipality of Florencio Varela, Province of Buenos Aires, and to Community Radio Enrique Angelelli, in the province of Neuquén, among many other social organisations. Looking at this latter case, we can piece together the complex network of actors involved in the initiative. A member

<sup>26</sup> Ludmila da Silva Catela, *No habrá flores en la tumba del pasado: la experiencia de reconstrucción del mundo de los familiares de desaparecidos* (La Plata: Al Margen, 2001), p. 148.

<sup>27</sup> The presence of Catholicism in the voluntary sector is examined in detail in Luis Miguel Donatello, 'El catolicismo liberacionista en la Argentina y sus opciones políticas religiosas: de la efervescencia social en los '60 a las impugnaciones al neoliberalismo en los '90', unpubl. doctoral diss., Universidad de Buenos Aires and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Buenos Aires and Paris, 2005.



of the Foro Argentino de Radios Comunitarios (Argentine Community Radio Forum, FARCO), recalls:

As discussed with the bishop, we asked Father Juan San Sebastián to lend us the transmitter for the remaining 364 days of the year. Thus F. M. 106 Community Radio Enrique Angelelli was born ... blessed by our bishop Jaime de Nevaes on 20 August 1987, celebrating his 26th Episcopal Anniversary ... On 19 January 1990 we registered our broadcasting station at COMFER under No. 1642, according to law No. 23,696, section 65, in the name of the Director, Presbyter Magín Páez.<sup>28</sup>

The radio station was largely the initiative of the bishopric in the province of Neuquén, put into practice by volunteers and by activists associated with the bishopric and identified with the figure of Angelelli; over time, it achieved state recognition. By the late 1990s it was declared by the Neuquén government as a 'civil defence partner' (*ente auxiliar de defensa civil*) in the whole territory of the province (Decree No. 2944/97).

At other times the impetus came from neighbourhood committees seeking to commemorate their 'neighbourhood priest', with backing from various religious institutions. Many of these initiatives found an outlet in the programme Barrios por la Memoria y la Justicia (Neighbourhoods for Memory and Justice) of the city of Buenos Aires. Under this programme, various neighbourhood committees set paving stones in Buenos Aires pavements listing those locals who had disappeared. For example, the neighbourhood committee La Paternal–Villa Mitre placed a paving stone in honour of Mauricio Silva at the above-mentioned corner of Terrero and Magariños Cervantes streets. Under the same programme, the paving stone placed in honour of Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet at 569 Callao Avenue on 26 March 2010 had the support and joint involvement of a human rights agency, the Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (Permanent Assembly for Human Rights), and a religious institution, the Conferencia Argentina de Religiosos y Religiosas (Argentine Conference of Religious Men and Women). Both housed in the same building, each organisation wanted the stone placed outside its own front door.

### *Memory productions*

Finally, another large set of activities concerns the production of books and documentaries tracing these figures' life histories, making them into role models for the younger generation. The various formats attempt to bring together testimony of religious actors with that of journalists and documentary-makers; some of the latter are directly linked with the Catholic world, while others are interested in these figures as political activists even if

<sup>28</sup> See [www.facebook.com/Radiocomunidad1057](http://www.facebook.com/Radiocomunidad1057).

they do not identify themselves with Catholicism. The commemoration of the 35th anniversary of Carlos Mugica's assassination, organised at the Argentine Department of Worship, was a multimedia event: after the opening speech by ambassador Guillermo Oliveri, there followed a video entitled *Vida del Padre Mugica*, made by Gabriel Mariotto (an official in the Kirchner government and the deputy governor of the Province of Buenos Aires) and Gustavo Gordillo; the launch of Martín de Biase's book, *Vida y asesinato del padre Mugica: entre dos fuegos*; and a performance by the murga band Los Guardianes de Mugica, among others. Closing speeches were made by priests Guillermo Torre, from the Villa 31 parish, and Carlos Saracini, from the Iglesia de la Santa Cruz.<sup>29</sup>

The same approach can be seen elsewhere. In relation to the massacre of the Pallottine community, the documentary *4 de julio: la masacre de San Patricio*, released in 2007 and directed by Juan Pablo Young and Pablo Zubizarreta, is based on the testimony of religious actors from this congregation – yet it also incorporates existing memory productions, such as the investigative journalism of Eduardo Kimel, laid out in his book *La masacre de San Patricio: 20 años del martirio de la comunidad palotina*, published in 1996.

