

## CATHOLIC CHURCH, EDUCATION AND LAICITY IN ARGENTINEAN HISTORY

Germán Torres

*Ceil-Conicet y Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, Argentina.*



### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze, in a historical perspective, the relationship between Catholic Church and the field of public education in Argentina, taking laicity as a conceptual axis. We assume that the different configurations of the relationship between Church and State can be defined following the tensions over education governance. We present a periodization, ranging from the colonial period to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through which we identify lines of continuity, tensions and re-articulations of educational laicity as well as strategies of the Church, the State and civil society actors in different historical moments.

Key-words: education, Catholic Church, laicity, Argentina.

### IGREJA CATÓLICA, EDUCAÇÃO E LAICIDADE NA HISTÓRIA ARGENTINA

### Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar, em uma perspectiva histórica, a relação entre a Igreja Católica e o campo da educação pública na Argentina, tendo a laicidade como eixo conceitual. Supomos que as diferentes configurações da relação entre a Igreja e o Estado podem ser definidas seguindo as tensões sobre a governança da educação. Nós apresentamos uma periodização, que vai desde o período colonial até o início do século 21, pela qual identificamos as linhas de continuidade, tensões e re-articulações da laicidade educacional, bem como as estratégias dos atores Igreja, Estado e sociedade civil em diferentes momentos históricos.

Palavras-chave: educação, Igreja Católica, laicidade, Argentina.

### IGLESIA CATÓLICA, EDUCACIÓN Y LAICIDAD EN LA HISTORIA ARGENTINA

### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar en perspectiva histórica la relación entre la Iglesia católica y el campo de la educación pública en Argentina, tomando a la laicidad como eje conceptual. Se asume que las distintas configuraciones de la relación entre la Iglesia y el Estado pueden ser definidas siguiendo las tensiones por el gobierno de la educación. Se presenta una periodización,

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que va desde la etapa colonial hasta el comienzo del siglo 21, que permite identificar líneas de continuidad, tensiones y rearticulaciones de la laicidad educativa, así como estrategias de la Iglesia, actores estatales y de la sociedad civil en distintos momentos históricos.  
Palabras-clave: educación, Iglesia católica, laicidad, Argentina.

## ÉGLISE CATHOLIQUE, L'ÉDUCATION ET LAÏCITÉ DANS LES L'HISTOIRE ARGENTINE

### Résumé

Le but de cet article est d'analyser, dans une perspective historique, la relation entre l'Eglise catholique et le domaine de l'éducation publique en Argentine, en prenant la laïcité comme un axe conceptuel. Nous supposons que les différentes configurations de la relation entre l'Église et l'État peuvent être définies suivant les tensions sur la gouvernance de l'éducation. Nous présentons une périodisation, allant de la période coloniale au début du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle, à travers laquelle nous identifions les lignes de continuité, de tensions et de ré-articulations de la laïcité éducative ainsi que les stratégies de l'Église, l'État et la société civile dans les différents moments historiques.

Mots-clé: éducation, Église catholique, laïcité, Argentine.

## Introduction

**B**y the last decades of the 19th century, then settled on a fragile institutional structure in the national territory, the Argentinean Catholic Church built its identity in a field of dispute against the liberal positions of the ruling elites of the country. The process of nation-State formation involved the mobilization of the Church as well as other civic organizations driven by it, aimed to catholicize political spaces of social participation and cultural production.

It might be said that to undertake a review in a historical perspective of the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church in Argentina only suffices to define the contingent power relations between the predominant ecclesiastical Catholicism and the field of public education. This paper takes precisely this premise as a starting point. It is not just to indicate education as one among other possible dimensions of analysis. Rather, this paper seeks to highlight the fact that education itself has been a privileged field of action in which the Argentinean Church built its identity as an unavoidable social actor, expanding from that central place in the definition of education its claims of interference in other country's political and cultural aspects.

This focus has already been identified by other studies centered on the relationship between the Catholic Church and politics in Argentina. For example, in his historical reading of the presence of the Church in the country's history, since the formation of the modern State until the late 20th century, Ghio says:

The conflict over religious education will strongly reappear at different times of the Argentina's 20th century troubled political history. The struggle for the so called freedom of teaching, the right to opt for a religious education, will allow Catholics to develop different strategies aimed to give back the Church part of its lost influence in the process of national organization. (2007, p. 21)

Another example of this perspective is Caimari's (2010), who argues that during the first Peronist government "education was one of the areas where the interests of the Church and the government crossed and one of the few where it is possible to follow the continuity of this relationship" (p. 139). Similarly, Dri (1997) notes, regarding the return to democracy in 1983 that "the issue of education is the privileged field of either confrontation or negotiation relations, between the Church and the State" (p. 85). Although centered on different historical contexts, these observations can serve as a common focus of analysis. The highlighting of the educational disputes as a constitutive element of Church's strategies and identity against the different governments was advanced by these studies.

