

Going to Churches of the *Evangelio*: Children's Perspectives on Religion in an Indigenous Urban Setting in Buenos Aires

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Introduction

In anthropology, religious studies and children's studies are usually presented as two separate fields: either as the "apparently more elevated" domain of religion or the "apparently more natural or common sense" domain of childhood, as Gottlieb (1998) sustains.

This division can be seen in the discipline's history. There is a great deal of anthropological material on religion and, more currently, there are studies on childhood and research involving children. However, as tends to be the case, there is a shortage of references to the intersections of the two fields. Likewise, although anthropological studies on religion constitute a field that has interested the discipline from its beginnings, this research does not usually include children as "authorized informants" (Gottlieb, 1998; García Palacios, 2005; Pires, 2007).

In approaching these issues I studied relations between these domains, historically presented as unconnected, and aspects of the phenomenon highlighted by different disciplines: What connections exist between the social construction of childhood and religion? How does religion affect children's everyday lives? What meanings do children give to religion? How do they become "believers"? How are social practices involved in this process? What is expected of children in their religious formative experiences at school and in their neighborhood? How do these different expectations relate to one another, such as those referring to their religious and ethnic identifications? These questions guided my doctoral research with children from the Toba community (an Argentinean indigenous group) from 2006 to 2012 in an urban setting near Buenos Aires¹.

The children from the neighborhood participate in activities where they interact with two distinct religious corpora. One corpus is related to the Catholic school that most of the children attend, where they represent a relatively small percentage of the school population. The school's inclusive mandate is intertwined with an evangelization process and with different conceptions of "Toba identity". The second corpus is related to conceptions of the *Evangelio* that the children interact with during social practices in the

neighborhood.

In Argentina, it was the Catholic Church that, to a large extent, carried out the “conversion” and “civilization” of many indigenous peoples through different religious orders:

The Catholic presence [in the region of Chaco, Northeastern Argentina] was in a way a continuation of the missionary activity that had never been altogether interrupted since the initial arrival of the Spaniards (Braunstein and Miller, 1999: 14).

However, Catholic missions involving Tobas constantly failed. According to several authors, the reason was that the mission’s rules were excessively paternalistic and authoritarian (Martínez, 1992; Hirsch and Serrudo, 2010).

Unlike Catholic missions in the region, Pentecostalism has been appropriate for different groups resulting in the phenomenon called “indigenous Pentecostalism” (Citro, 2009). In fact, the *Evangelio* dialectally links elements of Pentecostal evangelism— notions of healing and spiritual gifts, glossolalia or the “gift of tongues”, and sermons on an individualized religious experience—with “traditional Toba socio-religious baggage” tied to shamanism (Miller, 1971, 1979; Tamagno, 2001; Ceriani and Citro, 2005; Wright, 2008).

The socio-genesis of the *Evangelio* in the Greater Chaco area is due to different regional historic experiences since the 19th century, which were not exempt from conflicts such as the evangelist missionary action in Chaco, the arrival of Pentecostal churches to Qom settlements, religious movements which were headed by aborigines, and the work of American missionary Mennonites who initially started a mission in Chaco and later remained as “advisors” or *obreros fraternales* (“fraternal workers”) (Ceriani and Citro, 2005; Wright, 2008; Citro, 2009). In 1961 the first Autonomous Indigenous Church of Argentina, the *Iglesia Unida* (“United Church” in Spanish) received its legal status. Two churches led by Toba ministers represent the *Evangelio* in the neighborhood: the *Iglesia de Jesucristo Pentecostés* (“Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ” in Spanish) and the *Iglesia Unida* (“United Church” in Spanish).

Some of the traditional Toba religious elements have a special place in lectures about Toba culture that people from the neighbourhood give in schools in the city of Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires areaⁱⁱ. These talks emphasize what is considered “authentically Toba”, i.e., the Qom language, mythical stories, “ancient beliefs” as well as songs and instruments.

The analysis of this complex framework of relations where children are participants, and

the analysis of how their participation affects the meanings they attribute to religion, required the construction of a specific type of approach. This approach has to consider both the multiple interrelations between ethnicity, education, childhood, and religion, as well as the incorporation of certain contributions of genetic epistemology to this anthropological investigation. Therefore, I will now present my objectives and the key features of this approach, and in the following section, I will present the main characteristics of my methodological approach. I will then consider how religion and ethnicity intersect one another in the particular case of the *Evangelio* movement. Subsequently, I will focus on the meanings that children from the neighbourhood give to the act of “going to church.” Finally, I will present my main conclusions.

Children’s Constructions on Religion and Social Practices

Religion entails a moral community based on practices and representations that adhere to a socio-historic configuration of reference by referring to what is considered holy (Ceriani, 2008; Wright, 2008). As many authors point out (Turner, 1980; Geertz, 1994a,b; Segato, 2005), religion is a form of knowledge that appropriates the world and describes it in its historical context. However, it is important to stress that:

religious symbols ... cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with non-religious symbols or their articulations in social life, in which work and power are always crucial. (Asad, 1993: 53).

