

Secularism and liberalism in contemporary Argentina: Neoliberal responses, initiatives, and criticisms of Pope Francis

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Pablo SEMÁN

CONICET, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Nicolás VIOTTI

Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Argentina

Mari-Sol GARCÍA SOMOZA

Université Paris Descartes, France

Abstract

The role of Jorge Bergoglio as the head of the Catholic Church has provoked political positioning in Argentina, which reveals new forms of articulation between secularism and politics. While progressive sectors connected to the Kirchnerist government initially viewed Pope Francis and his theology of the people with mistrust, they currently see him as an ally in the defence of social initiatives. From the conservative perspective, the trajectory has been exactly the opposite. Although they initially saw the Pope as an ally to help undermine populism, they soon discovered serious obstacles in the way. As a response, they raised the banner of laïcité and called into question the close relationship between politics and the Catholic Church. In this context, we will analyse the reactions, initiatives, and critical arguments, which surfaced around this limited secularism in political life, the mass media, and public space. In other words, we will observe a displacement in which social conservatism

Corresponding author:

Pablo Semán, Catulo Castillo 2953, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Parque Patricios, CP 1261, Argentina.

Email: pabloseman@hotmail.com

is not necessarily of a Catholic fundamentalist variety, and neoliberalism launches its own secularising tradition.

Keywords

catholicism, neoliberalism, politics, pope Francis, secularism

Résumé

L'arrivée de Jorge Bergoglio à la tête de l'Église catholique a provoqué une série de positionnements politiques en Argentine qui laisse entrevoir de nouvelles formes d'articulation entre le sécularisme et la politique. Si les secteurs progressistes liés au gouvernement kirchneriste ont initialement vu avec méfiance la présence du Pape François et sa théologie du peuple, ils l'ont appréhendée comme un allié pour la défense des initiatives sociales. Du côté conservateur, la démarche a été diamétralement opposée. S'ils ont initialement cru percevoir un questionnement vis-à-vis du populisme et des habitudes institutionnelles dans le discours du Pape, ils se sont ensuite confrontés à une série d'obstacles conséquents. En réponse, ils ont remis en question l'étroite relation entretenue entre la politique et l'Église catholique. Dans ce contexte, nous analysons les réactions, les initiatives et les arguments critiques sur ce laïcisme limité dans la vie politique, les médias et l'espace public. Autrement dit, nous observerons que le conservatisme social n'est pas nécessairement intégriste et que le néolibéralisme ouvre sa propre tradition sécularisante.

Mots-clés

catholicisme, néolibéralisme, Pape François, politique, sécularisme

Introduction¹

A few days before candidate Mauricio Macri won the election that would land him the presidency of the Republic of Argentina, his chief electoral adviser laid out certain positions that no other political party aspiring to electoral triumph in Argentina had openly expressed before, not even through more peripheral actors than the presidential candidate himself, let alone so close to a decisive vote. For Jaime Duran Barba, electoral advisor-cum-media personality, the political force spearheaded by Macri would be capable of pushing forward and passing a law as controversial for Catholicism as the decriminalisation of abortion. This was due to the fact that said political force was, in his eyes, to the left of the governing Peronist party and that, according to him, the influence of Catholicism and the Pope on politics was negligible and there was therefore no reason to fear a loss of votes as a result of this apparently bold statement.

How was such a risky step in electoral terms possible? Particularly for a political imaginary and analytical outlook that attributed great risks and few potential benefits to a gamble of this type. After our demonstration, we shall see that the president's adviser

was predisposed to engage in a strategy in which calculation and audacity would be interwoven with the aim of making space for a historically unprecedented situation which electoral sociology intuited and attempted to take advantage of politically: a rift between the right-wing's potential electoral base and the standpoints of the head of the Catholic Church, which until recently would have been impossible. This was because the shifts in the relations between conservative sectors and their contemporary modernisation, on the one hand, and the impacts of interventions made by Pope Francis himself on the other, have been a catalyst for unusually critical currents both within and without Catholicism in civil society.

Preceding this situation were conflicts between Kirchner's government and Cardinal Bergoglio, the election of Bergoglio as Pope in March 2013, the realignment of relations between progressive sectors and Peronism, the papacy, and neoconservative sectors in a process of redefinition. This configuration will be described below with reference to two complementary approaches. First, we will show diachronically that underlying and arising from the unfolding of alliances and disagreements between parties, social groups, and the Catholic Church, is the possibility of a marked confrontation between a sector of the Argentinean right and the Vatican. Second, we will present a series of positions that emerge from this timeline that have stabilised in a relatively independent way, as a plural and contradictory bundle of possible relations between the right and Catholicism: ranging from the efforts to preserve stable and long-term interests, to the challenging of particular social privileges which Catholicism acquired in Argentinean history. From among these positions, paying heed to their historical novelty, we emphasise those which, arising from emergent positions, question the cultural centrality of Catholicism and Catholic deference to the papacy.

