



## 2. Being a Roman Catholic in a context of religious diversity. An exploration of lived religion among Catholics in Córdoba, Argentina

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### Abstracts

From a *lived religion* approach, the Authors explore how Catholics and ex-Catholics from Córdoba, Argentina, conceive “being Catholics”, and how they react to the plurality of religious options in their everyday lives. The conceptions are diverse and contested. Inter-religious practices are multiple, but when diversity is present within their own homes (inter-religious families) they prefer to avoid speaking of religion.

**Keywords:** lived religion, being a Catholic, religious pluralism, religious practices, spiritual narratives

Desde un enfoque de la *religión vivida* (*lived religion*), los Autores exploran cómo los católicos y ex católicos de Córdoba, Argentina, conciben el “ser católico” y cómo actúan o reaccionan ante la pluralidad de opciones religiosas presentes en su vida cotidiana. Las concepciones son diversas y se presentan como disputadas. Las prácticas interreligiosas son múltiples pero, cuando la diversidad se encuentra en la propia casa (familias interreligiosas), se evita hablar de religión.

**Palabras clave:** religión vivida, ser católico, pluralismo religioso, prácticas religiosas, narrativas espirituales

Partendo da un approccio di *religione vissuta*, gli Autori esplorano come i cattolici e gli ex cattolici di Córdoba, Argentina, concepiscono “l’essere cattolico” e come agiscono o reagiscono alla pluralità delle scelte religiose presenti nella loro vita quotidiana. Le concezioni sono diverse e sono presentate come controverse. Le pratiche interreligiose sono molteplici ma, quando la diversità è presente in casa (famiglie interrelate), si evita di parlare di religione.

**Parole chiave:** religione vissuta, essere cattolici, pluralismo religioso, pratiche religiose, narrazioni spirituali

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## 1. The transformations of the religious field in Latin America

Religiosity in Latin Americans, once predominantly Catholic<sup>1</sup>, is facing important transformations. During the last three decades at least, many scholars have observed a process of religious pluralisation with an on-going increase in the number of Pentecostals, the recovery of folk, Afro and native religious traditions, and an increasing presence of *New Age* and oriental spiritualities (De la Torre, Gutiérrez Zuñiga, 2007; Levine, 2005; Romero, 2017; Stoll, 1990). Despite the peculiarities of each country, the global number of self-identified Catholics has dropped in most of the area while the numbers of Pentecostals and non-religious or unaffiliated are increasing (Pew Research Center, 2014). Available data suggest processes of religious fluidity, conversions and de-conversions, even when the number of believers in God remains relatively stable.

Argentina is no exception although quantitative data regarding past religious affiliation are scarce and mostly unreliable (Esquivel, 2017). A recent national survey has reported that 76.4% of Argentinians identify themselves as Catholics, 9% as Evangelicals or Protestants, almost 3% as members of Other religions (Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, etc.) and more than 11% claim no religious identification (Mallimaci, 2013). Their practices and beliefs seem to combine different elements from multiple religious, spiritual and secular traditions: they are syncretic and often self-directed, and sometimes affected by cultural and social motivations which transcend the religious ones. At the same time, most of the believers favour the development of a personal relationship with God (61.1%) without the mediation of religious leaders or communities, even if among people of lower socio-economic status (Ses), personal contact with priests, pastors, gurus, *paes/maes* and other religious leaders is recurrent (Suárez, 2015).

The transformations within the religious field seem to be more prominent in urban settings. As some scholars have noticed, cities are the privileged *locus* for cognitive and normative religious and non-

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<sup>1</sup> In the article the adjective “Roman” will be omitted for the sake of brevity.



religious pluralism (Berger, 2014), religious reflexivity (Martí, 2015), and spiritual and religious experimentation (Fernandes, 2009).

Latin America's contemporary urban religious landscape has also been characterised as a sum of encounters and tensions between institutional and personal dimensions of religion, heterodoxy and orthodoxy, sacred and profane elements that coexists in the daily experiences of ordinary people (De la Torre, 2013). Religious individuals are positive creative agents of their own spiritual and religious experiences (Parker Gumucio, 2008; Semán, 2001). Latin Americans often embrace the "sacralization" of the practices of their daily lives (Martín, 2009), and they live in an «enchanted modernity», which is a way of dealing with secularisation and pluralisation trends (Morello *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, religion is still a social force in Latin American public sphere, even when religious "experts" do not exercise a total control over "non-experts" (*Ibidem*, 2017).

Catholicism in Argentina has not been immune from these trends: new religious movements and communities have acquired a significant presence in the daily lives of many Catholics (Giménez Beliveau, 2013; Roldán, 1999). Additionally, some elements of *New Age* spiritualities have made an important contribution to an understanding of the experiences of ordinary Ses Catholics (Viotti, 2011) and popular expressions of religiosity are still relevant and constantly being reshaped (Ameigeiras, 2010).

In short, being a Catholic is not homogenous as a social or self-identification category. Fluctuations and changes during people's lifetimes may act as common references in their autobiographical narratives. Some studies have indicated processes of internal conversion from a peripheral stance to a more individual commitment within the Catholic Church, as a way of people reaffirm and deepen their own particular experiences of faith (Giménez Beliveau, Esquivel, 1996). Nevertheless, there are also processes of de-conversion in which the autobiographical narratives express tensions between new spiritual and religious experiences and residual elements of past Catholic socialisation (Giménez Beliveau, 2013). Just as has been shown by literature, there is internal diversity in the Catholic Church, which coexists with, and is affected by social and religious diversity in a broader context.