This paper seeks to contribute to this analytical perspective, starting from a converged reading of the History of Catholic Church, History of Education and Sociology of Religion main literature, tracking and synthesizing the references to the Church's intervention in education. The unification of dispersed references aims to provide a global outlook of that intervention still not present in local historiography. This is not just to undertake a state of the art about the relations between the Catholic Church and education in Argentina, but attempts to analyze these relations in a historical perspective, according

to some analytical elements to identify continuities and ruptures along the political life of the country and its educational system. For this aim, we basically take the concept of *laicity* (i.e. the French *laïcité*) as an analytical gateway for addressing the mutual conformation of the Catholic Church and the field of public education in Argentina.

### **Laicity, secularization and education**

A first point to note is the distinction between secularization and laicity. In broad terms, secularization refers to the "long social, symbolic and cultural process of recomposition of beliefs with the consequent loss of power of religious specialists" (Mallimaci, 2006, p. 71). Within this process, Casanova (1994) identifies three different and not necessarily simultaneous ways to understand secularization: as differentiation of secular spheres (politics, economics, science) in relation to religious institutions and norms; as the progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices; as marginalization of religion in the private sphere.<sup>1</sup>

If secularization is presented as a cultural process of tension between religion and society which, as well as a fluctuating conformation of the public sphere, laicity refers specifically to normative configurations and linkages between State and religious actors around the construction of so-called modern freedoms, such as freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. In this sense, Blancarte (2012) identifies three core elements of laicity: respect for freedom of conscience; the autonomy of politics versus religion; and the guarantee of equality and non-discrimination.

There is also agreement on highlighting the historical character of laicity, in order to think of it rather as "a process than a fixed or finished form" (Blancarte, 2008a, p. 30), or in Poulat's words, to understand that "it is not static" and that we should understand it "from the battles of ideas it raised, the legal measures that instituted it, the *de facto* balances established" (2012, p. 38). Indeed, it is interesting to note in the context of this paper that the term *laïcité* first emerged in 1871 in the midst of the debates for the education without religious instruction in France (Blancarte, 2008b). A final point also stressed is the need not to focus the analysis of the processes of laicization in strictly legal terms, but also include the creation of specific political cultures by political leadership as a *modus operandi* (Esquivel, 2010a). So that it can be undertaken a social, cultural and historical approach to account for the laicity formation within the web of relationships between State, civil society and religious actors.

For our case, it is then necessary to analyze the development of laicity in the Argentinean educational system in a historical perspective to address the links between the Catholic Church and the various governments, paying attention to the disputes over the control of the educational field and the consequent restatements and restructuring of places for both the Catholic Church and the State in the public space. To this end, we

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the uses, scope and limits of the concept of secularization, cf. Casanova (2012), Mallimaci (2008).

propose below a periodization<sup>2</sup> of this relationship to identify continuities, tensions and re-articulations of educative laicity in different historical moments.

### **Church, education and laicity in Argentina**

#### **1500-1880: from Colony times to the formation of Argentina**

It is mandatory to start with a reference to the role of Catholic religious orders as the first impellers of educational projects in the colonial period. Under the Patronage begun by Pope Julius II in 1508, the goal that guided the conquistadors was the evangelizing enterprise and implementation of the Spanish Christianity on indigenous peoples. Mercedarians and Franciscans orders began the systematic evangelization in today's Argentinean territory. Also other orders had their own educational spaces, like the Dominicans and Augustinians (Brito, 1992; Liboreiro, 1992). The Jesuits especially marked their presence since the late 16th century, following the pattern of reductions in different regions of the country. In addition to these ventures, the Catholic educational commitment meant training their own body of clerics and local elites. In 1621, the Jesuits founded the Colegio Máximo Córdoba, germ of the future university. At the time of the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata, was founded in Buenos Aires the Royal College of San Carlos in 1772, by Juan Maciel, a prominent canon.

In the independence period was consolidated in a group of local intellectuals, such as Mariano Moreno and Manuel Belgrano, the idea of forming a free public school system. In the following years, this idea would move to the proposals of many provincial *caudillos*, as Estanislao López in Santa Fe, Juan Bustos in Córdoba and Justo José de Urquiza in Entre Ríos. These ideas contrasted with traditionalists and anti-liberal leaders such as Facundo Quiroga in La Rioja or Juan Manuel de Rosas in Buenos Aires. After the Battle of Caseros, the National Constitution of 1853 which enacted the support of Catholic worship, the requirement for the President to be Catholic and conversion to Catholicism of the indigenous, in its 5<sup>th</sup> article established that each province would dictate its own Constitution to ensure, among other things, free primary education. At this juncture of nation-building, it was opened a space for the realization of the liberal ideas of the so-called Generation of 37, particularly Domingo Sarmiento's educational projects. Beyond the discussions within that group of intellectuals on the educational profile that would prevail, the idea that "Argentina would had a schooling system in which the State would play a major role" (Puiggrós, 2012, 75).

However, note the dissimilarities between these ideas and other proposals within the national territory. The most notable example is the so-called Córdoba Catholic nationalism, which since the 60s of the 19th century faced the laic claims in education (Roitenburd, 1993). This position based on a "Hispanic-Catholic" hard substrate spread also in northwest schools. It was marked then a continuity with the privileged place accorded to

<sup>2</sup> There are periodizations of the historical configurations of laicity in Argentina (cf. Di Stefano, 2011; Mallimaci, 2004), though centered in wide socio-political processes in which it is not possible to define the specificity of the educational issue.

the Catholic religion in provincial Constitutions enacted after Caseros, in which, despite the liberal progress, compulsory religious education was imposed.

