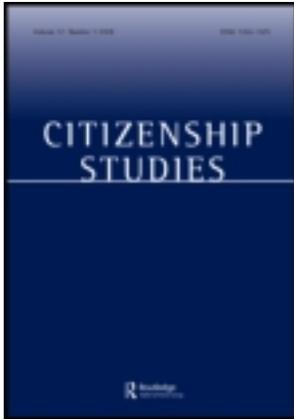


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Questioning religious monopolies and free markets: the role of the state, the church(es), and secular agents in the management of religion in Argentina

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Questioning religious monopolies and free markets: the role of the state, the church(es), and secular agents in the management of religion in Argentina

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This paper reviews the variety of (sometimes contradictory) processes affecting religion in Argentina today. It questions the idea that a true Catholic monopoly existed in the past, and suggests that the current advancement of religious diversity in the country does not necessarily entail increasing pluralism (since, following James Beckford, this would mean the positive appreciation of this diversity) but can, on the contrary, cause increased social resistance to new religious practices and ideas. A realistic appraisal of religious pluralism should take into account the degree of social as well as governmental regulation of religion. Therefore, this paper emphasizes the expanding role of different secular agents in the control of religious ideas and practices.

Keywords: Argentina; pluralism; cult controversies; religious regulation; social theory

Introduction

Academic renderings of the religious situation in Argentina usually stress the *breakdown* of the Catholic religious monopoly and the resulting ‘pluralism’ due to the rise of a novel religious ‘market’. However, by doing so, they assume a too simple transition between these two following ideal states: one of them characterized by the Catholic Church’s monopoly and the other by the existence of a myriad of churches and religious denominations, and therefore, ‘pluralism’. One of the shortcomings of this position is the lack of attention to the heated controversies that religious minorities have sparked – just by becoming more visible either on public space or in media. Also, these interpretations about Catholic dominance principally focus on church–state relationships and, basically emphasize governmental regulations, ignoring the existence of what Grim and Finke (2006) call ‘religious favouritism’ and ‘social regulation’.

Taking some theoretical contributions of James Beckford as a starting point, I will differentiate the existence of ‘religious diversity’ from that of ‘pluralism’, since the latter would imply the *appreciation* of the former. Besides, using insights derived from the ‘religious economies’ perspective developed by Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence R. Iannaccone, I will consider that the *degree of regulation* of the religious market is one of the most important variables for approaching changes in the religious sphere. Accordingly, I will follow Grim and Finke’s (2006) statement about the relevance of including means of

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regulation that are not legally formal but also those advocated by the media and other secular agents – in this case, anti-sect organizations – that lead to stigmatization of new religious movements (NRMs). The recent history of the two main religious minorities in Argentina – i.e. *Umbandistas* and Evangelicals – reveals that, along with recruiting new members, they have made strong (more or less collective) efforts to overcome various types of regulation (Frigerio 2003, Wyncarczyk 2010).

These endeavors occur in a democratic context that, scholars generally assume, is characterized by the prevalence of a ‘religious market’ and of taken-for-granted ‘religious pluralism’. It is true that there *is* more religious choice than ever before; some options, however, imply considerable social costs. To this day, some religious identities are more stigmatized than others – practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, for example, frequently do not disclose them at work. Such a restrictive state of affairs shows that the transition from a situation of monopoly to one of a ‘free’ market is neither linear nor automatic. A closer analysis reveals the need to acknowledge *degrees of regulation* of this market and of taking into account the strong influence of both religious and secular agents in the process of change and social control.

To present these arguments, I will first briefly address what I consider to be the hegemonic paradigm of Catholic monopoly, present in many if not most Latin American studies on religion, and critically examine its ground principles. Second, I will criticize this paradigm using insights provided by Beckford (2003) and Grim and Finke (2006). Third, I will examine state and social management of religion in Argentina focusing on the legal framework affecting religious activities as well as on the controversy over sects that took place in media and other relevant social arenas for at least a decade in the 1980s and 1990s.

Catholic monopoly and state regulation of religion in Argentina: an alternative vision

Catholic monopoly: the dominant paradigm

The assumption that there was a traditional Catholic monopoly that has been broken in the last two or three decades because of the sudden expansion of Evangelical and other NRMs is commonplace in the academic study of religion in Argentina and other countries of Latin America. It is also believed that, as a consequence of this situation, a ‘religious market’ has developed, giving rise to ‘religious pluralism’. Some examples of this view can be found in the following statements by well-known Argentine researchers:

The main historical institutions that had granted meaning to Argentines during the origin, development and climax of the welfare state (from the 1920s to the 1970s) had been: the state itself [...] especially in relation to education, health, work and transportation, the Armed Forces and the Catholic Church considered [...] as the founders and guarantors of Argentine-ness and guardians of integral and totalizing identity, the workers’ associations [sindicatos] and political parties [...] Nowadays, these institutions builders of multiple imaginaries are criticized, held under suspicion and losing their legitimacy among the population [...] Therefore, today we can see the following process: the neighbourhoods and peripheries of the cities are being transformed into an active religious market with a variety of offers and demands. At the end of the millennium, the novelty is that the traditional Catholic religious monopoly in the popular sectors of society is being broken [...] The popular sectors are looking for happiness – symbolic salvation goods – in alternatives to the official and institutionalized religious identities. On the other hand, this means that the captive clientele is shrinking [...] Today’s emergence of new beliefs in Argentina leads us to a market of symbolic goods that put an end to the old Catholic monopoly in popular sectors. (Mallimaci 2001, pp. 22–24, my translation)

The new transformations affecting religion imply the passage from a ‘closed religious field’ to an ‘open religious field’ and make possible an appeal to different symbolic universes in the context of a fertile religious pluralism. (Ameigeiras 2008, pp. 10–11, my translation)

The final years of the twentieth century are a period of profound transformation of Argentine society. Several simultaneous and related processes bring about a new societal configuration: Social heterogeneity, decomposition of historical identities, breakdown of Catholic monopoly in the face of Evangelical growth in the religious field, fragmentation of beliefs ... (Esquivel 2009, p. 47, my translation)

The above quotes suggest that the breakdown of the 'Catholic monopoly' leads both to a situation of pluralism and to a market of 'symbolic goods of salvation'. In this new scenario, it is presumed that people are no longer 'captive' to the ecclesiastic supply; as a result, each individual freely chooses between the new beliefs and identities found among the growing religious supply, or makes a personal synthesis thus accelerating the individualization of beliefs.

This description, I believe, overestimates both the extent to which people really were 'captive' to the Catholic Church in the past, and how 'freely' they can choose nowadays. As in other countries of Latin America, 'Folk Catholicism' is – and always was – widespread in Argentina. This, as yet poorly defined, concept points to the fact that syncretism and mixtures of all sorts have always been commonplace. Certainly, as globalization increases, there are now more elements to add to the mixture, but idiosyncratic readings of the Church's teachings have a long history in the country. Given the appalling lack of statistical data on religion in Argentina, I have argued elsewhere (Frigerio 2007) that there are *theoretical* motives for this exaggerated emphasis on an all-encompassing Catholic monopoly in the past.¹

Far from being a mere local perception, this perspective is shared by many Latin American Spanish-speaking researchers. It comes from a more comprehensive vision regarding the relationships between religion and modernity proposed by authors widely cited in the area – particularly Berger (1967) and Hervieu-Léger (1986), whose quotation seem to be almost mandatory when reviewing the contemporary religious scenario.²

In these works, after the customary criticisms of the classic sociological secularization thesis predicting the demise or growing irrelevance of religion in modern public life, there are repeated references to Hervieu-Léger's work, according to which 'secularization is not the disappearance of religion when confronted with modernity. It is the process of permanent reorganization of the work of religion in a society that is structurally impotent to answer to the hopes required in order to continue existing' (1986, p. 227).³ Religious diversification, individualization of belief, and the breakdown of collective memory are thought to be the main features of such a 'reorganization of religion'. This perspective highlights the ongoing importance of religion, but – at least in its local reading – unduly stresses a stereotyped 'prior' situation of Catholic monopoly that artificially exaggerates the novelty of the contemporary dynamics of the religious diversity. In other words, it sets a sort of *cosmological break* between past and present. The novelty of the current situation is supported by theoretical assumptions about a hypothesized past rather than by empirical data that could appropriately describe it.

Implicit in this thesis of the Catholic monopoly – along with Hervieu-Léger's ideas about the reconstitution of religion in modernity – is also Berger's conception of religion as a 'sacred canopy', as well as his vision about the consequences – in terms of beliefs and identities – of the passage from a situation of monopoly to a new one of religious pluralism. This perception has been recently criticized by several authors.

Beckford, for example, states that 'Berger's point of departure, the idea that "throughout most of human history religious establishments have existed as monopolies in society" (Berger 1967, p. 134) is, at best, debatable, and probably wrong' (2003, p. 82).

According to the British sociologist:

(This view) overlooks, first, the extent to which religious sentiments and beliefs have often been diverse and, second, the degree of force that has usually been required to maintain the fiction of a unitary world of religious truth [. . .] The interesting sociological questions are not about the credibility of any kind of religious claim to truth but about the social conditions that enabled a variety of beliefs, practices and organizations to achieve acceptance, permission or legitimacy. (Beckford 2003, p. 83)

Therefore, for Beckford the real question is not about the lessening credibility of a certain religious worldview but about the *legitimacy* of some beliefs in relation to others and the possibility for one religion to suppress the activities of its competitors.