## **2. Catholicism in Córdoba: a “two-faced city”**

In Córdoba, the second largest city in Argentina with 1,329,604 inhabitants according to the 2010 census, the number of people self-identified as Catholics has been dropping consistently since the turn of the millennium (from 83% in 1995 to 66% in 2016). Protestant and Evangelicals represent at least a 10% of the population, and the number of non-affiliated and non-religious has been growing faster (from 5.6% in 1995 to almost 25% in 2016) (Rabbia, 2014; Consultora Delfos 2016, in Carreras, October/2016). The weekly attendance at Sunday Mass is not as frequent as other practices, like praying at home, meditating and helping others. However, the Catholic Church is one of the most trusted institutions according to the local samples, and most of the people who are active members of a social organisation claim to be part of Catholic or Evangelical groups (Rabbia, Brussino, 2010).

The historical presence of the Catholic Church is still evident in the colonial architecture of downtown Córdoba, in the relevance of their universities (two of them founded by the Jesuits), in the local political debate, and in different traditional rituals and public devotion. However, as reported in relation to the national and regional context, the presence of Catholicism in local culture is best characterised as diffused because it is expressed in values, sentiments and other elements that transcend the institutional religious field (Cipriani, 2003; 2017; Mallimaci, Giménez Beliveau, 2008). The notion of “diffused religion” involves considering the fact that religious experiences form a value-oriented habitus which persists far beyond any visible religious expression, and tends to imprint different social levels in a general sense (Cipriani, 2003). As the data suggest, most of Córdoba’s inhabitants have been, at some point of their lives, socialised into Catholicism, especially by their parents (primary socialisation), so the idea of Catholicism as a “diffused religion” may be appropriate.

Scholars have also referred to the existence of an ambivalent religious culture based on a mixture of traditional and progressive Catholicism<sup>2</sup>. This social imaginary led to a local historian to consider Cór-

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<sup>2</sup> For the growing local relevance of the Catholic Church since the International Eucharistic Congress of 1934, see Mauro (2016). For the contradictions and tensions in the local context between a conservative and a progressive agenda in Catholic



doba as “a two-faced city” (*ciudad bifronte*) (Tcach, 1994). In a similar way, Lacombe (2014) identified local religious leaders’ recollections of “two churches” that echo narratives concerning Post-Conciliar Catholicism and the emergence of the Third World option. Considering the different positions held by Catholics during the last dictatorship, Morello (2014) identifies at least three different types of “being a Catholic”: the anti-secular, the institutional, and the committed. Each type involved different personal stances concerning state terrorism and violations of human rights during the last dictatorship. The social representations of how the Catholic Church behaved during that dictatorship still resound, even when its role has been reconfigured as a reservoir of confidence and social legitimacy after 2001 political and economic collapse (Mallimaci, 2008).

Nowadays, self-identification as a Catholic in Córdoba seems to rely on these heterogeneous imagings of the past in a context of increasing diversity of religious, spiritual and secular discourses.

Adopting a narrative *lived religion* approach (Ammerman, 2003; 2014), this article explores what the meanings associated with “being a Catholic” are in contemporary Córdoba, and how Catholics respond or react to the diversity of religious options present in their everyday lives. A *lived religion* approach allows us to consider the voices of “non-experts”, contemplate the multiple ways of being part of and practising religion emerging from ordinary people’s narratives. *Lived religion* embraces the idea that religious or spiritual elements may be present in a diverse set of emotions, practices and spaces, instead of those explicitly promoted by traditional religious institutions (Ammerman, 2003; 2014).

### 3. The Catholic Church and religion as a matter of opinion

Most of our interviewees were baptised by the Catholic rite, were raised as Catholics, or have/had parents that are/were Catholics. How-

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groups during different periods, see also Vidal (2016) (for the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); Blanco (2014) (for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century); Morán Faúndes (2015) on pro-life and conservative activism during the last three decades. For some references to popular Catholicism, see also Giorgis (2004).



ever, today, at least half of them do not identify themselves as Catholics. For them, “religion” is, generally, a concept that has lost much of its value, in opposition to “spirituality” which is evaluated positively. The diverse narratives on de-conversion, unbelief, (dis)identification or inter-religious migration contain ideas of self-awareness, freedom, personal needs and desires, autonomy, spiritual quest, or self-imposed spiritual or religious routines. To former Catholics, religious institutions and the Catholic Church in particular are mostly dissociated from those positive categories. A middle-class Ses female college student who was raised a Catholic but identifies herself as «a believer without religion» said:

Religion is something that is regulated, there are institutions that mediate and they tell you what you *have to do*, and what you *cannot do* in accordance with that religion. Spirituality is something freer, more internalised and personal (None, middle-class Ses).

The path to dis-identification as Catholics in most of the narratives in the sample is paved with tensions between conceptions of the Catholic Church as a strongly regulated institution which leaves no space for quests of self-directed spirituality, and, on the other hand, as something extremely vague, ample where rituals have no connection with profound religious or spiritual motivations. Sometimes both of these conceptions, held by those who are now “outsiders”, combine with anti-clerical attitudes, rooted in the historical tradition of Argentinean anti-clericalism (Di Stefano, Zanca, 2013). Sometimes, they also include narratives regarding negative personal experiences with religious leaders or their former religious community.

