The Pope, the Poor, and the Role of Religion in Argentina’s Public Sphere

by

Gustavo Morello, S.J.

Pope Francis’s public statements about and criticisms of the global economic system and local politics present an opportunity to explore how ordinary people react to the presence of a religious voice in the public sphere. Data on people’s perceptions of the pope’s interventions collected from semistructured nonrandom interviews with 41 low-income Argentines of various religious orientations reveal that they identified and regulated the boundaries of religion in the public sphere with different criteria from those that secularists would expect. Respondents assumed that religion and politics shared the space of power and therefore accepted the pope as a political actor. However, they considered it legitimate for him to intervene only when he stood for the poor, promoted human brotherhood, and exemplified God’s love. Religion was welcome where modernity had failed.

Las declaraciones públicas del Papa Francisco y las críticas al sistema económico global y la política local presentan una oportunidad para explorar cómo la gente común reacciona ante la presencia de una voz religiosa en la esfera pública. Los datos sobre las percepciones de las personas sobre las intervenciones del Papa recopiladas de entrevistas semiestructuradas no aleatorias con 41 argentinos de bajos ingresos de diversas orientaciones religiosas revelan que identificaron y regularon los límites de la religión en la esfera pública con criterios diferentes de los que los laicistas esperarían. Los encuestados asumieron que la religión y la política compartían el espacio de poder y, por lo tanto, aceptaron al Papa como actor político. Sin embargo, consideraron legítimo para él intervenir solo cuando defendió a los pobres, promovió la hermandad humana y ejemplificó el amor de Dios. La religión era bienvenida donde la modernidad había fallado.

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From the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has intervened in the public sphere by expressing concerns about global inequality, social justice, and human rights (Levine, 2016; Mallimaci, 2013). In his writings and speeches (Francis, 2013a: n. 54, 202; 2015: nn.12–13), he has made clear his belief that the world system neglects the poor and has challenged faithful Catholics and political leaders to take care of them (Francis, 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2013d; 2014a; 2014b). While for John Paul II the problem was communism, for Francis the problem is the free-market economy that does not work for the majority (Glasmann, 2015; Puggioni, 2016).

Since 70 percent of the world’s Catholics live in poor countries (Froehle and Gautier, 2003), the pope’s remarks about the economic system have a deep impact, and it is plausible that religion plays an active role on the political agendas of countries with a significant number of Catholics. Discussion about the political involvement of religious figures is not new in Latin America or the world (Levine, 2016; Shortell, 2001). While we expect religion to continue to reject the marginal and privatized role that some social theorists and political actors ascribe to it (Casanova, 1994; 2009), we usually do not see secular intellectuals encouraging such deprivatization. Francis’s case is unique in that the head of the Catholic Church has become one of the most important and outspoken critics of the free-market economy (Burawoy, 2015; Glasmann, 2015; Löwy, 2015). By criticizing the economic system, the pope discursively relocates religion from the private to the public sphere. Surprisingly, the global secular elite has received this well.

The modern distinction of “spheres of influence” meant a relocation of religion in society and an open field for competing worldviews that ascribe different roles to religion in society (Casanova, 1994; 2009; Dobbelaere, 1999). The differentiation of spheres, with its own rationality, specialists, authority, and scope of influence, did not affect all societies in the same way. While the relocation of religious institutions in Europe left some churches with very little political power and a declining role in public life (Glendinning and Bruce, 2011), in Latin America modernity brought a revitalization of religion (Vaggione, 2005a). This article assumes that modernity is a culture shaped by the aforementioned separation of spheres and the expansion of capitalist dynamics and of the idea of human rights and that, since there are multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000), there are multiple ways to accommodate religion in a society (Morello et al., 2017). Here I explore how Latin Americans manage a concrete situation of religious intervention in the public realm.

