

# Religion and Migration: The Argentine Experience

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**Introduction.** The purpose of the article is to analyze the relations between religion and migration in Argentina over several historical periods up to the present day.

**Content.** The religious diversity in Argentina was one of the engines of the country's social and economic development. At the same time, the coexistence between diverse religious communities became one of the distinctive characteristics of the country. The contribution of religious communities continues to be very important today, especially in times of economic or social crisis. Religious communities also continue to be very important in receiving new migratory flows motivated by wars or other situations that have occurred in their countries of origin.

**Conclusions.** Religion was never, nor is it now, a conflictive element for migratory movements in Argentina. And there has never been emigration from Argentina for religious reasons.

Key words: religion, religious diversity, religious communities, migration.

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## Религия и миграция: опыт Аргентины

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**Введение.** В статье рассматриваются взаимоотношения религиозного и миграционного факторов в Аргентине на протяжении истории этого государства вплоть до современного периода.

Содержание. Одной из отличительных особенностей Аргентины является бесконфликтное сосуществование различных религиозных общин. Религиозное разнообразие всегда было одним из факторов, способствующих развитию страны. Вклад религиозных общин остается очень важным и сегодня, особенно во времена экономических кризисов или социальной напряженности. Религиозные общины играют очень важную роль в принятии и адаптации периодических миграционных потоков, вызванных войнами или другими кризисными ситуациями в странах исхода.

**Выводы.** Религия никогда не была и ныне не является конфликтным элементом в отношении государства к миграционной среде Аргентины. Из самой Аргентины никогда не было эмиграции по религиозным мотивам.

Ключевые слова: религия, религиозное разнообразие, религиозные сообщества, миграция.

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# <sup>230</sup> Introduction

The Argentine Republic was born to independent life at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached its constitutional and legal organization in the second half of the same century. At that time the country had a huge territory, mostly uninhabited.

The country project, expressed in the National Constitution of 1853 (still in force), included an express call to migrants "who want to inhabit Argentine soil". In order for that call to be successful, the authors of the Constitution included something that was completely new in Latin America: freedom of worship. They considered that it was essential that immigrants bring their own religion.

That social experiment was wildly successful. The Argentine Republic (deliberately) attracted an enormous migratory flow; and with it the religious map of the country was modified. From the Catholic uniformity imposed during the Spanish colonial era, it became a mosaic of great religious diversity.

### Content

The understanding of the relations between religion and migrations in Argentina is impossible without an adequate historical perspective. That is why it is convenient to look at the different periods of national life, whose succession will in turn serve to adequately understand the present.

### The Colonial Period

The conquest of America by Spain (and Portugal, in its case) is not usually seen as a migratory phenomenon, although if it is looked at it also had that characteristic. This conquest was made possible by the transfer of an exotic population that settled in the "New World" with the intention of remaining there. Certainly (at least for the most part), this was not a population fleeing war, famine or natural disaster, nor religious persecution, as was the case with other forced migrants.

In this migration or transfer of a human group from one continent to another, religion played a major role. Moreover, a central motivation for carrying out this displacement (together, obviously, with important economic and political interests) was the deliberate decision of the kings of Spain (and the Catholic Church) to implant a religion in America: Christianity (and more specifically, Roman Catholicism). Many of the conquerors came with that explicit purpose, and it must be recognized that they were successful in it. From this point of view, the conquest of Spanish America was a migratory process closely linked to religion.

From the very beginning, the kings of Spain sent contingents of missionaries, especially members of religious orders (Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans, Mercedarians) with the purpose not only of accompanying the conquerors but mainly of converting the Indians to Catholicism [7]. It was therefore a singular migratory movement, where it was not about seeing how the "migrants" accommodated themselves to a pre-existing religious reality, but how, with absolute intention, they modified it to the point of destroying aboriginal religions and implanting their own. However, it cannot be said that it was the only example in history where something like this happened: in a certain way it is the same thing that the Muslim Arabs did when they expanded through North Africa to Spain and through the Near East, for example.

The truth is that these migrants/conquerors/missionaries not only brought their own religion with them but also imposed it in an exclusive way. During the Spanish period that goes from the beginning of the  $16^{th}$  century to the beginning of the  $19^{th}$  century, the Catholic religion was imposed as the only one allowed, beyond the hidden subsistence of ancestral practices, especially in places where the conquest did not reach be effective.

