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Statue of Virgin Mary Reopens Secular Debate in Uruguay

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The request to install a sculpture of the Virgin Mary in the historic area of Uruguay’s capital reopened a debate rooted in the mid-19th century that now divides a society where all religions have coexisted for many years under strict secularism.

Since February, when Cardinal Daniel Sturla went to the Montevideo government with his plan to install a four-meter statue of the Virgin Mary next to the country’s historic first customs office, legislators, political parties, prelates, members of non-Catholic churches, the media, and neighborhood organizations joined a debate in which the country’s unique secular history occupies a central place. After Sturla said that he made the request with the confidence that Uruguayan society had “evolved” in its secularism, former President Julio María Sanguinetti (1985-1990 and 1995-2000), a declared agnostic, felt attacked and said, “The cardinal persists in reopening a healed wound and smears those of us who state our opposition to the image, when in reality what we are trying to do is to keep this space from being changed into a sort of open-air church, something that does not fit with the neutrality that the state must maintain before all religious faiths.”

In Latin America, where 40% of the world’s Catholics live and where religious symbols in public spaces abound, barely 5% of Uruguay’s citizens attend Mass and participate in Catholic activities. That 5% figure is a non-scientific projection; there are no statistics on Uruguayan religious beliefs because it is against the law for the census to ask about people’s faith. However, the Uruguayan Episcopal Conference indicated in 1980 that only 3.8% of the population regularly attended Mass.

In the midst of the debate, the Uruguayan daily El Observador cited a 2015 study by the Washington, D.C.-based Pew Research Center that said that 37% of Uruguayans say they have no religious affiliation and 13% say they are atheist or agnostic. The study does not indicate how many are Protestants, how many belong to the new Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches or to the increasingly visible sects rooted in African religions, but it offers a revealing figure: 22% of respondents said they had left Catholicism for another religion. Proponents of the monument didn’t take the anti-clerical sentiment of the Uruguayans into account, Leonardo Haberkorn noted in an AP story on April 8.

Some historians trace the exclusion of the Catholic Church from the institutional life of Uruguayans to the origins of the fight for independence from Spain at the beginning of the 19th century, when the country didn’t exist as such. Church leaders who followed liberator José Artigas were rare. Artigas always declined to use his baptismal name (Gervasio), and the word God didn’t appear in his writings, except for the few cases when he used it for formal reasons at the end of his letters.

Church pushed out of civil registry, cemeteries

Nevertheless, Uruguay’s original 1830 Constitution established “the state religion is Roman Catholic” and it cited God as “the all powerful, author, legislator and supreme conservator of the universe.” Three decades later, however, a confrontation began that is still ongoing and reached critical points 1917, when the Uruguayan government broke the standing concordat between the
church and the state, and in 1919, when the government removed religious references from the names of cities and festivals such as Easter week and Christmas.

In 1861 cemeteries became secularized after the Catholic Church refused to bury the remains of Dr. Enrique Jacobson, who was a Mason. Days after Jacobson’s death, the government ordered his burial, for which it first had to remove the church as the administrator of cemeteries. In addition, citing “hygienic reasons,” it ordered all cadavers to be transported directly from funeral homes to cemeteries, thus prohibiting traditional funeral Masses, where the remains are brought to the church before burial. Later, in 1879, the passage of the Civil Registry Law took the church out of the business of registering births, marriages and deaths. In addition, in 1885, the government established that couples must participate in a civil ceremony before the religious marriage ritual, making it impossible for any couple to marry before God if they haven’t previously made vows before the state. Religious weddings lost their legal validity and were reduced to private, personal events.

Secular education, law of the land

Prior to that, in 1877, the church received the toughest blow of the 19th century with the passage of the Education Law, which made Uruguay the first country in the world to take religion—and the religious interpretations of physical and astronomical phenomena—out of educational programs at all levels. The regulation, promoted by José Pedro Varela, known as “The School Reformer,” established that education would be “secular, free and mandatory.” It wasn’t until 1984, in one of the final and transcendental administrative acts of the civil-military dictatorship (1973-1985), that authorization was given to the country’s first private university, the Universidad Católica.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a succession of government rulings effectively relegated the Catholic Church to a secondary role, setting Uruguay apart from other countries in the Americas where the church is financed by the state and enjoys extreme privileges. In 1906, the government ordered crucifixes and any other religious symbols (statues and images of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, for example) to be removed from public hospitals. It allowed, if they so desired, for nuns to minister to believers receiving care in health centers, but the state stopped paying their salaries. In 1907, a law was passed that allowed for divorce by mutual consent and that suppressed all reference to God and the Gospels in the oath of office for the president and the legislators. In 1909, the pastoral ministries in the armed forces were abolished and military honors were banned in religious ceremonies. In 1913, Uruguay established that women could file for divorce (NotiSur, Nov. 2, 2012, and July 26, 2013).

The rupture of the concordat in 1917 came with the passage of a constitutional reform establishing full freedom of worship and reaffirmed that “the state does not have any religion.” Secularization of national holidays came two years later.

Last April 4, the Associated Press quoted an indignant Sturla as saying, “Uruguay must be one of the few countries in Latin America and the Christian world whose capital does not have a public image of the Virgin Mary. That the armed forces do not have chaplains is incomprehensible to some. It is not understandable that Holy Week is called Tourism Week. That is astonishing. So is the fact that we are the only country the West where Christmas is not called Christmas.” Since 1919, Jan. 6 has not been called Three Kings Day (or Epiphany) and is instead called Day of the Child; Dec. 8 is no longer the Feast of the Immaculate Conception but Beach Day (since it is close to the beginning of summer in the Southern Hemisphere); and Dec. 25 is no longer celebrated as Christmas but as the
Day of the Family. Only one section of the capital, San José, retains a religious name from colonial times, and that has become a real enigma for researchers.

Uruguayan historian Roger Geymonat, a descendant of the Waldensian immigrants who arrived in the country in the mid-19th century, points out that the process of secularization developed in parallel to what is known as “the Uruguay of the first modernization”—in other words, the process that built a benefactor state, which distributes work and the means of upward social mobility to large sectors of the population, including immigrants. In his book Religions in Uruguay, Geymonat speaks about the displacement of religion into the private sphere and observes that this “constitutes the manifestation of a concrete itinerary that sublimated particularities in pursuit of a unique national identity.” The historian notes that immigrants were integrated into the developing country with the requirement that they displaced the differences related to their place of origin (religion, culture, etc.) into the personal realm. According to Geymonat, what was sought was social unity in the interest of equality, a basic tenet that, however, does not appear in the thinking of the current protagonists of a debate that was believed definitively settled.

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