Our research comprises a series of records we have been gathering since Jorge Bergoglio became Pope (Frigerio, 2014; Martín, 2017; Roldán and Frigerio, 2017; Semán, 2015; Viotti, 2015), which seeks to extend the analysis of local cultural processes driven by the election of an Argentinean Pope to political attitudes. Here, we have concentrated on the analysis of documentation appearing in the national press and its coverage of the relations between the Pope and various political and social sectors in Argentina. We also present the data gathered from tracing the intellectual and political trajectories of some of the actors who have participated in debates with the Vatican, as well as discussions which, on the basis of prior hypotheses about the possibility of an emergence of a spirituality critical of Catholicism, we have been developing since 2007. Our interpretation prioritises positions which arose at crucial moments in the relationship between the Pope and political forces in Argentina, such as presidential visits or key conflicts and dialogues regarding the policies pursued by the Argentinean state. In this context a privileged point of observation has been some newspapers with mass circulation such as *La Nación*, *Clarín*, and *Perfil*, which position themselves ideologically between liberalism and the centre-right. *La Nación* above all is a paper, which not only discloses the actions of politicians and members of the Catholic Church, but also forges a mechanism from its readership which encourages the participation of Catholics motivated by the novelty of an Argentinean Pope and by new access to a right-wing government. A government that the social milieu this newspaper has influence over demanded.

The relationships between Cardinal Bergoglio and the political sphere in Argentina

For a stretch of time from 2003 until ascending to the papacy, Cardinal Bergoglio maintained a pattern of conflict, which seemed to identify him with sectors opposing the government of Cristina Kirchner who rose to power in 2015 at the head of a right-wing formation integrating diverse political and cultural dimensions. At this time, the centre-right sectors, who condensed both neoliberal positions and a defence of the republican institutions they perceived to be in crisis and whose criticism was directed first at Nestor Kirchner's and then Cristina Kirchner's governments, saw in Cardinal Bergoglio a strategic ally as a consequence of his openly declared tension with the national government.

Among the elements that determined this oppositional stance for Cardinal Bergoglio, the first we should mention is composed of a series of tensions related to the overlapping attempts at interference pursued by the state and the Catholic Church in Argentina (Bianchi, 2001; Caimari, 2010; Esquivel, 2004; Mallimaci, 1988; 2015; Zanatta, 1996). An initial point of tension arose when President Néstor Kirchner backed sanctions against members of the clergy who made declarations contrary to human rights policies, while the Catholic Church and Cardinal Bergoglio himself gave their support to those church members. Another point of conflict emerged around the *Te Deum* ceremony held by the Catholic Church to commemorate the anniversary of the May revolution (one of the national holidays marking the foundation of the Republic of Argentina). The archbishop of Buenos Aires used the pulpit to admonish the governing politicians and the political class in general and, in response to this dynamic, Néstor Kirchner moved the ceremony to the province of Santiago del Estero, whose bishop was favourable to the political direction of the government, thus snubbing Cardinal Bergoglio and a tradition which, according to the Catholic Church and a section of the opposition, should be respected. Bergoglio also added his voice to a chorus of protest denouncing what they held to be the authoritarian aspirations of Nestor Kirchner's government. Thus, he stressed the need for dialogue that implied his alignment with the liberal demands of the opposition, and he sponsored Bishop Piña's participation in provincial elections, which were decisive in terms of defining Nestor Kirchner's decision to not seek re-election.

In December 2004, a fire at a music venue during a rock concert which caused the death of 194 young people and left over 1400 injured, provoked Bergoglio's concern and through several interventions he attributed blame to the political class and above all the Buenos Aires city council politicians who were at that time allied with the national government. Hence, the current preaching against 'throwaway culture' that permits him to combat liberalism was in those circumstances a weapon against a government that was supported by a majority of those who would describe themselves as left-wing.

Some other episodes were paradigmatic of this tense relationship between the future Pope and the Peronist government: the dispute around the passing of the same-sex marriage law in 2010 and the dissemination of the Technical Guide for the Comprehensive Care of Non-Punishable Abortions by the Ministry for Health. Both cases were grounds for conflict between the church and the government as a result of concerns related to the status of marriage and the definition of personhood (Vaggione, 2011).

This all chimed with the harmony that Cardinal Bergoglio maintained with centre-right politicians who years later would govern the country: Elisa Carrió, Gabriela Michetti and Ernesto Sanz, later assembled together in the Cambiemos alliance, which formed part of sphere of dialogue that seemed to place the future Pope on the side of the opposition to Kirchnerism. Although Cardinal Bergoglio distanced himself from certain centre-right stances after some of its representatives enabled the same-sex marriage law 26.618 and the non-punishable abortion protocol to be approved, these regulations had been driven through by the national government and the Pope's wrath was directed above all else at the national government. However, this concealed a factor which eroded the relations between the right and the then head of Catholicism in Buenos Aires which would render comprehensible the surprising turn that relationship would later take.

In 2013, the election of Bergoglio as Pope appeared as a bolt from the blue as much for the opposition as for the governing Peronism. And if the former believed that, given the aforementioned background, the papal presence would be favourable for them, the latter initially reacted with dread and disappointment to the bad news of the ascent of a man who had fought against them. But reality upended expectations: the centre-right forces would rise to power in national government and both during their process of electoral ascent and after they took the reins of government, they would encounter reservations, distance, and hostility from the Pope, while the outgoing government would take on the role of opposition, having reached a kind of understanding with Pope Francis. The forces of Kirchnerist Peronism exchanged hostilities for agreement with the understanding that Francis' papacy would inaugurate a period of alignment with the subaltern classes, and struggle against neoliberalism that would see Catholicism legitimising demands that would overwhelm a government pushing the restoration of the principles of liberal globalisation. This understanding was reflected in various portents. The meetings between then-president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the Pope were frequent and visibly affectionate, and many Peronist leaders advocated a convergence between the rallying cries of Peronism and the social policy stances taken by the Pope.