Attempts to construct an autonomous register of one’s own spiritual and religious experiences are common features of the narratives provided by the sample group from Córdoba, including those who still identify themselves as Catholics, a point this study shares with other studies (Fernandes, 2009; Ammerman, 2014). For those who do not identify themselves currently as Catholics, the experience most indicative of autonomy is the decision to leave the Catholic Church. This decision, as some of our interviewees declared, is often the consequence of a process that is not penalised by the institution or the community itself, except in cases of people who have been part of a fundamentalist movement. Giménez Beliveau (2013) called these cases “unaffiliated



Catholics” meaning people who prefer to remain on the margins of the institution even when their narratives are not easily associated with “exiting religion”. Voas (2009) proposed the term «fuzzy fidelities» to describe those who assign a minor role to religion in their lives, who are believers whose involvement is residual and whose identification with the Christian tradition is casual.

Questioning theism and religion are relevant elements of some of the narratives regarding the development of a non-religious identity, as exemplified by the testimony of a lower-class Ses musician who found religious beliefs “inexplicable” and “delirious”. In other cases, the process led to a reinterpretation of their own Faith, a personal quest for deeper roots and expressions of spirituality, where freedom and self-desires might find a place in their lives. It may be noticed that these processes were promoted sometimes by different agents of Catholic religious socialisation. For example, an unaffiliated woman who worships Energy and Nature, and is interested in esoteric Christian readings, believes that her own personal «free and mature quest for spirituality» was achieved by means of the Jesuit spiritual exercises and Catholic missions she used to take part in. She also refers to some Jesuit priests as her “spiritual guides”.

Other interviewees also decided to deepen their religious practices and develop a personal relationship with the transcendent through a process of inter-religious migration. A former Catholic, now a practicing Buddhist found internal peace and personal spiritual balance by doing *daimoku* and *gongyo* every morning instead of praying to God or going to Church. In some of these cases, the Catholic Church is conceived as a lax and uncommitted institution, and Catholic rites are perceived as habits devoid of deep religious or spiritual content. A young lower-class Ses former Catholic mother who now claims being an Evangelical criticised her parents calling them «nonsensical structured Catholics» who attend Mass every Sunday but «don’t recall anything of what the priest says. They just *must* go there (to Church) as if they had to fill in a blank».

Because of the predominant presence of Catholicism in local history and culture, the Catholic Church is constantly referred to by almost all our interviewees. Rites and practices of other religions or the spiritual narratives of unaffiliated believers are compared to those of Catholicism. The Catholic Church is also a frequent point of reference for



those accounts regarding the general conception of “religion”, mostly from a critical or negative perspective. According to Berger (2014), as a consequence of pluralism, the historical predominance of the Catholic Church seems to «percolate upward into the consciousness of individuals, from the level of certainty to the level of opinion» (Berger, 2014: 29). Catholicism is increasingly subjected to opinion, like most of the religious and spiritual elements present in the narratives of our interviewees.

#### **4. To be a Catholic and to live as a Catholic**

The attempts to construct an autonomous register of one’s own spiritual and religious experiences is also frequent in the narratives concerning Catholic self-identification. In the words of our Catholic interviewees, “being a Catholic” is a concept charged with multiple implications. It is conceived as a way of practising religion, self-inscription in a tradition or a community, adherence to a system of beliefs or values and principles, or even a way of life that dictates how to behave in different contexts, at home or in the workplace, with others. Sometimes these conceptions intertwine; on other occasions, they seem to compete.

At first glance, in most of the narratives, different elements seem to lead to a hierarchical cognitive construct that constitutes a conception of being an ideal Catholic, as in the notion of prototype proposed by Socio-cognitive Psychology (Fehr, 2005). This architectural cognitive construct helps our interviewees to identify themselves as being closely (or not) “true” or “authentic” Catholics, or something beyond the prototype. Nevertheless, the prototype is frequently contested.

The central categories of the prototype denote doubts, discernment, disagreement and/or self-directed practices as peripheral elements, adding pressure to self-identification as Catholics. In these cases, “being a Catholic” is associated with virtue, frequent practice and attendance and a robust faith. This conception seems almost superimposed upon that of orthodoxy, and constitutes a benchmark by which to judge one’s own and other’s “failings”. As noticed by some of the Catholic interviewees, it is almost impossible to meet all the conditions required to be an “ideal” Catholic. The role models, in these cases, are Saints (such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta) or exceptional religious persons, but not





ordinary people. By way of contrast, most of the Catholics from Córdoba distance themselves from orthodoxy and prioritise some elements from each conception over others, in an attempt to build an autonomous register of their own way of being a Catholic.

## **5. Practising Catholicism**

For those who conceive being a Catholic as related to religious practice, attendance at Sunday Mass and fulfilment of all the rites of passage promoted by the institution (Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, etc.) are evoked as elements central to the prototype and are referred to as mandatory. Nevertheless, these practices are not as central as they are supposed to be in their lives. For example, Baptism is sometimes conceived of as a social ritual (a traditional family feast), and sometimes as an expression of superstition (to protect the newborn child). As Pérez-Agote (2007) pointed out with reference to Spain, baptism may be perceived as a social custom rather than a Catholic duty. A former Catholic, now a believer without religion, said:

I was baptised, I went to the Catholic Church, I took Communion and I received Confirmation, all the things that are required by the institution, but mostly because it is a social convention. It does not mean much to me (None, middle-class Ses).

By way of contrast, a 56-year-old middle-class Ses woman who recently became a grandmother insisted that her non-religious daughter baptise her grandson so that he would be protected. In the face of her daughter's refusal, she planned to carry out an improvised baptism, «making the sign of the cross with holy water on the forehead of my grandson [...] so that I could feel relieved».

Baptism also appears as a contradictory sacrament: autonomy is a highly positive value in our sample, but most of the narratives on baptism tend to be considered as the ultimate expression of heteronomy. Although most of the Catholic parents in the study said that they have baptised their children, they often made it clear that they prefer their children to choose their religion or beliefs freely.

