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Míguez, Daniel.

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Poor People in Religiously Diverse Contexts: Assets and Drawbacks in the Latin American Experience.

Dr. Daniel Míguez
Universidad Nacional del Centro
de la Prov. de Buenos Aires.

It is by now a widely acknowledged fact that religion has ambivalent consequences. Religion may inspire fraternal feelings and humanitarian values, but it may also conduce to racial hatred or ideological conflicts. Looking at the Latin American experience these two sides of religion are easily recognisable. In the recent history, they have been present in the contrasting roles played by Catholics and Protestants during the dictatorships of the sixties and seventies. For example, in Argentina the Catholic hierarchy did not question, and even occasionally supported, the violent military rule of 1976-1983. This implied an implicit and sometimes explicit legitimisation of the repression suffered by many popular organisations and leaders of the time. The Catholic leadership also took advantage of their military connections to enforce restrictions on religious minorities. In contrast, some Protestant leaders and dissident Catholics together found ecumenical human rights associations (eg. the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights) which acted against the violations committed by the military task forces.

Exploring further the Latin American experience we find that, since the 1980s the atmosphere of political restriction has changed, but the ambivalent character of religion is still present. As it is well known, in the past decades democratisation has taken place in many Latin American countries. This democratic wave was accompanied by a 're-emergence of civil society' (O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1985) where many new social and cultural movements blossomed. This atmosphere of social creativity also inspired religious leaders and followers who began to experiment with new alternatives—especially with charismatic rituals—favouring an unprecedented diversification of religious culture. Those more eager to engage in religious experimentation were the poor, who many times found in new religious experiences means to endure the stressful situations provoked by the deep economic recession that accompanied democratisation during the 1980s. Here we find again the positive side of religion. However, the diversification of the religious field has also introduced new threats. Traditional religions have not always been tolerant with the new religious manifestations, and the new religious movements are also not always opened to ideological and religious diversity. Thus, although pluralization has created new means of expression and organisation for the poor, it has also renewed the bases for religious conflict.

This brief overview opens a poignant question for those involved in policy making: is it possible to enhance the positive side of religion while countering its more negative aspect? Regretfully, the answer to this question cannot be an unqualified affirmative one. The positive, resourceful side of religion is inextricably linked to its more restrictive thus negative aspect. If religion enhances a creative side in human beings is, basically, because it is able to provide a reference system, an ultimate meaning of life, a founding truth. It is also for this reason that it becomes difficult for *believers* to tolerate other ideologies that offer contrasting truth claims. Even more, the mere existence of competing ideologies opens, at least potentially, the possibility to doubt religious truth claims. This alone jeopardises the resourceful character of religion, since it limits the ability of a doctrine and ritual to act as donors of ultimate meaning or as providers of a

reliable identity for religious followers. Thus, to an extent, religious *freedom* conspires against *belief* and its psychological positive consequences.

This tension in religion explains what has happened and is actually happening with religious freedom in Argentina in particular and Latin America in general. We will now explore this situation in more detail to see what lessons can policy makers learn from these historical processes.

Religious Diversification in Argentina

During the 1980s the Argentinean religious field experienced a significant transformation due, namely, to greater religious freedom and the growth of different religious groups, above all Pentecostal ministries. These changes represented a culmination of pre-existing tendencies, not a complete transformation of the Argentine religious landscape. Catholic domination had been rampant in Argentina especially since the 1930s when the church penetrated at the same time the social body and the state. Argentines considered themselves Catholics, but in most cases this did not imply playing an active role in church or a firm commitment to doctrine. Thus, in this context of Catholic domination dissidence existed: On the one hand, through forms of syncretism expressed predominantly in popular cults, which had ambiguous relationships with official Catholicism (Santamaria, 1991:20-21; Roldán, 1991; Pascual, 1991). On the other, because Spiritists and Protestant groups had entered the country between the 1850s and 1920s (Saracco, 1989; Deiros 1991).

