Right-wing Catholic Orthodoxy and Argentine Military

Introduction

To understand terrorism in Argentina requires that we suspend the presumption that all acts of terrorism are motivated by leftist ideology. Not just in Argentina, but in many other countries, acts of political violence were carried out by both left-wing and right-wing groups. In Argentina, Guatemala, Chile, Colombia, and El Salvador, attacks by leftists were often matched or exceeded by political violence and acts of terrorism perpetrated by the right, frequently with the complicity or under the direction of conservative military governments. This unit will attempt to untangle the web of violence that began in Argentina during the 1960s student uprisings by the left-wing Peronist Montoneros, but also by right-wing paramilitary groups. Political violence intensified in the next decade with the military overthrew the presidency of Isabel Perón in March 1976 in a coup. The ruling military junta immediately launched its official program of violence, euphemistically labeled the Process of National Reorganization (Proceso de Reorganización Nacional). This campaign, usually know as the “Dirty War” against subversion, was designed by the military to rid the country of leftist ideology, and all liberal and progressive trends in Argentine society and restore the country to its core values: Fatherland, the Catholic religion, and Family.

Prominent Catholic bishops were known to have maintained close contact with the generals who plotted the coup. Indeed, common wisdom assumed that the church at all levels offered institutional and spiritual support to the military both during the coup and throughout the entire Proceso.

Criticism of the church's suspected role in the Dirty War began almost immediately following the 1976 coup, when relatives of the detained and disappeared were frustrated by the bishops' reluctance to intercede on behalf of the victims of systematic human rights abuse. Although no bishops or clergy were arraigned during the 1985 human rights trials against the junta leaders who instigated the Proceso, a stain is left on the church’s credibility and integrity. Testimony of survivors of detention centers implicated military chaplains, who were present during interrogation and torture sessions. Later confessions of military personnel indicated that military chaplains provided pastoral support for torturers but not to their victims.

Andrés Avellaneda, in Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina 1960-1983 (1986), argues that the church’s primary role during the dictatorship was to provide a “discourse of support” for the Proceso. Although official church pronouncements and public statements by bishops comprise a minor portion of his primary analysis of the military’s “discourse of censorship,” Avellaneda provides a theoretical framework for text-criticism. He contends that the discourse of cultural censorship developed gradually through a succession of political and social situations in Argentine history. Groups vying for political and economic primacy developed their own discourse that outlined their philosophies on government and society, which are constructed on their own vision of
what it means to be Argentine. In other words, competing groups offered competing definitions of el ser argentino.¹

In many respects, Avellaneda’s thesis supports Nicolas Shumway’s observation that Argentine political history beginning in the 1880s can be characterized as a series of conflicts among groups with competing visions of Argentine reality. Each group developed its unique political culture with its own interpretation of Argentine history and of its destiny. Shumway’s The Invention of Argentina (1991), breaks down the components of their discourse into “guiding fictions” that become more sophisticated over time. As positions hardened into “mythologies of exclusion,” competition between the groups becomes more serious, ultimately taking the form of political disruption, civil war, and military uprisings.

The concept of national unity, if Avellaneda and Shumway are correct, was one such “guiding fiction.” The Catholic Bishops Conference of Argentina (CEA) repeatedly declared the church’s commitment to the unity of the nation, even to the point of endorsing the methods used by the military government to restore order. Novelist Ernesto Sábato, who chaired the national commission (CONADEP) charged with investigating the horrors of the Dirty War, called Argentina a “society of opposers.”²

Argentines in general by the time of the 1976 coup were already weary of kidnappings, skirmishes between leftist insurgents and right wing paramilitary units, runaway inflation, and the seeming inability of the government to maintain order. Although military rule seemed to restore order, the harshness of the repression exacerbated tensions between competing groups rather than heal old wounds. Chilean political scientist Arturo Valenzuela noted a similar hardening of oppositional elements during seventeen years of military rule under Pinochet.³

The church from the early 1880s was far from a unifying element in the perennial conflicts that at times paralyzed Argentine society. It fought tooth and nail against anti-clerical Positivist governments before the turn of the century and openly opposed reforms of Liberal parties throughout the Twentieth Century. Church-state relations were severely strained during Peronist governments in the 1950s and later during the 1970s when Perón retired from exile. During the military government’s Dirty War, the church sided with the junta against human rights groups, who formed the primary vocal but muted public opposition to the repression.