A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING MODERN

This paper argues that, since Latin Americans have a different way of being modern from people in the United States and Europe, they locate religion in the public sphere differently. Latin American modernity has been described as “baroque” (Echeverría, 2000) or “hybrid” (García Canclini, 2001). This characterization highlights the facts that Latin American modernity challenges hegemonic views of modernity (Ribeiro, 1997) and that the achievements of modernity are not a concrete gain for many Latin Americans.
The hegemonic model of modernity developed in Argentina since the late nineteenth century has assumed that the French model of separation between church and state was the best way of organizing a society. For the Enlightenment, religion either did not exist or was a private matter with no influence over the public sphere. Following this “cosmopolitan” model (Casanova, 2011), the Latin American intelligentsia fought to curb the Church’s influence in the political realm (Blancarte, 2007; Da Costa, 2011; Mallimaci, 2015). Since this political project implied the loss of social functions and political power for religious institutions (Glendinning and Bruce, 2011), the Catholic Church resisted it (Morello, 2017a) to keep its authoritative voice from being limited to a specific sphere of influence (Vaggione and Morán Faúndes, 2017). Along with Argentina, many other Latin American nation-states adopted the French model of secularism (Blancarte, 2007), and that struggle at the institutional level (Dobbelaere, 1999) shaped the political history of most Latin American countries over the past two centuries (Lynch, 2012). There were different outcomes in different countries, but their comparison is beyond the scope of this paper. The point is that, today, at the micro level in Latin Americans’ daily lives, what we see is not a cultural war between religious and secular realms but people using both discourses to make sense of their lives (Ameigeiras, 2008; Semán, 1997). The ideas at stake are one thing, the incorporation of them into daily life another. Because of this secular-religious dynamic, Argentina’s modernity can be characterized as “enchanted” (Morello et al., 2017: 11), highlighting a persistent supraempirical quest in the midst of modern political, social, and economic transformations. The differentiation of spheres of value and the capitalist dynamics of rationalization of life that brought economic development, democratic governments, and a growing middle class in the past century have changed the spiritual realm of the country. Religion still influences the public sphere (Morello, 2017b), but its authority is not necessarily recognized in every domain (Chaves, 1994). For example, religious discourse is not tolerated when sexual and reproductive rights are in question (Morán Faúndes, 2013; Vaggione, 2005b), but religious institutions and actors are welcome in the public sphere to provide social services or mediate social conflicts (Kippenberg, Lehmann, and Nagel, 2013; Mallimaci, 2015; Rinaldo, 2010).

In the Latin American imagination, Argentina is a European enclave with an important educated middle class. It is considered an “upper-middle-income” country by the World Bank (2017), with only 1.7 percent of the population making less than US$2 a day. However, some benefits associated with modernity—civic rights, free markets, economic progress, and social mobility—are not spread evenly throughout society. Almost 30 percent of the population are below the national poverty line (Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina, 2017), and the Gini inequality coefficient is 0.426.

Over the past 20 years, the transformation of poverty has altered the relationship of the state and religious institutions in Argentina’s public sphere. The Peronist candidate Carlos Menem won the presidency in 1989 and implemented a “laissez-faire” state model that, continued by his successor Fernando de la Rúa, landed the country in bankruptcy in 2001. Whereas in 1990, according to the World Bank, 1.1 percent of the population earned less than US$2 a day and the Gini index was 0.467, by 2002 the proportion not earning US$2 a
day had increased to 14 percent and the Gini coefficient was 0.537—equivalent to that of Honduras, the poorest country on the continent. The economic collapse resulted in political turmoil. The situation started to ease only when, after the appointment and resignation of five presidents within a week, the Catholic Church and the local office of the United Nations Development Program got involved. Since the institutions were unable to deal with the emergency, political actors sought intercession by the bishops. This dynamic was not an exception. Latin American scholars have noted that, in times of crisis, religion (its ideas, institutions, and personnel) appears as a substitute for politics (De la Torre, 2015; Mallimaci, 2013; Morello, 2015).