Children construct meanings about religion in contexts defined by different formative experiences. In this respect, I find it important to point out that although anthropological religious study has been reviewed since Durkheim—postulating that religion is not an illusion of the individual mind, but rather responds to a social fact (Ceriani, 2008)—it seems that some studies with children return to the conception of religion as merely an individual phenomenon (for example, Goldman, 1965). This is a warning that the conceptualisation of a child as an asocial being is still strong. In fact, until the late 1970s, anthropological studies which took children into consideration presented an evolutionary perspective, greatly due to the immense influence of classic Piagetian theory among other theories of development (James *et al.*, 1998). In this perspective, the stage of development that children have to reach is adulthood; children’s knowledge matters only as a means to understand the development of knowledge in adults. Congruently, so-called “socialization theories” in social sciences studied the ways in which younger members of

each society were incorporated into different dimensions of social life (Mead, 1985, 1997; Benedict, 1989). In this approach, children only get information and receive social guidelines that are external to them (Szulc, 2006; Pelissier, 1991).

Childhood studies especially embraced the concept of agency—the capability to be the source and originator of social acts (Rapport and Overing, 2010)—partly as a reaction to studies based on models that stress the constraints of social structures and focus on “becoming” and “reaching a certain state” (Bluebond and Korbin, 2007). Children produce meaning as much as adults do (Toren, 1993; Cohn, 2005b). Nevertheless, I agree with Pires (2007) that some studies have exceedingly emphasized children’s agency and autonomy, even postulating the existence of “children’s cultures.” Therefore, it is necessary to recognize their agency, but also to place their constructions in the context of social relations and to analyze the mediations that these present.

What I have illustrated so far is compatible with current thinking in psychogenetic theory, which state that children's construction of social knowledge is studied by placing this knowledge within a socio-cultural context. Moreover, social practices place knowledge in previous systems of social meaning (Castorina, 2005, 2010).

In short, through their different experiences, people construct cultural meanings, appropriating previous ones and interpreting them in such a way that when they are reproducing them, they are reorganizing them (Toren, 1990). In this sense, educational anthropology incorporates the idea of appropriation as a counterweight to the concept of socialization (Rockwell, 1991), therefore establishing the concept of a “formative experience” (Rockwell, 1995). This notion becomes helpful when referring to the everyday relations and practices that children are actively involved in, which mediate their construction of knowledge. In this case, the meanings children construct (e.g., those attributed to “going to church”) do not reproduce those proposed by adults without mediation and cannot be understood outside their formative experiences and broader social relations (Castorina, 2005; García Palacios, 2004, 2006; Pires, 2007).

Toren (2003) observes that the process of making religious experiences become meaningful is the same process of “fixation of the belief,” the process where a person becomes a “believer.” By following this suggestive proposal, I will try to contribute to the debate by analyzing whether it is possible or impossible to separate the construction of certain “beliefs” from “practices” within religion (Carozzi, 2002). In this specific case, I will show how placing “beliefs” in concrete practices and in broader social relations reveals that the religious environment is one of the fields where children from the neighbourhood

construct their membership to an ethnic group distinguishable from “others.” In this sense, paying attention to connections between religion and ethnicity will be crucial.

Variety of Techniques in Ethnographic Fieldwork

Current studies stress the importance of conducting ethnographies that include adults as well as children. Responding to the challenge of how to turn children into interlocutors in the research process, I encountered the use of different techniques and methods as resources. The main technique continues to be participant observation with adults and children. I used this technique during the entire ethnographic fieldwork (from 2006 to 2011) in different spaces simultaneously: the neighbourhood (i.e., visiting different houses and collective spaces, and participating in *Evangelio* rituals), the school, and the lectures about “Toba culture.”

Other techniques, which can be combined in different ways, help complement participant observation. Thus in many anthropological studies children are asked to produce drawings, write down short essays, and use audiovisual media (Mead, 1985; Toren, 1990; Cohn, 2005a; Pires, 2007; among others). Throughout the development of this research, these techniques were used in two workshops (2007 and 2009) with children from the neighbourhood (Cf. García Palacios and Hecht, 2009; Vivaldi *et al*, 2010). Finally, in 2011, I carried out a new series of interviews with a total of 40 children. The interviews were focused on specific themes according to my research objectives in which I incorporated some key aspects of genetic theory’s clinical-critical methodⁱⁱⁱ. However, when incorporating this method into an ethnographic approach, certain restrictions become evident. This method is not enough to understand the place of social practices in the construction of knowledge. Therefore, this method must be redefined through drawing on a methodological approach like ethnography with the aim of studying the social practices in which children interact, with one another and with adults. Accordingly, I carried out extensive fieldwork with adults and children before interviewing the latter for my research. As a result, when it was time to consider the questions that would initially structure the interview, a vast amount of material was available, and I extracted questions on different matters such as those relating to “going to church.”^{iv}

Furthermore, understanding local conceptions regarding the stage of childhood and the different periods that it covers were essential. Following Toba construction of childhood (Hecht, 2005, 2010), I organized the children into two large groups, considering two stages within *nogotshaxac* (“the way of being a child or young person” in Qom). The first covered

those characterized as *nogotole/c* (“boy/girl” in Qom: from speech until the menarche and voice thickening), and the second covered those called *qañole* and *nsoqolec* (“young men and women” in Qom: from the menarche and voice thickening until the arrival of the first born, when the *nogotshaxac* is finished)^v.