### *The symbolic effectiveness of the initiatives*

These initiatives provide us with some keys to understanding why 'Catholic martyrs' are being commemorated. In practice, state acknowledgment, led by clergy members, worked in each of these undertakings as a kind of mirror. Catholic actors, both those affected by recent history as victims/survivors and younger individuals seeking to identify with their experiences, found that state recognition legitimised their reinvention of the tradition of martyrdom approved by the Church. They established in the social imaginary a new canon of martyrs that has enabled them to build a lineage which makes it possible and legitimate both to be politically rebellious and to maintain a religious identity within Argentine Catholicism. Equally, state agents have become authorised memory entrepreneurs, framing the memory of Catholic victims of the last military dictatorship, incorporating them into a larger universe of experiences common to all state terror victims and acting as legitimate mouthpieces in the religious field.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes this allows political authorities to engage in battles with Church authorities, invoking these martyrs in order to grant political-religious legitimacy to their endeavours.

<sup>29</sup> An account of this commemoration is available in the newsletter *Agencia Informativa Católica Argentina*, 12 May 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Pollak, 'Memoria, olvido, silencio', in Pollak, *Memoria, olvido y silencio: la producción social de las identidades frente al límite* (La Plata: Al Margen, 2006), pp. 9–31.

*Semantic Shifts around the Notion of the Martyr*

Commemoration initiatives are full of competing discourses seeking to define the 'true' meaning of the figure of the martyr. Such discourses, laid out in different types of documents and/or delivered in the public sphere in the context of commemorations and anniversaries, bear the marks of historical time. A review of various statements by religious actors allows us to reconstruct the network of meanings and semantic shifts defining the contours of the figure of the martyr at different moments in recent history.

*The successful revolution: the martyr as hero*

The 1960s in Argentina, suffused with the triumphant glow of the Cuban Revolution and characterised by the utopian practice of armed struggle as a legitimate and necessary tool for social change, proved fertile ground for the resurgence of the figure of the martyr as a key signifier able to consecrate both the heroism and transcendence of those who had 'fallen' in the struggle. As a 1967 text states:

As a martyr and emblem of the slogan 'Liberation or death', one year ago Camilo Torres fell in Colombia's guerrilla war; Camilo plunged along his own personal path towards Revolution. A priest and a sociologist, a fighter and a political agitator, a popular and student leader, he quenched his thirst for justice with armed struggle once he understood that oligarchy closes off all other paths and leaves the people with only one last resort – violence. Camilo Torres, silenced and scorned by his Christian brethren, demonstrates how he was moved by the gospel in the fight for the liberation of our peoples and his name is the banner of the Latin American revolutionary movement.<sup>31</sup>

In this passage, former seminarian Juan García Elorrio<sup>32</sup> invests the guerrilla priest with the status of martyr and standard-bearer of armed struggle in Latin America. What are the attributes of this martyr? 'Camilo is a sign of contradiction, of controversy, of questing, of union, of sacrifice, of action, of violence, of devotion. We embrace him completely.'<sup>33</sup> As times and martyrological models changed, the attributes of contradiction, controversy, action and violence gradually lost relevance, while questing, union, sacrifice and devotion became prominent. This was accompanied by a process by which

<sup>31</sup> Juan García Elorrio, 'Bajo el signo de Camilo', *Cristianismo y Revolución*, 4 (March 1967), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> The life of Juan García Elorrio, a former Catholic seminarian, founder of the journal *Cristianismo y Revolución* and, later, cadre of the Montoneros armed organisation, is covered in Gustavo Morello, 'Cristianismo y Revolución': los orígenes intelectuales de la guerrilla en la Argentina (Córdoba: EDUCC, 2003). <sup>33</sup> Elorrio, 'Bajo el signo de Camilo', p. 3.

the category of martyr was extended to other icons of armed struggle, such as Che Guevara:

He died like the heroes of yore, who never die in the minds of the people ... It is not my role, as a priest, to say whether the exploits of 'Che' had social or political grounds. That is for others to say. Only time will tell. But I see very clearly that, if his struggle was inspired by a craving for justice, for social redemption, by the love of others, he is a *Christian hero* ... One day, not so far from now, the triumphant third world will include his name in the *martyrology* of its *heroes*.<sup>34</sup>

Amidst revolutionary fervour, the conviction that victory was imminent stamped the heroic notion of the Christian martyr acting in solidarity on all those who 'knowingly' or 'unknowingly' shared the same cause. Priest Hernán Benítez's definition thus shifts the figure of martyr away from an association with religious *status* towards an idea of *action* undertaken for a common goal: taking up arms to defend the masses against unjust attackers.<sup>35</sup> The attributes of the martyr embodied by Che are unshakeable passion, courage, heroism and vocation. There is no room for the 'victim' – associated with passivity in the face of violence – in these comparisons and martyrological constructions:

Spending his life in the jungle, starving and naked, with a price on his head – US\$ 5,000! – facing the military might of imperialism and, to make things worse, suffering from asthma, likely to die of suffocation if not cut short by the bullets; a man who could have lived comfortably, with money, games, friends, women and vices in any of the great sinful cities – this is heroism, heroism in the strictest sense, however intricate his ideas may have been.<sup>36</sup>

### *The failed revolution: the martyr as victim*

By the mid-1970s in Argentina, the triumphant euphoria of the 1960s had begun wearing off at the local level while escalating political repression had decimated the ranks of armed organisations, even more so with the installation of the military dictatorship in 1976. With this the notion of the martyr took on different connotations. This did not mean that the idea of the martyr-hero disappeared completely, but it certainly lost power and visibility in the public discourse employed by Catholic clergy and lay people.

<sup>34</sup> Hernán Benítez, 'Testimonio del Padre Hernán Benítez', in *Cristianismo y Revolución*, Supplement, 5 (Nov. 1967), p. 2, emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> During the 1940s, priest Hernán Benítez had been prominent in the management of the Peronist imaginary. As Eva Perón's confessor, he became a public personality who, in addition to granting religious legitimacy to the government, was instrumental in secularising and reframing various issues in the Catholic world, such as 'social justice', which became part of the political imaginary. See Humberto Cuchetti, *Religión y política en Argentina y en Mendoza (1943–1955): lo religioso en el primer peronismo*, Serie Informes de Investigación, 16 (CEIL-PIETTE CONICET, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Benítez, 'Testimonio del Padre Hernán Benítez', p. 2, emphasis added.

Carlos Mugica, murdered on 11 May 1974, was the first victim of a repression method that would be used systematically against clergy members. As the political clampdown became more widespread, various groups of Catholic victims and survivors found in the martyrological baggage an effective means of denouncing human rights abuses and of distinguishing these victims from the widespread – and very often undisputed – ‘virus of subversion’ that the military regime sought to ‘eradicate’. Thus the concept of the martyr, although it kept an element of triumph, gave way to another type of heroism, emphatically dissociated from armed struggle:

Carlos’ life was, above all, that of a man who intensely lived out his faith in Jesus Christ, God and Lord, and profoundly adhered to His teachings, transmitted by the Catholic Church ... Therefore, if his words and attitudes had great resonance in the country’s social and political life ... this was only the inescapable outcome of that which was key and decisive in Mugica: the passion of his priesthood which was lived for the benefit of men, his brothers ... We Christians know that the blood of those who fall whilst bearing witness to their faith makes such witness fertile, multiplying like sown seed.<sup>37</sup>

The emphasis placed on Mugica’s priestliness does not imply a denial of politics. On the contrary, for priest Jorge Vernazza, as well as for intellectual-clerics in the Centro de Investigación y Acción Social (Centre for Social Research and Action, CIAS), who were clearly defined by their adherence to Peronism, religion and politics are not ‘pure fields’ likely to be ‘contaminated’, but rather spaces for the circulation, exchange and transfer of meaning.<sup>38</sup> However, politics stopped being explicitly associated with armed struggle as a legitimate and necessary path for liberation, and became identified with ‘the Christian witness among the poor’:

This terrible event of Father Carlos’ murder, which we naturally see at first as thoroughly absurd, acquires deeper meaning in the light of our Christian faith: Jesus Christ, the quintessential man, suffered a violent and unjust death for proclaiming the rights of God and the dignity of men ... This Christian lifestyle which seeks, following in Jesus Christ’s footsteps, to serve others with love and humility, to live like and with the poor, to fight each day for greater dignity and to give up everything in that fight, even one’s own life if necessary.<sup>39</sup>

The heroic view of the martyr stopped being associated with contradiction, violence and controversy and became characterised by humility, poverty, questing and sacrifice as required to ‘spread the Word’.