We can find in this period and in the current Argentine territory, although in a much more notable way in others such as the current Brazil, or the Caribbean, another interesting religious phenomenon linked to a kind of migration much more unfortunate and deplorable than the previous one: the trafficking of slaves from Sub-Saharan Africa. Those slaves, brought by force to America, had their own religion, in most cases traditional animist religions. In their new place of forced residence, they were forbidden to practice it, but many kept it in a certain hidden way, assuming external forms of the Catholic religion. Thus, for example, the worship of the saints (in an exercise of syncretism) replaced that of the traditional deities. In this way, various forms of religiosity with an African matrix emerged that, much later, would come to light (umbanda, kimbanda, candomblé, macumba, santería, etc.).

The Time of Independence

The independence of the American countries, including the current Argentine Republic, occurred quickly and in a synchronized manner at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Revolution had no religious motivations, and the revolutionaries did not set out to change the *status quo* in religious matters. However, they were aware that a certain religious flexibility was necessary to welcome non-Catholic people who for different reasons began to settle in the territory: sailors and soldiers, merchants, diplomats, and others. They were mostly practitioners of the Protestant religion (English, German, North American), and later also Jews and believers of other faiths.

Independence therefore caused a relaxation of the prohibitions on non-Catholic religions that had existed during the colony. In its replacement, a policy of tolerance was developed, which in the Río de la Plata was especially marked. In this way the door was opened to individuals, then to families and finally to entire communities of migrants who were not Catholic, but who were welcomed.

Law took some time to adapt to this new reality, but it did. Thus, for example, the State granted Protestant pastors in relation to their parishioners the same functions that until then had been fulfilled by Catholic priests in the registration of births (baptisms), deaths, and celebration of marriages. These innovations were faster in the city of Buenos Aires, port of entry for foreigners, and more resisted in the interior of the country, which has traditionally been more conservative.

In 1825, the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation with Great Britain enshrined freedom of worship for British citizens. They could not be "disturbed, persecuted or bothered for reasons of their religion, but they will enjoy perfect freedom of conscience in it, celebrating the divine office, either within their own homes or in their own and particular churches and chapels, which they will be empowered to build and maintain in the convenient places that are approved by the government of said United Provinces: it will also be allowed to bury the minions of H.B.M. who die in the territory of said United Provinces, in their own cemeteries, which they may likewise freely establish and maintain." The citizens of "said Provinces" (of Rio de la Plata) would enjoy similar rights "in accordance with the system of tolerance established in the domains of H.B.M."

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As an immediate consequence of this treaty, the Anglican and <sup>[233]</sup> Scottish Presbyterian faithful had their own pastoral care and built their churches, the first non-Catholic churches in Spanish America [11]. The German Evangelical Lutherans did the same in 1831 [3; 5]. The establishment of these churches proves the existence of an incipient migration of individuals and families linked by a common religious faith.

The National Organization and The Constitutional Project

The independence that began in 1810 and materialized in 1816 was followed by a turbulent period of civil wars that, among other consequences, produced the dismemberment of the former Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata and the emergence of several independent countries in its territory (Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia).

The Argentine national organization would only be achieved with the Constitution of 1853/1860. That Constitution, still in force, marks a fundamental milestone in relation to the issue we are studying. Because that constitution was the first in Latin America to broadly establish "freedom of worship", guaranteed to all inhabitants in its sect.14 and especially to foreigners in sect.20. This consecration of religious freedom (resisted by the most conservative groups to the point of having endangered the very approval of the Constitution) was not a coincidence or a capricious idea, but was deliberately planned and desired, precisely to promote a migration process.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the current Argentine Republic was a huge, mostly empty territory. One of the main inspirers of the Constitution, Juan Bautista Alberdi, proposed a motto: "to govern is to populate". The country could only prosper if a dramatic increase in population was achieved. But the settlers who wanted to attract should preferably be the most industrious, hard-working and economically prosperous, which for Alberdi and for the "founding fathers" were northern Europeans and North Americans, mostly Protestants. That is why the Constitution contained an explicit mandate to promote "European" immigration, especially with these Protestant Europeans in mind.

Alberdi had a "Weberian" intuition: he believed that it was the Protestant ethic that could lift the vast Argentine desert from its backward and precarious situation, and not the indolence of the <sup>234</sup> Catholics<sup>1</sup>. There was no grievance or aggressive intention against the Catholic Church, but a positive admiration for the countries that grew to the rhythm of the industrial revolution. To attract these immigrants, it was essential to guarantee their freedom of worship, precisely because it was their religion that made them productive and healthy.

