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The Religious Historiography of Uruguay (20th and 21st Centuries). Balance and Perspectives

La historiografía religiosa sobre Uruguay (siglos
XX-XXI). Balance y perspectivas

A historiografia religiosa sobre o Uruguai
(séculos XX-XXI). Equilíbrio e perspectivas

Uruguayans stand out due to a singularity that transcends the mere peculiarities that other nations tend to claim on a whim of exceptionality. Our true distinction lies in the originality of certain characteristics linked to the origins of a socio-political idiosyncrasy and a middle-class, secular, and State-centered collective identity. Likewise, we particularly value “monopolies” in all possible dimensions. These characteristics are, partly, product of the peculiar conditions under which Uruguay came to be, of the modernization

and secularization process, and of the “batllista” hallmark.^{1TN} Nevertheless, this is not the best moment to delve into an exhaustive analysis of these topics, given that they have been the object of endless debates and discussions.

Our perspectives on the past also have a particular originality. The popular, the pseudo-intellectual and even the “professional” perspectives fluctuate between the longing for a golden age set in a geography of the past (like the “Switzerland of the Americas” or the “Athens of the River Plate”) and a rigorous canon characterized by the patriotic axioms promoted by the defenders of the “classic Independent Thesis” and the theoretical-methodological guidelines of the so called “New History”. A historiographic and hegemonic consensus existed which condemned uncomfortable interpretations and overlooked those considered dysfunctional. Two illustrative cases of these two extremes are “historic revisionism” and the interpretations of Mario Cayota about the national development and the ways of relating to the region and the world.

The historical and historiographic consideration of the religious phenomenon in its various dimensions is no different. The evolution of the studies on the churches, especially the Catholic Church, and the practice of faith has oscillated between elision and minimization. The dominant historiography has shown some disdain towards dealing with these topics, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. It seems that the successful privatization of the religious phenomenon in Uruguayan society has led to its neglect by professionals who study the past.

This reality does not reflect the role played by a group of institutions which, in some cases, preceded the State and have been dominant since their national inception. However, the situation started changing in the 1990s with the emergence of a “new religious historiography” whose background dates back to the 1970s.

The Uruguayan *intelligentsia* was born in an intellectual and ideological climate impregnated by a strong secularism that permeated the social body and influenced the approaches to religious thinking. This *habitus* would condition both the research and the writing of history.

With its background rooted in the beginning of the 20th century, ecclesiastic historiography was late to emerge. At first, it was providential

^{1TN} Relating to President José Batlle y Ordoñez, his ideology and doctrine.

in nature, prioritizing biographical approaches centered on institutional and devotional aspects.²

Since the 1920s a progressive increase in the historic production can be appreciated, highlights of which include the rise in secular authors who spread their work in official publications such as *Revista Histórica* and *Revista Nacional*. Although the biographical genre still predominated, the growing interest in studying the Jesuit³ presence and figures of the revolutionary period⁴ was a novelty.

During the 1960s, during a structural crisis that affected Uruguayan reality, the renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council, and the new ideas about the theology of liberation, critical,⁵ historic-sociological-theological,⁶ and opusculé essays were published. These reflected the crossroads faced by ecclesiastic institutions.

One of the most significant studies of this period—and of the history of religious historiography in Uruguay—was *Las corrientes religiosas* by Alberto Methol Ferré.⁷ This work offers a concise approach to the evolution of confessions and religious practices from pre-Colombian to contemporary times.