With the murder of three priests and two seminarians from the San Patricio church on 4 July 1976, we see the powerful emergence of a new meaning: the

<sup>37</sup> Jorge Vernazza, ‘Ante la muerte del padre Carlos’, in *Boletín del Centro de Documentación – Centro de Investigación y Acción Social*, 16 (25 May 1974), pp. 12–14.

<sup>38</sup> Catoggio, ‘Intelectuales orgánicos del catolicismo frente a la represión en sus filas’.

<sup>39</sup> Vernazza, ‘Ante la muerte del padre Carlos’, p. 14.

martyr as victim. The CIAS journal itself, which years before had avoided characterising priest Carlos Mugica's martyrdom as victimhood, brought this framing to the foreground now:

We do not know how many there are on the list of those murdered, kidnapped or tortured, but there are undoubtedly many true martyrs among them. Because, let us not be mistaken in this case as in others – we are not looking at a political crime, not even a religious error, that is, one committed out of hatred of Faith and Preaching of the Word of God ... Some try to ignore the religious components of this act and turn it into a merely political one, but this is an old tactic that the Church, so often a *victim* throughout its history, perfectly knows how to unmask. This *persecution*, sometimes concealed, sometimes open, can be seen all over Latin America.<sup>40</sup>

The association of victimhood with martyrdom is inseparable from the representation of a Church persecuted for political reasons:

Being committed to the poor and suffering the same persecution they suffer are inseparable realities. Governments respond by accusing the Church of deviating from its mission ... even those governments that claim to be purging the Church of infiltrated elements when they repress those who, because of their faith, have taken on the cause of the poor.<sup>41</sup>

This was a new semantic shift, apparent both in the CIAS fragment and in the newsletter of the Movimiento Internacional de Estudiantes Católicos – Juventud Estudiantil Católica Internacional (International Movement of Catholic Students – Catholic Student Youth International, MIEC-JECI). The distinction between armed struggle and political commitment gave way to the need to fully distinguish religion from politics. This emphasis simply reinforced the liminal position occupied by the figure of martyr in the border between the political and the religious worlds. Violent death stemmed from the political consequences – whether intentional or not – of an action claimed as strictly religious. Located in this borderland, the figure of martyr became a fertile ground for stressing 'innocence' in the political field. This process, set in motion by religious agents themselves, drove a new process of secularisation by associating martyrdom and innocence.

Indeed, various human rights agencies, among other civil society actors, have distinguished between 'guilty' and 'innocent' victims – that is, between those who disappeared and died after being involved in armed struggle and those who had no such involvement.<sup>42</sup> The category of martyr, as we have

<sup>40</sup> 'Testimonio de sangre', *Boletín del Centro de Documentación – Centro de Investigación y Acción Social*, 25: 254 (1976), pp. 3–4, emphasis added.

<sup>41</sup> 'Padecerán persecución por mi causa: diez años de conflictos Iglesia-estado en América Latina', *Boletín MIEC-JECI*, 16/17/18 (Oct. 1978), p. iii.

<sup>42</sup> Ana Longoni, *Traiciones: la figura del traidor en los relatos acerca de los sobrevivientes de la represión* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2007).

seen, made it possible to understand and legitimise such a distinction within a religious imaginary. One observer wrote in 1978:

my (new) friend, with whom I work, is in contact with the Amnesty International office. According to her, I cannot believe it, Amnesty gave up because it considers what happens in Argentina to be a 'logical' and highly justifiable consequence. And Amnesty helps only those political prisoners who are 'martyrs'. What about those without any blame whatsoever – when in Argentina EVERYBODY is guilty (???).<sup>43</sup>

Judging by this source, the notion of the martyr, associated with the idea of 'innocence', worked as an argument at certain human rights agencies to distinguish between 'prisoners of conscience' and those victims of human rights abuses who had taken part in violent acts, even if indirectly.