Exchanges and Tensions Between Religion, Ethnicity, and Childhood

Since Barth’s (1969) ethnic identification studies, many writers have accounted for the ways in which ethnicity uses communal actions against a dominant group (Tambiah, 1989; Briones, 1998; Tamagno, 2001; Cardoso, 2006; Gordillo and Hirsch, 2010). Trying to articulate elements of different terminological uses of the concept of ethnicity, Dietz (2003: 84) proposes to define it provisionally as:

The organization of social groups, where their mechanisms of delimitation with other groups whom they interact with are defined by their members using distinctive features between the cultures that interact with one another, and these mechanisms tend to be presented with biological arguments such as kinship and lineage terminology.

Thus ethnicity combines an organizational aspect (and therefore it must be placed in the field of social and power relations) with a semantic-symbolic aspect that manifests itself through a sense of belonging to a “we.” Organizing internal variety demands that the members of a group constantly negotiate the culturally-validated meanings (Dietz, 2003). Therefore, I will try to gather some clues to understand why the *Evangelio* became the “Toba religion” (even when the interpretations of its meanings are not homogenous). I will favour four aspects that I consider essential when dealing with this problem.

First, I will refer to the study of ethnicity linked to universal religions. Segato (2005, 2007), analyzing the expansion of evangelism in northwest Argentina, accounts for a re-symbolization process of the contradiction between ethnic groups and the nation state, a key historical opposition in the struggle and ethnic reaffirmation of indigenous groups. At this point, it is necessary to point out that even though Argentina is considered a secular country^{vi}, the Nation’s Federal Government supports the Catholic religion (section 2, Argentinean Constitution). Due to the ambiguity of the term “support,” the Catholic faith is portrayed as a “privileged religion.” Thus Catholicism is left demarcated (Wright, 1999) and any other religious institution needs official authorization to operate within the national territory^{vii}. Catholicism is then associated with the state, and Evangelical religions bring

new ways of capturing an opposition that used to be between ethnic groups as that opposition is now between Evangelism and Catholicism. This opposition is even more meaningful when considering that indigenous groups of the Greater Chaco area previously had contact with Catholic missionaries as well: Tobas remember “the time of the priests” as a visit organised by the government to “civilize and domesticate the aborigine culture” (Wright, 2008: 161). This, for Wright (2008), conditioned the view of the Tobas on Pentecostalism by establishing it as liberating, but at the cost of stigmatizing some of their ancestral practices (in Ceriani, 2008). Taking this into consideration, one can see that the possibility of selecting diacritic cultural features is subject to multiple relations of power that tie a certain group with different socioeconomic strata and the nation state^{viii}.

Even when there are differences and tensions between the neighbourhood’s two evangelical churches, residents in both consider that “*we are still brothers in Christ*” (Alba, 11 years old); “*it is the same ... the names only change*” (Estrella, 34 years old). Thus a strong separation still exists between Pentecostalism and Catholicism. In brief, as Ceriani (2008) points out, for Toba groups Catholics represent the absolute other and their view of them is dialectally defined by the ethnic dimension (the *Evangelio* is Qom, Catholicism is *doqshi*, “white” in Qom) and by protestant-based morality (Catholics “drink, smoke, and are idolatrous”):

You go to [the Evangelio] church and you can’t go dancing or drinking and that sort of stuff ... and here at [Catholic] school it is different. You are Catholic, but you still go out to dance, drink, and all that (Laura, 14 years old);

We worship the living Jesus Christ, not images like the Catholics ... Catholics are idolatrous (Minister Mirta, 54 years old).

The presence of the school in the lives of the residents of this neighbourhood reinforces religion as an ethnic marker. There, one can hear about Toba children: “*Tobas have another religion, another way of thinking,*” “*they are not Catholic,*” “*they are evangelists.*” When I approached the school to introduce myself and explain my research interests, the first thing one of the heads told me was: “*The only non-Catholic children we let inside are the Tobas*” (Ernesto, vice-principal).

A second aspect that contributes to making the *Evangelio* the “Toba religion” is the fragmentation of churches into congregational units with certain autonomy. This turned out congruent with the traditional dynamics of political fusion and separations into different units of Toba communities (Miller, 1971; Ceriani and Citro, 2005).

Third, most studies stress that the doctrinal core of Pentecostalism, which emphasizes ecstatic experiences and healing, was able to connect to the rituals and cosmological complexes of the Toba people (Ceriani and Citro, 2005).

Closely linked to this last point, I find a fourth key aspect that has traditionally been overlooked but is essential to my enquiry: the conception of childhood that underlies the social processes, and the construction of particular subjects that are implied in education practices (Levinson and Holland, 1996; Jociles and Lobato, 2008). At this point, considering the analytic dimensions of childhood and education as well as the notion of formative experience, it is important to be able to examine the intersections between religion and ethnicity in the context I am analyzing and locate this within a broader context.