The genesis of the modernising new right

The literature dealing with Peronism, in a permanent state of flux, is well known. However, it is necessary to dedicate a brief paragraph to trace the characteristics of the political force currently governing Argentina and its specific relations with Catholicism since they constitute a part of the dynamic we describe and at the same time permitted the consolidation of the types of reaction described below. After the crisis of 2001, the dominant political forces in Argentina went through a process of realignment. The discontent expressed by society with political representation was a short-term consequence of a profound economic and political fragmentation, which led to the bankruptcy of the financial system and the resignation of President De La Rúa, who had represented an alliance between the Radical Civic Union and progressive sectors of Peronism. In the long term other processes can be perceived. First, the discrediting of neoliberal policies which during the Peronist government of Carlos Menem in the 1990s generated a high level of consumption, but at the same time deepened the structural

social inequality inherited from the 1970s. Significantly, without contradicting the former, there was a second process of increasing liberalisation and individualisation which made a distrust of the public sphere visible, incubating differential politico-cultural experiences centred on individual autonomy that produced mutations in progressive sectors, strengthening a hedonistic dimension, as well as in conservative sectors who found in an autonomous sensibility a space of affinity with neoliberal culture.

In 2003, after Néstor Kirchner assumed the presidency, a process of implementing policies of relative redistribution began, along with the reconstitution of the position of the state, which produced a reshuffling of the political scenery with the stamp of different fractions of Peronism in high relief and with the slogan ‘*ampliación de derechos*’ (expansion of rights). Also, unlike in previous decades (Esquivel, 2004), during this period the relations between the national state and the Catholic Church were relatively distant.

It must be noted that the processes of secularisation of Argentinean society and *laïcité* (which includes the separation of church and state – we use the French term here to differentiate this judicio-political process from socio-cultural secularisation) have been complex and not always simultaneous. The secularisation process of Argentinean society over the last few decades reflects shifts of great historic density (Di Stefano, 2011) and new processes associated with subjectivization, the relative erosion of religious authority of an ecclesiastical model and the immanentisation of religiosity. In this perspective, the emergence of spirituality shows modes of connecting with the sacred which has repercussions on adherence to a Christianity centred on the self and even on the heterogeneous framework of New Age spirituality.

With regard to *laïcité*, this has been characterised more by the porous nature of political and religious spheres, often historically intertwined, than by the neutrality of the state towards religion, and also by the separation of political and religious power – aspects which characterise the typical model of laicism. As Baubérot (2015), Baubérot and Millot (2011), and Blancarte (2008) suggest, this is a complex and multidimensional concept, as a result of which the processes of state secularisation have not always been univocal. In this sense, when we speak of *laïcité*, it cannot be considered without taking into account the social, political, and historical context in which it is embedded. In the case of Argentina, the secular state has been modelled along the lines of what Mallimaci (2010) describes as subsidiary laicity, in which ‘religious power is bestowed with legitimacy to carry out social welfare functions autonomously, and in collaboration with the state’ (p. 22). In this form of hybrid laicity – typical of most Latin American societies, with the exception of Mexico and Uruguay – social bonds have been forged in the close relationship between political power and Catholic power. One example of this multidimensional process of recomposition between religion and politics can be observed in the ‘*Patronato*’: an institution with political authority to regulate the religious sphere which was resurrected by the state around the beginning of the 19th century, performing its functions through the Senate up until 1966 (Mallimaci, 2010: 19). In summary, as a consequence of its connections with religious power, the Argentinean state cannot be categorised as a secular state in the theoretical sense clarified above, but neither is it a confessional state. Although it retains a privileged

relationship with the Catholic Church (Esquivel, 2010: 165) as a vestige of its history of Catholic tradition and a reflection of contemporary society, there are spaces of tension, rupture, opposition and disengagement which reinforce its secularising character.

Therefore, to the aforementioned reasons which shape current political alliances and substantial disputes in relation to gender politics and policies of reproductive health, others of an institutional type can be added: the key posts in this tense relationship, for example, were filled with people recruited from the political arena and not from sectors close to the church as had been habitual in Argentina.

In this context, an unprecedented political force arose which combined diverse traditions: the classical liberal tradition, identified with politically conservative and pro-market sectors, heterogeneous sectors of Catholic origin ranging from conservative to social reformist, and a modernising-developmental current which focuses on public works and state reform. Their main cadre comes from the business sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and from the more traditional spheres of political parties such as the more conservative factions of the Radical Civic Union and even Peronism itself.

The ideological divergences and heterogeneous political tendencies organised around the PRO (Republican Proposal), led by the civil engineer, businessman, and football manager Mauricio Macri, are held together by a basic pact organised, at least initially, around a strong opposition to the Peronist government of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner. As with Kirchnerism, the PRO emerged in the wake of the mutation of politics and the party system that struck in 2001. While on one side the PRO represents continuity with a socially, politically and culturally neoliberal model which emerged in Argentina in the 1970s and was consolidated in the 1990s, at the same time it reflects certain new developments in terms of parties or alliances that previously flew the flag of neoliberalism (Vommaro et al., 2015). The pragmatism and 'flexible' leadership style of Mauricio Macri, the emphasis placed on 'neighbourhood' politics, and a political apparatus focused on entrepreneurship constitute a group of features that furnish the PRO with a great capacity to adapt in response to processes of substantial cultural change that have affected a large section of Argentinean society.