*The return to democracy: the heroism of victims*

Recalling the initial question about why the martyr category is so fruitful in political discourse, it could be argued, after the analysis above, that the martyr offers an alternative to the hero. It sees victimhood as a necessary condition for martyrdom, yet it imbues this with an air of victory. Martyrdom is the supreme form of the victim's heroism: 'martyrdom from the Christian perspective is a grace, a privilege, a Gift ... *What appears as a failure for men is a triumph in God's eyes.*'<sup>44</sup>

In historical terms, this helps explain why the strong initial association between both models started to weaken. As the prospect of successful revolution receded and the horizon darkened with the shadows of repression, the figure of the victim became the focus of discourse<sup>45</sup> while that of the hero, too closely linked with combativeness, moved to the background. The notion of martyrdom had the virtue of reconciling both ideas. Similarly, with the return to democracy, it was able to bring together different memory narratives. Firstly, it supported a humanitarian narrative, built around the image of the 'victim' established in society by the 1984 *Nunca Más (Never Again)* report compiled by the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, CONADEP). By presenting the disappeared as human beings whose rights had been trampled on, the aim was to avoid providing details about their political affiliations

<sup>43</sup> Letter sent to Emilio Mignone, dated 3 April 1978, available in Archivo de Correspondencia Emilio Mignone, Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales.

<sup>44</sup> Monsignor Esteban Hesayne, in *Dar la vida en la opción por los pobres: XI seminario de formación teológica*, La Rioja, 4–10 Feb. 1996, p. 138, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'Dai Martiri agli eroi e dagli eroi alle celebrità', in Michelina Borsari and Daniele Francesconi (eds.), *Martirio: il sacrificio di se nelle tradizione religiose* (Modena: Banca popolare dell' Emilia Romagna, 2005), pp. 179–208.



and/or connections with guerrilla groups that might allow the public to come up with justifications for the abuses committed.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, the notion of the martyr could also sustain the demands later put forward by the organisation Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence, HIJOS) that had emerged from the 1990s. This new generation of activists sought to remember their disappeared parents not as victims but rather as heroic forerunners: 'grassroots fighters and/or political militants'.<sup>47</sup>

Here the secularisation of the category of martyr, led by religious actors, saw its counterpart in the *consecration* of the 'disappeared'. As various civil society actors and government officials later accepted their 'sacred' status, so the field of political violence came to be imbued with religious meanings. Estela de Carlotto, a key leader in the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, stated in 1996:

Today, 34 years later, I step on Monsignor Angelelli's soil ... In that previous life, in that life 34 years ago, I never imagined that I would experience what I did afterwards ... The sorrow of a people, the sorrow of a *martyred* daughter, the sorrow of a grandchild I am looking for and cannot find ... 30,000 *martyrs*.<sup>48</sup>

The association of the disappeared with martyrs, as suggested by de Carlotto, has been taken up discursively by various political actors, even the Kirchners, both president in the 2000s. Political rallies as well as commemorations of Catholic martyrs have adopted this association of terms and conferred legitimacy on these actors' political decisions.

In 2006, then president Néstor Kirchner appealed to this conjunction to justify state human rights policy, saying: 'Neither you nor I are heroes or martyrs; *martyrs are the 30,000 disappeared people* the Argentine people had to suffer.'<sup>49</sup> In 2010, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's speech on the anniversary of Carlos Mugica's assassination deployed the same model to legitimise political militancy: 'Therefore I say let's thank God, Carlos Mugica and those who, like him, gave their lives so that never again in Argentina may an Argentine be persecuted because of what he or she says or thinks, or where

<sup>46</sup> Even in those testimonies advocating militancy, there is an explicit effort to untie political commitment from armed struggle – that is, to distinguish between the Peronist Youth and the Montoneros. See, for instance, Graciela Daleo's testimony, Juicio a las Juntas, 18 July 1985, available at [www.desaparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/testimon/daleo\\_graciela.htm](http://www.desaparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/testimon/daleo_graciela.htm). Also see Emilio Crenzel, *Historia política del Nunca Más: la memoria de las desapariciones en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> See HIJOS, '¿Quiénes somos?', available at [www.hijos-capital.org.ar](http://www.hijos-capital.org.ar).