Confession is another sacrament that is frequently the object of criticism. Most of the participants in the study, including those who wor-



ship every week, are against the idea of the mediation of the religious leader involved in the practice. The notions of sin and guilt related to confession also seem disputed. Many of the Catholics have expressed their preferences to «confess directly to God», «to beg God for forgiveness», or «to limit the confessions to one or two per year».

Attendance at Sunday Mass appears more relevant to those who consider themselves more involved in the Catholic Church. As in other Latin American contexts, attendance at Sunday Mass may be over-reported and seems not to be as central as other practices for many of our interviewees (Romero, 2017). However, references to autonomy, self-choice and freedom are present even in the narratives of frequent congregants, especially middle-class Ses Catholics. Some of our interviewees emphasise the idea that they *want* or feel a *personal need* to go to Church. For example, a Catholic doctor and college professor pointed out that he decides to go to Church every Sunday: «It's an every-Sunday decision». He even chooses where to attend considering how much he likes or dislikes the priest of this or that parish.

«I contact God in my own way», said a Catholic mother of two who works in a public office, but she considers that her beliefs are essentially linked to participation in the practices promoted by the Catholic Church:

There are people who communicate with God on their own terms, but do not want to adhere to any cult. In my case, I believe that the bread and wine are Jesus Christ's body and blood [...] and I adhere to the Catholic Church. I do adhere to the rite. It would be ridiculous if I said 'I'm an Apostolic Roman Catholic but I do not attend Sunday Mass and I do not believe... I do not want to receive communion', for example, because that would be a contradiction. [...] Even when I do not agree with the totality of the Catholic Church doctrine [...] I find it extremely contradictory when some people say 'I am a Catholic but I'm not practising my religion' (Catholic, middle-class Ses).

By way of contrast, a 49-year-old lower-class Ses domestic worker considers that there is no need to go to Church, even when she likes the «songs, emotions and celebration» of Sunday Mass. To her, being in the sanctuary constructed by her deceased husband in her own house «is like being in Church. Maybe you do not have to go to church all the time when you feel you have it in your own house».

The decision to get involved in Catholic rites and practices sometimes collides with the responsibilities of daily life, which is also per-



ceived as a limit to the orthodox prototype of “being a Catholic”. As a middle-class Ses mother of two noticed:

I *need* to go to Sunday Mass, to the Eucharist, to worship our Holy God, but I do not experience that as an obligation (...) Sometimes, my Sunday Mass involves staying home with my children and husband because he does not want me to go to Church (Catholic, middle-class Ses).

Other interviewees characterise attendance at Sunday Mass as an “exterior” practice, a way to display public support for the religious institution, but they tend to value the practices associated with a personal or intimate relationship with God, like praying at home and reading the Bible, in terms that are more positive. A 47-year-old Catholic said that he knows that God is listening to him when he prays: «It is not a prayer that I do by inertia like the inertia of people who always attend Sunday Mass (...) If I pray, I really do it from the bottom of my heart». A Catholic woman often participates in prayer chains with her neighbours via a WhatsApp group. Another participant, a lower-class Ses Catholic who works for a social organisation for the prevention of youth addiction, said that she reads the Bible in a non-systematic way; she has often found words that help her to go through the difficulties of everyday life.

In some cases, the conception of being a Catholic permits the inscription of practices and beliefs not promoted by the Catholic Church. This is especially relevant among lower-class Ses subjects, but is also present among some middle-class Ses Catholics. To be devoted to *Di-funta Correa* or *Gauchito Gil*, to meditate, to do yoga or reiki exercises, to do Tarot readings or to worship *Pachamama* (Mother Nature), for example, are practices that appear in multiple narratives of Catholics from Córdoba. In some cases, these practices are reinterpreted through a spiritual or religious lens that, in the words of the interviewees, does not clash with “being a Catholic”. Thus, the ideal of “being a Catholic” involves some expressions analysed by studies on «popular Catholicism» (Ameigeiras, 2010), re-appropriations and re-significations of elements associated with different religious traditions that become significant in people’s daily lives and diversify religious experiences.

These diversified experiences also include those spiritual and religious practices made available by cultural religious industries (Algranti, 2013; Ammerman, 2014). For example, some Catholics mentioned watching religious TV shows or telenovelas as religious prac-



tices. *Moises. The Ten Commandments* and *Miracles of Jesus*, two Brazilian telenovelas that are broadcast right now by an Argentine TV station, were related to a dynamic of admiration of God's power and the practice of reading the Bible. For example, a middle-class Ses Catholic woman said: «Right now, I am planning to read the Exodus because there's a telenovela called 'The Ten Commandments', and I want to figure out how accurate it is scripted».

## 6. Beliefs and values

Believing in God and in Jesus Christ as His Son is considered the cornerstone of the Catholic system of beliefs. For some, these beliefs are the pre-requisite for "being a Catholic", even more important than fulfilling the sacramental rites. Some interviewees pointed out that

[to be a Catholic] is not to attend every Sunday Mass, to beat one's breast during penitential rites. No. The most important thing is to feel the love of God in all of its versions: Child Jesus, the Sacred Heart of Jesus [...] in everyday life (Catholic woman, lower-class Ses).

However, the images of God are multiple and not innocuous, as has been studied in other contexts (Ammerman, 2014; Bader, Froese, 2005). In some narratives, God appears in «the traditional image of the Catholic Church», in the words of an interviewee, «as an almighty old man with a beard». One young middle-class Ses Catholic thinks that this is an «old image of God that the Catholic Church used to teach». To him, God is an entity which transcends the materiality of our lives: «I feel Him as a very intimate and personal expression of Creation».