The Constitution was dictated "for all the men of the world who want to inhabit Argentine soil", as its Preamble says. It was something completely new and revolutionary in a constitutional text. Migrations would not be an accident, but an achievement. And the religious element would not be something secondary, but (at least in the intention) something decisive. That was the "country project", and marked the subsequent development.

When the constituent Congress discussed section 14 of the Constitution (which mentions all the major civil rights), most of the debate was devoted to the question of religious freedom. One of the fundamental reasons that were taken into account to accept this freedom of worship was provided by the representative Seguí, who said: "tolerance was essential for the progress of the country due to the virtuous immigration that it would bring to our soil. And that the competition that would be offered to it with the other dissident sects should not be feared without doing injury to Our Holy Religion; and that it would also be a favorable occasion for Catholic priests to exercise their zeal in evangelical preaching, obtaining for Catholicism the same triumphs that it obtains in other parts of the world, taking advantage of the example they could receive from Protestant ministers for the improvement of their morals and customs" [13, p. 509]. Another argument also used was the existence of the Treaty of Friendship with Great Britain, of 1825, which already established freedom of worship for British subjects.

The fact is that since the approval of the Constitution, immigrant communities multiplied, in which the religious factor was one of the main agglutinating factors. In the case of Protestant groups, "religion appears before their eyes as an expression or confirmation of their culture of origin" [14].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> He wrote: "To exclude the dissident cults of South America is to exclude the English, the Germans, the Swiss, the North Americans, who are not Catholics; that is to say, to the inhabitants that this continent needs most. To bring them without their worship is to bring them without the agent that makes them what they are; to live without religion, to become atheists."

### The Great Migrations

With this favorable legal framework, beyond the fact that the Constitution itself continued to give a relevant place to the Catholic Church (*"The federal government supports the Roman Catholic, apostolic cult"*, said and still says article 2); and with policies sustained over time that promoted the country's development in all areas, Argentina became one of the largest magnets for migratory flows from the 1880s until after the First World War. At that time there were periods in which the city of Buenos Aires (the natural gateway for migrants through its port) had more foreign inhabitants than natives. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20th century, Argentina competed on an equal footing with the United States as a land of promise for migrants.

It is true that beyond the wishes of the "founding Fathers", most of these new inhabitants were Catholics. The countries that contributed the most immigrants were Spain and Italy, and among those who came from other nations (Ireland, Poland, the Middle East, France...) there were also many Catholics. But along with them came hundreds of thousands of migrants of other religions.

In addition to the millions of migrants who arrived individually or with their families, there was an interesting public policy of creating agricultural "colonies", mainly in the region known as the "humid pampa" (provinces of Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, Córdoba, Entre Ríos). In hitherto deserted lands, settlements were founded populated with immigrants of various origins, including Germans, Volga Germans (Russians), and others. Some of these immigrant communities were made up of families of the Protestant religion, mainly German Lutherans, and others of the Jewish religion [10]. The towns that were built had the usual format in the Río de la Plata, with a central square around which the main public buildings are located: the City Town, the bank, the church. But in these towns the main church was not (and is not) Catholic, but Protestant, or else a synagogue<sup>1</sup>.

Another successful colonization experience occurred in Patagonia, in the Chubut River valley. Several towns were formed there with Welsh immigrants who established their churches and brought their pastors from their country of origin. Most were Con-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This Jewish immigration gave rise to groups of so-called "Jewish gauchos", who adopted the customs, clothing and way of working of the "gauchos" but conserving the practice of the Jewish religion. Many of these Jewish families later migrated to the big cities, but the colonies with their old synagogues still exist.

<sup>236</sup> gregationalists, but there were also Methodists, Anglicans, and Baptists. Already in the first group of settlers three religious ministers arrived, who fulfilled important roles in communities that were very isolated and far from other populations [4; 8; 9].

Meanwhile, in the big cities, immigrant communities (Protestant, Evangelical, Orthodox from different churches, Jews and Muslims) also formed, establishing their places of worship and their institutions (clubs, hospitals, libraries, schools).