The political-ideological space represented by the PRO was consolidated over the last two decades as a centre-right alternative with a discourse centred around management and efficient administration, as well as on the principle of dialogue as an axis of a type of politics presenting itself as both an alternative and symmetrically opposed to Kirchnerism. From 2007 onwards it was a political force largely restricted to the city of Buenos Aires with scant representation on a national level.

The ideological currents comprising the centre-right are heterogeneous. Although the PRO is the most visible institutional expression of this, they extend beyond the party political system to reach into capillary political-cultural sensibilities and traverse journalism, the intellectual sphere, and broad layers of the population who assert them in daily life as well as in rituals and public interventions.

The current government re-established traditional institutional strategies of creating ties with the Catholic Church by appointing mediators recruited from the ranks of conservative Catholicism to key posts. However, and without any contradiction, the government also took heterogeneous positions which subjected Pope Francis to scrutiny

while his image increasingly acquired a populist profile. These criticisms extended to the Catholic Church and some of its factions, and even took some decidedly secularist stances inspired by classical liberalism or contemporary hedonistic neoliberalism. The modes by which these ideologically heterogeneous positions shape the reception of the papal authority of Francisco domestically tell us much about the contemporary processes of political and religious reconfiguration in Argentina, revealing both continuities and completely new articulations.

Old and new right against the Pope

In the context of this conflict entailing realignments and ‘blocks’ a series of responses arise in which diverse expressions of the political forces and conservative visions find themselves obliged to construct what otherwise would have been almost inevitably a harmonious relationship of understanding with the supreme pontiff. The fact that the Pope does not demonstrate support for the right-wing’s positions, at least in any consistent and unequivocal way, is evident for all the forces that consequently, and almost surprisingly, have to shape a regime of affinities, rifts, and hostilities. But given the relative unexpectedness of Pope Francis’ election as well as the different trajectories and institutional positions of the leaders and forces involved in the plural spectrum the right represents, the responses are diverse and variable over a short period of time. In very general terms, these reactions follow different courses and may even overlap. First, there are forms that take a realist stance, accepting differences and espousing common and permanent interests shared by Catholicism and the nation. Second, there are varied forms of defiance which are directed more at the Pope’s views than the Catholic Church itself. Finally, there are hostile positions which call into question not only the prerogatives of Catholicism as a social and state organisation, but also within the ‘religious field’ itself. This process also redefines what we understand by ‘religious field’, thus questioning its own limits.

Permanent interests

An initial range of responses accepts an unfavourable reality, attempting to organise it in such a way that the evident contradictions between the messages and actions of Pope Francis and the course pursued by the government are pushed into the background. In this way, an attempt is made to prioritise common denominators and permanent interests as a means of ensuring that the relationship with the Argentinean head of the Catholic Church at a global level does not deteriorate, or blow up in the faces of the governing force in a damaging way.

In a series of interactions with the Vatican that oscillated between hope for support and disappointment due to their differences, the leaders of the PRO who had risen to important executive and legislative positions repeatedly exhibited an understanding that underlined the complexity that their relationship with the Pope had acquired.

Mauricio Macri’s first presidential visit to Pope Francis showed signs of being strictly by the book and frosty. The meeting lasted just 22 minutes and the official photographs showed the Pope with an expression somewhere between sullen and awkward, a stark contrast with his ready smile on other presidential visits. In this context Gabriela Michetti,

Argentina's vice president and often Bergoglio's preferred interlocutor, publicly demonstrated her dismay in a tone that wavered between personal and political: 'it pains me to see the Pope without a smile' (Clarín, 2 March 2016), she asserted and so acknowledged that the visit had not yielded its hoped-for results. Her disclosure expresses the tone and complex structure of feeling shared by various members of the government which they had to overcome. For the vice president, the events of that visit generated 'an internal sensation which is very difficult to explain because [the Pope] really is a person I respect, he was hugely important to my religious and political education as an intellectual' (Clarín, 2 March 2016). In this same context of political confession, Michetti offers an example of a type of connection that can be established while recognising serious differences. There is a dimension here that goes beyond these differences, and that defines the common ground of 'priorities given to the concern about poverty. One from the political point of view and from his role as president, and the other from his leadership of the Catholic Church' (Clarín, 2 March 2016).

That path taken that veers between public frustration and reactive construction in a framework of better understanding is referred to in the words of the Foreign Minister, Susana Malcorra. This is no longer a simple compensatory response to a delicate political moment, but a terrain of objectified understandings independent of other vicissitudes which may or may not arise, but which surely will not affect it. Thus, for the minister, there is a common agenda based on tackling 'terrorism, poverty, and inequality' (Clarín, 2 March 2016).

A similar approach is shared by many Catholics. In readers' letters to the newspaper *La Nación*, they partly understand Pope Francis' 'gestures' as a validation of the theory that there is no contradiction between the interests of the government and those of the Pope. In their opinion, some of the Pope's expressions, such as the remark that Macri is a 'noble man', or the supposed lack of public criticism of Macri and his government derived from the absence of direct remarks to that effect, are sufficient evidence of an assumed harmony that they, controversially, defend in these texts sent to the newspaper. These references are not simply an exercise in wishful thinking: they are fuelled by less noticeable, but equally important, gestures made by the Pope, such as refusing requests for interviews from politicians seeking a photo opportunity, or the praise he heaped on María Eugenia Vidal (governor of the province of Buenos Aires) and Carolina Stanley (minister for social development).