The existence of dissimilar positions on laicity within Argentina is one of the features that will define education and the role of the Church in the following decades. Just at this historic moment of the formation of Argentina is pertinent to talk about laic education based on the construction of religious freedoms between the State and the Church, although the two actors still had not shaped and consolidated their institutional profiles. On the one hand, there was not a national State structure that could sustain a public education system as we know today, but there was a mixed proliferation of national establishments, others ruled by the provinces of religious orders, as well as public libraries and popular societies. On the other hand, at this time the Argentinean Church was a weak institution, marked by the leaderless in most of its dioceses and by the remarkable decrease in their body of clergy.

### **1880-1930: progress and setbacks of educational laicity**

In the process of Argentinean nation-state formation, Catholicism was forced to reformulate its place in society, facing public space actors who questioned and advanced on the areas of intervention that it had occupied until then. The ecclesiastical institution initiated a triple process of romanization, nationalization and clericalization (Zanatta, 1996). That is, it strengthened its links with the Vatican, rooted its evangelizing role in the national territory and identity, and consolidated its doctrinal orthodoxy within the spectrum of Catholic lay actors. In this period, in addition to the voices of the clergy themselves, also emerged a militant Catholicism through a proper Catholic press, labor organizations and other associations of Catholic intellectuals, who reacted against the liberal positions that proliferated for decades, and that in these defining moments of the Argentinean State and identity features, became crucial for the Church. The organic connection between "the citizen and the faithful" (Di Stefano; Zanatta, 2009, p 321) gradually ceased to function as a foundational premise, opening the field to a restructuration of the place of the ecclesiastical institution in the new Argentinean society.

This process of secularization, which articulated with a spirit of time based on the ideas of the triumph of reason and indefinite progress, forced the Argentinean Church to consolidate its identity through a differentiation against those elements opposed to its vision of society, culture and politics: modernity and liberalism. The dominant anti-liberal position in the Argentinean Catholicism was part of the ideological weave of the Roman Church, based on the doctrinal complaint of Pius IX against the contemporary errors, listed in the *Syllabus* of 1864, which included the ideas of State intervention and control on education.

Since the late 19th century, the dispute with the State over the control of education was one of the defining points not only of the tense relations between the Church and the political field, but of its own identity as an active institution in the public discussions on the senses of the Argentinean culture. In addition to civil marriage, the nationalization of the cemeteries and the registration of citizens implemented by President Julio Roca, the

establishment of a national educational system meant for the Church the dislocation of its place in society.

The epicenter of the discussions for the government of education was firstly in the South American Pedagogical Congress, launched in 1882 from a Roca's decree and that served as a prelude to the discussion and passing of the Bill n. 1.420 in 1884. In that event, involving local and international specialists in the Americas, were deposited the highest expectations of the ruling liberal oligarchy in relation to the construction of an educational system that would function as one of the fundamental pillars of the nation-state structure that was expected to be consolidated. In the Pedagogical Congress, Catholic intellectuals had a strong presence in the debates. The discussed topics included the freedom of teaching, the place of State in the education of children and the presence of religion in public education. Indeed, one of the critical points of the event was given by the motion to declare that common education "is essentially Catholic" (Bravo, 1985, p 21), which motivated that, after heated discussions, the assembly dominated by a liberal majority, resolved to suppress the religious theme from the discussions and that participant bishops and other Catholic representatives withdrew from the event.

Certainly, the issue of religion and the place of the State in education would again be present in the debates initiated in 1883 at the National Parliament. These issues were the tensest knots in the parliamentary sessions that resulted in the enactment of the law n. 1.420. While compulsory religious education could be resisted by liberal laicists, the religious issue and the place of the Church did not cease to be present in the text of the law finally enacted. The law n. 1.420 was recognized and exalted at the time and throughout the 20th century as the legislation that established the compulsory, free and laic education. In light of the debates and the final text, it is clear that the law corresponded more with an active *laicism* than with laicity, following the distinction of Blancarte (2008b) between, on the one hand, a critical political positioning often anticlerical (laicism) and, on the other hand, a form of social legitimation that excludes any religious element (laicity). The dispute over laicity remained latent in its controversial 8<sup>th</sup> article, which instituted that religious instruction "may only be given in public schools by authorized ministers of the different religions, to the children of their respective communions, and before or after class hours". Although the laic character of education is not mentioned in any of the sections of the law, the explicit exclusion of religion from the compulsory curricular minimum meant for the Church a defeat that would feed since then its lively rejection of any educational proposal that could had the centrality of State and laicity as guiding principles. The law n. 1.420 operated as an unavoidable point of anchorage in the educational discourse memory, which would be extended as a unifying narrative along the entire 20th century.

The compulsory, free and laic education slogan of a law that applied only to the Federal District and the National Territories<sup>3</sup> must be contrasted with the configuration of laicity in other educational practices. Resistances to the law n. 1.420, at the normative level, had a heterogeneous development in other provinces where compulsory teaching of

<sup>3</sup> The law n. 1.532 of 1884 created the National Territories of Chaco, Formosa, Misiones, La Pampa, Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz and Tierra del Fuego.

religion was included. Also in the immediate years from the enactment of this legislation, new Catholic schools, focusing on the formation of the ruling class, were created, and the education offered by some religious orders was expanded. In the following years, the Argentinean Church focused on the consolidation, standardization and discipline of all Catholic educational establishments.

