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## Rethinking Institutional Secularization as an (Im)possible “Policy”

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes through a genealogical discourse analysis how religion as a cultural practice escapes into the borders of state institutions. While most studies about secularization focus on institutional aspects, such approaches tend to link state secularist policies with cultural secularization. This essay argues that state promotion of religious institutional secularist policies needs to be rethought. The institutionalization of republicanism in Argentina exemplifies this problem. In order to shape a secular Argentinean citizen the government promoted an array of secularist policies (1860–1910). The article aims to problematize such linear historical account by showing how Catholic religious principles became part of the “secular” Argentinean citizen. In fact, religious connotations such as salvific narratives or dogmatic qualities were reenacted in seemingly secular state discursive spaces. Nowadays, several states are enacting secularist state policies to ban nonwestern religious manifestations from public spaces such as schools. In unraveling the Argentinean processes, the article aspires to highlight the impossibilities of banning religion from the narratives that shape the republican citizen.

**Keywords:** religion; education; citizenship.

### Repensando la secularización estatal como una “política” (im)posible

**Resumen:** El ensayo analiza a partir de un análisis genealógico como la religión entendida como una práctica cultural escapa las estructuras instituciones del estado. Mientras numerosos estudios

referidos a la construcción de ciudadanía focalizan en el estudio de prácticas institucionales, dichas aproximaciones no tienen en cuenta que la secularización institucional no equivale necesariamente a una secularización cultural. Por ello, considero oportuno repensar los límites de las políticas estatales de secularización. El caso de la institucionalización de republicanismo en Argentina ejemplifica los límites de la secularización institucional. Durante la formación del estado moderno el gobierno promulgo una serie de leyes con el objetivo de construir un ciudadano argentino “laico”. El ensayo quiere problematizar esa narración lineal de la historia mostrando como principios religiosos católicos formaron parte de la construcción del ciudadano “secular” argentino. De hecho, narraciones religiosas como discursos salvíficos y cualidades dogmáticas resurgieron en espacios discursivos aparentemente seculares. Hoy en día, políticas de secularización están siendo promulgadas por estados para limitar manifestaciones religiosas—usualmente no occidentales—en espacios públicos como escuelas. A través del análisis de los procesos de secularización institucional en Argentina el ensayo aspira a señalar las imposibilidades y límites de las políticas que buscan eliminar la religión de las narrativas que construyen el ciudadano republicano.

**Palabras-clave:** religión; educación; ciudadanía.

### **Repensando secularização institucional como uma "política" (im)possível**

**Resumo:** Este ensaio analisa a partir de uma análise genealógica como a religião entendida como uma prática cultural escapa as estruturas das instituições do estado. Embora inúmeros estudos relacionados com a construção da cidadania focalizaram nos estudos das práticas institucionais, tais abordagens não consideram que a secularização institucional não necessariamente equivale a uma secularização cultural. Por isso considero oportuno repensar os limites da política estadual de secularização. O caso da institucionalização do republicanismo na Argentina exemplifica os limites da secularização institucional. Durante a formação do governo do estado moderno promulgou uma série de leis que visam a construção de um cidadão argentino "leigo". O ensaio pretende problematizar a narrativa linear da história que mostra como os princípios religiosos católicos faziam parte da construção do cidadão argentino "secular". Na verdade, os discursos e narrativas religiosas como qualidades salvíficas dogmáticas aparentemente ressurgiu em espaços discursivos seculares. Hoje, as políticas de secularização estão sendo promulgadas pelos Estados para limitar expressões religiosas não-ocidentais, geralmente em espaços públicos, como escolas. Através da análise dos processos de secularização institucional Argentina o ensaio tem como objetivo apontar as impossibilidades e limites das políticas que visam eliminar a religião das narrativas que constroem o cidadão republicano.

**Palavras-chave:** religião; educação; cidadania.

## **Introduction**

“She asked me in a thoughtful manner:-What is it to be Colombian?  
-I don’t know-I answered - It is an act of faith  
-As being Norwegian- she nodded” Jorge Luis Borges (1975, p. 27)

The scope and depth of institutional religious controversies seems to proliferate. In contrast with the prediction of social scientists, religion proved to be very resilient. Recent events shook the confidence of secularist approaches, the emergence of radical American evangelism in the US, the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in the global South, the Iranian revolution, and the strength of Islam are just a few examples. Institutional religious controversies around schooling arise as heated and

unsettled issues. Such controversies are framed through an institutional way of thinking that includes a categorical mistake. For example, in Europe, the controversy that rose in France around the use of the hijab in schools shows to what extent western democracies are perplexed and hesitant to satisfactorily articulate values of religious pluralism with notions of citizenship. Furthermore, in the US, although the Supreme Court has barred religion promotion from schools since 1962, the institutional line of separation between the State and Religion is still being challenged. For example, the US Supreme Court refused, in December 2011, to intervene in the New York City’s prohibition on the use of religious buildings by public schools. Supporting this Court decision, Udi Ofer, the advocacy director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, stated that “the Department of Education is right to erect a wall between religious worship and our schools” (Udi Ofer, 2012). However, in the current debates regarding citizenship and religion it is possible to lose sight of how non-institutional aspects of religion still forge a ‘common’ sense about the republican citizen that forges undercurrents in the contemporary debate.