One of the strongest pieces of evidence that this strategy is likely to yield fruit is this idea that the relationship with the Pope generates specific agreements on issues that both parties hold dear, while other, secondary, considerations are left to one side. One case that bears witness to the productivity of this approach is the debate around an eventual informal 'Social Pact' that would have the Catholic Church and the Pope as the instigators and guarantors along with the Argentinean government and other sectoral organisations.

It is necessary to briefly describe the context of this pact. From the end of the 1980s one of the most recurrent and destabilising forms of social conflict took place in the form of looting of supermarkets during the Christmas holidays or periods of economic hardship determined by inflation or macroeconomic restructuring. The fear of a politically destabilising sequence of looting and deaths as a result of ensuing repression increased

sharply towards the end of 2016 when the new government implemented a raft of economic adjustment measures which drove lower socio-economic classes into even more severe hardship. Stoking this fear was the threat of a general strike by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) which, too early into the new governments' term and with very bad timing, threatened to unleash an escalation of conflict that could coincide with the danger of looting.

This fear spurred various agents of the Catholic Church and the Pope himself to promote a 'Social Pact', which the government initially resisted with a series of arguments ranging from technical to political that demonstrated the lack of social concern displayed by the government in the eyes of Catholicism. For this reason social assistance for the poorest sectors was conceived as part of the general understanding: end of year bonuses for workers and the commitment to not call a general strike. The tensions eased somewhat and, for some, this became a symbol of a possible joint agenda between the government and the Vatican in a context in which the political alignments of both parties sowed the seeds of conflict.

This is perhaps one of the most important effects of the sum of the government's reactions, the Pope's public stances redeeming the opposition, and the government's strategy of prioritising general agreements that tend towards maintaining social peace. The absence of looting incidents in the middle of a period of economic adjustment, after years in which these types of events occurred regularly, implied both the self-limitation of the protests and a range of government social spending. This represents a settlement that should be regarded as one of Pope Francis' concrete achievements both in terms of articulation with the current government and also in terms of relations with social movements. This compromising approach, which is less visible but demonstrates great effectiveness, follows familiar tracks: the dialogue at the beginning of this century had already generated compromises between the government, social organisations, and the Catholic Church as sponsor and guarantor (Ameigeiras, 2008).

In this sense, it is interesting to make a comparison in order to bring into sharper focus where the effectiveness of Pope Francis' interventions into Argentinean society is most concrete. It could be argued that one example of this is the movement 'Francis' missionaries', which is an amalgamation of labour unions, political and ecclesiastical groupings rooted in a Peronist movement, *Movement Evita*, articulating grassroots social action with evangelical politics and the construction of chapels in poor settlements and deprived neighbourhoods (Carbonelli and Giménez Béliveau, 2015). But it is also significant that this movement is representative of a reorientation of the relationships between a relatively small group of political and social activists and the Catholic Church, and an historic commitment of a Peronist left that vindicates the idea of the centrality of the 'pobretariado' ('poortariat') from liberation theology, rather than a widespread, active and mobilised endorsement of Pope Francis' critique of capitalism.

Equally as important as this is the fact that the widespread acceptance of the Pope's stances from within the ranks of Peronism, some of the left and the social organisations connected to these forces, does not necessarily immediately correlate with an increase in the level and impact of mobilisation. The results of this relationship with progressive forces, for now, take root in examples that, like a virtual social pact, reflect the

government's need for stability and the relative success of politics they have developed to foster alliances and coexistence with the Pope along the lines of permanent interests.

The policy of protecting permanent and higher interests finds other expressions, and is to a certain extent the most regular way in which the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church and the governing party intervene, in defence of the most traditional positions regarding gender, sexuality, and education, which are values which both sides wish to safeguard. The following positions, however, express variations that, in contrast, incorporate hints and shades of novelty.

Challenging the Vatican: a possible exercise for PRO Catholics

The relationship between the political sensibilities of the right, embodied in the PRO and its leaders, on the one hand, and the Vatican on the other, has opened up new potential areas of conflict which in other circumstances would only have existed between fundamentalist groups and the Vatican, or otherwise between the secular left and the Catholic Church. Currently, these disputes materialise between different facets of the political tendency represented by the PRO, many of whom self-identify as Catholics, and a papacy from which they feel distant, dissenting, and perhaps even in open conflict with.

One variant of these positions appears on the letters pages, from readers who denounce omissions and grave errors in the Pope's standpoints. In these cases, a central issue repeatedly arises: the supposed alignment of Pope Francis with the positions of human rights groups and the symbolic concessions made to the ideological heirs of the revolutionary left of the 1970s, in contrast with the disregard shown to the victims of revolutionary violence and the jailed military figures serving, unjustly according to this right-wing current, sentences for the violation of human rights.