2 Lorenzo Pons, *Biografía del Ilmo. y Revmo. Don Jacinto Vera y Durán, primer Obispo de Montevideo* (Montevideo: Barreiro y Ramos, 1905); Pacífico Otero, *La orden franciscana en Uruguay. Crónica histórica del convento de San Bernardino de Montevideo* (Buenos Aires: Cabaut y cía., 1908); Daniel García Acevedo, “El Doctor José Manuel Pérez Castellano. Apuntes para su biografía”, *Revista Histórica* I, n° 1 (1907): 252-307; Raúl Montero Bustamante, “Manuscritos del Presbítero José Benito Lamas”, *Revista Histórica* I, n° 1 (1907): 843-861; Manuel Castro López, “El sabio Larrañaga en el año 1804”, *Revista Histórica* IV, n° 10 (1911): 615-618; Mario Falcao Espalter, “Virgen del Pintado. Notas a una tradición”, *Revista Histórica* VII, n° 19 (1914): 515-531; Alberto Jones Brown, “Algunos documentos sobre un conflicto eclesiástico del año 1782”, *Revista Histórica* III, n° 7 (1910): 222-241.

3 Carlos Ferrés, *Epoca colonial. La Compañía de Jesús en Montevideo* (Montevideo, L. Gili, 1919); Juan Faustino Sallaberry, *La Iglesia en la independencia del Uruguay* (Montevideo: El Demócrata, 1930); Juan Faustino Sallaberry, *Los jesuitas. Su actuación en nuestra tierra* (Montevideo: Consejo Superior de los Círculos Católicos de Obreros, 1943); Juan Faustino Sallaberry, *Los jesuitas en Uruguay. Tercera época (1872-1940)* (Montevideo: Urta y Curbelo, 1940); Guillermo Furlong Cardiff, *Los jesuitas y la cultura rioplatense* (Buenos Aires: Urta y Curbelo, 1933); Guillermo Furlong Cardiff, *Cartografía jesuítica del Río de la Plata, dos tomos* (Buenos Aires: Peuser, 1936).

4 Víctor Pérez Petit, “El Padre Larrañaga”, *Revista Nacional*, n° 40 (1941): 88-131; Alfredo R. Castellanos, “La biblioteca científica del Padre Larrañaga”, *Revista Histórica* XVI, n° 46-48 (1948): 589-626; Plácido Abad, “Sacerdotes de la independencia. Ignacio Zufriategui y Juan F. Larrobla”, *Revista Nacional*, n° 74 (1944): 265-278; Javier Gomensoro, “El Canónigo Tomás Xavier de Gomensoro”, *Revista Nacional*, n° 89 (1945): 257-281; Eduardo Salterain y Herrera, Monterroso, iniciador de la patria y secretario de Artigas (Montevideo: LIGU, 1948).

5 Juan Luis Segundo, *Función de la Iglesia en la realidad rioplatense* (Montevideo: Barreiro y Ramos, 1962).

6 Carlos Rama, *La religión en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: Ediciones Nuestro Tiempo, 1964); Galo Martínez Arona, *Función de la Iglesia en la cultura Nacional* (Montevideo: Publisher, 1966); Juan Luis Segundo y Patricio Rodé, “Presencia de la Iglesia”, *Enciclopedia Uruguaya*, n° 37 (1969).

7 Alberto Methol Ferré, *Las corrientes religiosas* (Montevideo: Nuestra Tierra, 1969).

Gradually, the outbursts characteristic of the essays of the time calmed down and strictly historical contributions by both national⁸ and foreign⁹ authors appeared. Amongst these, *Iglesia y Estado en el Uruguay en el lustro definitorio (1859-1863)* by Darío Lisiero¹⁰ stands out. This work analyzes the confrontations between Freemasonry and the so called “ultramontane fraction” of the Catholic Church during that period. Thanks to its solid heuristic base and its epistemological approach, it can be considered as one of the earliest precedents of the “new religious historiography” in Uruguay.

During the military dictatorship (1973-1984), although production slowed down, it didn’t completely disappear. In addition to some monographic studies¹¹, in 1978 a book titled *La Iglesia en el Uruguay. Libro conmemorativo en el primer centenario de la erección del Obispado de Montevideo. Primero en el Uruguay. 1878-1978*¹² was published. Inspired by Mons. Carlos Parteli, this work gathers a number of contributions that offer a panoramic view of the history of the Church in the country. While the value of the chapters is uneven, the contribution by Juan Villegas stands out.