This article examines how, during the wave of institutional secularization in the late nineteenth century (1853–1900), Catholic narratives became part of the Argentinean republican citizen. I select the wave of institutional secular policies<sup>1</sup> to exemplify how during the so called institutional secularization period religious discourse and practice shaped the educational discourse space.

I engage in a genealogical analysis developed most notably by Foucault. Although I analyze the rhetoric of specific texts, I am not primarily concerned in the internal logic or grammar of the texts but in the rules that govern and make possible those texts. In the essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” Foucault (1977) develops his understanding of genealogy. For several reasons, I consider the genealogical method valuable in the study of the shaping of the republican citizen and its intersections with religious narratives.

First, because my understanding of religion as a cultural practice transcends institutional borders and established temporal periodizations. The genealogical approach allows me to study how the religious principles ordered the construction of the Argentinean citizen, without getting trapped in essentialized notions of religion. Second, because a genealogical analysis regarding the construction of the citizen through religious narratives helps me to discover not only certain consequences about the implications of religion in the construction of the citizen but also the complex set of relations that permits the emergence of the Argentinean citizen. Third, and finally, the genealogical approach has already been fruitfully used to study religious discourses. For example, in *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”*, King (1999) studies the Western construction by scholars of “the mystical East,” in a way that no longer remains bound to the particular orientations of Christian theological speculation. Instead, he analyzes religion as a specific form of cultural study rather than a branch of theology (King, 1999, p. 53).

My aims to make visible the productive role religious elements had in the “secular” period of the Argentinean history. I approached religion as a cultural narrative that functions in governing the soul of modernity, which is a particular kind of human inscribed as the citizen of the republic. I argue that the institutional banning of religion did not necessarily provoke the disappearance of religion in educational discursive spaces. On the contrary, the Argentinean case shows the extent to which religious narratives were reinserted in the shaping of the Argentinean citizen. Hence, through a genealogical discourse analysis, this study shows how Catholicism as a cultural practice did not disappear with the institutional secularization of Argentina but was reassembled shaping modern notions of the seemingly secular Argentinean republican citizen. As Anderson suggested, the nation building process “has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political

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<sup>1</sup> See Di Stefano (2000) for a comprehensive study about the history of the Catholic Church in Argentina.

ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which -as well as against which- it came into being” (Anderson, 2006, p. 12).

The discussion focuses on the radical distinction between the secular and the religious portrayed in the thesis of secularization theory as a categorical mistake (Latour, 2013). The secularization theory roughly states that the more modern the society the less religious. This modernist approach based its expectations on certain conditions of veridiction based on scientific criteria. Religion understood as a cultural practice is somehow invisible from a modernist perspective (Latour, 2013), which is only able to notice the “scientific” dimension of reality. Hence, the making of religion has a different mode of existence overlooks the ontological and epistemological premises that circulate in political and educational practices concerned with the making of the citizen. The so called disappearance of religion—widely proclaimed by secularization theories—in the shaping of the republican citizen was based on a ‘scientific’ criterion that ignored the specificity of the religious modes of existence.

My approach to religion as a cultural practice aims to supersede that categorical mistake by acknowledging the specific mode of existence that religion has, and its role shaping the republican citizen. In this article, first, I explore the forging of the Argentinean Republican Constitution and its relation with the European immigrant. Second, I analyze Law 1420 (1884) that established the secularization of Argentinean public schools through the Juan Domingo Sarmiento’s motto “civilization or barbarism.” Third, I characterize the extent to which religious discourses were embedded within the nascent narratives that shaped the Argentinean public school (1850). Fourth, I describe how the universality and the realism that used to be characteristics of Catholic thinking appears in the Argentinean curricular subjects, specifically in Arithmetic and Geometry. Finally, I depict how a Catholic sensitivity helped to forge a specific notion of citizenship (Dussel, 2011) and its national pantheon.

### **The Republican Constitution (1853) and the Ideal European Citizen**

I explore the Argentinean citizen in the light of the European immigrant in the nascent Constitution since the role of the European immigrant somehow shaped the Constitutional debate about who the Argentinean citizen should be. Juan Bautista Alberdi was a key political figure in such a debate that believed in Europe as a political model to imitate. Alberdi, a distinguished political theorist was called “the father of the Argentine Constitution” (Schulman, 1948) and wrote the famous *Bases and Starting Points for the Political Organization of the Argentine Republic (1852)*, a book that included a preliminary project for the new Constitution. European immigration was highly encouraged in the Argentinean Constitution:

The Federal Government shall encourage European immigration, and shall not restrict, limit or obstruct by taxation of any kind the entrance of foreigners into Argentine territory ... (Argentinean Const., art. 25).