In this particular case, until transitioning to adulthood, children participate in different spaces and relate to different types of knowledge that are not considered “mandatory” or “necessary” at the present moment (Hecht, 2010). Specifically, formative religious experiences (in school and in the neighbourhood) are considered as “non-mandatory” by adult neighbours. My thesis is that this is congruent with the group’s particular conception of childhood and education practices on the one hand, and the experiential visions of Pentecostal religion, on the other: They preach on an individualized religious experience, where “*entregarse*” (“giving one’s self”) ^{ix} depends on each person’s own conviction.

In the Toba neighborhood of Buenos Aires, children play and walk around without adult supervision at a very early age. One could consider they have more autonomy than that which is observed of children from other social groups. However, this does not mean they live in the neighbourhood isolated from other inhabitants and that adults are not present in their lives. It does not have to do with a lack of care, but rather with a strong group and family network that give children both freedom of movement and security (Colangelo, 2009; Hecht, 2010). In addition, this relative autonomy could be part of a “native pedagogy” (Tassinari, 2007). By allowing them to roam through the neighbourhood’s different spaces and “see everything,” this pedagogy recognizes their active participation in learning^x. This possibility of movement is lost as children grow: adults do not go inside a house without invitation. In contrast, children are sent to go observe an event in the neighbourhood or to receive and deliver messages, since they can “see everything.” Adults from the neighbourhood consider children to be excellent “information bearers.” However, adults do keep secrets from children. In fact, when they wish to communicate something among themselves, they usually resort to *la idioma* (their way of referring to the Toba language), because the majority of children do not speak Toba as their first language

(Hecht, 2010).

The differential positioning of adults and children is also shaped by the surrounding practical knowledge about the *monte* ("woodland") and the field. In elders' constructions, "being indigenous" is established by the memory of a common origin in the *monte* (of the northeast of Argentina) and in the knowhow carried out by living there (Vivaldi, 2010). On the contrary, according to the adults, the children of the neighbourhood "don't know the *monte/field*" because they have always "lived in the city." Therefore, certain social knowledge (e.g., "knowing the *monte*") defines each generation (e.g., adult and child). From the natives' perspective, adults have certain social knowledge that children do not have. To speak *la idioma*, to know the *monte*, and congruently to know the *Evangelio* are part of what it is to be a "Qom adult," and these are not considered "mandatory" or "necessary" during childhood.

Regarding religious activities, some children participate by dancing in the *cultos* ("worships" in Spanish) when they feel like doing so and independent of their family's attendance. Others do not participate in these activities or only participate sporadically, even if their families attend. In this sense, adults do not "take" children to the *cultos* or other events, with the exception of babies ('o'o'). They do not consider them "mandatory activities": "One goes to church or the culto when one feels like it, when one needs it" (Violeta, 14 years old)^{xi}.

Different authors claim that a certain principle of autonomy dominates the "Qom model of child upbringing," because the idea that a voluntary agreement is necessary for sociability underlies it (Tola, 2009; Mendoza and Wright, 1986). Accordingly, certain rituals like baptism cannot be carried out if the participant does not previously express his or her will to do so. As 17-year-old Renata pointed out,

I used to go every Sunday to the Catholic chapel here. I'd go with my friends [from school] ... I'd leave thinking... I mean, it's not the same, it's not, you don't feel it. ... Everyone got baptized, and I'd look at them and... They're still the same, you know? I compared it with my baptism. They're not the same ..., because a person has to really take it seriously and feel it. Because that [the Catholic baptism] is like part of a religion: 'If everyone does it. Well, if you're part of a religion you have to do it, for sure'. This [the Evangelio], on the other hand, is your decision: of changing, of being a new creature, as they say. It's different...

With regards to baptism, I claim that since the Catholic Church conceives it as the

congregation's entrance to the neighbourhood and that which gives "eternal salvation," it should be received very early in a person's life (Cowen, 2000). The *Evangelio* maintains that baptism should be received preferably when the person "believes," repents the life that he or she has lived up until that moment, makes the decision of "giving him or herself", and stops "being in the world." The dispute surrounding "children" or "believer's" baptism does not seem to be settled in the field of theology either.

Thus in contrast to the social construction of childhood as a "privileged catechumen" that can be observed throughout the history of Catholicism (Aries, 1987; Gélis, 1990; Varela and Álvarez, 1991)^{xii}, in the *Evangelio*, the evangelized subject is the adult. He or she must leave "las cosas del mundo" ("the worldly things" e.g., alcohol, tobacco, adultery, *la joda* or "partying"). And in this sense, as inferred from Renata's interview fragment, the "non-mandatory" nature of the baptism ritual becomes "evidence" and, to a large extent, a value of the *Evangelio*, in opposition to the "obligatory nature" observed in Catholic rituals. It is, therefore, necessary to take this into account in the analysis of its "singularity"^{xiii}.

Religious Formative Experiences: "Going to Church" According to Children

Following the meanings of "going to church" that children gave in the interviews, I found two subgroups within the younger children (*nogotole/c*). The first subgroup consisted of children of up to approximately eight years old. They associated "going to church" solely with singing and dancing. These actions were mentioned by everyone in this first group.

