

From Uniformity to Pluralism: Changes in Argentina's Cultural and Religious Landscape

Dr. Juan Cruz Esquivel

Ministry of Religion (Argentina)

Professor, University of Buenos Aires

Researcher, CONICET [National Council of Scientific and Technical Research]

First of all, I want to give special thanks for the invitation extended to me by the organizers of this conference. It is truly an honor to be present in this symposium and to be able to exchange ideas and points of view with clergy, government officials and academics from such far away places. It is undoubtedly a very valuable experience for all.

We are called together to reflect upon matters of religion and identity, aspects of humanity so closely linked together, as well as upon the challenges this link presents to government authorities in the contemporary world. I would therefore like to share with you some thoughts regarding the profound transformations that have taken place in Argentina and the Latin American region, noteworthy transformations that have enriched our cultural and religious heritage.

From the last decades of the twentieth century on it has been possible to recognize significant changes in the configuration of Argentine society. Although it has its peculiarities, it is not unconnected to changes in the political, economic, social and cultural processes generated by globalization throughout the world. Internationalization of the economy; regional/continental integration; re-formulation of identities; the extension of communication networks that redefine the notion of global distances; and the diversity and ever-increasing complexity of

social structure as a result of reforms generated in the labor market are some of the characteristics that define societies today.

Immersed in this succession of events, we are witnessing a dual process of standardization of images and fluidity of information thanks to the sophistication and expansion of the media; and, at the same time, the re-composition of identities based on the diverse membership of the subjects.

The significant variations we see in economic, political, international relations, communications, social and cultural contexts demand that government authorities and those who study current social conditions make a constant effort to re-think, re-formulate and re-work laws and administrative policies which once fit more uniform societies.

Globalization as a process involves a profound transformation in worldview. Notions of time and space and the scope of ideas are modified with changes in social organization.

It is no longer possible to comprehend an individual's sense of meaning and belonging in terms of a single institution which contains and includes them and is capable of offering an orderly and all-encompassing vision of the world. Large social entities as the nucleus of sense of community have disappeared. Those all-encompassing identities by which certain institutions formerly expressed and met the needs of individuals—such as unions, political parties and the Catholic Church itself in the case of Argentina—have given way to the emergence of multiple entities with diverse memberships.

In the purely religious context, the emerging re-formulations of the high-, hyper-, ultra- or post-modern, whatever they may be called, are expressed in a process of re-composition of belief systems, with the resulting diversity of adherence and religious practices.

An undercurrent worthy of note is the circulation of those individuals who, while not renouncing transcendent religious accounts, do exercise their religious freedom and choose their own beliefs in matters of worship.

However, passage through different spaces in the field¹ of religion coexists with a secularized daily life. Individuals do not wonder about the consistency between their actions and the code of conduct dictated by religions. Yet, paradoxically, that same order of daily life proves incapable of responding to the existential needs of contemporary societies, societies which rely on divine help and turn to petitions to the supernatural in order to mitigate the vulnerability, unhappiness and lack of self-esteem that propagate within them. It is this context that allows us to conceive of religious continuity within a secularized social framework. It is not to be inferred from this that the search for spiritual richness is in decline, as was understood by theorists of secularization.

Looking deeper into the case of Argentina, religion in general has fulfilled a fundamental role as a symbol of social cohesion and a reference on life's meaning. Historically the Catholic Church has played a substantive role in the

¹ The concept of *field* is taken from the definition suggested by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu when referring to *structured spaces of positions* that have specific properties irreducible to those of other fields and having a determined symbolic capital by monopoly of which relationships of struggle are established. This symbolic capital is the basis for the specific authority characteristic of the field. The agents who act in that field have, in addition, common interests that depend on the essence of the field (Bourdieu, Pierre. *Choses dites*. Paris, Gedisa, 1987.)

formation of national identity. It labored to institute itself as “the only significant source capable of giving meaning to life and to society as a whole.” In addition to that, many times it became one of the main sources of legitimacy in political processes.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholicism assumed a central role in the consolidation of the nation-state model. Thanks to its cultural and religious contributions it participated in society’s process of integration. Its distinctive status, spelled out in the national constitution, indicates the singularity of the structural role it has played at various historical moments. The state, in turn, constituted the reinsurance of Catholicism’s predominance, providing throughout history the institutional means needed to guarantee its place as a protagonist.

