

# THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: AN ARGENTINE PERSPECTIVE

*A Discussion with Practitioners and Academics*

**Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies**

*University of California, Santa Barbara*



at Universidad del Cema  
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## An Opportunistic Collaboration

The purpose of this Buenos Aires workshop was outlined by Mark Juergensmeyer, Director of the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies at UC Santa Barbara, who said that he hoped it would provide insights into the variety of ways in which religion and global civil society relate in the Latin American context. The workshop was part of a four-year project on Religion in Global Civil Society organized by the Orfalea Center and funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, a project that will create resource materials for those graduate programs in global studies and international affairs that provide training for future leaders of international non-government service and humanitarian organizations. The workshop benefited from the participation of influential Argentinian academic and civil society leaders, who helped to identify some of the issues that the Orfalea Center will deliberate during the 2009-10 academic year when the focus of the project is on Latin America.

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## Constitutional Tie to the Catholic Church

“The Federal Government supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion.”

**CHAPTER 1, SECTION 2,  
CONSTITUTION OF THE ARGENTINE NATION**



*Catedral de la Plata. La Plata, Argentina.*

Officially, the state religion of Argentina is Roman Catholicism. The first page of the Argentine constitution declares Catholicism as the state religion, and allows for prominent recognition of the Catholic Church in state functions. However, every subsequent mention of Catholicism in the constitution effectively limits the Church’s practical political influence. For instance, reforms resulting from the efforts of the 1994 constitutional assembly eliminate the requirement for the president of the country to be a Roman Catholic. Another reform states: “Neither the regular members of the clergy nor governors in representation of their own provinces, may be members of Congress.” Finally,

Congress is granted power to approve or reject treaties and concordats concluded with the Vatican.

Leonor Slavsky, workshop panelist and a contributing member of the 1994 Constitutional Assembly, was instrumental in representing rights for indigenous people in the new constitution. Argentina’s indigenous population — estimated at between 700,000 and 1.5 million — is granted special ethnic, cultural and other rights under the Argentine constitution. Enforcement of those rights, however, is inconsistent. Of the 23 provinces, only eleven recognize indigenous rights in their constitutions.

With some exceptions, Argentine government protocol has historically tended to honor the Catholic Church. Bishops often have a place alongside ministers, governors and other officials in patriotic ceremonies. At the important May Revolution celebration, for instance, Argentina’s president along with his or her spouse and ministers is expected to attend the Te Deum, celebrated by the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Throughout Argentina’s history, presidents have occasionally challenged the influence of the Church, but have never entirely eliminated the Church from state affairs.

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## Religious Identity: How Argentines Identify Themselves and How They Practice Religion

The contrast between the nominally prominent position of the Catholic Church in the Argentine constitution and the scant elaboration of any meaningful political role for it, mirrors what appears to be the role that the Church plays in the day-to-day lives of Argentines. Leonor Slavsky concurs with the opinion that the Catholic Church has a limited role in Argentine society: “Here in Argentina, the Church is very close to the political and economic hierarchy but has limited influence in everyday life... I think Argentina is a quite secular society. And that is why the Church can say no to abortion or divorce and people will do it anyhow.” Slavsky offered by way of explanation that early immigrants were not particularly religious: “The conditions in Argentina were not the ones in which to



*Mercedes Carluccio, Program Director, Global Democracy.*

“The power the Catholics have here – the link between the Catholics and the government – doesn’t imply a connection between religion and society.”

**MERCEDES CARLUCCIO**

lead a religious life. They [immigrants with strong religious convictions] went to the U.S.”

Beatriz Gurevich, Special Advisor to CEIEG at UCEMA, added that although liberation theology spread widely in Latin America after the Second Vatican Council, it “never caught on in Argentina because it was strongly opposed by the hierarchy, and the state itself.”

Argentina hosts a broad range of religious practices and forms of worship. Demographic data indicate

that most of the people of Argentina self identify as Roman Catholic, with dramatically smaller percentages claiming Protestantism, Judaism, various indigenous religions, and Islam. Recent decades have witnessed a rise of evangelicalism throughout the country. As in other parts of Latin America, the evangelical movement in Argentina has been formed largely by converts from Catholicism among the lower classes.