The neoliberal policies that fostered retrenchment of the state on social welfare opened public space for religious communities to gain ground. Neoliberal globalization separates public tasks usually provided by the state’s social services from state responsibilities, and this enables nonstate actors to take over public functions (Kippenberg, Lehmann, and Nagel, 2013; Morello, 2004; Rinaldo, 2010). The modification of the state’s role in Argentina almost overlapped with Jorge Bergoglio’s tenure as Buenos Aires’s archbishop. He served as auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires from 1992 until 1998, when he became bishop, and finished his tenure in 2013 when he was elected pope. During this time, he positioned the Church close to the populations of the slums. He doubled the number of priests working there from 11 to 22, gave them a more visible structure within the dioceses by creating a vicariate and upgrading chapels into parishes, and established that a priest working in the slums should live in the neighborhood. This precedent may explain why the Catholic Church remains a trusted institution for the inhabitants of the slums of Buenos Aires (with 80 percent trust), while the pope earned 85 percent trust, similar to teachers and just behind doctors at 92 percent (Suárez, 2015). Even acknowledging all the caveats about measuring ephemeral concepts such as “trust,” people in the slums tend to rely on the institutions that share life with them.

The expansion of Church infrastructure among the poor and their trust in the institution did not, however, translate into a “sacralization” of the public realm. Generally, Argentines, the poor in particular, dislike having clerics involved in politics. Only 1.3 percent of the country’s population agrees that churches should have political involvement. Nearly 60 percent do not like a cleric’s running for office, and 77 percent of the poor reject even that possibility (Mallimaci, 2013; Suárez, 2015). On one hand, the data point toward distrust of clerics’ involvement in partisan politics. On the other hand, the pope’s advocacy for the poor has garnered high approval. Thus it seems the poor want the power of the Church to help them but not the involvement of clerics in public office.

This paper focuses on the poor’s perception of the pope’s interventions in the public sphere. The fact that an Argentine pope is making public statements about the global system and local politics presents an opportunity to explore how the poor react to the presence in the local and global public sphere of a religious voice—a voice well regarded by the majority of the people of Argentina and the world (WIN/Gallup International, 2016). What is their view of the proper role of “religion” (understood here as the pope’s interventions) in the public sphere? What categorical distinctions inform the boundaries they set for it? Do Catholics and non-Catholics identify this space differently?
RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

To explore the role of religion in Argentina’s public sphere, I used a sample of 41 in-depth, intentional, semistructured interviews conducted in Córdoba from November 2015 to December 2016. Participants were classified as lower-class according to annual income and maximum educational level achieved. Some worked, mostly part-time, as janitors, street artisans, sanitation workers, and house cleaners. Many were employed part-time in construction, retailer shops, kitchens, and bakeries. Others were either unemployed (4) or retired (5). Sixteen received some kind of welfare. The sample included 17 males and 24 females. Seventeen were 19–39 years of age, 19 were 40–59, and 5 were 60–80. Twenty-one identified themselves as Catholics, 10 as Pentecostals, 3 as “Others,” and 7 as “Nones.” None were religious officials.

The recruitment of the sample was a snowballing process, starting with acquaintances of colleagues and then using social organizations, both religious and secular. The interviews were conducted in Spanish in homes, classrooms, markets, squares, and other workplaces. After obtaining consent, researchers conducted two interviews with the same individuals, each about 40 minutes long, to explore how each participant “lived religion” (Ammerman, 2014). The interview was a questionnaire of 13 topics and one question specifically about Pope Francis. Some of the respondents talked about the pope before they were asked (usually when talking about religion and politics) or mentioned him spontaneously, prompting the interviewer to pose the question about the pope in that situation. Interviewees were assigned pseudonyms and the interviews were transcribed and processed with Atlas.ti software. I have access to the transcripts but did not conduct any interviews, nor do I have contact of any kind with the participants.