The innovative trends that had been outlined since the 1960s started to consolidate themselves after the return to democracy in 1985. The interest in learning about the life of distinguished personalities persisted, but with a novel approach. The biographical studies¹³ of that time reflect the authors’ efforts to adequately contextualize the characters in their respective environments. What’s more, we can appreciate an important methodological novelty derived from the incorporation of prosopography¹⁴ as a tool.

Despite some technical differences, these studies provide valuable clues to understand the socio-economic formation and origin of the ecclesiastic

8 Alfonso Fernández Cabrelli, *Artigas y los curas rebeldes* (Montevideo: Ediciones Grito de Asencio, 1968).

9 Cayetano Bruno, *Historia de la Iglesia en la Argentina, doce tomos* (Buenos Aires: Don Bosco, 1966-1981).

10 Darío Lisiero, “Iglesia y Estado en el Uruguay en el lustro definitorio (1859-1863)”, *Revista Histórica*, n° XLII (1971): 1-230; n° XLIII (1971): 1-225.

11 María Inés Oholeguy Couto, *La predicación y la enseñanza de la doctrina en la Banda Oriental del Río de la Plata durante el Virreinato (1776-1811)* (Torino: Università Pontificia Salesiana, 1975); Rubén Irureta, “El P. José Letamendi visto por su cochero”, *Revista Histórica de Soriano*, n° 23 (1982): 46-52; Rodolfo González Rissotto y Susana Rodríguez Varese, “Contribución al estudio de la influencia guaraní en la formación de la sociedad uruguaya”, *Revista Histórica* LIV, n° 160-162 (1982): 199-316.

12 AAVV, *La Iglesia en el Uruguay. Libro conmemorativo en el primer centenario de la erección del Obispado de Montevideo. Primero en el Uruguay. 1878-1978* (Montevideo: Instituto Teológico del Uruguay, 1978).

13 Vicente Cicalese, *Montevideo y su primer escritor. José Manuel Pérez Castellano* (Montevideo: Biblioteca Uruguaya de Estudios Literarios, 1987); Fernando Mañé Garzón, *El glorioso monterideano. Vida y obra de José Manuel Pérez Castellano (1742-1815), tres tomos* (Montevideo: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1998-2003).

14 Luis Astigarraga, *El clero de 1800 en la Banda Oriental* (Montevideo, Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1985); Lellis Rodríguez, *Apuntes biográficos del clero secular en el Uruguay* (Montevideo: OBSUR, 2005).

personnel, the structure of the relationship networks, and the development of their professional careers.

During this period, interdisciplinary studies were published which transcended institutional ecclesiastical studies for the first time. They also addressed issues related to the broader problematic of Uruguayans' religiousness. Highlights of the period include the work of Néstor da Costa,¹⁵ Alejandro Sánchez, and Roger Geymonat.¹⁶

The confluence of anthropological, sociological, and historical approaches gave rise to a kaleidoscopic perspective on how people live their faith, while also exploring both the inter-institutional and the deeply human dimensions. The expansion of the theoretical-methodological arsenal brought a more scientific and empathic understanding of the study object, which allowed minimizing the completely secular character of our society, amongst other things.

The most auspicious news of the post-dictatorship religious historiography include the publishing of academic studies carried out within the framework of the institutional projects commissioned to Universidad Católica, OBSUR, and CLAEH. These projects were led by prestigious specialists like Juan Villegas,¹⁷ Carlos Zubillaga,¹⁸ Mario Cayota,¹⁹ and Gerardo Caetano.²⁰ The studies were designed following the methodology of this discipline, and specifically focused on topics and problems of the secularization period.