Making up this variant are not only those readers whose letters are included due to editorial policy, but also respected editors on the paper, and those belonging to the political configuration that influences and disputes positions in the political sphere that the governing party participates in. For example, Reymundo Roberts who, besides holding a high ranking position in the management of *La Nación* and belonging to a conservative catholic group, mocks the relationship struck up between the Pope and Hebe de Bonafini (president of *The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*). A relationship which is heavily criticised by those Catholics who protest against the Pope's lack of equanimity. In an article written as part of a series aimed at detailing the inconsistencies and lack of knowledge displayed by the Pope about the situation in Argentina, Roberts states 'I feel sorry for Francisco: I am convinced he was hoping to inspire less antagonistic sentiments in his esteemed visitor' (*La Nación*, 28 May 2016), to call into question the Pope's endeavour of meeting with Bonafini and the meagre results this supposedly yielded, in Roberts' view. This visit, conducted in the year designated the 'Year of Mercy' by the Pope, according to Roberts did little to pacify an Argentinean society still tense about the debate about state terrorism, but instead gave a platform to someone who Roberts not only considers to be intransigent but also capable of imposing her conditions on the Pope himself.

But there is another variant of the objections that arise from within Catholicism to the Pope's viewpoints both on a global and national level. Pope Francis has not only, or mainly, intervened to legitimise leaders of the human rights movement. His interventions

are directed above all towards social issues, poverty, and the radically exclusionary character of contemporary capitalism, and in this context he has articulated sympathy towards some initiatives of the Kirchnerist government and discreet criticism of some of Macri's policies. Given the logic of these interventions, it can be understood that part of these objections aimed at the Pope intend to call into question his links with Peronism.

If the Pope expresses socially critical positions, if he judges the Argentinean political process based on those positions and if, in addition, he gives special preference to Peronist leaders, then the opponents of Peronism, despite being Catholics, will criticise him without constraint. Elisa Carrió, a key figure in the Cambiemos alliance that brought the PRO to power, who is a prominent Catholic and a former preferred interlocutor of Bergoglio, had opportunity to severely admonish him. For her the Pope is a 'spiritual leader I am deeply fond of and know well, who enjoys power more than anybody' (Clarín, 3 March 2016). Carrió attributes to this will to power his ambition to be a firm guiding hand for the President of Argentina, and since this would be impossible with Macri this explains Bergoglio's preference for candidates from other parties, as well as explaining his reluctance to develop a good relationship with the current president. In Carrió's view, the Pope's policy of meeting with Peronist leaders, as well as his gestures of solidarity with different social leaders, serves to 'empower thugs', in contradiction with his pacifist preaching. It is in this context that Carrió adopts secularist positions: 'I am in favour of the separation of church and state. I would repeal the law that gives bishops a state salary. I do not think these relationships are good for the faithful' (Clarín, 3 March 2016).

This opinion is endorsed and elaborated on by readers. One of them reviewed Francisco's life to find authoritarian tendencies in his Jesuit background that lead him to discriminate against President Macri. Another, similarly to Carrió, points out that 'thugs' number among those invited to visit the Pope, and that the Pope's spokespeople in Argentina, given their political stance, contradict the declaration of 2016 as the Year of Mercy. This same reader insists on the authoritarian character of Pope Francis when he treats Macri differently than he had previously treated President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Neither Carrió nor these readers are outside of the Catholic congregation, nor are they actors belonging to extremist conservative movements within Catholicism. Just as the election of Francis stirred progressive forces to his support, it also determined the reactivation of political reflexes that prioritise local political loyalties over obedience to the Pope. In this context, a whole range of tools can be employed, including old secularist assumptions and anticlerical premises that can be used pragmatically in defence of a conservative political project.

A third viewpoint emerging in the circulation of opinions close to the currently governing party criticises the Pope from a position that conforms to the demands of economic and political liberalism. Some of these criticisms come from renowned, influential and skilled researchers, intellectuals, and journalists who occupy an original position in relation to the dominant traditions on the Argentine right. In this context, it is pertinent to briefly mention a debate which will help us to understand the specificity of the positions mentioned.

The historian Loris Zanatta, noting the Pope's populist tendencies, counterposed to the President's liberal ethos, wondered whether the best approach would be for the latter

to unashamedly defend his modernising positions and ruthlessly steamroller the populist past that, as he describes it, is the progeny of the 'Catholic Nation' – that conservative project engendered by the elites in the 1930s.

The response of the historian, sociologist and political analyst Marcos Novaro, who recommends proceeding with pragmatism and cautions the government against antagonising the Pope, offers a critical characterisation of the Pope's stance: he has been profoundly anti-liberal and represents the antithesis of the current government. However, his advice concerning how to deal with Bergoglio is to practice a 'healthy populism', thus avoiding a head-on confrontation that could weaken liberal tendencies in Argentinean society, which Novaro considers to be vigorous but which still need to go through a process of expansion in order to become definitively dominant.

Therefore, in the discussion between analysts and defenders of political liberalism the consensus is that there is a tension between Catholicism and liberalism, but there are disagreements about the extent to which this tension can be overcome in favour of a definitive predominance of liberalism. In this context, and in spite of the divergences between diagnoses, the Pope is an adversary who represents a historical obstacle that must be overcome.

This situation takes on various nuances when the tendency of liberalism is fundamentally economic. For this position, the consequences are more extreme than for the one mentioned above. If on the one hand Pope Francis is an extremely productive figure, given his peacemaking interfaith interventions in terms of dialogue between cultures and religious traditions, on the other hand he is considered representative of an economic atavism all the more damaging as its influence grows. This is how Andrés Oppenheimer explains that the support from Argentinean Catholics for Macri, lower on average than the support liberalism receives from Catholics in other countries, is due to the Pope's stance and his alliance with groups opposed to liberalism and the government not only implies prolonging Argentina's economic backwardness, but also leads him to behave in a 'politically erroneous and morally repugnant' way (*La Nación*, 22 June 2016).