Rebeca Estevez, a graduate student of political science at UCEMA who attended the meeting, shared something of her religious attitude: “I am a Catholic. I come from a Catholic family and I went to a Catholic school. But I have my own opinions about issues.” Workshop panelists confirmed that Rebecca’s religious identity reflects that of a large percentage of Argentines.

Kurt Frieder explained that the Catholic Church is changing rapidly in Argentina. “The gap is growing between the hierarchy and the priests who are working in the community... People don’t believe in the hierarchy, but on the other hand the priests working in the community are finding solutions.” These priests “are working with evangelical churches and Jewish rabbis... and they are doing things together, specifically in social welfare.”

## The not-so-exceptional story of Fernando López-Alves



*Fernando López-Alves shared the story of his family history and his relationship with religion.*

I was born next door in Uruguay. My parents were immigrants from Spain. So, my contact with religion was to hate it, simply because my father was an anarchist. He came to Uruguay to organize labor. I grew up playing dominoes with my father and his telling me every single day, “Do you see that [church] building there across the street ? These are our enemies. You shouldn’t go in there.” So of course I wanted to go in there. Our local priest offered a free movie every Saturday if you attended mass. So I attended mass – which I didn’t understand very much of – every Saturday. I [went] so I could see the adventures of Zoro and Gary Cooper and those old cowboy movies. They were free so, heck, religion was not that bad after all.

An example of this type of cooperation made the news several months before the workshop. A priest who denounced the use of drugs among youth was threatened by drug dealers. "It was a big deal that appeared in the newspapers and so on, and there was a big movement on behalf of this priest," recounted Mr. Frieder. "You had rabbis and evangelical pastors who were working with [the priest]... and that was really great because you found that the social movements working in the lower parts of society, and especially in the poorer parts of society, are working together. And the hierarchy had nothing to do with that."

Commenting on his difficulties with Catholic dogma, Carlos Escudé explained: "I was born under Catholicism and I ceased to be a Catholic precisely because I disagreed." Carlos eventually converted to Judaism.

Beatriz Gurevich, Special Advisor to CEIEG, also talked a little about her religious background: "I was born in a Jewish family. My grandfather came from Vienna... He created an NGO in the province of Buenos Aires, a Jewish NGO. We are free thinkers. We are Jewish. So my relationship with religion was quite difficult. When I had my children I tried to teach them why we did not need to

believe in God. Man is the partner of the creator... I got to know that people's relations to religion are not so simple."



*Carlos Escudé, Director, Centro de Estudios Internacionales y de Educacion para la Globalizacion.*

I studied philosophy and of course I became a socialist at the age of fourteen. I started to work in politics a little bit before that, at the age of twelve. I went with my father distributing a newspaper that the anarchists have called *El Sol* on the streets of Montevideo. Pretty soon Uruguay became something different than it used to be: the military dictatorship came in. Pretty soon we needed to escape. Franco was in Spain, so we could not go back to Spain. By 1975 we were in Venezuela. I met a professor from UCLA who told me I should go there and get a degree in something from the United States. He said, "If you don't do that number crunching you will never get a job." So I became a number cruncher. In that regard, I learned more about religion. When I was a number cruncher, my advisor was totally religious. When he invited me for dinner we had to hold hands and

pray before we could get to the food. I couldn't understand that incredible dichotomy. He was a religious guy and I couldn't get that. My relations with religion have not been resolved to this day: my father's voice versus my experience. There is a connection between religiosity and rationality. At UCSB I was director of a program in Washington DC for four years. I worked for Al Gore, [and] found out that Al Gore is also deeply religious. He was working very intensively with 25 NGOs out of his deep religious belief that the universe is one and that we are destroying it. This is what interests me about religion. This is what my academic work is about. This is a good experience for me and my learning process.