<sup>48</sup> Estela de Carlotto, in *Dar la vida en la opción por los pobres: XI seminario de formación teológica*, La Rioja, 4–10 Feb. 1996, p. 144, emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> 'La política de derechos humanos en la pelea entre Kirchner y Alfonsín', *Página/12*, 1 July 2006, emphasis added.

he or she is active.’<sup>50</sup> The mechanisms by which the state acknowledged Catholic victims of state repression were a mirror image of the media confrontations between the government and ecclesiastical authorities over the two Kirchner terms, 2003–7 and 2007–11. State involvement in commemorations conjured up an image of an ‘anti-Catholic government’, yet at the same time generated support from wide sectors of believers among the Argentine population.

### *Conclusions*

In the 1970s, the notion of the martyr, already present in Argentine political culture, was taken up by Catholic agents to confer meaning on those victims of state repression from among their number. This move strengthened the liminal position of this figure, straddling religion and politics. In their calls to consecrate the victims of state repression, religious actors looked for alliances with different civil society actors and state officials to push for initiatives that would publicly acknowledge their martyrs. Turned into national emblems, such figures became part of the ethical-cultural heritage of the nation. The discourses encouraged by religious actors served as a means, in various contexts, of associating the martyr with other archetypes in politics (such as the hero and the victim), leading to the transfer of legitimacy and meaning from one social sphere to the other. In so doing, they played a key role in the process of secularising the idea of the martyr, which became part of a shared field of reference that helped various social actors to process their political suffering. The religious concept of martyrdom became central to dealing with the political conflicts of a traumatic past. Religious agents, social role models and state officials used it as a major device for commemorating the religious victims of state terror.

So, what do these developments add to our understanding of the notion of the martyr in contemporary social theory? The martyr has become not only a secularised figure present in the lives of these social actors, but also a category that has been incorporated into the social analysis of various modern phenomena. Here two very different traditions can be identified. From a historiographical perspective, the term has simply been borrowed from the language of social actors to allow for the emergence of new kinds of ‘martyrs’ in a contemporary context, and has become naturalised rather than being problematised theoretically.<sup>51</sup> However, those who show an interest in the

<sup>50</sup> Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, ‘Acto homenaje al Padre Carlos Mugica, en la parroquia Cristo Obrero de la Villa 31’, Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, available at [www.casarosada.gov.ar](http://www.casarosada.gov.ar).

<sup>51</sup> Jean Meyer, ‘Geografía de las guerras cristera: México 1926–1940’, in *I Jornadas de Estudios del Carlismo: el carlismo en su tiempo – geografías de la contrarrevolución*

historical genesis of 'martyrdom' examine only the early centuries of the Christian era.<sup>52</sup>

From a sociological perspective, martyrdom is associated with 'sacrifice' as one of the ambivalent characteristics of the 'sacred'. Given the concern with religiously motivated violence over the last 40 years, models have been proposed for understanding the meaning of religious action.<sup>53</sup> Martyrdom, as 'self-sacrifice', appears very close to the Durkheimian ideal-type of 'altruistic suicide'. Argentina has recently seen the publication of papers devoted to understanding the 'cult of martyrdom' as a form of 'sacrificial ethics' in the practices and writings of militants from armed organisations in 1970s Argentina.<sup>54</sup>

More broadly, sociologists and historians working on social memory agree on the increasing centrality of the 'victim' in contemporary societies. Some see in this a concomitant decline in the notion of the martyr and hero as meaning-giving models in the axiological framework typical of 'solid modernity'.<sup>55</sup> However, other interpretations identify instead a process by which the martyr and hero archetypes have become generalised and secularised, where previously they were limited mostly to the religious and military worlds. These identities have been attributed to all victims under a 'cult of memory' that has become a kind of civic religion.<sup>56</sup>

This article contributes to these reflections. In relation to the work of Todorov and Traverso, it has shown how it was religious agents themselves who secularised the idea of martyrdom, turning it into a civil religion, by means of initiatives and public discourses.<sup>57</sup> Contrary to what Bauman expects, evolving discourses and successive semantic shifts have rendered this notion, originally linked to the religious sphere, a useful resource for political discourse. The 'martyr' now encompasses other meanings beyond that of the 'sacrificial ethics' examined by Carnovale, Longoni and Vezzetti.<sup>58</sup> In combining the notion of 'victim' and 'hero', the 'martyr' trope has become