God is sometimes perceived as a vengeful judge, but most times, He is conceived of as a paternal figure or an entity related to love, positive energy, and creation. «When I close my eyes», said one Catholic man, «I often get the image of the Holy Cross and Jesus, but God [...] God is a superior being [...] maybe He is energy, something that is above all of us, watching us». The idea of God as energy is recurrent. This conception provides different ways of entering into contact with the transcendent not confined to the spaces or practices traditionally fostered by the Catholic Church. Some of these ways are wonder at Nature and the Universe, the experience of music and dance as spiritual links with



others, feeling the presence of God in the workplace, or taking part in Family-Constellation practices, among others.

Catholics who do not attend Mass frequently often associate the image of God with themselves. God is perceived as an interior strength present in most – if not all – human beings. The link between an immanent conception of what is sacred and the Self that derives from frameworks promoted by New Age spirituality (Carozzi, 1999) has been analysed by Houtman and Aupers (2007) in terms of post-Christian spirituality. Thus, God is also ordinary evidence: «I see God in the homeless children in the street, in my own children, my husband», said a Catholic woman. Sometimes, that piece of evidence is not even questioned: «I do not need an image of God to think about God or to know He exists. I just know it», stated one male middle-class Ses Catholic.

Among lower-class Ses Catholics, God is someone who is always testing people. «He has a destiny for everyone», some interviewees claim. Even the problems, doubts, and negative experiences that people go through are perceived as different steps in a master plan that each believer should try to unveil. According to another interviewee, a former drug addict currently unemployed, «God is knowledge, because He helped me to open my eyes, and He showed me the way». He said that he came off drugs without professional help because of a promise he made to God and Our Lady of Lourdes during a period when his mother was very ill.

Even if some Catholics have shown unbelief in the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Mary is also the object of frequent devotion. Lower-class Ses Catholics prefer Our Lady of Lourdes, probably because her sanctuary is closer to the poorest neighbourhoods of the city. On the other hand, Our Lady of Schoenstatt and Our Lady of Saint Nicholas (Argentina) are usually mentioned by middle- and upper-class Ses Catholics.

Devotion to Saints is very widespread. Saint Cajetan (Patron Saint of the unemployed and people seeking work) and Saint Expeditus (Patron Saint of emergencies and expeditious solutions) are the Saints most frequently mentioned «because they always respond», as one lower-class Ses Catholic woman noticed on the basis of her own experience. Popular Saints, like *Santa Muerte* and the *Gauchito Gil*, are mentioned in some cases. As some scholars have stated (Ameigeiras, 2010), these beliefs are inscribed as part of the daily religiosity of many



Argentiniens and permit them to extend the notion of “being a Catholic” to experiences of transcendence that are not promoted by the Catholic Church but which have symbolic efficacy. In other cases, it is frequent to consider the everyday world as a battleground featuring a fight between the forces good and evil. One lower-class Ses Catholic who used to be a catechist and would like to take part in parochial missions, narrates the following:

I started to feel something strange when I was on a mission and went into some houses. I suffered from headache. I felt ill [...] We prayed with the families and suddenly I felt sick [...] To me, it confirmed the fact that there are good and evil forces everywhere (Catholic, lower-class Ses).

Nevertheless, some Catholics object to the material aspects of recurrent devotion to Saints and the Virgin Mary. They consider it a “false” way to live one’s spirituality and link with God:

My mother believes in amulets and usually goes on processions. My sister lives in Salta and goes to [Our Lady of] Salta and Saint Nicholas. She supplicates the Virgin of Saint Nicholas that I may get a husband [...] but I do not like that. God is not a supermarket. He is not a God of amulets. Those are false images of God. I believe in a God that lives inside me, and that He is a kind of spirituality and that He is spread inside of me. [...] It seems to me that people sometimes only associates the Church with religion and a lot more than that. God is not the exclusive property of any religion (Catholic woman, middle-class Ses).

These cases tend to show that the more important aspect of “being a Catholic” is the value system invoked and promoted by the Catholic Church. Respect, solidarity, honesty, care, hard work, etc., are present in most of our Catholic subjects as important expressions of being socialised as such. Nevertheless, they often consider that these values are not an exclusive property of Catholicism. Furthermore, not every Catholic holds, promotes or lives according to these values, as some interviewees have remarked. Even to some former Catholics, values are a positive aspect of Catholic teaching and are present as remnants of their religious past, as expressions of the essential core of a diffused kind of religion (Cipriani, 2003).

There are some values promoted by the Church that I consider pretty good, like thou shalt not kill and you shalt not steal, which are general values that



make one a good member of society... There are more positive values, and perhaps the Catholic Church can provide them (None, middle-class Ses woman).

## **7. Being part of a tradition or a community**

As has been pointed out continually above, Catholicism is often considered as a widespread social tradition. For several Catholics, to be baptised or to baptise their children, to take Communion, to be devoted to Saints or to marry through the Catholic rite are practices anchored in an inter-generational legacy, as a memory chain (Hervieu-Léger, 2005) and as socially effective rites of passage (Pérez-Agote, 2007). For most of the subjects, the notion of tradition implies a kind of self-inscription as a Catholic that involves only commitment to the transmission of some of these beliefs and rituals. It is possible to consider them as nominal Catholics or, as Voas (2009) defined them as fuzzily faithful Catholics. The idea central to this kind of identification is that social custom or the pressures of tradition make it mandatory to comply with some milestones along one's pathway of life. For them, it is not necessary to reflect on their own identification, beliefs or practices: traditions and rites exist; they are something to be observed, even if this does not imply mandatory self-identification as a Catholic. For example, a former construction worker, now retired, said:

My grandparents told me: «You have to be a Catholic, and go to Church». They told me: «You have to believe in Saints, souls, and in God» [...] I think that God may exist because everybody says so (Catholic, lower-class Ses).