After a narrative analysis of the transcriptions, coding for mentions to the pope (terms like “Francisco,” “papa,” “Roma,” “Vaticano,” “Santa Sede,” and “Bergoglio”), I identified 115 statements that referred to the pope. I selected only those that referred to Francis’s economic and political interventions (94 statements from 33 respondents). In order to compare Catholics and non-Catholics (assuming that Catholics would have a favorable opinion of the pope’s interventions), I regrouped statements by religious self-identification: 55 from 19 Catholics and 39 from 14 non-Catholics (20 from 7 Nones, 3 from 2 Others, and 16 from 5 Pentecostals). I translated and edited the statements for this publication. In my analysis, I sought the categorical distinctions that explained the respondent-constructed boundaries of religion in the public sphere.

FINDINGS

THE POPE’S INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR CONTEXT

The participants in the sample, both Catholics and non-Catholics, did not consume the pope’s interventions from official documents. Their information was mediated by radio, newspapers, and other people’s comments. For example, Nicolás (None) said, “The whole situation is weird. . . . If the pope says ‘A,’ it’s on the news that the pope has said ‘A.’” He is complaining that Argentine
media reproduce the pope’s statements almost daily. The perceptions of respondents were more about the media’s selection of statements by the pope than about the statements themselves.

At the time of the interviews, public debate centered on whom the pope had received and what he would or would not say about the political climate of the country. For example, almost all interviewees reflected on the pope’s reception of President Mauricio Macri after he was elected president of Argentina in November 2015. Macri, a center-right candidate proposing neoliberal policies, won the election with 51.34 percent of the votes over Daniel Scioli, the Peronist candidate supported by former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who proposed to keep most of the left-wing populist program in place. In Córdoba, more than 70 percent of the electorate voted for Macri. In February 2016 he visited the pope, whose reception was reportedly cool and brief. The media replayed their interaction and interpreted it in different ways, as did the Argentine electorate.

RELIGION AND POLITICS: A SHARED SPACE

Modernity was a process of differentiation of spheres of values (Casanova, 1994; Dobbelaere, 1999), and because of that it was also a reduction of the presence and influence of religion in the public sphere (Achterberg et al., 2009; Glendinning and Bruce, 2011). In Argentina, religious privatization was an element of a political project of secularization (Mallimaci, 2015). In order to establish a viable secular bureaucracy, the liberal state sought to curb the political influence and the economic strength of the Church, but it did not extirpate Catholicism from Argentina’s public life (Morello, 2017a). The same was true of the populist state model. During Juan Perón’s presidency, there were tensions with the Catholic Church, but Perón did not “privatize” religion. He challenged the authority of the bishops to be sole interpreters of the Christian faith, pretending to be also a legitimate religious voice (Morello, 2017b). The differentiation of scopes of influence between church and state is still an institutional struggle.

The perception of the interviewees is that religion and politics share a space in which power is traded. “The Church had in its hands the power to order the economy. The Crusades [read “the Conquest”] should have been a revolution to bring social change in the 1500s, not to adhere to colonization. . . . That is the fault of the Church,” explained Carlos (Catholic). His point is clear: the Church is a powerful institution with agency in shaping the world order. Statements from other respondents agree with this argument (Carlos [Pentecostal], Ainhoa [Catholic], Gloria [None]).

The power of the Church makes the pope powerful. Respondents not only associated religion with politics but associated the pope with politicians. Both Catholics and non-Catholics tended to situate the pope among power brokers at the same level as presidents. For them, the head of the Catholic Church and the presidents of Argentina and the United States inhabited the same social space (Nicolás [None], Lucy [Catholic]). Some participants placed the pope above the politicians, implying that he had the ability to challenge the political authorities: “The pope has the opportunity to say today, ‘Stop killing each
other. We are all brothers here.’ He has the opportunity to build universal brotherhood with his speeches. He has to challenge the presidents so that people will criticize the presidents and say, ‘Dude, what Francis is saying is true’” (Carlos [Catholic]).