The promotion of the European immigration had embedded ideas of the good society and the good citizen. The ideas were moral categories related to religious notions. Alberdi states:

How would the vivifying spirit of the European civilization arrive to our soil? Just, as in all the epochs: Europe will bring us its new spirit, its industrial habits, its civilizing practices through the immigrants that Europe would send us ... Each European who comes to our shores brings us more civilization in his ways of being, which he will then pass on to our people, more than many philosophical tomes. Perfection which is not seen or personally touched is poorly understood. A working example is the most edifying catechism (Alberdi, 1852, chap. 15).

In this vision of the ideal citizen, the European immigrant was described with salvific connotations. A salvific narrative was embedded within the notion of the European immigrant. Europe was seen as the vivifying spirit. In fact, the vivifying spirit is a Christian way of naming the Holy Spirit. The European immigrant was described as a living catechism, a subject/individual who, as the ideal citizen, had the mission of spreading civilizing way of being. If millions of European immigrants came to civilize the Argentinean wild pampas, Argentina would experience an outstanding progress. Even the cult of saints, something engrained very deeply in the Argentinean sensitivity, was deployed to highlight the value of the European immigrant. Alberdi tackles the nationality of Catholic saints:

Foreigners are the saints in our altars, and our believing people kneel daily before these worthy foreign [European] saints, who never stepped on the soil of America, nor spoke Spanish. St. Edward, St. Thomas, St. Gallen, St. Ursula, St. Margaret, and many other Catholic saints, were English, and were foreign to our nation and our language (Alberdi, 1852, chap. 14).

Alberdi, the father of the Argentinean Constitution is relevant as an example to show how Catholicism, through the cult of saints, was reenacted in the shaping of the ideal “Argentinean” citizen. As the Catholic ritual established with the saints, people should kneel in front of the European immigrants. At the same time, the narratives that sacralized the European immigrant as the perfect citizen was accompanied by a strong stigmatization of everything that was deemed local or native, like the gaucho or the Indian. All the local elements or traditions were considered barbarian and were barred from the qualities of the ideal Argentinean citizen. Only the European immigrant through his living example would convert the indocile gaucho into industrious citizens.

### **Sarmiento, the National Educational Law and Civilization and Barbarism**

Are we Europeans? So many brown faces deny us!  
 Are we indigenous? Smiles of contempt of our blond ladies give us perhaps the only answer.  
 Mixed? Nobody wants to be, and there are thousands that neither Americans nor Argentineans would want to be called.  
 Are we a nation? Nation without an amalgam of accumulated materials, unadjusted and, without foundation?  
 Argentineans? To what extent and for how long it is good to be aware of it? ~  
 Sarmiento (1883, vol. 37 p. 27)

In the mid-1880s the social atmosphere was convoluted since most of the same politicians who were the ones who promoted pro-immigrant policies started to recognize the increasing dangers regarding national cohesion. Those raising fears confirm Strath’s idea (2000) that “identity thus becomes a problem when there is no feeling of cohesion or community, and this is particularly the case in situations of crisis and turbulence” (p. 20). In the midst of this situation, the national government proposed at the beginning of the 1880s an educational law that triggered one of the most interesting debates in Argentinean history, a debate about Argentinean identity.

The national law of education (Law 1420) was another milestone that shaped the Argentinean citizen. The Argentinean Law 1420 clearly resembles the French law that established the laic, free and mandatory education passed by Jules Ferry (1882) and the Belgium law of 1879 that

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<sup>2</sup> The quotation starts Sarmiento’s famous book *Conflict and Harmonies of Races in America* (1883). Sarmiento dedicated this book to his friend, the American educator Horace Mann.

withdrew all state support to Catholic primary schools in Belgium. Regarding the Law 1420, dozens of studies have been conducted from Catholic and secular perspectives. However, most of the previous studies approach the Law 1420 as a war between two clear cut armies: the Seculars vs. the Catholics (Auza, 1975; Campobassi, 1961). Such institutional lenses shed light upon the role of key actors such as Estrada, the spokesman of Catholics, and Wilde, the liberal Secretary of Education who was a well-known physician. Nevertheless, such institutional approaches also cloud the analysis of a vast array of complexities. The legislators argued whether or not Catholicism was the bonding element of Argentinean national identity.

After a passionate debate, the Parliament approved Law 1420 that established the mandatory, free, and secular primary education. The debate around the famous Law 1420 was one of the cornerstones of the Argentinean nation building process. Certainly, the legacy of the establishment of a mandatory, free, and secular primary education shaped generations of Argentines. In order to analyze the religious images embedded in secularist narratives, I analyze Sarmiento's ideas in such debate and his most famous motto: *civilization and/or barbarism*.

In the establishing of a national imaginary, Sarmiento, President of Argentina (1868-1874) had a relevant role establishing a dichotomy between the civilized European ideals represented by the metropolitan Buenos Aires and the barbarian pampas ruled by caudillos. His influence is so bold that even today his ideas shape the political debate (Svampa, 1994).