In the past decades, the historiographic panorama has been enriched with the publication of monographic works dedicated to reviewing various topics

15 Néstor Da Costa, Guillermo Kerber y Pablo Mieres, *Creencias y religiones: la religiosidad de los montevideanos al fin del milenio* (Montevideo: Trilce, 1996); Néstor Da Costa, *Religión y sociedad en el Uruguay del siglo XXI. Un estudio sobre la religiosidad en Montevideo* (Montevideo: CLAEH – Centro Unesco de Montevideo, 2003).

16 Alejandro Sánchez y Roger Geymonat, *La búsqueda de lo maravilloso. San Cono y otras devociones populares* (Montevideo: Cal y Canto, 1996); Roger Geymonat (Compilador), *Las religiones en el Uruguay. Algunas aproximaciones* (Montevideo: La Gotera, 2004).

17 AAVV, *Monseñor Soler. Ideas y pensamiento* (Montevideo: Hegil, 1985); AAVV, *Monseñor Soler. Acción y obras* (Montevideo: Hegil, 1991). Ambos textos fueron coordinados por Juan Villegas.

18 Carlos Zubillaga y Mario Cayota, *Cristianos y cambio social en el Uruguay de la modernización (1896-1919)* (Montevideo: CLAEH – EBO, 1988).

19 Mario Cayota, *Siembra entre brumas. Utopía Franciscana y Humanismo Renacentista: una alternativa a la Conquista* (Montevideo: Instituto San Bernardino, 1990); Mario Cayota (Dirección), *Historia de la Evangelización en la Banda Oriental (1516-1830)* (Montevideo: UCUDAL, 1994).

20 Gerardo Caetano y Roger Geymonat, *La secularización uruguaya (1859-1919). Catolicismo y privatización de lo religioso* (Montevideo: Santillana, 1997); Gerardo Caetano (Director), *Los uruguayos del Centenario. Nación, ciudadanía, religión y educación (1910-1930)* (Montevideo: Santillana, 2000); Gerardo Caetano - Roger Geymonat - Alejandro Sánchez - Carolina Greising, *El "Uruguay laico". Matrices y revisiones* (Montevideo: Taurus, 2014).

related to “artiguismo”,²¹ the contribution of religious congregations,²³ the Ultramontanism of the 19th century,²⁴ and specific incidents during the process of secularization.²⁵ We have also studied the contribution of the churches to the development of culture and education²⁶ and to issues related to the situation of ecclesiastic institutions and of Christians in the face of state authoritarianism.²⁷

It is important to mention that the previous review is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but a general evaluation of the knowledge of the history of Christianity in Uruguay and an exposition of the challenges that are still

21th relating to Uruguay and Argentina's Independence leader José Gervasio Artigas.

22 Mario Cayota, *Artigas y su derrota: ¿frustración o desafío?* (Montevideo: Taurus, 2009); Mario Cayota, *José Benito Monterroso. El inicio del destierro de un ilustre ciudadano* (Montevideo: CEFRA DOHIS, 2011); Pedro Gaudiano, *Artigas Católico* (Montevideo: Universidad Católica, 2002).

23 Alfonso Esponera, *Los dominicos y la evangelización del Uruguay* (Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban, 1992); Julio Fernández Techera, *Jesuitas, MASONES y Universidad en el Uruguay, Tomo I (1680 - 1859)* (Montevideo: DE LA PLAZA, 2007); Julio Fernández Techera, *Jesuitas, MASONES y Universidad en el Uruguay. Tomo II. La difícil fundación del Colegio Seminario (1860-1903)* (Montevideo: De la Plaza, 2010); Susana Monreal, “Des sœurs soignantes aux religieuses enseignantes, d'Albi au Río de la Plata. Le long parcours des Sœurs dominicaines de Sainte Catherine de Sienné”, en Bruno Dumons (dir.), *Les congrégations féminines missionnaires. Éducation, santé et humanitaire: une histoire transnationale (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, Roma : I libri di Viella (2022) : 308-329 ; Susana Monreal, “América Latina, el Cono Sur y Uruguay: visiones e interpretaciones de los frailes dominicos franceses en los años sesenta”, *Itinerantes. Revista de Historia y Religión*, n° 16 (2022): 108-128; Susana Monreal, “Dominicos de Toulouse en Montevideo: una comunidad convertida en un período bisagra (1953-1970)”, *Cuadernos del Claeh*, Segunda serie, año 38, n° 109 (2019): 63-84; Susana Monreal, “Las Hermanas Dominicas de Santa Catalina de Siena de Albi. Su instalación en el Río de la Plata como modelo de itinerancia (1874-1886)”, *Itinerantes. Revista de Historia y Religión*, n° 10 (2019): 77-98.