*Mark Juergensmeyer, Orfalea Center Director and Sebastián Kobaru, graduate of UCEMA.*

Sebastián Kobaru, a student of international relations at Universidad del CEMA, wanted to emphasize that the link between religious studies and international relations is not yet apparent to potential employers and that this has an impact on those seeking to bridge the two. “I have worked at the only center for Judaic studies at the university level here in Argentina... Something I would like to share with you is that when I sent out my CV... stating my experience at the center for Judaic studies, no one understood my interest in international relations and this link: why a center for Judaic studies is related or linked to international relations, and how we can see religion from a more secular point of view. These clear interactions can be very evident to people who see [them], but very difficult for people in other fields to feel and to understand. This touches me, because I thought this connection was very clear for most people. But I was mistaken.”

“Argentina is different from the U.S., where most people belong to a religious community. Most Argentinians do not belong to a religious community... Even if they say ‘I am Catholic,’ or ‘I’m Jewish,’ it is not the same; it is the story of their family they are talking about.”

LEONOR SLAVSKY

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## Indigenous/Marginalized Populations’ Relationship with Religion

Leonor Slavsky, whose research program is focused on the relationship between indigenous communities and various levels of Argentine government, explained that political disjunction, geographic fragmentation, and the organization of the Catholic Church prevent indigenous peoples from coordinating their advocacy efforts in pursuit of coherent and progressive policies. The indigenous peoples of Argentina “are under the jurisdiction of each province... which makes the people closer to their government, but we also have big difficulties with the real application of the national laws. We have good legislation for indigenous people but it is on the national level. The national congress doesn’t have much trouble signing laws [but] each province has to try to apply the laws. This brings many difficulties not only to the state situation, but also to the possibilities for local organizations. Indigenous people who live in the



*Leonor Slavsky, Kurt Frieder, and Carlos Escudé.*

four different provinces have many difficulties uniting themselves and forming a strong organization” because the political relationships are different in each province. Finally, the leadership of the Catholic Church is not uniform around the country, as “there are different bishops with different politics” in each province.

Kurt Frieder kept the acuteness of problems related to poverty on the front burner throughout the workshop. “Access to a health system in most countries in Latin America is Darwinian; really only the empowered have access.” One’s chances of receiving basic health support “has to do with poverty and level of knowledge, which means that the majorities in poor, indigenous, and otherwise marginalized populations” are often mortally vulnerable to ailments that modern medicine can address very easily.

“We have 500,000 women who undergo abortions each year, and they have to do it in a clandestine way because the Church is opposed to it... Of those 500,000 abortions, 50,000 women die because of clandestine abortions forced because of religion. They wouldn’t die if the health system was open to them.” The 50,000 who die “are poor women and they die because they have no money, they have no knowledge,” and therefore no access to safe medical treatment.

In Latin America, “as opposed to Europe, most people can’t act in opposition to the Church because they don’t have the means. The system does not grant poor people sovereignty over their bodies,” explained Frieder. Thus, prevalent poverty throughout Latin America has resulted in the empowerment of conservative social policies advocated by the Catholic Church.



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## Faith-Based Organizations in Argentina: How Are They Perceived? What Are Their Real Objectives? What Are Their Tactics? Some Case Studies

One brief comment went a long way toward elucidating the general credibility of various sectors of Argentine society relative to each other: “The Church and the NGOs still have a good reputation,” Kurt Frieder observed. “Not the government, the army, and the police. Not the politicians.”



*Rebeca González Esteves conveyed her experience working to bring solar energy to rural communities in northern Argentina.*

Graduate student Rebeca Esteves reinforced this theme from her own experience working as a volunteer for a Catholic NGO supplying solar energy to rural communities in northern Argentina. “Although we are a Catholic NGO,” she said, “we do not teach the Bible or do any kind of propagandist activities... We found out that being a Catholic organization opened a lot of doors and possibilities.” Speaking of the people with whom her organization now regularly works, she noted that most of

them “did not want to receive us when they thought we came from the government, [but] when we told them we came from an NGO — a Catholic NGO — then it was okay.”