Sarmiento claimed that a state religion can never act as a nation-building element. He asked, "In the nineteenth century can we establish the union of people on the unity of belief?" (Sarmiento, 1895, vol. 48, p. 377). He pointed out that only Islam, through death and oppression, was able to establish a state based upon a religious belief. Sarmiento even states that the Inquisition was founded to establish the union of a nation through a stated religion. Along the same lines, Sarmiento believed that a religion taught by schools was synonymous with barbarism:

In Prussia, Sweden, Norway and Boston, where Reformed churches prevail, from a hundred people, ninety-seven percent receive civil and religious instruction. In Italy, the center of churches that continued the old tradition, according to the last census, the number of children not attending schools is seventy-three percent (Sarmiento, 1895, vol. 38, p. 333).

From, Sarmiento's perspective, the most advanced countries show the extent to which a state religion acts against progress and civilization.

In a different way, Sarmiento also described the case of the United States. He made a detailed narrative of the foundation of Maryland. He described how Lord Baltimore, a devout Catholic, was expelled from Virginia, which still had a state religion. So when he finally settled in Maryland he established in its constitution the freedom of all Christian denominations and forbade any preference of a religion among the others. Through this story, Sarmiento states that such arrangement was accepted by Catholic bishops and Fathers in Maryland. Hence, while Catholicism inaugurated tolerance and progress in North America, introducing Catholicism as a mandatory religion in public schools would inaugurate intolerance and barbarism in Argentina. Sarmiento rejected Catholicism as a state religion and his perspective eventually was the one supported by Parliament.

Although Sarmiento fiercely critiqued the church institutional intervention in the public school, he deployed the power of religious narratives with superb mastery. All through his speeches and books, Sarmiento constantly made use of religious images and symbols to express his ideas. For example, while inaugurating a famous park in Buenos Aires he said, "I would like to hear that the people in every town of the territory instinctively says (after contemplating the advantageous of progress-railroads, factories, schools): Here passed the vivifying breath of the Nation" (Sarmiento,

1900, p. 198). In the example, Sarmiento uses the religious image of the Holy Spirit, as vivifying breath, to describe civilization and its effects in the space. He uses the symbol of the Holy Spirit to describe his understanding of civilization. The railroad would represent the *saving* civilized movement (Amante & Jitrik, 2012, p. 256).

Sarmiento was arguably the Argentinean author who most poignantly and effectively articulated a liberal political project with salvific narratives in the Latin American scenario. The motto “civilization or barbarism” that he popularized transcended him and nowadays, still is a source of public debate. Many authors have studied the famous motto from different perspectives<sup>3</sup>. Paradoxically, I believe that Sarmiento’s famous motto should be analyzed via the religious rhetoric, specifically through the biblical Jeremiad rhetoric pushed to its extremes.

The rhetoric of the Jeremiad (Bercovitch, 1978) has its origins in the old testament prophets. The prophets, who had a direct mission from God, were sent to Israel to call for repentance usually because Israelites worshipped foreign gods. The jeremiad rhetoric implies an emancipating destiny or a dangerous one if not accomplishing the redeeming “reformation” demanded by God. The Old Testament prophets announced military defeats, persecutions and slavery if people did not convert to God. In the United States, “the New England Puritan inherited the jeremiad as a traditional mode of denunciation ... The New England Puritans proceeded to reconfigure this homiletic genre, in a striking reinvention of tradition, as a vehicle of their worldly mission” (Bercovitch, 2012, p. 8).

Sarmiento did not invent the Jeremiad in Argentina. Several Catholic Fathers enacted the Jeremiad rhetoric after the May revolution (1810). Fray Pedro Luis Pacheco or Fray Pantaleon Garcia enacted the Jeremiad rhetoric in republican coding. However, their understanding of the Jeremiad was still linked to Catholic values. Those Jeremiads could be read as *if we are loyal to God, the Republic would flourish otherwise the Spanish king would enslave us again*. Hence; the Jeremiads were linked to Catholic morality. Sarmiento with his civilization and barbarism somehow completed the displacement of the Jeremiad rhetoric from the Catholic preaching setting to the republican sphere.

In Sarmiento’s motto there is not an explicit series of commands to follow as in the classic Jeremiad. However, Sarmiento had the ability to comprise all the “good” commands in the word *civilization* understood as progress, schools, libraries, and culture (Sarmiento, 1868, v. 49, p. 283). Boston was the epitome and beacon of civilization,

The pioneer city of the modern world, the Zion of the ancient Puritans (...) the brain of the United States, the Chair of science, and the Cenacle from which they depart apostles of democracy, to bring to the Mid-West, the practice and the spirit of free institutions (Sarmiento, 1885, vol. 29, p. 71).

The salvific aura once attributed to Catholicism or the Spanish king became part of the civilizing narratives. At the same time, Sarmiento combined all the disgraces announced through the Old Testament prophets in the term *barbarian* understood as tyranny, and brute caudillos. With Sarmiento, civilization “took on a sacred aura, owing to which it could sometimes reinforce traditional religious values and at other times supplant them” (Starobinski, 1993, p. 17). In Argentina, religious narratives became part of the civilizing discourses. At the same time, the radicalism of such rhetorical construction implied a dreadful future if civilization was not revered.

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<sup>3</sup> See Starobinski (1993) who makes a conceptual history of the term civilization in France.