24 Sebastián Hernández Méndez, “Mariano Soler: activista ultramontano transnacional (1846-1908). Una historia del internacionalismo católico desde América Latina” (Tesis doctoral, Universidad de los Andes, Universidad de Zaragoza, 2022) y “«Fui, vi y gocé por las conquistas de la religión y de la ciencia». Viajes y relatos de un obispo latinoamericano por Oriente (1885-1908)”. *Rivista di storia del cristianesimo*, vol. 17, n° 2 (2020), 335-350.

25 José Gabriel González Merlano, *El conflicto eclesial (1861-1862). Aspectos jurídicos de la discusión acerca del Patronato Nacional* (Montevideo: UCUDAL – Tierra Adentro, 2010); José Gabriel González Merlano, *Varela y Vera. Dos visiones sobre la Religión en la Escuela* (Montevideo: Tierra Adentro, 2011); Daniel Sturla, ¿Santa o de Turismo? Calendario y secularización en el Uruguay (Montevideo: Instituto Preuniversitario Juan XXIII, 2010); Dante Turcatti, *Diplomacia pontificia y secularización en Uruguay. Relación de correspondencia Santa Sede-Nunciatura Apostólica (1905-1922)* (Montevideo, Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación, 2013).

26 Susana Monreal (Ed.), *La Iglesia en el bicentenario de la nación oriental* (Montevideo: UCUDAL – CEU, 2014); Pablo da Silveira y Susana Monreal, *Liberalismo y jacobinismo en el Uruguay batllista. La polémica entre José E. Rodó y Pedro Díaz* (Montevideo: Taurus, 2003); Susana Monreal, *La Universidad Católica del Uruguay. El largo camino hacia la diversidad* (Montevideo: UCU, 2005); Susana Monreal, “Intelectuales católicos en Uruguay en la segunda mitad del siglo XX: presencia y relaciones con los frailes dominicos de Toulouse”, en Névio de Campos y Gerardo Garay (orgs.), *Os Intelectuais em contextos nacionais e internacionais. Campos, Fronteiras e Disputa* (Porto Alegre: Editora Fi, 2021), 275-301; Susana Monreal, “Coincidencias y disputas religiosas y políticas en torno al concepto de Educación. Provincia Oriental /Uruguay (1816-1886)”, *Historia Unisinos*, vol. 20, n° 3 (2016), pp. 375-386; Susana Monreal, “Libertad de enseñanza en Uruguay. Cuestionamientos y debates (1868 - 1888)”, *Ariadna histórica. Lenguajes, conceptos, metáforas*, n° 5 (2016): 127-150.

27 Pablo Dabiez, *No se amolden al tiempo presente. Las relaciones Iglesia-sociedad en los documentos de la Conferencia Episcopal del Uruguay (1965-1985)* (Montevideo: OBSUR, 2009); Nicolás Iglesias y Dahiana Barrales, ¿De qué lado está Cristo? Religión y política en el Uruguay de la guerra fría (Montevideo: Fin de Siglo, 2021); Roger Geymonat, *Iglesia, Estado y Sociedad en el Uruguay contemporáneo* (Montevideo: Ediciones Banda Oriental, 2021).

to be addressed. In order to advance in the knowledge of these topics, we have organized this dossier specifically dedicated to the writing of religious history in Uruguay.