With her experience as a case in point, Rebeca reminded workshop participants that while faith-based NGOs often do have ulterior motives, those motives do not necessarily involve proselytization. For example, the *Asociacion Civil Santa Maria Reina*, the organization that Rebeca volunteers with, has taken on the challenge of bringing electricity to impoverished rural communities. She explained that this objective “is moved by the idea that it is important for these people to feel part of the country before they can feel part of the world. They are isolated... in a province that has a very limited communication network. We think it is extremely important for them to feel part, first, of the province, then of the country that actually cares about them. Because we come from Buenos Aires, a place they have never known and have never been to, [the beneficiaries of these programs] see that they are not isolated and not left out by society.” Without the presence of NGOs, many Argentines would “have the feeling they have been left out by society.”

A controversial topic brought up by local participants was the establishment in South America of a wing of the Shi’ite Islamic organization, Hezbollah. The group started in Latin America among the roughly 25,000 immigrant Muslims who inhabit a remote region divided by the borders of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina known as the Tri-border or Triple Frontier. These families emigrated mainly from Lebanon in two waves, first after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and then following the 1985 Lebanese civil war. There are now roughly 600,000 Muslims in Argentina alone. Hezbollah’s alleged involvement in two deadly terror attacks in Argentina led some panelists to voice concerns regarding terrorism and the risk that this group poses to Argentine security. On the other hand, Hezbollah, which the U.S. government labels a terrorist group, is not simply a purveyor of Shi’a militancy; in Lebanon where it originated it is in fact largely a social service organization, providing basic public services that the Lebanese state is unable or unwilling to offer its citizens. The group appears to

be replicating that model in the South American context. “It is very interesting how they are moving among the poor in Argentina,” noted Gurevich. “They are building a society from below.” Gurevich, who has researched the group in the Argentine context, emphasized the scope of the group’s aspirations: “What they are doing is trying to create a general consciousness about a new way of ruling the world that is essentially about solidarity... It is a universal movement of solidarity. They are making a contribution to solidarity and to new kinds of equality politics in the country.” Escudé reinforced this point, observing that, “it really is an important force... They have great influence in picketing and [political] organization” at the grassroots level. “Ever since the 1992 and 1994 bombings in Buenos Aires,” Escudé explained, “I have become very concerned with religion-inspired terrorism. That is the reason I am sitting at this table. I am concerned not only as it relates to Argentina, but as it relates to the world at large. I don’t think Americans understand that religion-inspired terrorism hit Argentina almost a decade before it hit the U.S. in a major way.”

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## Understanding ‘Global Civil Society’



*Giles Gunn, Chair of the Global & International Studies Program at UCSB.*

Giles Gunn of UC Santa Barbara commented at length on how “the borders between the civil and the political, as well as between the civil and the economic or commercial, are porous at best and often merely define another space where power, frequently in the form of symbolic capital, is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in ways that are

sometimes decidedly uncivil.” Further deconstructing the term *global civil society*, Gunn continued: “This process of going global occurred, or rather began to occur, from the moment religions began to create for their communicants a trans-local sense of personal/social identity that permitted or encouraged extensive and intensive mobilization.”

Gunn’s comments provided the basis for an exchange between professors Juergensmeyer and Escudé which elucidated two contrasting perspectives on how human societies may be understood, and the extent to which they can be compared with one another.

Escudé stated one position as follows: “If all men and women have the same human rights, then all cultures are not ethically equivalent. Contrariwise, if all historically rooted cultures are ethically equivalent, then not all women are endowed with essential human rights. These two statements are not mutually compatible; you have to take one or the other.”

Escudé referenced Juergen Habermas when asserting his position on cultural relativism, arguing that “it is incompatible with the West’s discovery, so to speak, of human rights... I can only accept a global civil society which is anchored on the idea that all men and women are created equal.”

Juergensmeyer was not willing to accept Escudé’s logic: “I don’t agree, because the subtext which you



Mark Juergensmeyer and Carlos Escudé.

gloss over is the assumption that there are cultural structures that provide a template of a certain kind, or mode, of behavior that then provides the opportunity for greater ethical behavior in some societies than in others. I find it problematic to assume that there are impermeable civilizations.” Juergensmeyer noted further that it is important to deconstruct categorizations of peoples in order to understand how individuals think, act, and ultimately influence the norms within their societies.