In Argentina, Pablo Ansolabeherre (2012) poignantly describes in his chapter “*Escrituras de la Barbarie*” the scope of Sarmiento’s motto.

Scavino. (1993) in his book *Barcos sobre la Pampa* describes the dichotomies of Sarmiento from his understanding of the bodies of the caudillo and the city.

The double gesture of salvific narratives brought with itself a religious dogmatism that emerged as a dichotomy<sup>4</sup>. Sarmiento constantly announced the tyranny of Rosas or the absolute chaos if people did not adhere to the civilizing faith. As Starobinski pointed out, “a term fraught with sacred content demonizes its antonym. Once the word civilization ceases to denote a fact subject to judgment and becomes an incontestable value, it enters the verbal arsenal of praise and blame” (Idem, 1993, p. 17). Sarmiento pushed to the maximum that Jeremiad’s dogmatism through his motto “civilization or barbarism.”

Sarmiento’s jeremiad portrayed “reality” with a binary logic in which the real looks like a black and white photo without allowing any tone of gray in the picture. The binary rationality of salvific narratives describes the two possible paths to follow always as a life or death crossroad. In the above example, civilization has all the power while the citizen’s role was just to contemplate and to venerate the ‘saving’ effects of civilization. Sarmiento’s depiction of civilization as a saving force able to transform the fruitless Argentinean land into an orchard and Sarmiento’s motto are two examples of how religious narratives became part of the Argentinean modern debate about citizenry.

### **The Public School as the Civilizing Temple**

The way Sarmiento envisioned the public school can also be analyzed through a religious lens. He assured that the secular public school was the source of civilization and as such the end of barbarism. The solution that he supported to end with the barbarian was public instruction. Sarmiento claimed that without public instruction, all the vices of the current generations would continue forever in Argentina (Sarmiento, 1895, vol. 38 p. 51). Therefore, public instruction and the school had the crucial role in civilizing the citizen. These thousands of immigrants who came from the most distant places of the earth should become Argentinean citizens in the public schools. Therefore, the role of the school in the forging of national identity was crucial. In a country in which immigrants were constantly arriving without any knowledge of the country, its language or its law, the school would be the space to shape an Argentinean national identity. Schooling would become the key to progress and civilization and the target of Sarmiento’s efforts. In fact, during his presidency, the educational subsidies from the central government to the provinces quadrupled (Rock, 1985, p. 130).

In 1845, Sarmiento was commissioned by the government of Chile to examine primary schools and teacher training schools in Europe. Describing the *Ecole normal* at Versailles where Sarmiento visited, he states, “[Schools] are certainly these other convents of our time in which [teachers] get prepared to become the poor and humble apostle of civilization, destined to bring the light of instruction to all remote extremities of the state” (p. 146). As Sarmiento later explains, these normal schools aimed to keep prospective teachers away from the distractions of the world. The goal of such separation from the world was to prepare the candidates with a “different” spirit. As Ian Hunted (1994) pointed out the modern Argentinean school drew upon Christian ‘spiritual discipline’ to govern the self. The school and the teacher will enact this pastoral relation between the teacher and the student.

Beyond the borders of the convent—normal schools—everything was wild, dangerous, and sinful. Like the monasteries during the medieval age, the normal schools were understood as fortresses against the sinfulness, now ignorance, of the modern world. The religious rationality describes how the school was understood as a church within the wild and barbarian people. The teacher was the civilizing apostle, and the attitudes of the prospective teacher articulated as poverty and humility had ascetic resemblances. These meek civic apostles were the ones that would bring the light of civilization and eventually supersede the barbarian forces.

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<sup>4</sup> Shumway (1993) analyzes the implications of the divisive ideological legacy left by Sarmiento.



The Jeremiad rhetoric and the way the “secular” public school was envisioned are examples that illustrate the extent to which the institutional secularization in the 1880s did not eliminate Catholicism as an element in the making of the Argentinean citizen. In fact, Catholic salvific narratives started to appear, not only linked to the institutional Catholic Church, but also embedded within the state discourse space —*civilization and barbarism*- and the mission of the Argentinean public school.

In the debate about the institutional secularization the key element of salvation previously linked to the Catholic Church was reenacted into the public school narratives—that would be able to forge Argentinean citizens from a vast array of immigrants with different nationalities. Sarmiento explained how the public school would have the role of instilling the Argentinean national identity. Following the United States case Sarmiento stated:

In the United States neither are a common religion nor a common language the binding elements of the nation, since in the United States it is spoken and taught German; not even the race is the bond of union of that Babel of people, (...) but the public school without special religion is the cauldron in which the soul of the American people is made (Sarmiento, 1895, vol. 48, p. 378).

Sarmiento explained how the public school has a crucial role forging citizenship. As soon as the public school was imbued with the power to mold the Argentinean citizen, the role and status of the Argentinean public school would rise dramatically. Significantly, the public school started to become entangled with salvific narratives. As Wilde, the Secretary of Education, states:

Mandatory education, free education and secular education are things that perfectly amalgamate each other; those ideas necessarily and reciprocally need themselves.

Such trinity cannot be destroyed and the whole system fails every time that one of those elements is changed (Debates parlamentarios, 1884, p. 975).