These are some excerpts:

Manuela (five years old): I go to church ...

Mariana: And what do you do when you go?

Manuela: Uh... we sing. We sing and... we dance around ... My mom is always playing the tambourine ...

Mariana: And why do you think you go to church?

Manuela: To sing, I don't know ... I'm going to lots of cultos ... and... maybe I start dancing

Mariana: And why do you think people dance? Why do you think they do it?

Manuela: To... make other people dance.

Natalia (seven years old): I go to church ... We sing, dance, then we drink, then we wash our cups, and church is over ... At church, they sing, play the guitar, play the tambourine, that's all.

It is not a coincidence that children compared going to church with singing and dancing, because these activities have an important place in the *Evangelio*. In fact, the term *l'onaxanaxaqui* is used to talk about “church” in the Qom language (literal translation, “his or her place for singing”). The connection is such that when I asked four-year-old Facundo what a minister has to do, he answered: “*He has to sing.*” Although these activities continued to be mentioned in the other subgroups of children who were over nine, references to the Bible, Jesus, God, and prayer began to appear:

Barbara (11 years old): That's church. And... mom... my mom goes to church with me. There, they sing. They just sing ... for Jesus. They sing for him. And then they talk... about the Bible, about... then, then they sing and dance... the brothers. They just dance ... There, they explain things to you and it's like God is speaking to you, but in your heart ... If you don't have something, a job or something, and you pray to God, God will give you that job.

Federico (12 years old): Sometimes, I go sometimes [to church]. Sometimes I have to go sell something somewhere, or I have to go to practice at the [soccer] club ... [When I go] they sing... They speak the Word and... they pray. All kinds of stuff...

Finally, within the group of the oldest children (young men and women: *qañole* and *nsoqolec*), the idea of “believing” often appeared when they spoke of “going to church”:

Sofia (14 years old): About going to church, I used to go. But I don't now... There were a lot of problems, so I left. But about believing in God, I believe.

Clara (17 years old): From what I know, as long as you believe in the Lord, well, if you want to go [to church], go. But if, for example, you don't believe, that's something else ... There are many people that don't go. But they do believe. That's what's important ... They have to believe. That's what's important.

The different fragments show that even when “going to church” is part of both children and adult's everyday life in the neighbourhood, the meanings that are given to this activity are not the same. The first aspect that is important to point out is that children relate to prayers, the Bible, and the figure of Jesus before the age of nine, even though children younger than nine did not mention these topics in the interviews. At this point, it is

necessary to stress aspects daily life, because the different social practices, and the ritualized activities among them, produce certain inscriptions that are key to the construction of the meaning of the world (Citro, 2009; Bourdieu, 2010). In this sense, I will consider some formative experiences that children have.

Currently, “Sunday school” is held at the *Jesucristo Pentecostés* Church (especially for children), and *cultos* are carried out at both churches. Other formative experiences might be overlooked because of their everyday nature, such as the evangelical music listened to in the neighborhood, or videos played in different houses. Moreover, since the Bible is always the last entity of authority (Miller, 1979), even very small children have their own^{xiv}. Lastly, praying is usually a very common practice for several reasons. It might occur that people go by every house if they need prayer for a particular difficulty:

[At church we do] prayers for the ill (Francisco, 10 years old).

I made requests and prayed for her [her sister was sick]. It was fulfilled, because they came by the houses to request and... after, they prayed for her. They prayed and... that's how it was fulfilled (Julieta, 10 years old)^{xv}.

On the other hand, children learn at a very young age that they have to pray when they are afraid. Many times fear is associated with entities that might appear in the neighbourhood: the *duende* (“goblin”), the *pomberito* and the *lobisón* (both local creatures), and different ghosts are some of the most mentioned ones. It is always possible to pray in these cases and even get baptized, as many children explained: “*I used to see things; Ale [her brother] too, but since we have gotten baptized, they haven't appeared anymore*” (Marina, 12 years old).

Therefore, the fact that prayer and the Bible were not mentioned by children under nine when speaking of “what they did” in church does not imply their lack of knowledge, but *does* imply that they are not necessarily connected matters. The process that appears to develop here over time is the association of “church” and its activities (“dancing and singing”) with “religious contents” (the Bible, Jesus, God, and prayer).

Therefore, it is evident that children carry out a reconstructive process. Over time, they associate the church’s activities with new meanings that are “naturally” presumed by adult believers. The constructive process that subjects carry out regarding socially proposed objects is based on their interactive experiences with them (Castorina, 2005). Therefore, it should not surprise anyone that the object, “prayer”, did not appear first as something “of the church” for children—or associated to it exclusively. Because according to their own

experiences, “praying” belonged to different realms. As five-year-old Tamara recounted, when her two-year-old brother is afraid, “you have to pray loud so that he’s not afraid. If not, I play [with him]”. Her words show knowledge regarding the act of praying and its possibilities as well as the fact that it is not necessarily separated from everyday aspects of life (you can also play to make fear go away). With time, what appears to happen is the association of matters that are not conceived in the beginning as necessarily linked together. To stress my hypothesis even further, there are other everyday actions that children do in church that did not appear in the interviews of any group, not even with the eldest children, because they never associated them with church. For example, “sitting,” “listening to the elders,” and “taking care of siblings.” In short, as Toren (1993) sustains, meanings are never “received.” They are always the product of a construction process that is mediated, but not determined, by the relations of each person with others. Even when the material conditions structure the array of possible experiences, an active process of appropriation and reconstruction exists.