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## Each Country in Latin America Has a Unique Relationship with Religion

“We have different [Catholic] Churches in every Latin American country.”

**LEONOR SLAVSKY**

Among the workshop participants the feeling was nearly universal that Argentine society has a relationship with Catholicism that is unique in Latin America. Leonor Slavsky drew on years of experience as a scholar of Latin American cultures in making this point. Attributing current religious practices in some segments of the Argentine population to an “historical process,” she observed: “Argentina is a special case, even in Latin America. We can’t generalize... If you compare Argentina with Brazil, it is not only that their Churches are the result of a historical process; they have very different historical



Leonor Slavsky Senior researcher for the National Institute of Anthropology, with Mark Juergensmeyer, Kurt Frieder, and Carlos Escudé.



“In Central American countries the Church is much more important in what happens day to day.” In these countries, “what the Church says is what is being done. It is not the same here.”

**KURT FRIEDER, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF FUNDACION HUESPED**

processes, even though, from the outside, we are seen as a whole.” Expanding on this point she also noted: “The aboriginal population that was here when the Spanish came was not the same as that in Brazil or Uruguay. You can’t generalize, because the evangelical churches [too] are very different from each other.” Closer examination reveals that religion’s role “even depends on the region of the country” one is studying.

“The stories of López-Alves or of Beatriz... are not exceptions in South America, particularly in Argentina,” Slavsky went on to explain. This point was reinforced by Mercedes Carluccio of Global Democracy: “I agree with Leonor that Argentina is a different case... When you look at the map from Mexico to Argentina, as you go [further] down, the link is less strong, the link between religion and the society.”

Estevez, recounting her experience in Mexico, affirmed this point of view. “I also believe Argentina to be a very particular case. I went to Mexico two years ago for an exchange program. I was shocked to see that everybody was Catholic... a practicing Catholic. So I realized on that trip that Argentina really is as different as some people say it is, and is not as Latin American as I thought it was.”

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## Poverty is the Real Underlying Issue

Beatriz Gurevich stressed her opinion that it is very difficult to change the orientation of the Catholic Church in Latin America and added that in order to act “globally” in civil society when dealing with religion, more tangible progress could be made if religious leaders from various faiths worked together on “substantive” issues such as drug abuse and abortion, as opposed to “universal huge projects of changing the world and democracy.” She concluded: “All churches share some common values... I think there are more practical things, [so that] in order to begin and to be more or less successful you have to work on the basis of already overlapping consensus.”

In his concluding remarks Giles Gunn reemphasized the salience of Frieder’s analysis of poverty as



*Beatriz Gurevich, Special Advisor, Centro de Estudios Internacionales y de Educacion para la Globalizacion.*

the underlying problem. “Even though global civil society should be working on — and in this case is working on — issues of poverty, the other side of it is that religion isn’t doing a whole lot about that. Religion, in fact, insofar as it is in support of the elites in this state, isn’t doing anything about it; at least, not the most powerful agencies of religion.”



*Cristobal Colón “En Las Americas.” The bronze and steel sculpture is by Ugo Attardi, a Ligurian artist. It was donated to the city of Buenos Aires by the Italian government in commemoration of Christopher Columbus’ discovery of America on the 500th anniversary, October 12, 1992.*

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## Closing

At the conclusion of the meeting, workshop convener Mark Juergensmeyer thanked participants for their thoughtful and at times very personal contributions to the discussion. He concluded by noting: “We came here with a sense that Argentina was a little different,” but had many issues and concerns in common with the rest of Latin America. “We go away feeling that things are more extreme. Argentina is a lot different, but does share many of the same concerns. All of these global issues are very much alive and present in Argentina, but very much in a special Argentine way.”



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*Victor Faessel, Orfalea Center Program Director; Mark Juergensmeyer, Orfalea Center Director; Dinah Van Wingerden and Jack Ucciferri, Orfalea Center staff and report compilers.*