Further criticism to the sacred canopy paradigm has come from the proponents of the 'religious economies' model (Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone). In several works, these authors have argued that religious pluralism, and not religious monopoly, is the natural state of any 'religious economy'. Taking the North American religious situation (instead of the European one) as a point of departure, they further claim that pluralism strengthens the religious economy since monopoly religions are inefficient. In their opinion, 'there are no effectively monopolistic religions, but rather regulated religious markets' (Stark and Iannaccone 1993, p. 252). The *degree* of regulation of a religious economy is therefore a key variable.⁴

The combination of Beckford's propositions (2003) with these principles of the American paradigm allows us to develop a different view of the dynamics of the Argentinean religious field. Having dispensed with a theoretical imperative to consider a specific religion as a society's sacred canopy, we can then suggest that in Argentina the Catholic Church monopolized not religious beliefs *in toto* but *legitimate* religious beliefs. This legitimacy resulted from a process of identifying the Catholic Church with the Argentine *nation* and of increasingly gaining control of the state apparatus. This process started with (more or less) democratic regimes, but intensified with the military governments that dominated political life from 1955 to 1982.⁵ Catholicism and the military came to be seen as the moral reserve of the nation, and an essential part of *el ser argentino* (the essence of being Argentine). This led to increasing regulation of the religious market, invisibilization of religious alternatives, and the spread of Catholic symbols in the public space and state offices: the Virgin in railroad, metro, and police stations as well as in public parks, hospitals, crucifixes in courts, etc. Catholicism certainly had the control of public religion, but very much less so of the private religious beliefs and practices of Argentines.

When democracy returned with renewed vigor in 1983 – and with the discredit of the military after the war over the Malvinas/Falkland islands – many behaviors that had until then been considered highly deviant began to be practiced more freely and, especially, more publicly. With the more secularist *Unión Cívica Radical* party in power, the sacrosanct identification between nation, Catholicism, and the military rapidly lost state support. Thus, a more conjunctural variable as the progressive deregulation of the religious market caused by the return of democracy can be advanced as a main cause for the changes in the religious field in the last three decades, making it unnecessary to resort to explanations such as the reconstitution of religion or individuation processes in modernity – or if at all, only as a very large-scale and distant scenario.

This deregulation allowed several religious groups – but mainly Pentecostals and Umbanda practitioners – to take advantage of a series of beliefs and practices that have for long been present in Argentine culture but in less developed forms and just tolerated as 'popular religions'.⁶ Through several processes of frame bridging and transformation, they encouraged these beliefs at the same time that they shaped them into forms more akin

to their own belief systems and practice (Frigerio 1999). However, as I intend to show later, these activities occur in a progressively deregulating market, but certainly not in a 'free' one.

Diversity without pluralism: government and social management of religion

In *Social Theory and Religion* (2003), Beckford questions the identification between diversity and religious pluralism. According to him, under the concept of pluralism three different aspects of religion in the public life are usually and mistakenly combined. These are: the degree of religious diversity, society's acceptance of religious groups, and support for the moral and political value of the religious diversity. Beckford prefers to use the term 'pluralism' for the latter case; pluralism, thus, not only implies religious diversity but also its effective appreciation (2003, p. 74). This statement nicely complements some of the tenets of the 'religious economies' perspective. If diversity exists but is not appreciated, we do not have pluralism. This implies that there is a certain (undetermined) degree of market regulation: religious choices are not free; the costs of those choices vary according to the degree of legitimation of the religion chosen. The religious market is *diversified* but not *pluralistic* – as the Argentine case, and Latin America in general, demonstrates. An individual making a choice of a particular religious group that is socially labeled as a 'sect' has to first overcome the cultural burden of prejudices about it. If he joins the group, he has to bear the cost of stigmatization – and perhaps also his family, as thousands of Argentine Pentecostals and Umbandistas learned (and sometimes still do) when their religions were accused of being 'sects'.

If the degree of regulation of the market becomes a crucial variable for the understanding of religious choice and change, it is then necessary to take into account Grim and Finke's (2006) argument that to examine its extent we must go beyond the common preoccupation with *state regulation* and adopt a wider perspective on the variables involved. We must also consider the important restrictions brought about by *religious favoritism* and *social regulation*.

According to these authors, government regulation consists of 'the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by the official laws, policies, or administrative actions of the state' (Grim and Finke 2006, p. 7). This form of regulation is not only limited to legal norms but also includes administrative restrictions that can curb the activities of certain groups.

When the action of the state benefits only one religion or a group of religions, a situation of *state favoritism* emerges. Grim and Finke define *religious favoritism* as 'subsidies, privileges, support, or favorable sanctions provided by the state to a select religion or a small group of religions' (2006, p. 8).⁷ Here they include, for example, constitutional privileges, financial subsidies, certain actions of administrative officers, and economic support for specific religious schools.

Finally, there is also a third form of control that has been less studied. This exceeds the state sphere and can be manifested in less explicit and elusive forms; the authors refer to it as *social regulation*. For them, it includes 'the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups, associations, or the culture at large' (Grim and Finke 2006, p. 8). This form of regulation is not implemented by government action, although it might be tolerated or even encouraged by the state. According to Grim and Finke:

Social regulation can be extremely subtle, arising through the pervasive norms and culture of the larger society, or it can include blatant acts of persecution by militia groups. Often, though

not always, this form of regulation is a product of religion. Religion itself can regulate other religions. When compared to government regulation, the sources of social regulation are more elusive. Yet the consequences can be equally potent. (2006, p. 8)

Social regulation can range from the assignation of a deviant status to certain religious beliefs and practices to the persecution of religions by more or less organized groups.