Why members of the Argentine Catholic hierarchy (Conferencia Episcopal Argentina – C.E.A.) refused to meet with human rights groups is one of the most vexing moral questions of the period. Although the church’s critics repeatedly condemned the eagerness of the hierarchy to maintain close ties with the military, politically it is easy to understand why church elites sought to maintain their position of privilege. However, morally it is especially puzzling in light of the fact that the Chilean bishops, by contrast, are widely admired for embracing the human rights movement in deliberate defiance of the Pinochet dictatorship.

When it became apparent that the Argentine hierarchy as a collective entity would not intervene on behalf of victims of the repression, a number of groups organized to compensate for the church’s failure. Despite being targets of persecution by the military, these small, independent human rights groups, including the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, struggled throughout the Dirty War without the church’s support, often encountering open hostility from the hierarchy.⁴

In Argentina, numerous human rights groups, along some of the historic Protestant denominations, organized to compensate for the failure of the Argentine Catholic Church to break with the military and fill a moral void.

Many wondered why the Argentine bishops did not set up a human rights agency similar to the Vicariate of Solidarity in Chile. Such an entity would have enjoyed the constitutional protection of the Catholic Church, but the Argentine bishops refused. Since one of the aims of the study is to arrive at a fuller understanding of why the Argentine church was unwilling to take a stand against repression, a study of alternative responses will be essential. The very existence of independent groups begs the question of the larger ethical imperatives ignored by the bishops, who, during the Onganía dictatorship (1966-1970) and throughout the Proceso, supported the military governments’ campaigns against subversion. By currying favor with military governments, the bishops opened themselves to being called the junta’s “docile lapdogs.”⁵

Activist clergy frequently defied orders from their bishops, who tried to suppress progressive social ministries and block publications identified with the popular movement. For this reason, the documents contain ideological cues that tend to corroborate suspicions of the hierarchy’s supposed affinity with right wing political groups. Indeed, many critics argue that the documents betray an underlying ideological agenda regardless of their pastoral concern for the well being of Argentine society.

The CEA’s declarations in the aftermath of the 1976 coup lend support to the contention that the bishops wanted to recover whatever access to power they had lost during previous Peronist administrations as well as anti-clerical liberal governments in the past. In some respects, the stated aims of the bishops seem virtually identical to those of rabid Catholic nationalists in the military, including an abiding hostility to Peronism as well as fear of the influence of ‘foreign ideologies’ such as Marxism.

Underlying the hierarchy’s apparent political leanings and apprehensions about reform, the fundamental doctrinal issue in the documents is to bolster the authority of the bishops. The popular church movement in the 1960s, according to the bishops, directly undercut their authority. Priests and nuns refused to wear clerical garb, they allowed lay

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people, including women, to celebrate the eucharist, and encouraged members of poor parishes to organize against their exploiters, including the hierarchical Church.

For this reason, one of the primary analytical tasks of this study is to determine the degree to which the documents articulate and defend the magisterium, that is, the official teaching of the Church. Catholic authority resides more in its magisterium and its traditions than in scripture. The Protestant Reformation, by contrast, broke tradition by adhering instead to Luther’s dictum sola scriptura as the basis of all moral authority.

Regardless of the specific issues addressed in the documents, one of my main concerns is to determine how the bishops sought to overcome criticism, restore legitimacy to the church’s teaching magisterium, and lend credibility to their image as the moral shepherds of Argentina. The bishops wanted very much to repair the Church’s tarnished image. Many of their press releases, speeches, and sermons published during the dictatorship were viewed by many as a ploy by the hierarchy to improve its public image in the face of criticism.6

Many would argue that the church’s behavior in the Dirty War was morally reprehensible and that all of its pronouncements and pastoral letters were desperate efforts to save face. Indeed, contemporary studies by political scientists and sociologists of religion have shown that official ecclesiastical statements may reveal less about the church than studying the routine ways in which its structures have an impact on Latin American society.7

Despite scholarly suspicion that official ecclesiastical positions frequently serve political agendas, such as lending legitimacy to structural and social changes that may have already taken place, a focus of this research is to examine the church’s stated role in Argentina’s human rights debacle of the late 1970s and its responses to critics.