Interestingly, the new intersection of ideas about Argentinean public education--mandatory education, free education, and secular education were embedded within a salvific narrative in a very Catholic ‘style’. The new public school emerged as a “holy” secular trinity that would save the Argentinean child. The categorical emphasis of the language that described the absolute importance of each feature in order to construct the public school had a clear Catholic dogmatic tone. Following Wilde, not even one element of this new trinity can be changed without the risk of a total collapse.

### **The Argentinean National Curriculum and its Catholic Religious Features**

Although the Argentinean flavor of the curriculum for public schools was very peculiar its Catholic religious roots can also be tracked. While arguing against the special schools for foreigners, Sarmiento states:

We [the Argentineans] educate as the North American, Mann; the German, Froebel; and the Italian, Pestalozzi had taught us. ... We make the students learn in a *rational* [My Italics] way everything that today is being taught in the well-organized schools all around the world (Sarmiento, 1895, vol. 36, p. 56).

How could such an affirmation be possible in the midst of a debate about the ideal *Argentinean* citizen? At this point, I introduce an epistemological detour to ask about how Sarmiento’s statement and the legislative debate that established the free, mandatory and secular education in Argentina was made intelligible. The debate about Argentinean identity was essentially an epistemological struggle between two different, though related, understandings of scientific truth. As Daston and Galison (2007), explain, in their book *Objectivity* since the second half of the nineteenth century, the scientific truth was deemed universal, abstract, and, opposed to any subjective or individual connotation. The legislative debate showed the extent to which the rationality that supported secular education was embedded in such ideas, so common since the second half of nineteenth century. The

scientific truth was deemed 'objective'. In those years "...to know objectively was to suppress subjectivity" (Daston, 2007, p. 210). Such objectivity was proportional to the self-restraint of the scientist in the scientific search for the truth. Aligned with those ideals, Sarmiento was able to describe how the Argentinean public school was 'rational' because nothing from the local or subjective domain was included in the Argentinean public school. Sarmiento's quotation is just a faithful example of the feigned objectivity applied to educational policy.

In Argentina, the epistemic shift that favored scientific objectivity dethroned Catholicism as the truth-maker, decrying religious truth as subjective and biased. As Wilde explains, "...the ideas that should be taught in schools must be universal in their present fashion, and no church is universal, no matter that all the churches tend to be universal" (Debates parlamentarios, 1904, p. 633). During the epistemological struggle, Catholicism started to be considered as the epitome of subjectivism, partiality, and deception. Wilde expressed during the legislative debate, "...the state obligation to instruct for social purposes is filled with teaching what is true in all the arts and for all men providing universal knowledge" (Debates parlamentarios, 1904, p. 633). However, it is interesting to note that a Catholic style of thinking appeared embedded in the "secular" narratives that were describing the characteristics of this new form of scientific truth called objectivity.

Although the Catholic Church has no "official" philosophy of her own, *Fides et Ratio*, the philosophical encyclical letter of John Paul II, signaled what was already well-known in the Catholic environment. Without hesitation, St. Thomas Aquinas can be regarded as the apostle of the Catholic truth. John Paul II states, "The realism of Thomas could recognize the objectivity of truth and produce not merely a philosophy of "what seems to be" but a philosophy of "what is" (1998, sec. 44). Catholic realism shapes an epistemology with specific features. Such epistemology states the universality of human spirit (Ibid, sec. 72). Catholic epistemology also establishes that the same essence or idea of man is present in all human beings no matter their birthing culture. Another principle that derives from the first one is that such essence of the human spirit can be discovered by any human normal intelligence, no matter its previous culture. Along the same lines but from a different perspective Žižek places the Christian origins of modern universalisms in Saint Paul's theological views. He explains how the notion of Christian universalism has its source in Saint Paul's quote "There are no men or women, no Jews and Greeks" (2001, p. 143), in opposition to the previous Jewish exclusivist notion of the Chosen People. If there are no men and women or any other distinction there are just humans, all the people share an ontological equality. In Argentina, Sarmiento explained that there is a universal human model to educate in a rational way.

The establishment of one set of ethical rules for everyone is doable only through an understanding that people from different cultures share a similar essence. In sum, Catholicism, broadly conceived, states a theological universalism that there is only one human nature, and any human intelligence is able to know such essence. Those premises are still the base of Catholic anthropology and ethics and were widespread in Latin America through several religious orders. A different outcome happened in many European countries in which different evangelical confessions (Shilling, 1988) helped to forge national identities, in Argentina the universalism of Catholicism was not somehow limited by the emergence of competing confessions. Therefore, Catholic universalism was able to maintain its original scope, and later became a relevant ingredient of the narratives that shaped the Argentinean citizen. Interestingly, France, another country in which Catholicism had a strong cultural importance and experienced a fierce institutional secularization, also enacted a comprehensive understanding of citizenry.

In the Parliamentary debate were traits of such Catholic universalism embedded within the secular calls for rationality. For example, while explaining the curricular subjects that should be included in the school curriculum, Wilde, "The ideas that should be taught in schools should be

universal” (Debates parlamentarios, 1904, p. 633). Within that rationality, arithmetic and geometry were the sciences *par excellence* because they are universal, abstract and accessible for a normal intelligence.