The theoretical propositions reviewed so far provide us with a conceptual tool kit that should make us reconsider the current situation of ‘pluralism’ in many Latin American countries. They coincide in doubting that monopoly is the natural state of religion in society. Besides, they emphasize the efforts of regulation originated in the state as well as in other social institutions – or in the culture itself – to enforce such a monopoly – which is neither complete nor totalizing.

Diversity can – or should – be conceived of as different from *pluralism*, that is defined by the value placed on the former. Instead of considering the transit from a situation of monopoly to one of pluralism as natural and unproblematic, it is necessary to take into account the *degree of regulation* existing in different moments. In doing so, we must recognize that regulation can be expressed through dimensions alternative to the state.

Argentina is a good example of the significance of extra-legal religious regulation. Even though the legislation dealing with religious issues has scarcely changed in the last 20 years, 2 of the most important religious minorities – i.e. *Umbandistas* and Evangelicals – had to fight against stigmatization promoted by media. They also had to rally against the growing bureaucratic control over their temples by the National Register of Religious Organizations (*Registro Nacional de Cultos*), and to mobilize against proposals of religious laws presented in Parliament by senators and government officials, which they saw as restrictive and designed to control the activities of religious minorities. I will now review some of these struggles and debates.

Management of religion in Argentina

State management of religion

The Catholic Church is not the official church in Argentina, but it does enjoy a very special status in the country. Legally, this position is supported particularly by three regulations, notably Article 2 of the National Constitution, which declares that ‘The Federal Government upholds the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith’. This clause was in the original 1853 Constitution, and maintained after the 1994 Reform.⁸ Its special status is also upheld by the 1869 Civil Code, which recognizes in its Article 33 the full legal standing of ‘the Church’, considering it a ‘legal entity’ (*persona jurídica*). In April 1968, Law 17.711 reformed the Civil Code, and article 33 now specifies that ‘the Catholic Church’ is a ‘public legal entity’ (*persona jurídica de carácter público*) on par with institutions of the state (our emphasis). Finally, in 1966 the nation signed a treaty with the Vatican (*Acuerdo entre la Santa Sede y la República Argentina*) that governs the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church. In sum, the Catholic Church is an entity in public law; its relationship with the state is ruled by specific legislation, and, according to the Constitution, must be maintained by the state.

Non-Catholic religious groups are not mentioned in the constitution. Article 14 of the 1853 constitution, however, awarded all inhabitants of the nation the right to ‘freely practice their religion’. The 1994 Reform upheld this right, and bolstered it by awarding constitutional status to several international human rights treaties (article 75, paragraph 22). The most important and still current regulation of non-Catholic groups is provided by Law 21.745 promulgated by a military government in 1978. This decree re-created the

National Religious Register in which non-Catholic groups had to enroll, providing information about their doctrine, rituals, organization, history, and the names of their officers both locally and abroad – among other items.

According to this law, registration is mandatory but does not, at the same time, confer full legal standing. It is presumed that *after enrollment* religious institutions must apply to other government agencies to obtain legal recognition as civil associations. To do this, however, they have to develop a parallel organizational structure to comply with the requirements of civil associations. After enrollment in the Register *and* registration as civil associations, non-Catholic religious groups can obtain the status of ‘private legal entities’. In contrast, the Catholic Church – as we have seen – exists as a ‘public legal entity’ by virtue of the Civil Code laws.

Considering that the Argentine military have, since the 1930s, been closely associated with the Church in their efforts to build a Catholic nation (Distefano and Zanatta 2000), it comes as no surprise that Law 21.745, which had the goal of ‘supervising’ and ‘establishing effective control’ over non-Catholic groups, was sanctioned by a *de facto* government.⁹ Such a regulation merely reflects the ‘national security’ doctrine that saw ‘foreign ideologies’ as enemies of the ‘national being’. Its intention, however, was not followed by the creation of the means to disqualify groups that did not enroll, or lost their registration. Thus, the only actual cases of prohibitions of religious groups under the last military government (1976–1982) – were the Hare Krishna, Jehovah’s Witnesses, The Children of God, and a few others.¹⁰ Members of non-Catholic religious groups, however, had to keep a low profile and probably limit the visibility – perhaps the frequency – of their public meetings as did most Argentine citizens during the period. The military dictatorship presided over the disappearance of 30,000 individuals (*desaparecidos*), severely curtailed the expression of many forms of popular culture, and religion was certainly among them.

The *Secretaría de Culto* (*Culto* being used here as synonymous with religion), within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is the institution that mediates between religious organizations – including the Catholic Church – and the state. The Secretary of Religious Affairs is appointed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the National Register of Religious Organizations (*Registro Nacional de Cultos*) is part of his Secretariat. The office of the director of the National Register of Religious Organizations is not a political position, but a more technical one, awarded after an open competition. However, along with state regulation of the religious market another kind of control is exercised by nongovernmental institutions, to which we now turn.