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(Pamplona: Gobierno de Navarra, 2007), pp. 245–65; Julián Casanova, *La Iglesia de Franco* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Marco Rizzi, 'Da testimoni a martiri: pratiche di martirio e forme di leadership nella città antica', in Borsari and Francesconi (eds.), *Martirio*, pp. 43–69; Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>53</sup> Enzo Pace, 'Il potere della perdita: autonomia e riconoscimento del martirio', in Borsari and Francesconi (eds.), *Martirio*, pp. 17–41.

<sup>54</sup> Carnovale, 'Jugarse al Cristo'; Longoni, *Traiciones*; Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria*.

<sup>55</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'Dai Martiri agli eroi e dagli eroi alle celebrità', pp. 179–208.

<sup>56</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'La memoria amenazada', in Todorov, *Los abusos de la memoria* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2000), pp. 11–60; Enzo Traverso, 'De la memoria y su uso crítico', *Puentes*, 8: 25 (2008), pp. 6–21.

<sup>57</sup> Todorov, 'La memoria amenazada'; Traverso, 'De la memoria y su uso crítico'.

<sup>58</sup> Carnovale, 'Jugarse al Cristo'; Longoni, *Traiciones*; Vezzetti, *Sobre la violencia revolucionaria*.

widespread in political discourse as a means of processing and framing the traumatic legacy of the military dictatorship in Argentina. It thus neatly sidesteps the uncomfortable binary questions related to 'struggle' that frame the modern hero model, such as victory and defeat, winners and losers. When martyrs are portrayed as both victims and heroes, bitter defeat and victimisation at the hands of the state security apparatus are transformed into transcendental triumph of good over evil.

*Spanish and Portuguese abstracts*

*Spanish abstract.* Este artículo se propone abordar los diversos mecanismos por los cuales un modelo religioso, como es el del mártir cristiano, se convierte en una figura fructífera en el discurso político. La hipótesis de este trabajo es que el proceso de secularización y politización de esta figura es fuertemente vehiculado por los propios agentes religiosos. El análisis contempla, por una parte, las iniciativas de homenaje tejidas entre agentes religiosos, actores sociales y funcionarios políticos que integran a los 'mártires católicos' al patrimonio de símbolos nacionales. Por otra, los diversos desplazamientos semánticos, plasmados en los discursos públicos de los propios agentes religiosos, que amplían los límites de la categoría religiosa, al asociarla a otras figuras del imaginario político, como son la del héroe y la de la víctima. Los resultados del análisis muestran que la potencialidad política de la figura religiosa del mártir es la proponer una víctima heroica legítima de la violencia política, evadiendo la difícil cuestión pública de elucidar las responsabilidades de la participación en la lucha armada.

*Spanish keywords:* secularización, martirio, religión, política, memoria, Argentina

*Portuguese abstract.* Este artigo trata dos vários mecanismos pelos quais a figura religiosa do mártir cristão tornou-se um conceito útil no discurso político argentino. Argumenta-se que o processo pelo qual a ideia do mártir foi secularizada e politizada foi, na verdade, iniciado pelos próprios agentes religiosos. A análise leva em consideração como as iniciativas comemorativas arquitetadas por agentes religiosos, movimentos sociais e atores políticos trouxeram 'mártires católicos' ao panteão de símbolos nacionais. O artigo também trata das várias mudanças semânticas observadas nos discursos públicos dos próprios agentes políticos, mudanças estas que estendem as fronteiras de uma categoria eminentemente religiosa ao associá-la com outras figuras em um imaginário mais especificamente político, por exemplo, o herói e a vítima. O artigo demonstra como o poder político da figura religiosa do mártir foi utilizado por vários agentes para evocar a vítima legítima e heroica da violência política. Desta forma, permitiu aos agentes desviar-se da controversa questão pública sobre o envolvimento dos que estavam sendo comemorados com qualquer aspecto da luta armada.

*Portuguese keywords:* secularização, martírio, religião, política, memória, Argentina