It has already been seen that the group of older children distinguished between “congregating” on the one hand, and “believing” or “being *Evangelio*” on the other. For the adults of the neighbourhood, it was possible for a person to “be *Evangelio*” or “be a believer” and not go to church activities: “I believe in the Evangelio, but I don’t go to church” (Pedro, 67 years old); “I appear as a member of the Unida [“United Church, church that represents the Evangelio] I used to congregate. Now, only sometimes, when I’m up to it” (Eduardo, 52 years old). This distinction that many adults made was the target of the ministers’ objections: “If you ask around, everyone is Evangelio, but they don’t come...” (Minister Marta, 54 years old).

The idea that the adult believer has of “going to church” presupposes identification and belief: if people attend church it is because they are *Evangelio*. But at the same time, “being a believer” is something that exceeds “going to church,” and for that reason a believer “might not congregate”. Picking up on a question raised by Pires (2007: 145): “How does one learn that belief exceeds going to church?” She concludes the following: “Curiously, it is precisely by going to church that people learn that in order to be a religious person it is not essential to attend church”. It would seem that the process of becoming an adult coincides greatly, as Pires (2007) puts it, with the process of “religious conversion,” where a person starts interpreting the world through Christian concepts. As Mercedes (17 years old) recognized: “You’re ‘in the world’ [see note ix]. It’s something else. And you can’t understand anyone if you don’t go to church, because they think differently...” Frequenting

church, singing, dancing, and participating in rituals is precisely how they construct “religious belief.”

Therefore, during childhood, people do not necessarily need to account for knowledge as adults do. Thus it did not seem contradictory for the people in the neighborhood in which the children lived, participated in different spaces, and interacted with different religious knowledge^{xvi}. In an interview, one of the elders of the neighbourhood, the second minister at the *Iglesia Unida*, commented regarding the attendance of his granddaughter to religious classes at the Catholic school: “They have to learn everything they can learn ... Afterwards, when they grow up, they’ll see where they stand/are” (Benjamín, 78 years old). In the same way, 35-year-old Blanca told us that when her 10-year-old daughter told her she wanted to receive her first communion with her classmates at Catholic school, she thought that it was fine if the child wanted to. The curious thing is that she declared she did not participate in the activities proposed by a movement of “transcendental meditation” that visited the neighbourhood, because she preferred not to “mix” since she was already with the *Evangelio*. At this point, the congruency becomes visible between the Toba perspective on a large margin of decision-making during childhood, and the “individualized feeling” that is sought in the *Evangelio* ^{xvii}.

I have claimed that it is the participation in these diverse everyday ritualized practices that contributes to the very process of the construction of belief. However, this does not mean that just by participating they turn into believers and identify with the *Evangelio*. In fact, children from the neighbourhood also participate in religious practices at the Catholic school they attend. Taking into account that the subject assimilates situation where the objects play certain roles but not others is necessary to analyze how these symbols are presented to children and what we expect they will do with them. Therefore, the process of constructing a belief is not simply about “being there” and participating. Rather, this participation is mediated by the relations with other people, and by different mandates and expectations so as to identify with certain groups and not with others. These mandates that have ethnic connotations condition the way children appropriate “beliefs” and religious knowledge. This is what differentiates the neighbourhood’s religious practices, where the children are expected to be part of a group (“we are Tobas so we are *Evangelio*”), from the practices carried out at school, where they are considered “the other” (“Tobas aren’t Catholic”) ^{xviii}. Furthermore, each subject’s agency also intervenes in the process of the construction of belief.

Conclusions

In an interview, 12-year-old Federico firmly told me: *“I didn’t use to think there was a heaven, nor that thing...hell, nothing. After, when I was older, there I already knew.”* During the research, I have tried to account for the process where people come to construct that they “already knew”: to build meanings about the world in relation to what others have constructed before. And at the same time, view them as part of something which is obvious and considered a given. This is due to the fact that people share a set of “truths” that “having been written both in things and in minds, [are] presented as beneath the veil of that which is auto-evident and goes unnoticed, because it is taken for granted by definition” (Bourdieu, 2005: 347). In the Buenos Aires “Toba neighbourhood,” the *Evangelio*, at least in its key aspects, seems to be part of that which is taken for granted. It has not always been this way. Therefore, I found it essential to consider not only the understanding of the complex historical process that made it be this way, but also the “micro-historic” process (Toren, 1993) by which a person takes something for granted that in the beginning is anything but obvious. Toren (1993) suggests that understating this process helps distinguish how people become “enchanted” by meanings that they themselves have built: how they consider their own concepts and practices as a given.