The process of institutional centralization of an educational circuit, alternative to the State circuit, included the adoption of a "plan of religious teaching" designed to "implement a basic religious instruction in all colleges and schools of the country which are in the hands of the Church" (Di Stefano; Zanatta, 2009, p 396), and the creation in 1925 of the Superior Council of Catholic Education - Consudec – as an organ that would settle the official guidelines for Catholic educational institutions. In this context also occurred the first foundation of the Catholic University of Argentina (UCA), in 1910. Thereby, the Church thought that could be materialized its desire of forming a properly Catholic ruling class. But the fact that there was no legal framework to support and guarantee that their titles could be recognized by the State authority, led to this first institutional proposal to close its doors in 1922. However, in the same year were created the Catholic Culture Courses, an educational space that functioned as a prolific stronghold for a Catholic nationalist intelligentsia, immediate antecedent for the definitive founding of the UCA to be held in 1958.

In addition to the strengthening of this Catholic education field, it should be noted that even within the same national educational system were positions not always consistent with the principles of the law n. 1.420, including resistance from Catholic actors in different provinces (Tedesco, 2003). Following Puiggrós, the liberal onslaught against the mandatory presence of religion in public schools:

Did not imply its restriction to the private sphere. On the contrary, its presence was manifested in the public school in the discourse itself, which included religious elements in textbooks, in the speeches of the educational conferences, in official dissertations and in everyday speech of many teachers. (1990, p. 41)

This foundational period of the national educational system was a process marked by uneven progress and setbacks and constant reconfigurations of educational laicity. That would not be but the dominant logic all along the 20th century. Since then, emerged the main senses and some of the strategies that would dominate the educational disputes between the Argentinean Church and the State for decades: the discussion on freedom of teaching, the State prerogatives, the place of Catholicism in the national identity; and the struggle for the inclusion of religious education, articulated with a search for consolidation of all Catholic educational institutions as an alternative to the State educational proposals.

### **1930-1946: Catholic Nation and religious education**

In the 1930s, the Argentinean Church had already advanced in its institutional consolidation through the centralization and discipline of the whole church and lay actors, besides expanding its presence in the national territory. At this social juncture, a militant

conception of Catholicism took hold, aimed at building a fully Catholic social order. This meant a flourishing of the Catholic Church in public sphere, clearly including the educational field. It was a counter-offensive that the Church had expected since the liberal onslaught that had driven the organization of the State and the construction of a national identity in the last decades of the 19th century.

The breakdown of what was seen as the liberal and laic hegemony in national education had as its background the succession of military coups that began with the one headed by José Uriburu in 1930. The brief rise of the law n. 1.420 - even though the above identified regional disparities - had its end in this period. In this new context, education was one of the prominent places where the Church could strengthen its position in the Argentinean society. For example, in 1936 was founded the Federation of Catholic Teachers and Professors who joined the Consudec as organizing institution of the Catholic education, while the Church kept its claims and pressure on the different governments for the mandatory inclusion of religious education in public education, as a means of educational "reconquest" on "behalf of the catholicity of the nation" (Di Stefano Zanatta, 2009, p. 442). In this period, local Catholicism's educational preaching was marked by the antiliberal precepts of 1929 Pius XI's encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri*, focused specifically on the issue of Christian education. This text synthesized the doctrine of the Church and parents' primacy in the "educational mission", leaving to the State the function of guaranteeing and protecting that mission.

The nationalist military coup in June 1943 represented the strengthening of ties between the Army and the Church, opening the space for the consolidation of the *myth of the Catholic Nation* (Zanatta, 1996), and the subsequent construction of an integralist device of christianization of all spheres of social life, against the "threats" of liberalism and socialism (Mallimaci, 1988). Gustavo Martínez Zubiría, who was Minister of Justice and Public Instruction of General Pedro Ramírez, initiated the normative breakdown with what most upset the Church about law n. 1.420, ordering the compulsory teaching of the Catholic religion in all primary and secondary schools. The decree n. 18.411, in late 1943, was based on the explicit signaling of the laicist "aberrations" of that law, derived from its controversial 8<sup>th</sup> article. While this decree involved a strong recognition towards the Church, its implementation also involved the opening of a State control space on educational activities of Catholics in schools (Bernetti; Puiggrós, 1993).

Since this time, the establishment of the imaginary that linked essentially the Catholic Church and the Armed Forces with the Argentinean identity strengthened its legitimacy to intervene actively in the political, cultural and social life of the country. This allowed the Church to achieve its repeated claim for the compulsory introduction of religious education in the public school system. Catholic claims on education, the progress obtained and the tensions and resistances around laicity that took place in this period would be all condensed into the educational experience of Peronism and its complex relationship with the Church.