The teaching of arithmetic, for example, is teaching of the whole world; the teaching of geometry is possible wherever men exist, because its truths are, I will say, modalities of human intelligence, but the teaching of religion is not the same case, it can be rejected by dissidents on behalf of different beliefs ... For a normal man’s intelligence there is only one arithmetic and one geometry, but several religions (Debates parlamentarios, 1904, p. 633).

As Wilde expressed during the debate, science was described as something self-evident that everybody without biases could not reject (Wilde, 1899, p. 56). Such ontological characteristics previously attached to Catholic epistemology emerged reinserted as features of the new scientific truth, objectivity. Nevertheless, that objectivity was born of observation and analysis of facts the power that objectivity enacted as the only absolute truth – *only* one arithmetic and one geometry – very much resembles the dogmatism present in Catholic epistemology. Paradoxically, as Catholic epistemology once considered that the same essence (universals) was possible to be grasped by different men, now objectivity proclaimed that the ‘rational’ was at hand for all normal intelligence.

Remarkably, the universality of Catholicism reemerged in the narratives of the “seculars” as a distinctive feature of the ‘objective’ scientific truth. The curricular subjects that best represent the new epistemic scenario were arithmetic and geometry. In sum, the universality and realism that used to be characteristic of Catholic thinking appears in the notion of science, understood as objective and accessible to all minds. Such Catholic insertion into what was the rationality assigned to scientific objectivity allowed Sarmiento to state that Argentineans were to be educated in the *only* one way possible: a rational one. The epistemological shift showed how, in the Argentinean debate, the Catholic universalistic premises moved to a modern notion of scientific truth. Ultimately, this shift was not as divergent as expected, and contained consistent overtones of Catholic universalism.

### **Catholicism, Nation Building and Educational Practices in Buenos Aires’ Schools**

In 1889, two educational laws from Buenos Aires tackled issues of citizenship in public schools. The educational laws are interesting examples of how Catholic narratives were reinserted in the Argentinean state discourse. Although I refer to the laws, my aim is not to belabor the laws but their underpinning rationality and, in particular, how a Catholic style of thinking allowed the Argentinean legislators to shape those patriotic education laws. The nation building rituals of the Argentinean Republic wanted to integrate the individual soul to a worldly nation-state, not to the universal holy mother church. However, in such shift from the church to the state, religious narratives previously presented in Catholicism were reenacted in the ways the national rituals were legislated. The first law required that all students sing the Argentinean National Hymn in Argentinean schools, and the second law stated that all students should participate in the ceremony of the raising of the Argentinean flag in the schools on national holidays. During the legislative debate, some legislators opposed the second law, claiming that was ridiculous and against the individual freedom of immigrants to compel them to participate in the Argentinean flag ceremony.

Eventually, the Parliament approved both laws, but the interesting element to analyze is the religious rationality used to defend those nation-building educational laws. Senator Hernandez, who was the sponsor of both laws states during the legislative debate: “All countries in the world have a state religion; however, we [Argentineans] do not have more religion than our homeland! In our country, there is freedom to practice all religions, all creeds, but it is not allowed to profess all the patriotic beliefs” (Buenos Aires, 1889, v.18, p. 82). Later, Hernandez (1889) concludes “As legislators, we make a very good job kindling the Argentinean nationhood feeling, which is the only

religion we have to profess and to impose on people” (p. 83). In the institutional secularization process, Argentinean republicanism was made into a “religion”, reinserting a specific Catholic dogmatic emphasis. As Catholicism was previously enforced with Indians during the Spanish domination, Argentinean Republicanism should be imposed on immigrants. Catholic dogmatism appeared reinserted in the narratives about Argentinean republicanism. Paradoxically, a few years after the institutional secularization of public education that triggered a whole debate about individual freedom of conscience, the narratives about the Argentinean citizen appeared to be linked with a strong Catholic dogmatization emphasis. Argentinean republicanism was understood as a religion that the state should impose in and on citizens, no matter their prior citizenship.

Catholicism also was rearticulated in other school practices in Argentina. In 1900, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, two days before the Argentinean Independence Memorial, the Catholic cult of the saints was reassembled in Argentinean schools. Paradoxically, Sarmiento, was the protagonist of the civic hagiography. The morning of July 7<sup>th</sup>, for the first time, more than 1,200 students went in patriotic pilgrimage to visit the statue of the new saint, Sarmiento. In the solemn event, the students put flowers on the memorial; teachers and principals made laudatory speeches about the “great apostle of the popular education” (El Monitor, 1900, p. 333), and even a choir of students with an orchestra of more than thirty musicians sang a hymn to Sarmiento. Catholic narratives, again, were present since the inception of a national pantheon. In the shaping of the national pantheon schooling would have a crucial role (Bertoni, 2001).