In spite of these embryonic diversity, until the 1980s there had been quite strong bonds between the Catholic church and the Argentinean state –especially during military dictatorships (Mallimaci, 1993). This hampered the diversification of religious culture by restraining the possibilities of people entering into contact with different alternatives and feeling free to choose among them. The association of state and church in the Argentine context was expressed in many ways. The banning of divorce or abortion are clear examples of the Catholic grip on the state.

The association between certain sectors of the Catholic Church and the state, especially during the military dictatorship of 1976-1983, resulted in strong restrictions to religious minorities. During this period many members of non-traditional religions were jailed, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostal ministers and Pais de Santo of Afro-Brazilian religions (Marostica, 1998). All non-Catholic groups also found restrictions in their access to the media or to organise street meetings. Another significant instrument for restricting religious freedom was the cult registration law, sanctioned before 1976, but strongly enforced during the military dictatorship. According to this law every religious group (except Catholics) had to officially register in the *Registro de Cultos* of the Secretary of Cults in order to be a 'legal' religion. Those cults whose registrations were not accepted were implicitly declared illegal and, thus, if continuing with their religious practices risked being prosecuted –which during the dictatorship not always implied a 'fair trial' but a life threatening risk. In order to avoid jeopardy many cult leaders did not even attempt to register, trying, in this way, to escape or complicate state control.

When Argentina entered democracy in 1983 the restrictive measures and the threatening atmosphere were drastically reduced, it is this that explains the deepening in the tendencies of diversification in the religious field¹. The new conditions that

¹ ? Since Argentina's return to democracy, the ties between the Catholic Church and the state weakened -the sanctioning of a divorce law in 1985 is one clear sign of this separation. Furthermore, the ideals of free consciousness and speech became hegemonic in Argentinean society (Cheresky, 1992; Portantiero, 1994). This implied two things in the

characterised this freer religious context allowed many religious groups to become more visible and expand. Due to the scarcity of data it is difficult to thoroughly document the changes, but the evolution of registrations in the *Registro de Cultos* allows at least a partial overview of the phenomenon.

Table I: Evolution of registrations in the *Registro de Cultos* (1979-1991)

Year	Pentecostal	Evangelicals	Protestants	Adventists	Mormons	Afro-Bra	Jews
Up to 1983	933	26	40	9	2	83	99
1984	54	0	3	0	0	35	1
1985	101	0	4	0	0	51	2
1986	130	1	1	1	0	65	0
1987	141	2	0	0	0	44	0
1988	143	2	3	0	0	29	0
1989	116	2	3	1	0	30	1
1990	97	0	3	0	0	35	0
1991	14	0	0	0	0	5	0
Total	1729	33	57	11	2	378	103

Source: Registro de Cultos

The previous description gives an idea of what the diversification of the religious field meant at an institutional level. Two groups lead, because of their growth and visibility, this diversification, Pentecostals that grew 85.3 % between 1983 and 1991 and Afro-Brazilian religions (namely Umbanda) that expanded in 355.4 % in the same period. This proliferation of new religions met the reaction of traditional Catholic sectors and also of representatives of secular or atheistic ideologies, like psychologists and sociologists who accused Pentecostals and Afro-Brazilian groups of being ‘alienating’ (Frigerio, 1993). If initially the reaction was essentially restricted to verbal imprecations in the media, at the beginnings of the nineties there were Catholic promoted initiatives to instrument institutional actions. This took place, basically, through the promotion of a ‘Bill of Cults’ that, if approved, would impose strong restrictions to the new religions. The law denied legal status to any group, which had not been in the country for at least 90 years, that did not have members in a minimum of three different provinces, or that counted with less than 5,000 members. Due to an active resistance by Protestant activists and also to a certain undercurrent of societal disagreement, the law finally has not been passed.

religious field. On the one hand, prohibition of and control over non-Catholic religious groups were eliminated or at least drastically reduced. This enabled them to proselytize freely gaining access to the media and the streets. On the other hand, the growing appreciation of freedom of speech and thought among the population made people freer to change their religious identity. Thus, the costs of religious dissidence diminished and a certain diversification of the religious culture took place (Forni, 1991:102; 1993:12). Frigerio (1993) noted that given this consensus on personal liberties and freedom, attacks on dissident religious groups by Catholics or opposing journalists were never made in terms that questioned personal religious preferences. They were framed as a more general social problem: accusing religious dissidents of being agents of imperialism or of engaging in alienating psychological practices such as brainwashing.