Social management of religion

In 1983, after almost eight years of a ruthless dictatorial regime, Raul Alfonsín, the newly elected president, promised ‘one hundred years of democracy’. As people slowly learned to live once again in a democratic society, many cultural and personal expressions – repressed or hidden during the military governments – started to be practiced freely.

Religion was no exception to this flourishing of new cultural practices. During 1985 and 1986, the *visibility* of groups that had kept a low profile during the military dictatorships increased drastically. Jehovah’s witnesses and Evangelical preachers held mass meetings in large soccer stadiums. Evangelical programs increasingly appeared in the mass media: American ones like the ‘Club 700’ on Television, while the local churches settled for the more modest goal of preaching over the radio. Pentecostal pastors preached in plazas located in front of the main train stations. Practitioners of Afro-Brazilian

religions, whose numbers quickly grew, could now put up signs telling the public that their houses (where private, almost secret, ceremonies had been held for years) were really temples that anybody could attend.

It is difficult to tell to what point this 'boom' of new religions was really an increase in the number of practitioners or devotees or if it was, after all, just a matter of practices becoming visible for the first time.¹¹ Probably there was a mix of both. Journalists were also intrigued, in some cases alarmed, with these new behaviors, and therefore, 'the problem of the sects' became a regular topic of debate in the media for the following years. However, as different voices and interests appeared in the social landscape, there were changes in the way sects were typified, in the analysis of their social consequences, and in the requests for state intervention in the matter.

1985–1988: the invasion of foreign sects, 'financed from the USA'

From 1985 to about 1989, the 'invasion of the sects' was typified in the media by the image of a Pentecostal preacher – preferably American or belonging to a transnational parachurch organization – speaking in a crowded soccer stadium to thousands of ecstatic devotees who, with arms outstretched and eyes closed, waited to receive the blessings of the Holy Ghost and, in turn, be relieved of their meager resources. This 'invasion' was interpreted as a North American imperialistic plot to demobilize the poor masses of Argentina and Latin America or, in a less political version, as money-hungry preachers making millions of dollars by taking advantage of the needs of their nearly destitute followers. Mass meetings in the biggest soccer stadiums of the city of Buenos Aires during 1985 and 1986 and the invasion of Evangelical television and radio programs were taken as proof of the popular appeal of these new groups and of the abundance of their financial resources. The main spokesmen who appeared in the media to interpret these new religious phenomena were Catholic priests (Frigerio 1998). As a dominant institution in Argentine society, the Catholic Church was initially the most affected with this invasion, and practically no alternative explanation of the phenomenon from secular voices was available in the mid-1980s.

1989–1991: sects as brainwashing groups

Beginning in 1989 and, increasingly during 1990, some important changes began to occur in the way this deviant behavior was interpreted. The appearance of expert spokespersons, posing as 'experts in sects', played an important role in this change. These new specialists, whose ideology had clear roots in the American anti-cult movement (ACM) (Bromley and Shupe 1995), characterized sects as totalitarian groups led by charismatic, deranged, leaders. In their view, these groups used coercive persuasion to recruit troubled young people who subsequently lost their identity and were forced to abandon society and depend on the group. Unlike the Catholic priests who had an obvious interest in constructing a label of religious deviance, these new experts were secular, published books on the subject, headed foundations for the study of sects, and cloaked their discourse in the rhetoric of science. Presented as 'research', their claims were awarded a more objective status.

In 1989 and 1990, scandals over child corruption and abuse in two groups (the Children of God and an obscure and very small local group known as The Eight Queens) served to typify the problem of the sects in the way proposed by the new frame.¹² For the first time, *victims* of sects, their identity concealed, were interviewed in news magazines and television programs.

In the last months of 1990, the first local anti-cult organization was formed in Buenos Aires. The SPES (Latin for 'hope') Foundation (*Servicio para el Esclarecimiento en Sectas* – Service for the Elucidation on Sects) led by a Catholic psychologist, José María Baamonde, had strong contacts with the conservative wing of the Catholic Church. In April 1991, Alfredo Silleta, the journalist who had denounced the case of the Eight Queens – known also for his books on 'sects' in the country – founded his own anti-cult organization, FAPES (*Fundación Argentina para el Estudio de las Sectas* – the Argentine Foundation for the Study of Sects).

The importance of the claims-making efforts of these groups in the new social image of 'sects' cannot be understated. Their leaders – especially journalist Silleta – were increasingly featured in the media, and soon became the main interpreters of the phenomenon in journals, magazines, and television shows. These same ACM activists also brought lawsuits against groups, and even convinced legislators and bishops of the need for harsher laws regulating the activities of minority religions.