### 1946-1955: peronism and religious education

The fluctuations in the links between the Catholic Church and the government of Juan Perón were in tune with the fluctuating tensions over the issue of education. In its pre-1946 presidential election campaign, the issue of religion as a compulsory item of public education came into play as one of the prominent elements for gaining the support of the Catholic Church. The continuity of religious education became then one of the main connection points between Peronism and the ecclesiastical institution, at least in the beginning of their complex relationship.

Peron's government did not hesitate to defend the decree n. 18.411/43. Moreover, in 1947 was proceeded its parliamentary treatment to convert it into a national law. That decision made the dissidents within the ruling party, who referenced in labourism and still defended Christianity, to rail against what they understood as a reactionary version of Catholicism. The heterogeneity of the nascent Peronism made, for example, that thirteen of the Peronist deputies refused to take an oath on the Holy Bible at taking their seats in 1946 (Di Stefano, 2010). When the vote for the ratification of compulsory religious education took place, many of these deputies decided to leave before the vote, favoring the passage of a law that Peron himself took as a responsibility, instructing his legislators to guarantee it (Caimari, 2010, p. 161).

After long parliamentary debates, the law was finally approved in April 1947. Its implementation promptly put in evidence the latent tension between Peronism and the Catholic Church. Disputes over both administrative and pedagogical direction of religious education in public schools marked the confrontation between two political actors who "shared a hegemonic vocation" (Ghio, 2007, p. 137) and that made education a battleground for the consolidation and expansion of its power to the rest of society. Since the regulation of the law itself in November 1947, the government delimited the place that would occupy the Church, establishing that the General Direction of Religious Instruction would be composed of six members: one director and four members appointed by the government, and the remaining would be appointed by the Episcopacy (Bianchi, 1992). With the creation of the Ministry of Education in 1948, also occurred the degradation of the Direction of Religious Instruction to the lower category of Department (Bianchi, 1992; Caimari, 2010).

The Church also had to address the lack of an adequate provision of teachers for the subject as well as their deficient training. But fundamentally, the Church had to face the process of peronization of education (Bianchi, 1992) which supposed the increasing dissolution of Catholic discourse within the new Peronist discourse. School practices and curriculum provisions exalted a sense of devotion to the figures of Evita and Peron and threatened to displace the Catholic discourse that had occupied a central space in schools since the so-called *Infamous Decade* (1930-1943) (Bertetti; Puiggrós, 1993, p. 338).

Within this period, it also has to be mentioned the law n. 13047, of 1947, which created the Statute for Teachers of Private Education Institutions. It was regulated then the functioning of these institutions and were put in the same level the rights and obligations of private teachers and those of teachers under the control of the State, including the

establishment of the minimum wage. This recognition was a milestone in the construction of the Argentinean education system, since it settled the State responsibility in financing the private education sector. It was also created a classification for private schools, distinguished between "ascribed to official education", "free" and "private educational institutions in general" (law 13047, 2<sup>nd</sup> Art.). This legal recognition, which provided a set of improvements to the private sector, supposed for the Church, however, greater State control over its activities, as had happened with religious education and now also rekindled the tensions within Catholic schools.

Finally, amid growing political clashes between Peronism and the Church, in 1954 the law of compulsory religious education was repealed. As Caimari states: "Despite the radiant prospects, the experience of religion in schools was disappointing for Catholics" (2010, p 167). This disappointment, among cessions and tensions with Peronism, led to a breaking point in the Church strategy, which noticed the limits of religious education under State control and with unprepared teachers, and shifted its focus in the following years to the construction of an alternative and independent educational sector.

### **1955-1976: consolidation of private education**

With the overthrow of Perón, the Church reconfigured its position in relation to the new authorities in government. The so-called Liberating Revolution counted on the Catholic Church as one of its main allies. Within this new context, nationalist Catholic Atilio Dell'Oro Maini, Minister of Education of General Pedro Aramburu, enacted in late 1955 a decree on the organization of national universities. The crisis was generated by the 28<sup>th</sup> article which authorized the creation of private universities allowed to issue professional degrees. The students' manifestations in opposition took the streets soon. It is also known the public statement of the then Rector of the UBA, José Luis Romero, who identified as "religious education" what in the decree was called simply as "free" education (Di Stefano, 2010, p. 367). The disputes around this legislation, synthesized as the debate between "laic or free", were abruptly silenced with the resignation of the Minister in May 1956, leaving open its regulation to the next government. Thus, the confrontation would re-emerge in 1958 under Arturo Frondizi's presidency.

Briefly, after Frondizi proposal to pass a law with that controversial article, mass demonstrations were initiated not only by those who opposed the decree, but also those Catholics who felt aggrieved by the anticlerical tone that discussions had taken. The intensity of the protests against the enactment of this law included the taking of schools and faculties by students as well as the mobilization of other political actors such as teachers' unions and other productive sectors. This brought to discussion a set of meanings that were beyond the university issue itself. The laic or free controversy reactivated the historical disputes that had at its core the Church's aspirations for the catholicization of society, including the educational field as a primary sphere of interference, against the claims of a laicist educational discourse that had intended to give sense to public school system since its formation.

Government repression allayed the street protests and finally led to the sanction of the law 14557, known as the Domingorena Law. Along with the recognition given by this norm to private universities, it occurred a change of strategy in the Church, who had noticed the deficiencies of a compulsory religious teaching within the public education system, in relation to the potential benefits of the consolidation of a properly Catholic educational circuit, separated from the State administration.