At times the church’s guiding mythology conflicted with the government’s vision, which helps explain its stormy relations with the anti-clerical positivist administrations of the 1890s but also with the anticlerical Peronist governments in this century. During those periods the church was alienated from the centers of power. However, when the hierarchy legitimated the guiding myth of the dominant group, as it did during the Onganía dictatorship and during the Dirty War, the church enjoyed fuller privileges and prestige. The CEA documents trace the church’s successes and frustrations in maintaining its privileges and promoting its own vision of what it means to be Argentine, but by the end of the Dirty War the bishops were fully aware that their image had been tarnished. The documents clearly spell out the church’s efforts to repair the damage to its integrity. Because of the criticism, there is a decided defensive tone to the CEA’s explanations of its relationship to the junta and its efforts on behalf of the victims of repression.

Integrity as Moral Archetype

The concept of integrity is oddly underplayed in Catholic moral philosophy. Indeed, the word integrity is only mentioned once in the New Testament, when St. Paul

6 Mignone, p. 25.
enjoins his student Titus to "show yourself to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured..." 

The moral dilemma for the Church is that in a professed Christian nation, when too few performed the good work of advocating for human rights, the bishops should have been the first to condemn the repression. What puzzled the church’s critics, especially the families who sought help from the bishops, was the strong disjunction between word and deed. The documents are full of the bishops’ attestations of support for human rights but without concrete actions, the words had a hollow ring. For this reason the church in Argentina suffered a crisis of integrity, which it struggles today to overcome.

In the history of church doctrine, integrity as an ideal of individual morality is scarcely mentioned in the Patristics. Integrity only receives a passing reference or two in Augustine, and occupies a small but not insignificant place in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Although Aquinas understood the nature of integrity in his references to the archetypal wholeness of God, integrity does not figure in Thomist moral philosophy as it pertains to the individual.

The obvious moral dilemma for the Catholic bishops of Argentina is that they sought to justify their complicity with the military by invoking their commitment to the "integrity of the nation." One of the primary reasons to focus on ecclesiastical documents is that pastoral letters and position papers, along with press releases and published episcopal sermons, represent the church's official teaching magisterium. Statements by individual bishops, although they represent the church, do not carry the same weight as declarations by the episcopal conference. This explains why the efforts of a handful of priests and bishops on behalf of the victims had little impact. Juxtaposing the content of the documents with the public conduct of church officials during the military repression might reveal whether the bishops demonstrated integrity in their teaching.

Understanding how "integrity" figures into the moral equation must begin with an analysis of Integral Catholicism in Argentina during the early decades of this century, which will be examined in the next chapter. The most important Argentine writer on Integral Catholicism, sociologist Fortunato Mallimaci, traces his country's integralist movement to such figures as Charles Maurras in France. Mallimaci's work has been greatly amplified by Austen Ivereigh's Catholicism and Politics in Argentina, 1810-1960, which gives a much fuller study of the intellectual backdrop of Catholic nationalism in Nineteenth Century Europe.

The concept of integritas in Latin signifies wholeness and sound health and even moral purity. In the infinitive it means "to make whole." Until the Puritan writers, notably John Milton, integrity was never an important philosophical or theological notion

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12 Ivereigh, op. cit.
in Western cultural history. Milton and other English writers may be fairly credited with bringing it into vogue not only as a feature of Puritan morality but as an important attribute of model public service. Their ideas, however, came directly from Cicero, whose works were important in training new generations of clergy and public officials at Oxford and Cambridge. Cicero's *De Officiis*, and other political writings, had an enormous impact on several generations of political and religious figures in England and in the United States, notably Benjamin Franklin. In Cicero's works integrity was a badge of honor that signified not only personal moral rectitude but also a standard of public etiquette for politicians.

Certainly in Puritan England the standards of integrity for members of the civil service also applied to members of the clergy and university faculties. Despite the importance of integrity, which the Puritans derived from Cicero, the word is not conceived in the same way by the Catholic bishops in Argentina. Integrity is not mentioned in the CEA documents to describe honesty and purity in the actions of public officials. Instead it most often refers to the church’s overarching concern for preserving the ‘wholeness’ and health of the nation. Hence, the Catholic hierarchy’s expressed doctrinal and pastoral agenda is to ‘hold together’ Argentina’s integrity, yet in the context of the church’s pastoral responsibility to “promote, consolidate, and mature the people in their faith.”

The CEA documents often wage battles that are both doctrinal and ideological, depending on the nature of the various internal or external forces the bishops identify as threats. These threats range from incursions of Marxist ideology in labor, education, popular religion, and politics to the corrosion of public morality by pornography and violence in cinema. The bishops warn also against the erosion of the family by efforts to legalize divorce and abortion. They also rail against the rampant greed of liberal capitalism.