July 1992–September 1993: moral panics over sects

In 1992 and 1993, three new scandals over sects rocked the Argentine media and caused the concern over sects to escalate into a moral panic. In July and August 1992, two Argentine groups were accused of ritually murdering children. One of them was a UFO cult named LUS (*Lineamiento Universal Superior*) and the other one was an Umbanda temple (Frigerio and Oro 1998). The accusations – which many months later were proved to be false – installed the topic of the 'sects' in the media (Frigerio 1993). Practically every television program treated the issue at least once, and the major print media featured many articles on the presumed murders, as well as editorials, opinion columns, and feature stories on the problem of the 'sects'. This concern intensified in 1993 with the siege and tragic ending of the Waco affair – which the local media covered in great detail – and with a raid on several local communities of The Family. Anti-cult leaders achieved ownership of the problem and their interpretive frame became hegemonic. They even expanded its scope by adding New Age groups as 'risk groups', claiming that the New Age was a 'borderline sectarian phenomenon' (Frigerio 1993).

Media coverage and journalists' interpretations of these three events (LUS/Umbanda, Waco, and The Family) drew on the previous ones (The Eight Queens, especially), and built on them. If during 1990 and 1991 the idea that sects were a threat to children had grown (with charges of corruption of minors and illegal deprivation of freedom), the scandal over the LUS/Umbanda ritual murders showed that these groups posed a concrete, *real*, danger, since they could go as far as *killing* them. The events at Waco proved that, as anti-cult activists had forewarned in the case of The Eight Queens, sect leaders were in fact psychopaths who could – and did – put their followers in grave danger or lead them into a mass suicide. Finally, the massive exposure of The Family material in the media demonstrated to Argentine society the extent to which sects could espouse 'perverse' belief systems.

1994–1996: new religious movements strike back

In 1994 and 1995, new scandals about sects were widely covered by the media, with charges of child abuse, prostitution, and 'corruption of adults' against the Argentine Yoga School (April 1994); the murders of members of the Solar Temple in Europe (October 1994 and December 1995), and the gas bombings in Tokyo involving Aum Shirikyo

(March 1995).¹³ Coverage of these events, although prominent, did not give rise to a new moral panic – probably because the most important one transpired in Japan and the possibilities of a similar event happening in the country were small.

The status of ACM activists as owners of the problem of the sects started to wane during 1994 and 1995. Although the Aum Shirikyo and Solar Temple events seemed to confirm the ACM belief that, ultimately, sects are linked to death, most of the scandals over sects occurred abroad. Because of this, local experts did not have more data about them than the journalists (in contrast to previous events, in which they contributed group literature, visual material, and testimonies of disgruntled apostates). Also, several of the a posteriori interpretations of these events occurring in developed countries linked them to wider sociopolitical trends (an end-of-the-millennium angst) to which the ACM frame appeared to be somewhat less applicable (Frigerio 1998).

The Yoga School affair in the city of Buenos Aires, although smaller than previous scandals, was important because it tied the ‘problem of the sects’ back to Argentina and attracted sufficient attention from the media to ratify the ongoing importance of the ‘problem of the sects’. However, as the days passed, the developments damaged the credibility of ACM activist Alfredo Silleta, the president of FAPES. Since most of the Yoga Foundation members were university graduates (lawyers, doctors, psychologists, etc.) they could retaliate and rebut several of Silleta’s main arguments. They convincingly argued, in television programs or interviews, that the brainwashing hypothesis was far from having achieved consensus in the scientific community and, especially, that Silleta was not an uninterested researcher but an activist who benefited from his claims. This argument was made more credible after the judges freed all indicted members of the Yoga School, finding no evidence of crime. Another court also finally cleared The Family from the heinous allegations leveled at them some months before. These facts reinforced the accusations of ‘persecutor of minority religions’ that both groups directed at the expert.

Even if the fame of at least one ACM activist was dwindling, sects were still considered undesirable groups. The image of the deranged leader who manipulates a throng of troubled followers for his own economic benefit continued to be the prevalent one¹⁴, although a softer concept of ‘manipulation’ seemed to prevail over the ‘brainwashing’ one, which had been championed by ACM activists. The concern over ‘sects’ was still present in many arenas of debate (Frigerio 1998). As shall be discussed below, a special commission was formed by the deputies of the Province of Buenos Aires with the goal of elaborating a report about the presence of sects in the area. Evangelical and Catholic monthly publications ran special articles about the different groups present in the country. Locally produced television series and docudramas featured adolescents (or adults) who ran into trouble when joining nontraditional religious groups (Frigerio 2000).

1997–2001: sects become less newsworthy

In subsequent years, problems with sects continued to appear in the press but with much smaller coverage. Except for the suicides of the members of Heaven’s Gate (1997) and in Uganda (2000), news almost never made it to the front pages and only lasted for a couple of days. A couple of local cases, in which leaders of minuscule groups (extended family groups, mostly) abused their faithful were noticed but did not create scandals, as the similarly insignificant Eight Queens had done almost 10 years earlier.