The 60s decade was marked by changes and disputes within Catholicism since Vatican II Council (1962-1965). In education, the 1965 encyclical *Gravissimum Educationis*, moving from the pre-conciliar principles focused on combating against liberal postulates, renewed the Catholic vision for the primary role of parents and the Church as educators, and the consequent state subsidiarity. In articulation with this new doctrinal framework, the revitalization of the Argentinean Church accompanied the consolidation of the private education sector, mainly Catholic. The progress of the private sector's relative participation within the national education system was evident in the increasing rates of private matriculation of 85% (from 303,648 to 561,306 students) in the period 1962-1976 compared to a rate of 22% (from 1,441,559 to 1,761,423 students) in the State sector (Bravo, 1984).

This growth of the private education sector was accompanied by a specific regulatory and administrative structure (Perazza; Suárez, 2011). In addition to the existing Statute for private schools promulgated by Perón, it was established in 1958 within the Ministry of Education, the National Superintendency of Private Education, whose first officials were mostly promoted by the Church itself. Under President Arturo Illia were regulated the proportions of State subsidies for the payment of teachers' salaries, covering from 40% to 100%, and breaking with the discretionality that had ruled until that moment (Morduchowicz; Iglesias, 2011). Also were regulated the conditions for the incorporation of private institutes into official education, particularly for secondary and higher education institutes.

That prominent position of the Church in the public space would be confirmed with the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-1970), even in its fluctuating relationship with Catholicism (Zanca, 2014). Onganía's second Minister of Education, José Astigueta, was surrounded by a group of Catholic scholars who shared sociability webs, and occupied various positions within the Ministry (Rodríguez, 2013a). Part of that team drafted in 1968 national education laws where the distinction between state *public* education and non-state *public* education (Bravo, 1991) was established, thereby seeking to include private schools as part of the public.

The beginnings of the 1970s would also be signaled by the prominent place of the Catholic Church as a consulting actor with a veto power on government decisions relating especially to the private education sector. During the third Peronist government (1973-1976) a questioning of the Catholic Church's place as an actor in the private education sector arose. Discussions took place around the normative regulation of the State financial contribution to private education and regulation of teaching labor in it. Eventually, the

Peronist government ratified the terms of the 13047/47 law, ensuring State contributions and legitimizing the administrative status of private institutions (Rodríguez, 2013b).

The support of the different governments to the expansion of private education in this period marks the passage from a distinctly educating national State to a subsidiary State. Throughout this period were settled the foundations for the strengthening - in normative, institutional and financial terms - of this sector. Leaving behind - though never completely - the clamor for the inclusion of religious education in public schools, the Church consolidated its strategy aimed at building educational space of its own, on the basis of freedom of teaching.

### **1976-1983: dictatorship, Catholicism and repression**

The military coup led by General Jorge Videla in 1976 deepened the syncretic link between the Armed Forces and the catholicizing claims of the Argentinean Church. This process was combined with a strongly reactionary and repressive structure, which meant that the field of education became for the dictatorship one of the primary points of attack against the "subversive threat." Unlike what had happened in other periods, this time Argentinean Church had not to push or negotiate for its requirements to be part of the definition of educational policies, since the military government gave for granted its alliance with the most conservative version of Catholicism. It was precisely the Catholic Church the one who suggested in a binding way the names of the officials for the Ministry of Education, who came from the pre-conciliar Catholic intelligentsia anchored in institutions such as Consudec, UCA or Catholic Action.

In terms of the educational policies of the auto-nominated National Reorganization Process, Pineau (2006) distinguishes two strategies of the military government. On the one hand, a repressive strategy; and on the other hand, a discriminating one. The repressive strategy consisted of a restoration of the "missing values" in the educational system and the consequent silencing of dissenting voices. This approach was based on a version of national identity linked essentially to the Western and Christian civilization, as well as order and respect for authority. The discipline on the educational system thus became in the kidnapping and disappearance of students and teachers, forced layoffs, censorship of books, and other forms of authoritarianism in everyday practices. And also, on another level, in fighting progressive educational ideas that had emerged in the past decades.

Beyond the specific characters of each of the five dictatorship's ministers of education (Rodríguez, 2011; Tedesco, Braslavsky, Carciofi, 1987), its educational guidelines had subsidiarity, elitism, and the defense of the Catholic tradition of the Argentinean nationality, Christian morality, the family and the value of spiritual transcendence in the person's definition as core meanings. The military government did not include compulsory religious education as a specific subject, but went even further by including a Catholic perspective across the definition of curricular guidelines, which was evident in subjects such as Social Studies at the primary schooling level, and History, or Moral and Civic Education at secondary school.

The dictatorship's discriminating strategy consisted of the dismantling of the national educational system, generating its progressive decentralization and the advancement of the private sector. The medium-term effect was an unequal segmentation of the educational system in different circuits according to the students' region and socio-economic sectors of belonging (Braslavsky, 1985). The first Minister of Education of the dictatorship, Ricardo Bruera, ordered the transference of national schools to the provinces to reduce the national State spending on education. This shift of the national State as main responsible for public educational funding was articulated with the subsidiarity which Church advocated as the basis of the educational system and the consequent transference of resources to the private sector. Minister Llerena Amadeo, in one of his public speeches, noted that the State should "ensure the validity of the private school" while, in a very important sense in relation to what would happen in the following decades, melted into the term "public education" both state and private schools (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 73).