In all these cases, the churches or synagogues were meeting and socializing places for the immigrants, who found the most complete freedom to establish and maintain them. During the first decades, the cults were celebrated in the language of origin, with religious ministers from Europe, but over time and with the incorporation of second and third generations already born in Argentina, they began to adopt Spanish as the liturgical language, with ministers of worship born and educated in the country. To this day, ministers of worship are trained in Argentina to serve Spanishspeaking communities around the world<sup>1</sup>.

### The Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Shortly after the Second World War (and after a last wave of migrant survivors of the war, especially Jews), for various reasons, the migratory flow from Europe was interrupted, while that from Latin American countries, especially neighboring countries (Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay) increased. These new migrants were mostly Catholic and had no problem integrating into Argentine society, also in the religious aspect. In fact, the Catholic Church dedicated special efforts to the attention of these migrants, favoring the devotions typical of their places of origin.

In the 1980s, a new migratory movement was registered, with a few thousand immigrants of Chinese (mainland China and Taiwan) and Korean origin. Many of these migrants were of Protestant or Evangelical religion (mainly Presbyterians), who established their own churches or gave a new appearance to some already existing ones. Also, as we said before, at that same time some religious expressions of Afro-Brazilian origin (mainly practitioners of the Umbanda religion) developed or became visible.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For example, in Buenos Aires there is the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary that trains rabbis for the entire hemisphere, or the International Baptist Seminary, among other formation houses.

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The different churches and religious communities (Protestant and Evangelical churches, Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic communities, etcetera) at that time were already fully integrated into society, and formed for the most part by Argentine citizens. But at the same time, they maintained their links with their countries of origin, and therefore they were also the first place of reception for new migrants who, although to a lesser extent than in previous times, were able to arrive. This was especially notable when a war conflict (for example in the Middle East) produced a wave of migration that, although to a lesser extent, also reached Argentina.

### **Current Times**

As a result of these migratory movements and the subsequent evolution of the religious communities thus formed, there is a very broad and diverse religious mosaic in Argentina, characterized by a very dynamic and positive relationship between the different communities. The ecumenical movement among the Christian churches and interreligious relations among all communities is very vital.

Other communities have joined the traditional religions, among which the Jehovah's Witnesses (who remain outside this ecumenical framework by own decision), the Saints of the Last Days (Mormons) and others stand out for their number.

If something has characterized Argentina, it is that there has never been any religious persecution [1; 2]. And there have been no major cases of discrimination on religious grounds either.

Migratory movements towards Argentina have decreased in recent decades, but they have not disappeared. Thus, it is possible to find groups of migrants from Senegal and other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, of the Islamic religion, who have joined the existing Islamic community of Arab origin. There are also Latin American migrants (mainly Venezuelans) mostly Catholic, welcomed by the local Catholic Church.

### Religion and Migrations in Current Law

After that very quick look at history, it is necessary to refer to the current legislation in Argentina on migration, and the references that exist in it to the religious factor.

The immigration laws in force in Argentina continue with the tradition exposed in the previous sections, of generous openness.

<sup>238</sup> Of course, there are no requirements or limitations linked to religion that can become obstacles to immigration.

Law 25.871, which governs the matter, proposes, among other objectives, "To ensure that any person who requests to be admitted to the Argentine Republic on a permanent or temporary basis, the enjoyment of non-discriminatory admission criteria and procedures in terms of the rights and guarantees established by the National Constitution, international treaties, current bilateral agreements and laws" (secc.3.f).

The law declares that "The right to migration is essential and inalienable of the person and the Argentine Republic guarantees it on the basis of the principles of equality and universality" (secc.4), and in accordance with the provisions of secc. 20 of the Constitution, indicates that "The State in all its jurisdictions, will ensure equal access to immigrants and their families in the same conditions of protection, protection and rights enjoyed by nationals, in particular regarding social services, public goods, health, education, justice, work, employment and social security" (secc.6).

Discrimination against migrants for religious reasons is especially prohibited: "For the purposes of this law, all acts or omissions determined for reasons such as ethnicity, **religion**, nationality, ideology, political or union opinion, sex, gender, economic position or physical characteristics, which arbitrarily prevent, obstruct, restrict or in any way undermine the full exercise on equal bases of the fundamental rights and guarantees recognized in the National Constitution, International Treaties and laws" (secc.13). The same rule prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion has been established especially for stateless persons (Ley 27.512, secc.9).