In view of the above, the work gathered in this dossier represents a contribution to the study of some aspects of the religious historiography of Uruguay. It focuses on authors, institutions or topics referring to the 20th century and that have not yet been the object of in-depth studies.

First, the article titled “The Church and the History of the Uruguayan Catholic Nation at the Beginning of the 20th Century” by Yanelín Brandon analyzes the ideas of nation and State supported by the Catholic Church between 1900 and 1930. The study of the History manuals by Hermano Damasceno (Brother Damasceno), better known as HD, and the analysis of the guidelines published by the Uruguayan Church in the *Boletín Eclesiástico de la Arquidiócesis de Montevideo* are the starting point of this text. Brandon focuses on the manuals, broadly disseminated by HD, to rescue the story of the Catholic inspiration of the origins of the nation and of state organization, in the context of secularizing and even anti-clerical perspectives in the early 20th century. The texts by HD, which connect the origins of Uruguay to the Catholic religion and bring new value to the missionary and educational work of the Church, seek to strengthen the accepted ideas of State, Church, and individual liberty among students. Over the first decades of the 20th century, this approach to national history confronted some of the basic precepts of the ruling batllismo.

The second article, “Reflections about the «Theory of the Catholic Ghetto» in a Secular Uruguay” by Carolina Greising, deals with one of the concepts most deeply rooted in the religious historiography of the 60s, the “theory of the Catholic ghetto”. Based on the renewed concept of “secularization”, Greising reflects on the notion of “Catholic ghetto”, particularly present in studies by renowned Catholic Uruguayan authors Patricio Rodé, Juan Luis Segundo SJ, and Alberto Methol Ferré, influenced by the innovative elements of the Second Vatican Council, as opposed to their own training in the Catholic Church, which they perceived as having an attitude of retreat. Greising places these authors in context, as well as the researchers who took up the same framework in the 90s. Of special interest is the author’s analysis of what she calls the border between the “ghetto” in discourse and the “ghetto” in practice, in relation to the reconstruction of the concepts of secularization and secularism.

The last two articles deal with very different topics, and bring their analyses to the present day, which gives them a special value. On the one hand, Martín Soterio, in his study “Secularization and Religious Deprivatization in Uruguay over the Last Decade (2013-2023): Paradigm Shift?”, analyzes the concept of secularization that has predominated in Uruguayan historiography in the last decade, relating it to the so called “classic paradigm”. On the other hand, he questions the thesis of the separation of the spheres and argues that the changes being processed in Uruguayan society in terms of religious deprivatization are not always seen or accepted neither by political-partisan actors nor by academia. In short, the author questions the classic concept of secularism, points to the constant increase of religious offers, reclaims the freedoms of thought and expression, while still assuming the validity of “the idea of an exclusively secular society”.

Finally, the dossier closes with an article by Gabriel González Merlano, “Fifty Years of Theological Reflection in Uruguay (1974-2024)”. This text reviews fifty years of publications by *Instituto Tecnológico del Uruguay* (ITU) and by the Facultad de Teología de Uruguay. This includes the different publications by the institutions: *Libro Anual* of ITU/ITUMS²⁸ (1974-1994); *Cuadernos* of ITU/ITUMS (1974-1996); *Puntos de Apoyo* (1983-1984), and *Soleriana* magazine, published since 1995 although not systematically. This article is especially descriptive and represents a significant contribution on a topic that had never before been studied. In this sense, the author details that the expression “theological reflection” must be interpreted in its broadest sense, including the different branches of theology and all similar ecclesiastic disciplines. Moreover, this study helps profile the “intellectual priest” in Uruguay, a scholar by personal calling, with various academic degrees, professor at the Facultad de Teología, but always devoted to his pastoral commitments.

28 Founded in 1966, the *Instituto Teológico del Uruguay* (ITU) was renamed *Instituto Teológico del Uruguay “Mons. Mariano Soler”* (ITUMS) in 1981. The same year the affiliation of the Institute to the Pontifical Gregorian University of Rome was established.