Despite the strong repressive atmosphere of this period, the advancement of the educational system catholicization also had some dissent focuses. One point of public discussion was the establishment of Moral and Civic Education as a subject in 1978, which was seen in some sectors as an underhanded way back to compulsory Catholic education. Given this arrangement, from the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations offered a statement in which, under the defense of freedom of conscience, were objected the contents of the subject arguing that it "instilled notions and concepts proper of a religion that could be foreign to some students" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 90). Similarly, there were statements by associations such as the Argentinean League of Lay Culture and the Evangelical Baptist Convention. In addition to these challenges to the Catholicism claim to universality, within the proper Catholic schools emerged disagreements with the dictatorial regime (Mignone, 1999). The strategy of repression against the possible "subversive infiltration" also included these institutions, especially in those where the Vatican II and the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín's postulates had been well receptioned. As part of the "Claridad" operation driven by the Minister Bruera in 1976, persecution of teachers, students and institutions began. Among them, there were some Catholic private schools. In August 1979, the national government enacted the 21381 law, which empowered the Ministry of Education to the disqualification and dismissal of private schools staff that were "linked to subversive activities" (quoted in Mignone, 1999, p. 154).

The dictatorial educational project advanced against the senses of free and laic education, from the integralist arguments at stake, the educational proposals sanctioned and the policies developed. The discredit of State as the main responsible for education opened the place to a relegitimation of the Catholic Church as a political actor within the educational system. With increased strength on this period, public education ceased to be linearly related to the State. It should be added the moralistic, repressive and authoritarian imprint along the educational system, that is, a set of features that would be put into discussion with the return of democracy.

### 1983-1989: democracy, education and laic memory

With the return of democracy in 1983, after the dictatorship's onslaught against the core senses that had founded the national educational system, Ricardo Alfonsín government efforts focused, as Southwell says, on "restoring the classical canon of the educational system, rather than generating a new one" (2007, p. 316). The main space to put into discussion the public education was the National Pedagogical Congress (CPN) convened by the law n. 23.114 enacted in September 1984; and celebrated between April 1986 and March 1988. This CPN called for the open participation of the educational community, unions, political parties and social organizations, seeking to generate consensus for the development and enactment of a law to reform the national education system.

It is undeniable that the meaning that was given to this Congress referred to the memory of the late 19th century discussions and the motto of compulsory, free and laic education of the law n. 1.420. The laicism present in those discussions had meant a wound to the Catholic Church dragged throughout the 20 century, so that this institution had now a new chance to become an undisputed protagonist of the definition of the national educational guidelines. Although at first the Church seemed reluctant, it mobilized the spectrum of Catholic actors, in a defensive attitude against what some of the members of the Argentinean Episcopal Conference perceived as a government's laicist menace (Krotsch, 1988; Fabris, 2011). To do this, the Church made a massive to the active participation of families, clergy and teachers linked to Catholic parishes and schools in order to take the CPN decentralized assemblies and defend the so-called free education, the right of parents as primary educators and the educational and administrative autonomy of religious educational institutions.

Besides dominating most of the discussions within the CPN, in different documents of the national Episcopacy centered on the political and social processes of the democratic Argentina, the educational issue took a main place. The main text inserted as a dispute strategy in the discussions of this period was the document *Educación y Proyecto de Vida* [Education and Project of Life], drafted by the Catholic Education Episcopal Team in 1985. This document was prepared as a contribution to the public discussion of the national educational system and again served to confirm the Catholic conceptions about the role of State, the defense of religious education, while insisting on an explicit pressure for financing the private education sector.

In this regard, it is also interesting to note the names given to private enterprises under the aegis of the Catholic Church. In some key Church documents written at this dawn of democracy, the Church proposed different names such as *non-official educational institutions*, *non-official public education*, or *free education* as alternatives to the "private education" denomination. The Church built this way, in a dispute against the educational State discourse, a new sense for the private education sliding towards its inclusion within the *public* educational sphere.

Still defending the religious education in schools, one of the points of interest for the Catholic Church was mainly to equate the private with the public - as *common* and not as

a synonym for state. The analysis of the multiplicity of meanings in dispute over the nature of public education in the 80s shows the controversies around what, after the enactment of the Federal Law of Education in 1993, would be imposed as *private management public education*.

### **1989-2001: Neoliberalism and private management public education**

Many of the conclusions of the CPN served as the immediate antecedent to the definition of the educational reform by Carlos Menem's government, promoted in the early 90s. As part of the redefinition of the historical senses assigned to public education, the aspirations of the Catholic Church - as the main representative of the private education sector - materialized, as had already happened in other periods, on the legal basis of the educational system itself. In an affable relationship context between the ecclesiastical institution and Menem's government, the Federal Education Law n. 24.195 enacted in 1993, included within public education the institutions of private management alongside the State-run institutions, as well as recognizing explicitly the educator role of the Church. Mainly, this change implied a new challenge against the role that the State historically had performed in education, now within a political and educational model aimed at the privatization of the public.