Carlos (Pentecostal) placed the pope above world politicians as a “universal figure,” arguing that he had the necessary agency to “build universal brotherhood” and “challenge the presidents.” Because he was above partisan politics and a power broker at the same time, he could say what he thought was beneficial for the society: “And if he uses his position to change the political world, to influence it with Christian commandments, it will be very positive. He is trying to do so, going against the financial powers of the banks that are negative for human beings.” According to this respondent, the pope should use his location among global leaders to challenge the economic order, something that other respondents endorsed as well (Carlos [Catholic], Alejandra [Pentecostal], Marcelo [Other], Nicolás [None]). However, other interviewees noted that the power of the papacy had limits—that the office might constrain him (Gustavo [Catholic]). “He is closer to John Paul II, among the ones I know. Francis has been freer. . . . John Paul wasn’t free. . . . He was limited. You know that where there is power, there are constraints” (Cayetano [Catholic]). Cayetano emphasized that Francis was strong enough to handle those limits, but again, the tension of the pope’s position between his power and its limits located him in the same spot as the Argentine president. According to Lucy (Catholic), “Since Francis arrived there has been a change. But you can’t change altogether. You have to go step by step because the world is complicated. . . . The same thing is going on with this new president; we have to give him some time and then see.”

Respondents gave historical and demographic reasons to explain the overlapping of religion and politics. “Politics has always been linked to religion. . . . Yes, I think the religious discourse is completely linked to the political one” (Antonio [None]). Another participant tracked the power of the Catholic Church to the colonial times, mentioning the political connotation of the Jesuits’ work in the missions of Paraguay in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ainhoa [Catholic]):

I don’t like it. I think you cannot mix them. But it started centuries ago. I don’t know if you have seen the movie The Mission—the king, the governor, the Indians, the Jesuits. . . . You cannot kick religion out . . . but it shouldn’t be so intermingled, so involved, you see? I don’t like that sort of involvement. It has always existed, but I don’t like it because you distort both of them, religion and politics.

Another group of responses emphasized the size of the Catholic flock, arguing that the space religion occupied in the public sphere was due to its membership. Catholics and non-Catholics agreed that Francis had a political voice as a religious leader because he was “like a singer with many followers” (Nicolás [None]), and many respondents thought that he was not naïve about this (Carlos [Pentecostal]):

He knows he is mostly the shepherd of the Catholic Church, but he is aware that having so many followers—I think Catholics are thousands of millions, I
don’t know how many, but more than a thousand million for sure around the world—that having so many members in his church his opinions will also have political influence. It has always been that way.

Moreover, Francis has increased his following during his tenure. Ceci (Catholic) explained: “People follow him a lot. I can see it. . . . He is everywhere. . . . In different ways, when he was appointed, many people stuck to him.” Mario (Catholic) confirmed that the pope was “very popular; people love him very much.”

For some interviewees, the pope had the power to shape the economic system and to challenge local (Macri) and global (Obama) leaders. Being in that social space had some constraints; power was a negotiation. But, according to respondents, the pope had been strong enough to overcome the limits.

THE CATEGORICAL DISTINCTIONS

WHEN RELIGION IS WELCOME

Respondents identified three main social roles for religion and religious institutions: care for the poor, being an example of God, and fostering unity. For most interviewees, the Church was supposed to exercise its power caring for the poor: “Religion should be separated from politics. The Church, as a religious institution, should care for the poor. . . . With all the money the pope has, he should send it to the poor countries and solve the problem of poverty in the world” (Mario [Catholic]). For this respondent, what mattered was not only what the pope should do but also what he could do to eliminate poverty. The Church was expected to care for the poor because it had the power to do so. As long as the pope and the Church were defending the poor and standing by them, respondents supported Francis’s interventions in the public sphere. As Carlos (Pentecostal), quoted earlier, put it, “If he uses his position to change the political world, to influence it with Christian commandments, it will be very positive.”

The mission of the Church, defined as the option for the poor, was the bar for measuring the deeds of religious figures among non-Catholics and the historical situation of the Church among Catholics. Religious actors in the past were criticized for generally supporting the colonial order, the caste system, and the social status quo (Lynch, 2012). The fault of the Church was not supporting the oppressed aboriginals and enslaved Africans or challenging the colonial enterprise. Critics of Francis argued that he was not paying attention to the needs of the poor. Jacinto (None) said, “Let me tell you, if I were the pope, I’d go to the Vatican and sell everything and distribute the money all over the world.” He explained that Francis had the power to help the poor but was not doing enough for them. When he complained about the pope’s not doing what he could do, he was attributing power to the pope and then evaluating him against the bar of helping the poor.