The State also undertakes "in all its jurisdictions, whether national, provincial or municipal, it will favor initiatives aimed at the integration of foreigners in their community of residence, especially those aimed at ... To the knowledge and appreciation of cultural, recreational expressions, social, economic and **religious** rights of immigrants" (secc.14.c).

Among the groups of people for whom migration and residence in Argentina are especially facilitated, mention is made of "Religious of officially recognized cults, with legal status issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Religious Affairs, who enter the country to exclusively develop activities of their religion. A residence term of up to three years may be granted, extendable, with multiple entries and exits" (secc.23 § .g) [6, p. 433]. The term "religious" refers in that norm to ministers of worship [12]. The entry and settlement of Catholic priests and members of Catholic religious orders is also especially favored and facilitated, due to the Agreement between Argentina and the Holy See of October 1966<sup>1</sup>, and various specific regulations<sup>2</sup>; but there are also facilities for non-Catholic ministers of worship<sup>3</sup>.

Religious communities are especially recognized as entities that may require the entry of migrants<sup>4</sup>. Provision 1170/2010 of the National Directorate of Migration<sup>5</sup> allows granting "special transitory residence in accordance with the provisions of section 24 inc.h) of Law No. 25,871, for a term of up to one month extendable, to those foreigners who enter to the National Territory in order to carry out paid or unpaid tasks, in the...religious field" (art.1).

Without an express reference to religious issues, Argentina has implemented special reception programs for migrants and refugees who must leave their countries of origin, among other reasons, due to religious persecution. This has happened in 2016 with the implementation of the "Special Humanitarian Visa Program for foreigners affected by the Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic", called the SYRIA PROGRAM, with the aim of establishing a special regime for the facilitation of entry into the Argentine Republic of foreigners affected by the armed conflict in Syria, including people of Syrian nationality and their families, and those of Palestinian nationality habitually resident or who have resided in the Syrian Arab Republic and received assistance from the United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), through the processing of entry permits and visas for humanitarian reasons"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> "The Argentine Episcopate can call the country to the orders, male and female religious congregations and secular priests that it deems useful for the increase of spiritual assistance and Christian education of the people. At the request of the local Ordinary, the Argentine Government, always in harmony with the pertinent laws, will provide foreign ecclesiastical and religious personnel with a residence permit and citzenship card" (secc.Y).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Decree 1207/89 (BO 15/11/1989), secc.5.1; Provision 40164/2007 of the Dirección Nacional de Migraciones (BO 2/8/2007), secc.53 and Decree 231/2009 (BO 6/4/09), secc.2°, among others.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Decree 231/2009 (BO 6/4/09), secc.2°, secc.2 inc. a), Resolution 1395/95 of the Secretary of Religious Affairs, BO 23/6/95; etcetera.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Provision 3043/2020 of the Direccion Nacional de Migraciones (BO 9/21/2020), secc. 5, which provides for its registration in a registry for that purpose, except in the case of Catholic religious congregations that are exempt from the need for that registration (art.9).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> BO 6/7/2010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Decree 1034/2016, BO 9/22/2016, and Provision 4683/2016 of the National Migration Directorate (BO 9/5/2016.

### Conclusions

Both the reading of history and of the legal regulations in force, allow us to conclude that religion was never, nor is it now, a conflictive element for migratory movements in Argentina.

Everything exposed up to this point refers to migrations to Argentina, which has traditionally been a receiving country for migrants. But it must also be said that there was never any reverse migratory movement, that is, in which Argentina was a massively sending country of migrants. And there has never been emigration from Argentina for religious reasons. Perhaps in recent years there has been a greater movement of Argentine migrants abroad, but in no case for religious reasons, but fundamentally for economic reasons.

In any case, the religious factor could have some impact on the choice of the country of destination, as occurs with a certain number of Argentines of Jewish religion who have migrated to the State of Israel, where many of them have reached relevant positions in politics, economics and the arts. But it is not about people expelled from Argentina for religious reasons, but in any case, attracted by a unique case in the world such as Israel.

Argentina continues to be a host country for many migrants. And religious communities are often the first recipients of them<sup>1</sup>. The call of the National Constitution to "all the men [and women] of the world who want to inhabit Argentine soil", with absolute religious freedom, is still valid.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Catholic Commission for Migration, dependent on the Argentine Episcopal Conference, is a very active organization in this matter, possibly the most important civil society institution as an interlocutor of the State in migratory matters.

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