Along with this legal recognition, the Argentinean Church could return to the confines of educational decision within the State structure. Its endorsement for the designation of the Ministry of Education's officials again became a common practice. In the same way, the Direction of Private Education settled as the reserved space for individuals from intellectual Catholic networks. In addition to controlling the private sector educational guidelines from the inside, the Church's leadership was erected as a prime consultant for the rest of educational decisions by the government. The most notable case in this period was the definition of the Basic Common Contents, under the terms of the recent educational reform. Several bishops intervened directly asking the Minister of Education to include Catholic axiological and conceptual elements, such as references to God, spiritual transcendence as a constitutive dimension of the human person, the primacy of the family and the leading role of Catholicism in world history (Esquivel, 2004; Nosiglia; Zaba, 2003). To the Church's satisfaction, those elements were actually included in the official curriculum proposal.

The shift of national State as main responsible for education legitimized the Catholic Church's actions. This involved the struggle for subsidies of a national State which, in the Church's vision, should not rule public education monopolistically but just finance it. The influence of Catholicism in the definition of national curriculum policies did not cease, though also in this period the focus of its public intervention was put into the consolidation of all Catholic educational institutions, thus tending to a relative autonomy within the national education system.

## Conclusions

In this paper we focused on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Argentinean education, at a national level. If, as Poulat (1986) notes the Church *is a world*, the quick tour around five centuries regarding education should recognize the multiplicity of institutional configurations of the Church itself, as well as the diversity of catholicisms, and practices, symbols, imaginaries, ethics as well as groups, social movements and subjectivities that support them (cf. Mallimaci, 1992; Mallimaci and Esquivel, 2013). The same goes for the configuration of the educational system and the diversity of actors, practices and imaginaries comprised into it.

Briefly, it might be said that the current configuration of the Argentinean education field is the result of both the regulatory guidelines as well as the political culture inherited along a history of tensions, disputes and recognitions between the State and the Catholic Church. Even the current National Education Law n. 26.206, enacted in 2006 as part of the critical onslaught against neoliberal education policies of the previous decade, regulates and legitimates a set of issues that were subject of controversy in the past decades. This law takes again the distinction of public education by its type of management (private or State-run), the Church's role as an educational agent entitled to issue degrees, and the State financial support for the teachers' salaries in private schools.

Also in the provincial Constitutions the inherited and prevalent tensions around laic education are still evident. For example, the Constitutions of Salta, Tucumán, Santiago del Estero and Córdoba contemplate compulsory religious education in public schools, while in La Pampa and San Luis it is stipulated that the teaching of religion can be given by the authorized ministers of the different cults, but off schooling time. The confessional imprint is in the basis of the Constitutions of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Catamarca and Tucumán, where the definition of educational purposes includes the *transcendent* dimension as part of the integral formation of the person (Esquivel, 2010b). All this articulates with the strong participation of religious sub-sector within the private education sector, with a national average of 64% for 2005 and figures near to 90% in provinces such as Córdoba, La Pampa, and Santa Cruz (Rivas, 2009, p. 80). Consequently, another element to note is the uneven application of the National Comprehensive Sex Education Program, instituted in 2006 amid disputes over its definition against Catholic Church's refusal (Esquivel, 2013).

Within a democratic context marked by a progressive displacement of the Catholic Church in the definition of national policies, in tension with its doctrinal precepts - such as divorce law, sexual and reproductive health, sex education, gay marriage, gender identity, dignified death, assisted fertilization, besides the discussions about decriminalization of abortion in the National Congress - education constitutes a privileged stronghold of resistance and intervention in the public space facing a State which, while still favoring the ecclesiastical institution, advances in an opposite direction in relation to Catholic demands.

In a historical review, in this article we identified lines of continuity, discontinuity and resistance at different periods, and we highlighted the discursive positioning of the Church about the educational issue. This finally leads to a theoretical and methodological input for the study of laicity and the place of the Catholic Church in the educational field. Following

Foucault's perspective, discourse “is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is for what, wherefore we struggle” (2004, p. 15). If it is also assumed that discourse, as a social practice, is “a sphere of cultural hegemony” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 95), it can be fruitful the analysis of the historical construction of a Catholic discursive order as part of a hegemonic configuration where the Church and the State’s political positions on education have been produced, reproduced, challenged and transformed.

At the undertaking of a long-term perspective, this paper cannot deal with the necessary nuances and specificities of each historical period. Facing this outlook, the conclusion of this paper is necessarily an open one, in relation to the further evolution of the Catholic Church and State relations around education, as well as the widening and deepening of research and discussions on those links from a historical, sociological and educational perspective.

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GERMÁN TORRES is graduate in Education (Universidad Nacional de Quilmes), master of Research Applied to Education (Universidad de Valladolid). Doctoral fellow of the Society, Culture and Religion Program at Center of Labor Studies and Research, Ceil-Conicet, and Department of Social Sciences at Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.

Address: Saavedra 15, 4º - Buenos Aires - Argentina.

E-mail: [germansmt@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:germansmt@yahoo.com.ar).

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