Research on religious conversions tend to emphasize the difference between “a before” and “an after” (Guerrero, 2005). But they do not necessarily show the process that connects both moments. Nevertheless, to analyze this process I have been guided by a different perspective from the one that inspired so-called “socialization theories” (Mead, 1985, 1997; Benedict, 1989). Although these studies tried to capture the transformation in time, they approached it in such a way that children represented a relatively homogenous set of people who only received cultural guidelines. In this way, not only were children seen as both the passive recipients of the teaching-learning operation, but the “transmitted content” was thought of as a-historical, finished, fixed, and external to the subjects. From this perspective, analyzing children does not make sense, because they only represent the incomplete beginning of a process where the result is supposed to be known.

On the contrary, I consider that including children’s experiences in social research can reveal aspects of a social phenomenon that would otherwise go unnoticed. The process of reconstructing meaning, which children do based on their experiences, shows that religion does not appear in people’s lives as a sudden and individual revelation, but neither does it constitute a simple “cultural imposition” by others. Since the past is reinterpreted with

conversion (Guerrero, 2005; Ceriani and Citro, 2005), if I only considered the adult believer's perspective on childhood, I would not be studying religion in children's formative experiences as I set out to do. Indeed, child participation in churches acquires new meaning in adulthood (Ridgely, 2005): Most people who "give themselves to the *Evangelio*" and appropriate the conversion accounts stress a certain immediacy ("*I was in the world before, now I'm in the Evangelio*").

In this article, I intended to demonstrate that children do not reproduce meanings proposed by adults and, at the same time, their meanings cannot be understood outside of their formative experiences that mediate the meaning of their appropriations over time.

ⁱ The Toba groups, whose ethnonym is *Qom*, are part of the ethnic and linguistic group called *Guaycurú* that also includes Mocoivies, Pilagás, Kadiweos or Caduveos, and the already extinct Abipones, Mabyas, and Payagüas (Messineo, 2000). In Argentina, 69,452 people identify themselves as Toba or first-generation descendents (source: Indigenous People's Additional Survey, National Institute of Statistics and Censuses, 2004-2005). This is one of the many Toba neighbourhoods in the province of Buenos Aires. 32 families, originally from rural and semi-urban Toba communities of Chaco and Formosa (provinces in the northeast of Argentina), settled there in 1995. The research is supported by the National Council for Technical and Scientific Research (CONICET-Argentina and University of Buenos Aires (UBA-Argentina). Special thanks to Flavia Pires and Christiane Falcao and the anonymous reviewers for their wonderful suggestions, and to Daniel Low, the translator, for his meticulous work. Names in this article have been changed.

ⁱⁱ Besides organizing these lectures, the main source of income for the families from the neighbourhood is from the production and sale of handicrafts, casual labour, state welfare and benefits. Even though school lectures started recently, they are the most important source of income along with the artisans cooperative for most people in the neighborhood since their migration to Buenos Aires (Spennemann, 2006; Hecht, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ At present, this method is still considered as a core element that defines the genetic epistemology tradition (Castorina, 2005). This means that the use of the method does not entail the validation of certain postulates of classic genetic psychology that have been critically analyzed elsewhere (García Palacios, 2005; García Palacios and Castorina, 2010), but rather the constant review of its epistemological postulates.

^{iv} I also researched the meaning that children give to other matters (e.g., the neighbourhood and its association to "Toba identity", the *Evangelio* baptism ritual, the Catholic rituals and teachings at school, the non-human entities that appear in the neighborhood). The way children consider these processes provide a deeper understanding of the construction of belief. In this regard, the works of Toren (1990, 1993, 2003), Pires (2007), Csordas (2009), and my own previous research with children attending Catholic catechism (García Palacios, 2004, 2006) provided suggestive approaches to children's religious knowledge. However, if the goal is to acknowledge the influence of socio-cultural aspects in the very process of constructing knowledge, important adjustments must be made in the use of any technique. For example, Pires (2007) asked children to draw about "my religion". In my recent research, using this approach with children from the Toba neighbourhood was not advisable, because on many occasions "religion" is used socially to establish a difference with "(ancient) beliefs", and my goal was to access the meanings children gave to *both* aspects of the *Evangelio* and the tensions that arise from this. On the other hand, Pires found that in the process of becoming a religious person there weren't substantial differences between Catholics and Evangelists in Catingueira (Brazil). In this context, the process by which a person finally "gives him or herself" to the *Evangelio* is intertwined with the process of ethnic differentiation between "being Catholic" and "being *Evangelio*". Hence, in order to gain ethnographic specificity, every method and technique must not immediately be made universal.

^v The first period within the *nogotshaxac* refers to gestation: The Qom term *huete'o* is used for the first few months and *hueta'o* for the next few. At birth, the person is considered an 'o'o' ("baby" in Qom) until the arrival of speech (Hecht, 2005 and 2010). Since the clinical-critical method involves doing interviews, I had to focus on the following periods. However, religion is already present in these first two periods of a person's

life, which again is a reminder that it is impossible to trust data obtained solely from oral interviews. I contemplated this in my research.

^{vi} According to Argentina's Constitution, all Argentine inhabitants are entitled to the right to profess their religion freely (section 14). The 1994 reform allows the possibility of the President to not recognize himself as Catholic (section 89).