The foregoing exposition of institutional conflicts and change does not foster, however, a complete understanding of the consequences of religious diversification. In order to have a complete picture it is necessary to see what pluralization has meant for the men and women on the street, especially for the poor sectors most responsible for the growth of Pentecostalism and Afro-Brazilian religions.

According to recent research, both groups provide significant resources to endure psychological stress in times of crisis (Mariz, 1994). To show this I give a few examples extracted from anthropological fieldwork done in a poor neighbourhood of Buenos Aires between 1992 and 1995. Since my research has been concerned, basically, with Pentecostalism I concentrate my analysis in this group, with occasional side references to others. One of the first things I noted during fieldwork was that the economical situation of the 1980s had a significant impact in the convert's lives, thus it is important to start by putting the stories and fieldwork observations in context.

The 1980s was a decade of economic recession (a 'lost decade') that put great stress on the Argentine lower-middle and poor classes. The crisis disrupted the life-style and domestic economy of many Argentine families. These disruptions frequently caused anxiety and tension. In this context, where religious diversity was growing, many resorted to religion to find comfort during critical situations. Religion and religious institutions favoured those in crises in many ways. In the more material aspects, it was many times the churches that through donations, soup kitchens, etc. helped poor people to overcome their difficulties.

In some churches, as in the Catholic and Methodist organisations, material help was shaped as a kind of vertical solidarity: the better-off within church would help those in a more difficult position, or even the church as an institution would organise assistance for those in need. Both, in the Catholic and Methodist churches I observed, miraculous solutions to critical situations were officially dismissed. That is, in these churches the official doctrine was that help would come through brothers and sisters (God would act through them) but they did not favour the idea of an immediate and direct intervention of sacred forces. This generated certain tension between church leaders and their laity, especially that of the popular sectors who tended to believe in miracles.

I saw this tension when doing fieldwork in a Catholic chapel. Among the many active groups in the church there were women who, acting as members of Caritas², distributed food and clothing for the needy. Within this group there was a *Curandera* (faith healer). The chapel's priest, however, frequently condemned *curanderismo* during mass. Thus, the Curandera did not openly disclose her condition as a faith healer. However, within the Caritas group she was known for her powers and had 'treated' several cases: while I was doing fieldwork she was making a 'prayer chain' to help a member of the Caritas group whose husband was an alcoholic.

There are several contrasts between the kind of help provided by Methodists and Catholics and that offered by small Pentecostal denominations. If in the former churches material help comes from vertical networks, in the latter case help is the product of horizontal relationships. That is, the fraternal bonds established in the congregation favour spontaneous forms of solidarity between poor people. This takes the form of a rotating assistance: those giving or receiving help change places according to circumstances. Another contrast is that Pentecostals strongly believe in miracles. To Pentecostals the main source of support comes from God's intervention in daily affairs. In this way, in

² Caritas is a Catholic organization that conducts nationwide campaigns collecting and distributing food and clothing for the needy. The group described here were needy women themselves that, however, collaborated by receiving the goods from the upper levels of the organization and distributing them to the rest of the needy people.

addition to material support, Pentecostals also provide 'spiritual help' for those in need—it is probably this 'extra' resource what explains the significant number of adhesions (as compared, for example, with Methodists) Pentecostals got in the eighties.

From an outsiders view this 'spiritual help' consists in putting threatening daily events (health problems, family crises, and domestic economy) in a transcendental perspective. This implies the idea that any stressful event in life is part of God's plan and that, in one way or another, it will have a positive resolution. This kind of explanation usually helps people to remain more psychologically stable during critical periods (Mariz, 1994). This has a practical effect in that people in better psychological condition have greater chances of overcoming difficulties. As said, people perceive this advantage and for this reason many opted to join Pentecostal ministries in the eighties (see Galliano, 1994 or Míguez 1998).