Sects were still considered suspicious, but journalists seemed more careful as to what groups they applied that label to. In previous years, coverage could be conceptualized as a ‘stream of controversies’ (Van Driel and Richardson 1988, p. 57), moving from one

scandal to the next. Now this stream had quietened down and gone from banner headlines and double-page articles to small notes in 'general information' or 'police' sections. Most noticeable cases were not followed, as had been the case in the first half of the decade, with 'negative summary events' (Beckford 1985, p. 235), tying the incidents involving specific groups to the larger phenomenon of 'sects' in the country or the world.

A brief analysis of the coverage of the local case that did gain widespread attention during this period shows visible differences with media treatment of previous scandals. In March 2000, two girls in their 20s murdered their father in an attempt to exorcise him. Since one of them had attended courses at an 'alchemy center' (specializing in some kind of Christian esotericism), its leader was blamed for having somehow inspired the grisly deed. The link of the center and its leader to the crime was very tenuous, and the fact that it was made shows that a climate of suspicion against 'sects' – as the group was labeled – still persisted. The episode, however, did not turn into a moral panic over sects, as had happened with the purported child murders in the LUS/Umbanda case of October 1992. The one article in journal *Clarín* that suggested a more general connection did not have the word 'sects' in its title ('The growth of alternative religious movements', 4 September 2000). Although a box within it asks 'Should there be some control over the new groups?' the content of the article is much more balanced than in previous years, featuring prominently the opinion of two sociologists, the present and former Secretary of Religious Affairs as well as of the leader of SPES, the ACM organization that still has some visibility in the media. Subsequent series of notes on non-Catholic religions have usually not featured the word 'sects' in the title.

Social suspicion against minority religious groups who are not considered to be sufficiently secularized, however, persists. To this day, most newspaper articles that mention Umbanda religious practices do so in the context of murders that, for very tenuous reasons, are considered 'ritual killings'. Two recent books on Evangelicals and Chabad Lubavitch written by journalists, although not as extreme as previous *exposés* on 'sects', portray them in a rather unfavorable light, ascribing deviant motives to several religious leaders and considering believers to be either gullible or socially deprived (Seselovsky 2005, Soifer 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have questioned the, by now, commonsensical assertion advanced by most sociologists of religion in Argentina that the country has gone from a 'closed' religious market characterized by Catholic monopoly to an 'open', pluralistic one. By using different theoretical perspectives from those usually applied in the country, I have suggested that Argentines were not as captive of the Catholic monopoly in the past, nor are they as free today – as is thought – to choose their religious alternatives. Following the proponents of the 'religious economies' perspective, instead of presupposing a sharp break from a monopolic past to a pluralistic present, I suggested that the idea of 'degree of regulation' of the religious market – never really controlled nor totally free – reflects the situation better. Following Beckford, I suggested that the existence of religious *diversity* does not necessarily entail *pluralism* – its positive evaluation. In my view the Catholic Church had, from the 1930s to the 1980s, only enjoyed the monopoly of *legitimate* religious beliefs – those that could be freely and unproblematically displayed in public arenas. If constitutionally the situation could be characterized, in terms of Grim and Finke, as religious favoritism toward the Catholic Church, in practice, especially during military governments, Catholicism almost functioned as a state religion. With the return of

democracy to the country, in 1983, the situation changed. Certainly, there is a progressive deregulation of the religious market, but the controversy over 'sects' that overtook the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the suspicion that still lingers today regarding certain groups, shows that it is an overstatement to claim that it is an open one.

The account of the development of the controversy over 'sects' suggests some relevant issues regarding regulation of religion. The first that 'state regulation' is not as monolithic and coherent as one might think, even using Grim and Finke's definition.¹⁵ If one were to consider '*policies and administrative actions*', it is clear that members of the three branches of government had different stances and policies toward minority religious groups. Officers of the Executive branch of government – the officials of the *Secretaría de Culto* – maintained, throughout most of the controversy, a delicate balance between the demands of certain journalists, congressmen, and Catholic bishops for stricter control and those of non-Catholic groups for increased equality before the law. This difficult balancing act took place within a social environment that, at the same time, increasingly valued pluralism and human rights and suffered moral panics over the presence and actions of 'sects' in the country. Certain members of Congress were among the most concerned with the 'invasion of the sects' and presented draft proposals to sharpen the laws against these groups – which were stalled because of the need to compromise with other legislators with different opinions. Some judges initiated cases against religious groups with scant evidence of misdoing – mostly accusations by ACM activists that were believable probably because they shared the same religious prejudices. If one were to consider 'state regulation' more restrictively, as '*official laws*', the evidence shows that even though the legislation dealing with religious issues scarcely changed during the period under consideration, the social controversy flared and led to the stigmatization of most religious minorities – heavy stigmatization for some, and downright persecution for others. This underscores the importance of the *social* regulation of religion. Admittedly, this is still an elusive concept, but certainly a relevant one to better understand the degree of regulation of religious markets. Data presented in this paper point to the relevance of the media in the stereotyping of religious minority groups as 'sects', which then spread to other important cultural arenas (books, movies, television series, the Internet, etc.) (Frigerio 1998, 2000).