^{vii} This demarcation dynamic invisibilizes Catholicism's specificity, portraying it as the "universal" religion by accentuating the specificity (and social devaluation) of other religions. This can be seen in the organization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion. It has a section called "Catholic religion" and another one that regulates all other religions, referred to as the "non-Catholic religions" section.

^{viii} As Asad (1993:53-54) sustains, religious symbols cannot be understood independently from their historic relations with non-religious symbols or from their articulation with social life, where power is always crucial. This is why the status of authority of practices and religious assertions must be explained as a product of historical forces.

^{ix} "Giving one's self" is a native expression that implies entry into the *Evangelio* movement, usually followed by the baptism ritual. When a person "gives him or herself", he or she stops "being in the world" (*estar en el mundo*) and begins to "be in the *Evangelio*" (*estar en el Evangelio*).

^x It is interesting to mention that in Qom the verbs "to teach" and "to learn" have the same root (-*apaxaguen*). They are distinguished by the prefix: The prefix used for the verb "to teach" (*sapaxaguen*) indicates that the participant is active (controlling or initiating the action). The prefix used for the verb "to learn" (*ñapaxaguen*) indicates that the participant is middle (active, but at the same time affected by the action of the verb). Note that the conception of the apprentice is active, although affected by the action. This is different from the hegemonic view on socialization where the apprentice is considered practically passive (there are Toba prefixes to indicate that a participant is passive in regards to the action).

^{xi} "Not forcing" them seems to underlie every interaction with children. In the neighbourhood, when children are doing their chores at home, but feel like doing something else, they can leave their work unfinished (except when taking care of siblings). Thus I agree with Tassinari (2007) who points out that for the Karipuna children of Brasil, the possibility that children have to leave their work unfinished (unlike adults) would indicate that even though they help out with many chores, these do not represent a "child's obligation." Nevertheless, even if they are not considered "mandatory," practically all children carry out different chores at home. But I stress the fact that they have the possibility of not completing them if they choose not to. Therefore, it would seem they have a certain margin of maneuverability.

^{xii} Children from indigenous communities have historically been seen by the Catholic Church as a medium to "convert," civilize," and "morally lead" their families (Del Priore, 1991; Díaz, 2000).

^{xiii} Consequently, it is necessary to place the cultural singularities within inter-ethnic relations. I am not claiming that there is not a certain degree of broader autonomy. Rather, I claim that a large part of its importance strictly corresponds with the process of contrast between both rituals. Likewise, agency is not a condition that belongs solely to "children of the *Evangelio*." Although the vast majority of the "children of the Catholic Church" were not able to "choose" their baptism, they also dispute many of the meanings that seem "imposed" by their elders (see García Palacios, 2006). I am trying to warn against the widespread temptation to over-dimension the "freedom" that children from indigenous communities have. Here, it is important to notice, just as Citro (2009) has, that the first characterization about Northeastern Argentine natives and their "savagery" remits simultaneously to an idyllic "love of freedom" and to "laziness" that justifies the "civilizing action."

^{xiv} "Would you like me to show you my little Bible?" asked five-year-old Manuela. She had it inside a small purse—which is how adults take them to *cultos*—that was pink and had a Barbie stamp on it.

^{xv} These fragments show the strong emphasis given to healing in the *Evangelio* and of how children participate in these experiences. The therapeutic aspects of worship pervade, in combination with other resources, the ways of attention and care of children from birth (Colangelo, 2009). These guidelines correspond with the medical attention provided in hospitals and with some of the "ancestor's beliefs," although not without conflict.

^{xvi} This gives children a certain role as mediators. For example, even though children are not exempt of the tensions and conflicts between the neighbourhood's two churches, they also tend to mediate between both. Many go indifferently to both *cultos*, or rather go first to the *Unida's* worship and later go to "Sunday school" at the *Jesucristo Pentecostés*. The adults can also go to both churches, but only when they are invited on a special occasion. Children can attend church without projecting any special implications just like they can walk into a house without being invited. It is not that this is forbidden for adults, but they do not usually do it because it would entail a type of involvement with the congregation. This is precisely because for adults "going to church" already implies the belief and membership to a specific denomination that tends to not change due to the congressional nature of the *Evangelio* ("I already gave myself to that church"). This

is also something that is perceived as different from Catholics. Because, as Ignacio mentioned, “they sign up as Catholics, but they’re not in any church” (63 years old).

^{xvii} The fact that people who consider themselves as part of a religion allow their children to perform the rituals of another religion does not seem to happen with other social groups. Indeed, Pires (2007) highlights the fact that adults of many social groups usually do not allow their children to go to the churches of other religions, because here “going to church” already involves belief. In this sense, taking the specific conception of the group on childhood and religion into account exacerbates the analysis of the intersections of religion and ethnicity in the context of this analysis.

^{xviii} Thus children do not associate with the *Evangelio* in a “social void.” Rather, their association is mediated by their relations with others. Asad (1993) stresses that it is inconceivable that a “disembodied mind” could identify with religion from a discovery point of view. There are conditions that help explain how symbols are built and how some of them are established as natural or as having authority in comparison to others.

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