Post-Catholicism and hedonistic individualism

One last factor, which is possibly one of the most innovative and yet least analysed in reflections on recent transformations to the politico-religious panorama in Argentina, is what we could describe as post-Catholicism. This tendency cultivates unconventional experiences within the religious scene in Argentina, ranging from the emergence and spread of evangelical Christianity to forms which are less established in the formal setting of a church such as discourses and practices focused on self-care, self-help, and Eastern spirituality. While in some cases these practices share common elements with spiritualised Catholicism, they are rooted in a challenge to institutional hierarchies, which contributes to a criticism that can range from the Catholic Church to the centralised state. Far from being a depoliticised current, it advances a type of politics in other terms: personal change as the axis of collective transformation.

This displacement in contemporary religiosity far exceeds the neoliberal appropriations that have been made of it from institutional political spaces like the PRO. In fact, New

Age sensibility traverses Argentinean society and may even articulate with emancipatory politics such as cultural and ecological movements, as well as what has been the most visible and effective movement in recent years – the struggle for gender equality.

The transformation of the post-Catholic religious scene gradually consolidated over the course of the 1980s, after the crisis of the political and cultural authoritarianism of the last military dictatorship and in the context of a process of cultural liberalisation. The spread of evangelical Pentecostalism was one of the axes of this process, with its emphasis on the individual and on the ‘free choice’ proper to a protestant matrix. Also central is a contemporary process that affects both the religious sphere and the status of its permeable borders. As heir to both the Argentinean esotericism of the 20th century and the long-term process of secularisation, the New Age sensibility emerged in Argentina as a religious schism of a new type that articulates spirituality and working on ‘oneself’ as a vehicle of individual autonomy (Carozzi, 1999; Semán and Viotti, 2015). Over the last few decades, New Age spirituality has been one of the channels for the diffusion of anti-hierarchical values, in many cases chronologically coinciding with or reappropriated by neoliberal ideology. While at first New Age sensibilities were cultivated in niche alternative circuits that brought together self-help literature, positive psychologies, and Eastern spiritualities, in recent years Argentinean society has experienced a significant spiritual boom that, not without conflict, challenges Catholicism and liberal secularism on the terrain of constructing well-being in different areas such as therapeutic resources, in business, education, and the prison system. The New Age has emerged from ‘submerged networks’ and truly alternative lifestyles, to command a public presence which is much more dispersed and heterogeneous.

One of the unusual appropriations of this post-Catholic spiritual experience took place within the ranks of the PRO, itself offspring of a previous experience related to the business background shared by many of its cadre. Mauricio Macri himself participates in heterodox Buddhist sessions that encourage reflection and meditation. Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, the current head of government of the city of Buenos Aires has declared himself to be a reader of the celebrated bestseller *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, as his ‘guide to spiritual enlightenment’ (*BigBang News*, 26 July 2015).

In May 2012, when the PRO only controlled the city of Buenos Aires, the ‘Golden Hall’ of the city legislature was the scene of an event completely unprecedented in the history of Argentina. For the first time, a public governmental space was the venue for a collective meditation inspired by Eastern techniques. Speaking before administrative employees, politicians, and state employees from different political factions, the rabbi and PRO member of parliament Sergio Bergman asserted that, ‘meditation in politics has never been as necessary as it is today’ (*La Nación*, 9 May 2012). The event, which brought together more than a hundred people, was organised by the Argentina Citizen Foundation and The Art of Living Foundation, a paradigm of globalised Hinduism and of a kind of spirituality focused on personal transformation, non-violence, dialogue and humanitarian aid close to the principles of the NGO sector. The most spiritual sectors of the PRO approved of the visit from the Indian guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. In this context, they also promoted the ‘first spiritual mega-conference in Latin America’, called *Fe Vida 2012*, in which Mauricio Macri and some spiritual leaders from the PRO gave talks, and made interventions revolving around ‘personal change’, ‘dialogue’, and ‘love’.

The philosopher Alejandro Rozitchner, one of Mauricio Macri’s main advisors, was one of the event’s main speakers. Sometime later, as Presidential advisor, he criticised

Pope Francis for having expressed concern about the level of unemployment in Argentina and describing the Cambiemos government as 'transgressive'. In Rozitchner's own terms, he asserted that 'I don't think the Pope is politically relevant. You could ask yourself why the Pope did not speak out before, when there was an inefficient and corrupt government? Well, he knows why' (*Clarín*, 7 August 2016).

Rozitchner, who gives 'enthusiasm workshops' in the PRO School for Leaders, more interested in Osho than Heidegger, is a paradigmatic representative of this neoconservative anti-Catholic current which appropriates the discourse of positive psychology, spirituality, and counter-culture. His statements attacking Francis for being 'too Catholic' are more than eloquent. Referring to his relationship with the president, for example, he says,

I am an intellectual associated with rock'n'roll, and marihuana. He is an engineer associated with business and sport. [...] We are from different worlds, but we get along really well. Macri has the quality of simplicity and he is capable of working, understanding the issues, being active, delegating, putting together good teams. (*Clarín*, 7 August 2016)

The religious ecumenism of the post-Catholic tendency not only challenges Catholicism, it also considers it an irrelevant actor in contemporary national politics. With its focus on New Age spirituality while exceeding it, it possesses another component which is the relationship with mass popular culture and the disbelief that Argentina continues to be a 'Catholic country'.