Sometimes the idea of being part of a tradition is related to compulsory practices and beliefs perceived as devoid of spirituality, one of the recurrent critiques advanced by ex-Catholics. On other occasions, tradition is associated with mass popular religious experiences, which are not typical of the city of Córdoba. These public demonstrations of Faith are considered with admiration and nostalgia, but also with a degree of suspicion by other Catholics. For instance, one young Catholic woman from one of the north-western Argentinean provinces currently a university student in Córdoba holds that:



[In my hometown] the spiritual is present mainly in the mentality of the people through their traditions. When you take part in the celebrations of the Virgin of the Valley, Catamarca, it is full of pilgrims. The bishop and the priests are tired of saying in their homilies that she (the Virgin) is the mother of God and that we should pay attention to Jesus who is the core of our beliefs... but people want to see the Virgin, period. [...] It is not that it is good or bad. I do not know if it is their personal need to reconnect with something that may be inherited. [...] It is a tradition, a local and popular tradition (Catholic, middle-class Ses).

Other interviewees consider these kinds of public demonstrations as the truest and most genuine popular expression of Faith, which are also a way of expressing autonomous and unmediated forms of belief. A domestic worker raised in a northern province said that, when she came to Córdoba, she abandoned several religious practices because they had not the same religious intensity remembered from her native town:

[In Salta] the processions of Our Lord of Miracles and the novenas are fabulous. I used to love them; I participated with great emotion and pleasure because I felt it [...] But I did not take part of all the religious practices there, because I have my differences with priests [...] The priestly figure, to me, does not mean anything [...] [By way of contrast] Córdoba's religiosity is so cold, so hierarchical [...] People do things just because [...] I do not want to go to Church here (Catholic, lower-class Ses).

Another way of "being a Catholic" is to be or feel part of a community. As some interviewees suggested, the idea of community relates sometimes to the popular experiences of most people. However, in the majority of the narratives, community refers to groups where a number of Catholics have been able to develop religious or solidary practices. In comparison to other Latin American studies (Fernandes, 2009; Giménez Beliveau, 2013; Romero, 2017), the association between "being a Catholic" and the idea of community is one of the least present among our interviewees. This is probably due to the interest in differentiation of identity present among the founders of the communities (Giménez Beliveau, 2013). For those who are part of a group or movement, the members of their communities are perceived ambivalently: on some occasions, the community provides an important reason for "being a Catholic", especially for extra-religious motives, but, on other occasions, the community can be sententious, hypocritical or overly controlling. One interviewee, for example, abandoned a conservative





movement to join a Jesuit missionary group she considers more open-minded and progressive. The experiences related in connection with membership member of the conservative group she spoke of were riddled with suffering, prejudice towards other people, the weight of guilt imposed by her colleagues, and obsession with perfection that led to serious health problems on her part. By way of contrast, another participant recalls her experience in a religious youth group as a «wonderful moment of social interaction. [...] It was a beautiful group. We prayed, we looked out for each other, we read the Bible». In that group, she met the person who is now her husband and the father of her children.

### **8. Catholicism as an “open” or “closed” religion**

As in the case of ex-Catholics, the tension between the Catholic Church and a heavily regulated, strictly organised Catholic community and the idea of Catholicism as something vague and open to personal decision, is also present in the narratives of currently practising Catholics. For example, one Catholic woman considers, in a positive light, that «being a Catholic implies adhering to all the precepts and religious practices regardless of whether you always observe them or not». She believes that «it is not possible to be half-Catholic». However, she thinks that «the Catholic and Apostolic tradition – and with this I want to mark the difference with pre-Conciliar Catholics [...] – is so free [...] If you want to leave the Church, you may, and nobody is going to say anything to you».

Therefore, most of the Catholics believe that there is not only one way of being a Catholic, and that the Catholic Church permits a multiplicity of experiences. The perception of an increasingly internal pluralisation of Catholicism does not necessarily clash with the traditional institution because a distinctive feature of Latin America is that its Catholicism has always encouraged internal diversity (Morello *et al.*, 2017).

However, some Catholics consider the institution as a closed space; they used expressions like «inside those walls» in relation to the Church, or the «priest coming from the street» as part of a surprising change in liturgical practice. By way of contrast, they tend to identify



Evangelicals as “being in the streets”, even when some of them criticised their leaders as “manipulative”.

For other interviewees, there is also a way of being “more relevant” and “aware” of each personal or social situation. One lower-class Ses Catholic woman who coordinates a young parochial group in one of the poorest districts of the city said: «we have to be more unstructured [...] Due to the difficult lives of these kids, we have to listen to them and speak to them about their problems [...] Religion comes eventually, but in a subtle way». In those cases, «to preach through example» is the preferred pathway to sowing the religious message.

To some of the most committed Catholics in our sample, the impossibility to fulfil the prototypal task of “being a Catholic” brings them to define themselves as Christians. To be a Christian means having to «follow the message of Jesus Christ in my everyday life». This self-identification associates them with other Christians, as part of a wider community reunited by Faith in Jesus Christ. Being a Christian is also referred to as a lifestyle that privileges the perceived centrality of God’s message: to be kind to others, and to spread love and harmony within the areas where they live, work, play and pray.