Announcing God with works and words was another role attributed to the Church and its leaders. Carlos (Catholic) explained, “The Church should show how God is with its deeds. In this case, the pope might have a bomb placed
under his car, because he has the courage to be like Jesus, a rebel. He’d be crucified, but he’d die doing what is right. That is good.” According to him, a religious figure should show the world how God is and should be aware that he or she might have the same end that Jesus had. If the pope was a rebel, he might meet the end of a rebel—a violent death—but that would be proof he was standing in the right place.

Francis’s “good words” were an inspiration to follow Jesus for non-Catholic respondents as well (Abraham [Pentecostal]):

As far as I can see—the things I hear from him—I think he is the closest image we have of what God wanted our lives to be. I do think so, beyond the fact he is a Catholic. I think his deeds speak volumes . . . He always has a good word, good things to say. He speaks to current events. . . . Times changes, but the message should remain, [and we should use] different words so that people understand it.

According to these respondents, the pope was not only a living image of the divine but also a catalyst for revival. Olivia (Pentecostal) explained: “And I love that God is using someone to get people closer to Him—with some shortcomings [she means being Catholic], but I don’t care (laugh). It is very good that faith is rising again. . . . It’s amazing how Francis has changed many things!”

In addition to the care for the poor and being a reminder of God’s presence, another perceived role of the Church is caring for humanity. Religion, as well as politics, should unite the people (Patricia [Catholic]), foster peace in the world (Olga [Catholic]), and spread “universal messages” (Carlos [Catholic]). This view of the Church’s function is shared with respondents from other religious traditions. Marcelo, a Buddhist, when asked what he thought of Francis, said,

A deep admiration! (laughs) There are many elements that are in tune with a Buddhist vision. Francis is talking about a conception of the human being. There are elements in his discourse that are new for a pope, like taking against the mercantilization of life that capitalism brought about, against a capitalism that is devouring human lives. What he is doing is placing humanistic values above the rest, protecting the life of immigrants. I think that’s fantastic!

Guillermo (Catholic) shared the idea of uniting humanity, “He is great! He seeks the same I am seeking as a believer: peace in the world, the end of wars, deaths, defeating hunger, pain, and suffering. . . . He is a great example of Catholicism.” Francis was welcome in the public sphere because he was advocating for universal humanistic values. Non-Catholics such as Gabriela (Pentecostal) also valued Francis’s actions aiming for unity among peoples, explaining, “The pope has it, you understand? To contribute, to join, that’s the problem. We are millions of people, but the pope has to unite us. That his most important work.”

For the respondents, then, religion was well received when it advocated for the poor, reflected God’s words, and looked after the unity of human beings. While the responses that emphasized the feature of announcing the gospel came from Pentecostal believers, Catholics and non-Catholics tended to make
similar statements about care for the poor and the unifying role of religious figures. Religion was welcome when modernity failed. Modern promises of secular universal brotherhood and equal access to the world’s resources are still pending (Echeverría, 2000; Ribeiro, 1997).

WHEN RELIGION IS NOT WELCOME

Even when religion is present and addresses modernity’s failures, religion is not expected to occupy the same location as politics. Modernity brought about important changes, such as the transformation of the political system. Even when it is not perfect, there is in Argentina a system at work. Since 1983, people have been able to vote, freely express their political opinions, and demonstrate in the streets. Even when, as during the aforementioned crisis of 2001, the bishops helped, the solution was found within the political system. There are spheres in which religious discourse is not tolerated. For example, in order to have a voice in debates on sexual and reproductive rights, religious actors in Argentina present themselves as “nonreligious,” act as civil society organizations (Vaggione, 2005a), and defend their positions with scientific and legal discourse (Morán Faúndes, 2013). They have “strategically secularized” (Vaggione, 2005a) their structures and arguments in order to participate in a debate that does not tolerate dogmatic religious actors. Respondents mentioned three main restrictions: the pope’s privileged position, the perception of him as pursuing a personal political agenda, and religion’s lack of transparency.