There is no space for a thorough ethnography here, but the following short extract from an interview may illustrate the previous point. The interviewee is called Ernesto, a Pentecostal convert that acted as one of my main informants during fieldwork. He was the former owner of a small car workshop that had gone bankrupt during the 1980s recession. The economic problems that ensued originated family crises, which almost caused Ernesto's divorce. In this context Ernesto and his wife attended to several curanderas, and then turned to Pentecostalism. In the Pentecostal church they found a solution to both, their economic and family problems, because of this they turned into active church members. Here is how Ernesto tells the story.

We first went to Curanderas, but we never went to the Priest because he is a man like anybody else. I didn't think he had powers or anything. Then my wife started to attend this [Pentecostal] church. At first I did not want anything to do with church. My wife was already going and for that reason pastors came to visit us here at home. Anyway I was curious because it was them that had made my wife come back home after our first separation. So, because of that and also out of respect I stayed and listened to the pastor when he came to visit. Suddenly, I began to like all this talk about that God had a purpose for us, and that even if we were poor and humble God had a plan. Then I started to go to church; first once in a while and then every Sunday. I was still out of work at that time, so I began to pray for a job. I did not get the job right away, so I was a bit disappointed and sometimes thought that everything was a fake. But the pastor kept telling me that God had his time, that this was a challenge I had to face and that everything would work out if I held on to God's hand. So, with my doubts and temptations I stayed in church. After six months I finally got a job. It was a brother in church that finally got that job for me, so there you have the proof that it was God that rewarded me for my faith, even if it was a bit shaky.

The story of Ernesto shows how Pentecostal doctrine and community may help people in need. Although this is only one story, this effect of Pentecostalism has been so thoroughly documented that there is hardly need for further proof (cf. Willems, 1968; Boudewijnse *et al.*, 1991; Canales *et al.*, 1991).

In order to preserve their effectiveness in alleviating people in stressful situations, Pentecostals need to question competing views, shattering in this way possible sources for doubt. The strenuous efforts made by pastors, and reflected in the following quotations, show the importance of presenting their own doctrine as holder of ultimate truth. For example, in the following extract from a sermon uttered during a Sunday service it is possible to see how Pentecostals strongly condemn Afro-Brazilian religions, Curanderas and Catholic popular deities.

Brothers and Sisters be aware of all those that call themselves anointed and are only a fake; or even worst, they are agents of the devil. Because I know that some people go to the Curandera thinking that she will cure them, and they get nothing. They even give money to these false prophets and come out with nothing. Also don't be giving offerings to the saints [Catholic Virgins or Saints] because this is to fall into paganism and idolatry. The only one that can help you, that can really help you is God, or his son Jesus Christ, nobody else. And well, I don't have to tell you about Umbanda, all that devilish stuff, those are directly the angels of Satan.

Scientific medicine is also called in question in certain circumstances, in the same sermon the Pastor said:

Doctors are also confused. They think they cure, that they have the power to cure. Even psychologists think they have the power to understand the human mind. See how arrogant men are. Such a complex thing as the mind, and we think we can understand it. It is only God that in his infinite mercy allows them [doctors] to heal. God has created medicine to alleviate those that don't have enough faith in him. Those that go to doctors however will never be cured, they will only be alleviated, but not completely cured because the only one that cures is God. However, if you feel that you have to go to a doctor go, we are not really against them.