Sometimes, people from other religions, including ex-Catholics, make comparisons with the openness and vagueness of the Catholic Church. As one young Evangelical put it:

The Evangelical Church is more closed than the Catholic Church. Catholics live a common and typical life. They do not know much about the Bible, they just identify themselves as Catholics. Maybe they know the “Our Father”, the “Hail Mary”, and that is it. To be an Evangelical Christian is different: we really try to live by the Bible. That is the main reason why those who know the Bible are somewhat isolated from the rest of the world (Evangelical, middle-class Ses).

## 9. Living as a Catholic in a religiously diverse context

To most of the Catholics interviewed, there are many signs of an ongoing process of diversification and pluralisation of the religious landscape in their local society.

The first previously mentioned sign is how Catholicism has diversified. Numerous Catholic interviewees adhered to the idea that there are many different ways of “being a Catholic”. Even though not every “ex-



terior” practice or belief receives the same commonly shared assessment (for example, devotion to Holy Death or taking part in popular public demonstrations generate mixed attitudes), various attempts at incorporating an autonomous register of their spiritual and religious practices permits the inscription of heterogeneous ways of living as Catholics. This internal diversity seems to be one of the consequences of opposing processes of a growing individualisation of experiences of belief and the pluralisation of the spiritual and (non)religious options available in society (Mallimaci, 2013).

The second relevant sign of religious pluralisation emerges in many of our interviewees’ accounts of their daily interaction with people from other religions or with non-religious people. This interaction occurs with different degrees of intensity and in different places such as the workplace, meetings with friends or with a physician, at school or university. Most Catholics referred to at least one significant relationship with a person of another creed. An inter-faith inter-group contact appears as an asset for most of our interviewees. These relationships are characterised as meaningful, generating mutual learning, and as an opportunity to satisfy curiosity regarding other ways of believing and belonging. One middle-class Ses man raised as an Evangelical went to a Catholic school and he even attended Catholic services. Another Catholic, the owner of a laundry and father of a girl, said that an Evangelical colleague belonging to the local chamber of commerce has acted as a spiritual reference every time he has gone through a difficult period:

He is not a friend of mine, but we have a special relationship [...] We can talk about religious issues without any problem. [...] When my father passed away and when I was going through economic problems, he phoned me and simply said: «Let us pray together». It was a comforting moment (Catholic, middle-class Ses).

One Catholic woman told the story of her desire to know more about Judaism, due to her friendship with a Jewish couple:

One day I told them that I would love to witness a boy’s baptism. So they invited me and I went to the synagogue. My husband wore the kippah [...] Everything was wonderful, we had a great time. I witnessed the whole ceremony and was really surprised (Catholic, middle-class Ses).



In lower-class Ses neighbourhoods, religious institutions are presented as *safe places* because they are also considered as social and recreational spaces. Some Evangelicals practice sports in Catholic Church facilities, and some Catholics from those districts often attend services or take part in activities organised by Evangelical churches. A Catholic interviewee, for example, has travelled with Evangelical groups for recreational purposes. One woman, who also attended the Evangelical rite, noticed that the Catholic parish has recently incorporated festive music and dance into its Sunday Mass like those she used to enjoy in the other temple. Contrariwise, another Catholic woman recalls a different experience when she once attended an Evangelical service:

There are churches and churches, right? I went to one church (laughter), because they invited me [...] I went with two other missionaries, and we felt like three fools who came to perform 'miracles', you know? [...] I saw how they lied to people. So I left the temple because I did not like that game (Catholic, lower-class Ses).

Despite this situation, she has a brother who converted to Evangelism and whom she loves: «It made me very happy to know that my brother, who used to make fun of my religiosity, finally found God, even if it's in another church», she states.

The third sign of religious pluralisation is evident inside the homes of Catholic interviewees. The internal pluralisation in households is often related to the crisis of inter-generational transmission of Faith, but also to attempts at guaranteeing an extra degree of autonomy and self-expression to every family member. According to Hervieu-Léger (2005), this is related to the crisis of the traditional family, which has led to a dislocation in the continuity of memory, and which pertains to «the core of the modern religious crisis» (Hervieu-Léger, 2005: 216).

Catholics with descendants tend to favour the idea that their children be free to choose spiritual or religious beliefs on their own even if most of them have been previously baptised according to the Catholic rite. Additionally, most of the parents interviewed insist that it is important that their children develop their own personal spirituality or religiosity; but opting to become a non-believer is seen with suspicion or fear. These situations establish tension between autonomy and heteronomy which we found in the words of our interviewees. At the same time,



when the chain of belief is broken, some mothers (more than fathers) believe they have failed in their mission.

Roof (1999) warned that intra-family religious diversity is a central feature of the religious transformation faced by the generation of baby-boomers. In his view, those families adopted a series of negotiation strategies: they established a dominant family religion in open dialogue with others, trying to observe the practices of both religions rigorously or even adopting freewheeling multi-religious practices that enabled them to develop new traditions with a particular sense.

McCarthy (2007), on the other hand, identified three different strategies to deal with intra-family religious diversity in narratives by North Americans: respect for difference, which she calls deep tolerance; a flexible code-switching which, like the case of a bilingual person who establishes bridges between two different cultural frameworks; and a less prominent creative recombination of religious belief, practice and identity. For her, in the microcosm of inter-religious family cohabitation, it is possible to find ways of solving public problems generated by religious plurality in society.