Francis has been perceived as simple and close to the people. Many participants appreciated this (Lucy [Catholic], María [Catholic], Abraham [Pentecostal]), but for others his position was one of privilege, not that of a “regular” person (Carlos [Catholic], María [Catholic]). Ceci (Catholic) claimed that if he were an ordinary individual nobody would pay attention: “But because he said it, it is different. . . . It is sad that a guy just appears and because he is the pope—.” Speaking from a privileged position of power was perceived as unfair. Respondents argued that he was using his religious position to make comments as a political player. The reaction of many interviewees to this point was that the legitimation of political power came from the popular will, not from divine ointment (Hagopian, 2008).

The interviews were conducted in an electoral year, and there was much speculation in the press as to whether the pope would be coming to visit Argentina. While some respondents thought that he would not visit the country to avoid being seen as supporting a political party, others thought that his silence and deferral of a visit were already a political statement. Because of this, both Catholic and non-Catholic respondents identified the pope as a political actor. Mario (Catholic) expounded:

I think people are talking too much . . . like “OK, the pope is over” or “He will come next month” or “He will come to Argentina” or even “He is not coming yet. When is he coming?” “Will he come to Argentina at all?” I understand he is a guy who is very political . . . and I think politics separated from church is better, completely separated from religion. . . . However, what the pope, what he is doing, he is doing politics too.
Francis was perceived as feeding competing interpretations, allowing people to speculate about his positions. The media interpreted his possible visit as an endorsement of the government. The issue of the visit became political, and, in Mario’s view, the pope allowed it. Francis became a partisan figure using his religious position to pursue his personal agenda. The following exchange with Ainhoa (Catholic) is also indicative:

*What do you think about Francis, his ideas, the things he is doing?*

I was very happy at the beginning because he was an Argentine reaching that position. But then seeing too many politicians involved, and that the wife of one of them works in an office that sets the meetings with the pope and she is the one who says who will or will not have a meeting, I don’t like it. Everything is mixed up. I am disappointed. They open the doors [of the Vatican] to give some politicians a picture with the pope.

There was this guy, Mr. Oviedo, who has one or two daughters with cystic fibrosis. One of them died last year. He wanted to meet the pope to ask him for help passing a law that would have helped them to have treatment and avoid a trip to Brazil. He [Francis] wasn’t there to receive him—a poor, humble guy with a simple request. But he is there for the picture with a politician or an ambassador. Therefore, I don’t like it. I am disappointed.

*Were there any popes that you liked more?*

The former one, no! John Paul I liked. . . . He was humbler. . . . But the former one, the one before this, no! He was a Nazi! And this one [Francis] is a politician looking for a picture! I don’t like it. . . . I just don’t like it. I don’t like that kind of behavior. There you can see that he is not serving anyone but himself.

The differentiation between religion and politics is not about location but about performance of religion in the public realm. It is a matter of when religion is present and why. The perception of some respondents was that in some situations Francis was not “beyond partisan politics” (María [None]). Because politicians are allegedly involved as gatekeepers and the pope allowed the infiltration of politics into his position, his performance was condemned.

Another group of respondents mentioned that a problem with religion in the public sphere was that religion was not transparent. The former Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner visited the pope many times. One respondent said, “I wonder what they talk about. What kind of arrangements are they making? Things like that, you know? For sure, they talk about things that we don’t know, that the majority of people don’t know” (Gustavo [Catholic]).