In academic papers and media interviews, scholars specializing in state–church relations in Argentina have decried the existence of the *Registro Nacional de Cultos*, and even more so its continued existence – in a slightly modified form – in all current draft proposals for new religious freedom laws (Esquivel 2009). They note that the Register was created under a military government and that its continued existence will allow the state to pinpoint which groups are religious and which are not (those that could fulfil the requirements needed for registration and those that could not). They would much rather have the state put an end to its favoritism toward the Catholic Church, and become really secular (*laico*). Therefore, they are surprised when Evangelicals – excluding the federation that groups the Historic Protestant Churches – lobby for its continued existence, and instead of the elimination of the privileges granted to the Catholic Church, want them maintained but also to have similar privileges bestowed on themselves (Mallimaci 2005, p. 61). Several other religious groups have the same stance. Instead of the secular state advocated by sociologists, they want a *pluriconfessional* one. The posture of these religious groups again underscores, according to the analytical perspective here employed, the importance of continuing religious regulation. Minority religious groups that are still socially suspected for promoting alternative worldviews, being too emotional and/or too magical (like Umbandistas and Pentecostals) – and who lack the endorsement of a legitimate church (like the Charismatic Renewal) – know that the best way to avoid

police persecution and media harassment is by being officially recognized by the state. Scholars advocating a more secular state fear that the sanctioning of a new *Registro* will create first-class and second-class religions. However, if we take a more critical view of the current state of affairs – i.e. if we doubt the existence of a current open market and religious pluralism – we see that this is already the case: some Argentines are second-class citizens because of their stigmatized religious identities. As happens with other social minorities, perhaps it is necessary for the state to make a conscious effort to diminish their discrimination.

Notes

1. The scant statistical data that could be used to back up these statements – or at least their more recent versions – is the 14% drop in the number of individuals who claim to be ‘Catholic’ in the last 50 years. This drop comes from comparing data from the 1960 census (90.48% Catholic) with a recent survey undertaken by Mallimaci *et al.*, (2008) (76.5%). Even if this were true, strictly speaking these figures only tell us the amount of individuals who are willing to *identify* as Catholics (or to claim a Catholic identity) when inquired by a census taker (in 1960) or a researcher (in 2008). I have argued elsewhere that such figures tell us little regarding these people’s beliefs, and have underscored the importance of making a distinction between acts of identification (*identity*), the possession of religious *beliefs*, and the performance of their *practices* (Frigerio 2007).
2. To demonstrate this assertion, it is enough to compare the theoretical frameworks used by three important quantitative studies about current beliefs developed in Montevideo, Uruguay (Da Costa 2003, pp. 5–37); Guadalajara, Mexico (Fortuny 1999, pp. 17–29); and Quilmes, Great Buenos Aires area in Argentina (Esquivel *et al.*, 2001, pp. 33–38, Mallimaci 2001, pp. 17–24).
3. My translation into English of the Spanish quote found in Ameigeiras (2008, p. 15), and Mallimaci (2009, p. 17).
4. See, for example, Stark and McCann (1993), Stark and Iannaccone 1993, Stark and Finke (2000), Finke and Stark (2003), and Frigerio (2008) for a critical review of the paradigm.
5. With military-supervised democratic intervals from 1958 to 1966 and 1973 to 1976.
6. Continuing the use of economic metaphors, we can consider popular religiosity as a true ‘black market’ of religious beliefs: a somewhat risky source, in a context of market regulation, of symbols, ideas, and religious practices different to those of the monopoly institution.
7. ‘This favoritism can come in many forms. Like government regulation, subsidies can be constitutional guarantees, or they can result from the more capricious actions of administrative offices. The most obvious are specific constitutional privileges and the financial subsidies that directly support religious institutions. Less obvious are the supports of state institutions and administrators for such things as the teaching of religion in state-supported schools and subsidy of service institutions run by religious groups’ (Grim and Finke 2006, p. 8).
8. Another important article (number 76), which required that the president and vice-president of the country had to belong to the Catholic Church, was abolished in 1994.
9. These goals are stated in the introduction that accompanied the law.
10. Most of the groups that were banned by the military regained their legal status when democracy was reinstated in 1983 – with the exception of the then Children of God.
11. The Pentecostal presence in the country, for example, can be traced back to the first decades of the twentieth century (Wynarczyk 2010).
12. The *Children of God* were accused of luring minors away from their families, and then enticing or forcing them to have sex with adults. The leader of *The Eight Queens* – a spiritual advisor for a very small group of families – was accused of having sex with his female followers and of cruel punishments inflicted on their children.
13. The Argentine Yoga School was an institute where classes of western philosophy were taught. It was believed that its leader forced female members to provide sexual services to political figures in exchange for support for the group’s activities.
14. In May 1995, the Evangelical monthly newspaper *El Puente* asked the three main candidates for the upcoming presidential elections (in which President Menem was reelected) what was their definition of a ‘sect’. All three candidates stressed strong leadership, deceit, and

manipulation of members and possible mental or physical hazards as the main characteristics of these groups.

15. According to these authors, government regulation consists of 'the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by the official laws, policies, or administrative actions of the state'.

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