At times, the urge to defend their doctrinal truths turn some Pentecostals against other Evangelicals who question their views, again this is clearly seen in a quotation from the same Pastor in a different sermon:

You will find theologians, masters of the Word, who will tell you that healing only happened in Jesus times and not now. But if they tell you that, with great respect... or [better] you may just remain silent and think to yourself: it's a lie Satan. Christ heals today. It is better to be a bit ignorant [like myself] and not to study so much [and don't belief in that God heals]

In certain circumstances Pentecostals have gone beyond verbal imprecations, and engaged in institutional action. When in 1993 and 1994 there had been pressure on the chambers of the National Congress to pass the new 'bill of cults'; Protestant organisations in general opposed the law defending the right of religious freedom. However, Pentecostals, although finally following the more general position, resisted the idea of sponsoring complete freedom. Many of their proposals implied restricting freedom to Christian groups only. In many sermons it was explained to the Pentecostal constituency that allowing other groups to proselytise freely was a concession they had to make because of the political circumstances, but that they did not really agree with this policy. In their view, freedom had to be restricted, at least, to Christians only; allowing other groups to freely proselytise was to permit the Devil to spread his word.

The foregoing account of the religious situation in Argentina shows several things. One is that, even through a conflictive process, religious freedom has improved in Argentina over the last 15 years. Another clear consequence is that the growth in religious diversity implies that many more resources are available for the Argentine poor. These resources are essentially of three kinds: material, organisational and spiritual (or psychological if one prefers a secular language). For the poor, the religions that offer more spiritual or psychological resources are those that accept the idea that divine forces

may directly intervene in daily life. If one looks at the religious preferences of the poor (which religions are usually more appealing for them) it seems that these last kind of resources are particularly important. This is manifested in, for example, that they select the variety of Protestantism (Pentecostalism) that more openly offers this possibility and in that, even with the Priest's prohibition, poor Catholics exercise curanderismo.

The problem relies in that for religions to offer this kind of resources for the poor, they have to make strong truth claims, which necessarily exclude the possibility of competing alternatives. Thus, the religions that more openly offer the kind of spiritual resources that poor people need are many times the less tolerant religions. The better example of this are the strong imprecations of Pentecostals against competing doctrines and ideologies.

The situation present in Argentina does not really represent the whole of Latin America. In fact, the relationships between the state and the Catholic Church in Chile, Brazil or Uruguay have been radically different. Regretfully, there is no space here for a thorough comparison between different cases in the region, however even a brief comparison with Brazil may be highly instructive.

Religious Diversity in Brazil

For many reasons religious diversity is greater and older in Brazil than in Argentina. Although, the purpose here is not to give a complete overview of why this is so, two reasons must be mentioned. First, the relationships between the Catholic Church and the National State were not as close in Brazil as in Argentina. Especially during the military regime, the church played an opposing role that greatly differed with that played by the Catholic hierarchy in Argentina. Second, the influence of the African culture in Brazil has produced a variety of religious expressions that only recently have found some space (albeit still very limited) in the Argentine culture. Thus, both the greater distance between church and state and the more heterogeneous culture explains the greater and older diversity of religion in Brazil. This condition has had consequences with regards to the existing tolerance between religious groups. One of the possible consequences is that people are more tolerant with regards to diversity. Examples coming from anthropological fieldwork show this. Anthropologists point more and more to the fact that poor people do not exclusively attend to one religion only, instead they combine religions merging rituals and doctrines in their own way according to their needs (Westra, 1991). The attitude of Dona Maria, one of Ribeiro de Oliveira's informants, clearly exemplifies this kind of practice.

Therefore mister I say: all religions are good, but there is an occasion for each one. For somebody who has no problems in life the best religion is the Catholic one; you become attached to the saints, go to church whenever you want, and nobody bothers you. For a person that goes through financial difficulties, the best religion is that of the Pentecostals, because they really help you as brothers; the only thing is that you must not drink, smoke, dance or whatever. Now, for somebody who suffers from headaches, the best religion is that of the Spiritists; it is demanding, you can't miss a session, but it really heals. If God will allow me, when I am totally healed, I'll return to Catholicism (Ribeiro de Oliveira, 1977: 37-38 [In: Droogers and Rostas, 1993])