Schools visiting Sarmiento's Memorial

Figure 1. Caras & Caretas Magazine, July 1900

Nowadays, after more than one hundred years, every eleventh of September, in commemoration of the death of Sarmiento, students in the public schools of Buenos Aires sing a hymn to Sarmiento. The hymn says, “Glory and praise! Honor for the greatest of the great, Father of the classroom, Sarmiento immortal! Glory and praise! Honor and praise!” I am not stating that every funeral eulogy had embedded Catholic narratives. However, I do believe that, Catholic narratives, in this case the Catholic cult of saints, gave intelligibility to the construction of the Argentinean national Pantheon that included Sarmiento. In *Patriotas, Cosmopolitas y Nacionalistas* Bertoni (2001), described, through a complex historiographical process, the forging of an “invented” Argentinean republican Pantheon. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) defined the invention of a

tradition as “a set of practices ... which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” (p. 3). The Catholic sensibility that was used with the cult of saints helped to shape the dispositions of people towards these republican heroes. In such a process, the yearly school celebrations honoring Sarmiento is an example of the key role the mass school had in constructing the Argentinean soul.

## Conclusion

The article historically explores the limits of the secularization thesis of the republican citizen and the formation of the modern school. Many studies have problematized the idea that institutional secularization played a definite role regarding nation building (Cuccuzza, 2007; Gorski, 2003; Hamilton, 2009; Popkewitz, & Labaree, 2011; Tröhler, 2011). My research follows this trend of studies that tackled the productivity of religion in shaping the republican citizen. From the initial functionalistic work of Schilling (1994) that presented the influence of religion at a macro level to the recent works of Hamilton (2009), Gorski (2003), and Tröhler (2011) that narrow the role of religion to specific topics – curriculum, disciplinary techniques, and languages of education – there is a sound tendency to place religion within a grid of historical practices through which nation-ness and national identities are forged.

The article problematizes the modern epistemological break between religious thought and secular reason (Taylor, 2011, p. 49). The institutional secularization of Argentina did not result in a cultural secularization of its educational discursive space. Throughout the paper, I have focused on the ways in which religious discourses and practices merged with educational discursive space. A genealogical discourse analysis helped me to approach religion as a pastoral narrative that functions in governing the soul of modernity, which is a particular kind of human inscribed as the citizen of the republic.

The institutional secularization processes that generated the governmental banning of Catholicism from Argentinean public schools did not extinguish the power of Catholicism shaping the Argentinean citizen. On the contrary, I believe that such institutional banning made religion more ‘elusive’ but no less integral in shaping the Argentinean citizen. Nowadays, in many western European democracies arise the debate about the convenience of banning religious manifestations from schools. For example, conflicts surrounding Muslims immigrants constitute some of the most important political struggles concerning secularization (Gorsky & Altinordu, 2008). Throughout the article, I analyzed the complexities and limitations of state secularizing policies. In fact, during the “secular” periods of the Argentinean history, Catholic narratives were reenacted shaping the state discursive space in Argentina. First, in the Constitution, Catholic salvific narratives were ascribed to the European immigrant who was understood as a living catechism. Second, the way in which Sarmiento’s Jeremiad was articulated exemplified how salvific narratives shaped the emergence of the seemingly secular Argentinean citizen. Third, the rationality deployed in the two educational laws from Buenos Aires demonstrated how Argentinean republicanism was understood as a dogmatic religion that the state should profess and impose upon citizens. Fourth, at the curricular level, Catholic universalistic features were reassembled into curricular subjects that were deemed universal and at the same time accessible to all minds. Finally, at the level of school practices, the Catholic cult of the saints scaffolded civic rituals in the civic pilgrimages and the cult of the Argentinean pantheon.

The several ways in which religion as a cultural practice acted as scaffolding to Argentinean republicanism confirms the limits of institutional secularization policies. I am not arguing in favor or against religion nor disregarding the democratic space that was opened through the banning of institutional religions from schooling. On the contrary, by pointing out the limits of institutional

secularization I expect for approaches that are more thoughtful. I believe that a fresh approach—from governments and stakeholders—that acknowledge the role of religion as a cultural practice should be able to promote a more democratic and sophisticated attitude. Current religious controversies need to be considered as spaces and opportunities to challenge the borders of contemporary democracies and its way to interact with difference. My hope is that more than one century after the Argentinean government enacted secularist policies we would be able to register and acknowledge the several ways in which religion as a cultural practice is shaping citizenry. The analysis of the Argentinean educational scenario at the end of the nineteenth century exemplifies the extent to which the Argentinean republican citizen was shaped by Catholic narratives. The Argentinean case illustrates the limits of institutional secularization policies and calls for a paradigm shift able to acknowledge the different ways religious discourse and practice shaped and still shape the educational discursive space. In short, secularization as an institutional policy can be compared with trying to grab the wind with a net.

I would like to end the article with the initial quotation from Borges about religion and national identity. In “*El Libro de Arena*” the main characters have a short dialogue, “She asked me in a thoughtful manner: -What is it to be Colombian? -I don’t know- I answered- It is an act of faith- As being Norwegian- she nodded” (Borges, 1975, p. 27). As Borges expressed with poetic intuition, the republican citizen has embedded from its inception a religious aura.

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