The relationship with the president was not an easy one, at least as portrayed by the Argentine media. While some news outlets had presented Bishop Bergoglio as a critic of her policies, after his appointment as pope they met five times in two years. “When Bergoglio was in Argentina, he was ‘anti-K’ [opposed to the Kirchner administration] and ‘anti-Peronist’ [opposed to the Peronist Party], and then, I don’t get what dark thing went on naming him as pope, you know?” (Gloria [None]). Religious institutions
and religious actors were perceived by both Catholics and non-Catholics as “dark,” and lack of clarity tainted interventions of religion in the public sphere. Because the issues debated were beyond public view, they were not perceived as honest and trustworthy.

CONCLUSION

The respondents in this sample were recruited among lower-class people in a city with a tradition of religious presence in the public sphere and significant influence by religious authorities on local politics. Because of that, I assumed that they would be less critical of the pope’s interventions in the public sphere. After all, he is an Argentine pope who is making a point of challenging the economic system—a challenge that the secular elites have endorsed. However, what I discovered was the ability of lower-class respondents to make sophisticated distinctions about the role of religion in Argentina’s public sphere.

For these respondents there was a place for religion in Argentina’s “enchanted modernity.” Religion and politics shared the space where power was exercised. At odds with the secularization project (Blancarte, 2007; Mallimaci, 2015), respondents welcomed religion in the public sphere when it challenged modernity to include the poor and served as a sign of divinity among us and a reminder of the unity of all humankind. For Argentina’s poor Catholics and non-Catholics, the proper role of the Church is with the poor, taking care of them and protecting them against “financial powers.” Francis can talk about the economy because the poor are marginalized from that system. They are not allowed to participate in the decisions that shape the economic order, and therefore they welcome a voice that will represent them. Because the pope, as a global religious authority, has access to that sphere of power, it is expected that he will criticize the system that disenfranchises the poor.

This acceptance of religion’s presence in the public sphere did not mean sacralization of it. Respondents preferred to keep the distinction of spheres (Casanova, 1994; Dobbelaere, 1999). They did not welcome the pope’s interventions when he used his position to pursue a partisan agenda. Since they can make their own claims heard in local politics, they disliked the involvement of the pope in that sphere. Even with limitations, and with Mauricio Macri’s neoliberal administration, the political system works, and therefore, the picture of the pope with a politician was seen as an abuse of a religious position.

In Argentina’s modernity, religious leaders share the place of power brokers, but the exercise of power is susceptible to checks and balances. Religious intervention is legitimated when it empowers people and when it advocates for those left behind by modernity, not when it leaves people powerless. In essence, the poor already have local politicians; what they need is a global voice. People dislike the pope’s intervening in local politics because they perceive that they can control the system through elections. If the pope gets involved, he is undercutting their agency. This also helps explain the high “trust” in the Church (80 percent) and the strong disapproval of Catholic clerics’ running for office (77 percent) (Mallimaci, 2013; Suárez, 2015).
The role assigned to religion challenges the hegemonic view of modernity that locates the religious experience in the private realm. For participants in the sample, when a religious figure gave voice to a human rights claim (the pre-eminence of human lives over financial interests), it was welcome in the public sphere. Since the economic achievements of modernity are not evenly shared in the region, respondents had no problem with the pope’s criticizing it. The discussion among participants seemed to be more about the role of religion in the public sphere than the location of it, which has been the issue for some scholars.

Seventy percent of Catholics in the world live in poor countries, and this may give the pope substantial political power. Even so, the findings here suggest that we cannot expect that people will follow without criticism what he says. They call for further investigation on the limits of religion in the political sphere and the agency of believers to set boundaries to religious figures’ interventions in the public realm.

NOTE

1. Córdoba’s latest data available on religious affiliation, for 2014, indicate that 61 percent of its inhabitants identify themselves as Catholics, 7.5 percent as Evangelicals, and less than 1 percent each as Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Muslims, and of other religions. Almost 26 percent identify themselves as “None” or indifferent, 2.3 percent as atheist, and 1.8 percent as agnostic. More than 80 percent of those responding “None” had been raised as Catholics (Rabbia, 2014). The city has a long tradition of Catholic presence, and its bishops have been regarded as power brokers by national public opinion (Morello, 2004; 2017a).

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