In those times, patterns of social integration were marked by a uniform identifying framework. The so-called “racial melting pot” assumed that peculiarities would fuse into a monochromatic whole. The consolidation of the nation-state was associated with the idea that peculiarities should be subsumed into a homogeneous social and cultural mass.

However, since the last part of the twentieth century the components of the nation-state’s foundation have eroded. The breakdown of the state model brought with it the loss of the monopoly held by national churches. Today diversity is the symbol that best characterizes our societies from the cultural and religious point of view. A multiplicity of organizations with varying degrees of

institutionalism interacts in the fertile soil of representations, memberships and identities.

In this scenario it is no longer a monopolistic religious institution but rather a plurality of creeds that is the socio-religious basis which government powers must reference in order to enact regulations and design public policies.

The social mosaic resulting from the new configuration of our society no longer consists of a uniform bloc, but rather of unique pieces that stand out for their own color, make their own contribution and enrich the whole. In the religious sphere, the daily challenge is to bring about from religious diversity a pluralistic coexistence. It is not a matter of eliminating or hiding differences but rather of understanding the various perspectives in order to enrich us as a society.

Undoubtedly the complexity of the modern world challenges legislation and public policies on a variety of levels. Historical inertia causes a gap between the pluralistic religious landscape and some inflexibility on the part of political institutions to democratically address the new state of things.

Although world history has witnessed innumerable attempts against freedom of belief, of conscience and of religion, in a context of greater pluralism such as the one in which we live the guarantee of these rights is an even more unavoidable commitment for states, and the restriction of even some of them warrants our strongest condemnation.

This collection of pronouncements, which may be seen as abstract and theoretical, should have a direct correlate in practice. In that regard, the Ministry

of Religion has defined as national policy the protection of religious freedom and the promotion of respect and valuation toward every religion in its uniqueness, encouraging harmonious coexistence within the framework of diversity. The wager is that religion will not be used as a component of hatred nor as a catalyst for wars and confrontations, but rather as a constituent and enriching part of human relations.

In recent years Argentina has made enormous strides in strengthening venues for bringing together the leaders of the various religions that coexist harmoniously. Although my country has traditionally been open to streams of immigrants of various origins bringing with them many languages, customs and religious beliefs, currently the succession of inter-religious activities with representatives of the various creeds is worthy of note. I refer to meetings that involve not only the leadership. On Argentina's Flag Day, June 20, the educational communities of Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, Islamic and lay schools have met together, an evidence of true brotherhood.

That experience of fellowship and the promotion of inter-religious dialogue have allowed us to discover that the value of human dignity, common to all creeds, necessarily leads to a fuller citizenship.

It is important to bear in mind that the growing cultural pluralism does not weaken our integration as a community. Within it religions continue to offer a meaningful universe from which they seek to answer the most profound questions posed by human beings. All of them communicate transcendent values to us and teach us the meaning of life.

Knowing full well that religions are a natural vehicle for transmitting values, bonds of community cohesiveness and belonging, cultural integration and strengthening of social ties, through the defense and promotion of religious diversity they have been at the heart of the policy we in the Ministry of Religion have been developing during the past four years.

The relationship of mutual trust and close cooperation among the leaders of the various religious denominations and area authorities has allowed a remarkable extension of venues for social integration.

Every day in Argentina we see how the transcendent humanist conception that identifies all creeds results in an orchestrated effort devoted to social undertakings, supportive projects and community programs.

Social commitment, expressed in innumerable social programs over the length and breadth of the country, deserves to be highlighted by the State and incorporated into its institutional memory. For that reason, last May the Ministry of Religion recognized the social and community works of more than ten religious institutions having an extensive presence in that field. This sincere homage has to do with the conviction that the state and civic organizations should work together for social inclusion. Along these lines, we should emphasize the significant work being done by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, among which is their service to persons with disabilities.

In short, it is essential for the state, religious institutions and civil society to join forces in renewing our commitment to promote religious freedom and create propitious venues for effective and permanent dialogue among the multiple

religious organizations that invigorate our social life, with no ethnic, religious or any other kind of discrimination. Thank you very much.