If Alejandro Rozitchner represents the paradigm of individual self-help entrepreneurship, and confronts the Pope with the catchphrase of out-dated Catholicism, Durán Barba, the other media advisor to the PRO, represents the strictly media-friendly version that, without the ideological sophistication of the spiritual discourse, considers that Pope Francis as a figure, while being culturally significant, is politically irrelevant: 'Francis is an important Argentinian, like [Lionel] Messi, and it would be great to get on well with him. But the Pope doesn't win votes, because nowadays people are more independent' (*Telam*, 25 May 2016).

The relations between religiosity and politics in Argentina have a complex history. The place of Catholicism has been considered the space par excellence, the privileged pole of this relationship. Even though, as we have pointed out, the presence of Catholicism both in ideological terms and in relation to trajectories and personal bonds is very important to the consolidation of the contemporary centre-right in certain arenas of power, that does not mean that it is isolated and does not live alongside other spiritual currents. The New Age sensibility and the constellation of principles focused on personal comfort, dialogue, and working on oneself as a source of transformation, is an innovative space which makes the composition of new conservative sectors more complex, with these principles providing a significant resource for the reconfigurations developing today in the face of the populist threat embodied by Pope Francis.

Conclusion

The election of Jorge Bergoglio as Pope has been analysed from many perspectives in terms of its impact on Argentina. The involvement, doubtless often exaggerated, of Pope Francis in local politics in recent years demonstrates an incorporation of certain issues

close to the ‘theology of the people’ that inspires the Pope by social sectors identified with Peronism and even progressives sectors: the social question, and the struggle against inequality. This displacement evidences realignments made by some progressive sectors that were initially in open conflict with Bergoglio, and which now appropriate the figure of Pope Francis in disputes with the current government. At the same time, this new scenario has sparked a polemic in sectors allied with neo-conservative politics who see a populist threat in this new affinity.

In this article, we have been interested in how Cardinal Bergoglio’s election as Pope reconfigured some of the classical relationships between the most conservative sectors of society and Catholicism. This movement reconfigured the most classical images of fundamentalist Catholicism and its alliance with the most conservative sectors, which identified Argentinean society with Catholicism, as being the only form of relationship possible between these groups. Without losing from view the continuing presence of Catholicism, including the conservative variety, among the upper echelons of governmental power, we describe positions which are redefining this one-way street. To that end, we have considered some political factors such as conflicts between the Kirchnerist government and Cardinal Bergoglio, his election as Pope, and the realignment of the relationships between progressive social sectors and Peronism, the papacy, and conservative sectors in a process of redefinition.

Likewise, we consider it important to analyse a process of long-term cultural transformation that has produced mutations among the old and new right, mobilising an individualist current – both secular and spiritual – that dismisses the influence of a Catholicism that acts and publicly intervenes on Argentinean society. In this framework, it is possible to consider the construction of an neoconservative pole that does not entirely reject its historic connection with Catholic roots, but at the same time seeks to transform them. Permeated by other spiritualities which value the individual above all else, it distances itself from the traditional bond with the Catholic clergy and seeks to use the state to broaden secularised spaces, which are not, however, necessarily devoid of a new mode of relating to the sacred.

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Note

1. These ideas were originally written in December 2016. In line with the hypothesis suggested here, it is necessary to note that in March 2018, and at the request of the ruling party, the Argentine National Congress began discussing the legalization of abortion.

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Author biographies

Pablo SEMÁN is a PhD in Social Anthropology from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and graduated in Sociology from University of Buenos Aires (UBA). He is currently a

researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) of Argentina in the Institute of Advanced Social Studies (IDAES) at National University of San Martín (UNSAM). His work is focused on massive and popular cultures, religion, music and politics.

Address: Cátulo Castillo 2953 Parque Patricios, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Email: pabloseman@hotmail.com

Nicolás VIOTTI is a PhD in Social Anthropology from the National Museum-Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and graduated in Sociology from University of Buenos Aires (UBA). He is currently a researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) of Argentina. His work has focused on religion, subjectivity and social hierarchy, particularly around the emergence of the spirituality milieu in Argentina.

Address: Bulnes 87, 3. Almagro, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Email: nicolas.viotti@gmail.com

Mari-Sol GARCÍA SOMOZA has graduated in Sociology from University of Buenos Aires. She holds a master's degree in Social and Human Sciences from the EHESS, France. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Paris Descartes University-UBA, her doctoral thesis: *From Fatima to Evita: Identities, Involvement Spaces and Religious Sociabilities of Muslim Women in Argentina*. She is a lecturer in Culture and Hispanic Civilisation at ESSEC and EM Lyon in France. Since 2010, she has been a member of the editorial board for the CEIL-CONICET journal, *Sociedad y Religión*. She is also a member of the Centre for Cultural Anthropology, Paris Descartes University and of CEIL-CONICET's Society, Culture and Religion Programme. She is part of the Steering Committee of the MERCOSUR Association of Social Scientists of Religion for the period 2015–2018.

Address: 22-30 rue du capitaine Marchal. 75020, Paris, France.

Email: marisolgarciasomoza@gmail.com