However, in Córdoba, unlike experiences of other inter-religious or inter-group contacts that are usually appraised in positive terms, intra-family religious diversity is seen with anxiety (Berger, 2014). Some interviewees' narratives reveal a tension between respecting and accompanying a quest for autonomous Faith by a family member, and an increased perceived distance in terms of his/her new beliefs, practices or lifestyle. One converted Evangelical daughter of Catholic parents criticises her Catholic socialisation harshly («My parents didn't teach me values or anything»). She tries not to repeat the ways in which she was raised with her own children. «At home, we pray all the time, we thank God for everything», she said.

One 61-year-old Catholic woman who has a daughter and son that have converted to Evangelism, stated:

I accept and respect the decisions of each of my children. But I also demand that they respect mine [...] My daughter invited me to her temple, my son also invited me to go, and I said: 'No, no. I can go with you, I can go to your temple, but I'm not leaving my church' [...] I want to be a Catholic (Catholic, lower-class Ses).



While cohabitation with Evangelicals is prominent among lower-class Catholics, in the middle classes intergroup contact is often with atheists, the disaffiliated, with New Age or orientalist spiritualists. However, both groups share an unusual way of dealing with perceived religious differences within the home: they avoid talking about religion. As another Catholic woman noticed: «My daughters are atheists, maybe agnostics [...] They often questioned the Catholic Church. And I got really bad [...] so we reached a compromise: we don't talk about religion anymore at home». Sometimes, this “compromise” is perceived as a sign of tolerance, but in other cases, it appears as tension emerging between recognition of each person's autonomy and breach of a self-imposed mandate.

## 10. Conclusions

On the basis of a narrative *lived religion* approach (Ammerman, 2014), here we have tried to contribute to a better understanding of the implications of being a Catholic in Córdoba, Argentina, in a context characterised by great religious diversity.

In the words of our interviewees, it is possible to notice the perception that they inhabit a religious world that is undergoing a transformation, affected by processes of individualisation, subjectivisation and, above all, a growing diversification and pluralisation of religious and spiritual experiences (Heelas, Woodhead, 2005; Mallimacci, 2013; Mallimaci, Esquivel, 2015; Parker Gumucio, 2008). As stated by Berger (2014), the plurality of religious and extra-religious elements and discourses available within the social space, as well as people's aspiration to build an autonomous register of their own spiritual narratives, seem to strengthen the idea that religion, and particularly the Catholic Church itself, may become the object of debate.

Thus, religion appears as a concept that is devalued in relation to the wider, freer and more personal concept of spirituality, as has been observed in other contexts (Ammerman, 2014). In addition, the personal narratives of many Catholics and ex-Catholics from Córdoba reveal that there is room for experimentation (Fernandes, 2009), for personal syntheses of popular traditions that seem to be socially expanded and that have a particular symbolic efficacy (Ameigeiras, 2010; Parker Gumucio, 2008), for the adoption of certain elements that evoke a post-



Christian kind of spirituality (Houtman, Aupers, 2007), and for a particular resignification of Catholic practices and beliefs by social custom and other systems of meaning (Pérez-Agote, 2007; Romero, 2017). Even though this implies that several people remain within the fuzzy boundaries of the institution in which they inscribe themselves as Catholics (Giménez Beliveau, 2013; Voas, 2009) and that it is possible to notice in most Catholics that there is a manner of challenging and reconstructing an ideal prototype of “being a Catholic” from the inside and on the basis of multiple conceptions.

The conception of being a Catholic involves many diverse senses and elements, like ways of practising religion, adherence to a system of beliefs, self-inscription as part of a tradition or a community, and, above all, subtle inscription within a system of values that permeates everyday life. Therefore, people from Córdoba seem to confirm Cipriani’s thesis (2003, 2017) that at the heart of religion resides, above all, a set of values that orient people’s lives, which appear dull within the social spectrum and which are not exclusively identified with Catholicism. The thesis of a diffused religion seems to be reasonably compatible with Berger’s (2014) perspective of dual pluralism, at least within the context of societies whose predominant religious reference point has been the Catholic Church (Cipriani, 2003).

According to McCarthy (2007: 188), «pluralism is lived at places where different religious identities [...] intersect, or at least confront each other». In these terms, among the people from Córdoba interviewed it is possible to identify references to at least three different kinds of religious pluralism:

1) a marked diversity within Catholicism, which seems to have been promoted by the Catholic Church itself in the regional context (Morello *et al.*, 2017);

2) pluralism involving inter-religious encounters with friends, acquaintances, co-workers, which is positively valued for the most part, even desired or wanted by some interviewees;

3) religious and non-religious pluralism within families themselves.

Intra-family pluralism implies a tension between the value of autonomy and heteronomy, perceived as a requisite for the continuity of the memory chain (Hervieu-Léger, 2005). Thus, intra-family pluralism, more than other cases, is experienced with anxiety and resignation. Unlike what has been identified in other contexts (Roof, 1999;



McCarthy, 2007), the most frequent strategy used by Catholics from Córdoba in multi-religious families seems to be that of reaching a compromise solution that establishes a kind of cohabitational tolerance and diverse attempts at “non-contamination”.

This strategy is stronger when Catholics are faced with family members’ ways of believing that are perceived as devalued (popular cults, new spiritualities) or when there is pluralism of religious and non-religious experiences and discourse. As Levine (2005) points out, plurality does not necessarily imply pluralism. The internal diversity recognised in ways of “being a Catholic”, which create the idea that the Catholic Church is ample, lax and does not punish abandonment by believers, does not necessarily lead to acknowledgement of the diversity of family members’ spiritual and (non-) religious quests. Thus, both the tensions experienced by Catholics who admit inhabiting a diffused religiosity and societies with growing religious diversity, impose crucial challenges on future inquiries.

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Received: 30/06/ 2017

Accepted: 03/10/2017