What this excerpt shows is not only that poor Brazilians may tolerate diversity, but that they avail themselves from the resources all religions provide without any prejudices. However, this unprejudiced disposition towards religious diversity in Brazil coexists with less open attitudes. A clear example of how religious conflicts may arise occurred

in 1995 when a Pentecostal Bishop offended Catholics by ridiculing the patron saint of Brazil, Virgen de Aparecida. Bishop Von Helde from the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) appeared in TV. on the morning of October 12 (the patron saint's day, a national holiday). In order to publicly prove that the virgin had no powers he hit an image of Aparecida 22 times while saying: 'This is a piece of plaster, almost of my size, done by men's hand. We want to show that this doesn't work, look (hits the image in the head), this is not holy (he kicks the image) this is not God or anything like it... May it be that God, who created the universe, can be compared with a dummy like this, so ugly and horrible.' (Frigerio, 1995).

More recently a similar thing happened when members of the same church tried to stop Umbanda followers (an Afro-Brazilian religion) from making offerings to *Iemanjá* (spirit of the sea, maternity and fertility). The members of the Igreja Universal accused Umbandists of being followers of the Devil and the confrontation concluded almost in a fistfight. The conflict was reported by the media reaching the level of a public scandal.

What Kind of Religious Freedom?

From the foregoing accounts it becomes obvious that religious freedom is the more positive situation for the poor. However, my perception is that not all kinds of religious freedom are possible or even suitable to improve their condition. It is quite clear that, in the 'ideal situation', religious freedom is guaranteed when all tolerate, *without dispute*, that each person or group might have its own claim to absolute truth. The question that we ask ourselves here is whether this situation is possible or even desirable and if there could be an alternative form of religious freedom.

Looking at the Argentine case the 'ideal situation' seems impossible. The two more popular religious groups, Catholics and Pentecostals, have a confrontational attitude; there seems to be little hope that they will change in this respect since their dispute originates in essential tenets of their doctrines. Thus, the Argentine case opens little expectations for a context of undisputed freedom. What we described for Brazil opens more angles for debate. On one side we have the open attitude of Dona Maria, who does not seem to have any difficulties in accepting religious diversity. Moreover, she is even able to benefit from all the existing alternatives. On the other side we have the aggressive attitude of Bishop Von Helder, who does not seem to be tolerant at all. The question to ask is whether we may have all Dona Marias and no Von Helders. Regretfully, it doesn't seem possible.

The mere existence of the kind of resources Dona Maria avails herself to overcome economic and health problems depend on religious agents that, like Von Helder, convinced and convincingly create and practice religious doctrines and rituals. It is completely improbable that a religious activist as him would have an unprejudiced view over other religions, as Dona Maria seems to have. Furthermore, if religious activists did have this open attitude they would not be able to present their creeds as real ultimate truths, and in that case the positive effects of religion would wane. Thus, we should not only ask if the ideal conditions for religious freedom (as presented above) are possible; we should also ask ourselves whether they are desirable. The latter question is particularly important since the 'ideal conditions' go against what poor people feel are important sources of identification and emotional strength.

Thus, given this condition, what would constitute for us a more realistic and desirable context of religious freedom is one in which conflict is kept within the boundaries of symbolic confrontation. Religious organisations and leaders will usually, (and should also be allowed to) verbally and ritually condemn others. However,

churches and leaders should not be permitted to turn this symbolic confrontation into an institutional or physical action that would objectively limit the liberty of others. There are, basically, two unavoidable conditions that need to be met in order to create such a context. One is a neutral state that would impede any group to trespass the symbolic threshold. Another condition is a civil society with strong secular institutions that will discourage any religious group from trying to influence the state or engage in any kind of institutional or physical action. The price to pay in negative public opinion on any religious group trying to trespass the symbolic limits should be so great as to discourage any initiative to go beyond them. The final effect of this kind of situation should be the development of a culture where the idea of engaging in physical or institutional action against other religions would not be present.

The combinations of factors that normally produce such situations are too complex and contextual to even try a generalisation here. In the case of Latin America, it seems that many countries in the region are progressively reaching this point. In fact, the lack of consensus on the 'bill of cults' in Argentina, and the very negative reaction of the public opinion against Von Helder's actions in Brazil permit an optimist forecast for the region.

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