Except for the bishops’ sensitivity to criticism, the church’s own integrity during the dirty war is never a primary issue in the CEA documents. Yet the most serious criticisms against the Church’s role in the Dirty War have been driven by questions about the integrity of ecclesiastical discourse. The fundamental theological problem facing the bishops in coming to grips with their alleged complicity during the Dirty War is also ideological. Are they concerned as much about human dignity as they are about protecting their privilege and prestige in Argentine society?

The widespread perception of the church’s lack of integrity fueled almost universal criticism in the literature, which will be reviewed in the following chapter.

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14 The documents contain frequent references to the bishops’ pastoral responsibility to maintain the nation’s integrity. However, criticism of the Church’s role in the Dirty War only intensified over time. In 1995, the military and the federal police issued critiques of their own overzealous attack on subversion. Only a year later, and after much public pressure, the CEA finally issued a qualified apology for the Church’s moral weakness during the Dirty War. See *La Nación* (April 27, 1996, pp. 1, 13; April 26, 1996, pp. 1, 13-15). The CEA document, *Caminando hacia el tercer milenio* (27 April 1996), will be analyzed in chapter 3.

15 For the bishops, pastoral integrity meant promoting human dignity but only through the vehicle of helping people grow in their faith, which is the primary task of the Church, according to Bishop Jorge Casaretto (e-mail interview, February 18, 2000).
However, two prominent writers, both loyal sons of the church, need to be mentioned at the outset of this study because their attacks on the church’s integrity will frame the debate in the growing literature.

The most outspoken critic of the church during and after the Dirty War was Emilio Mignone, an internationally respected legal scholar and devout Roman Catholic. He documented his family’s frustrating efforts to find out the fate of their twenty-five year old daughter Monica, kidnapped from their home in Buenos Aires in the early morning hours of September 14, 1976, and never seen again. Mignone’s tale of moral outrage, Iglesia y dictadura (1986),16 indicts the bishops because of their cowardly refusal to defy the military and use the full force of their pastoral and prophetic moral authority to stop illegal detentions and executions. Mignone’s testimony speaks for the disillusionment and anger of thousands of families over the church's inability to exercise its moral authority in the face of repression. He regards the church’s official collection, Documentos del Episcopado Argentino, 1965-1981, Colección completa del magisterio postconciliar de la Conferencia Episcopal Argentina (1982), as a public relations whitewash.17

Mignone attacks the reactionary conservatism of the bishops who dominate the CEA as the reason the church sided with the military. Since his analysis is limited in scope, he does not examine church documents from the mid-1960s, which reveal the conservative hierarchy’s ambivalence toward the reforms of Second Vatican Council. Nor does he demonstrate how the hierarchy’s “pre-conciliar” resistance to reform manifested itself in church documents during the Onganía dictatorship that came into power in 1966. While these documents fall outside the scope of Mignone’s analysis, they provide an important backdrop to understanding the church’s role in the dirty war and will also be explored also in chapter three.

Rubén Dri, another strong critic of the church, was a prominent sociologist, priest, and MSTM founder whose Teología y dominación (1987), examines the Catholic hierarchy’s ideological affinity with military hard-liners. Rather than focus entirely on official church documents, Dri’s study juxtaposes institutional statements against unofficial public statements of key figures in the Argentine episcopacy, gleaned largely from newspaper reports. Father Dri also provides a fascinating ideological taxonomy of the bishops, dividing them by name along ideological lines into three camps.18 The least powerful were a handful of progressive bishops who supported the popular church movement and spoke out against human rights abuses. The real power within the CEA structures rotated among center right and far right wing bishops, most of whom valued access to the inner circles of military government. Many ultra-right bishops also served in the military chaplaincy throughout the Onganía dictatorship as well as during the Dirty War.

Perón successfully exploited the suspicion among the working classes that the church was a handmaiden of economic elites. Indeed, he usurped much of the church’s authority by promoting a parallel Peronist spirituality that attracted the working classes.

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16 Mignone, op. cit.
17 Mignone, Witness, op. cit., p. 25.
The bishops’ response to this threat was to mount a pamphleteering campaign against the government’s efforts to disenfranchise the church from the center of power and influence. Although Ivereigh’s history closes with the short-lived Illía administration, it provides helpful background for understanding the bewildering political and ecclesiastical climate of the turbulent 1960s.  

Ivereigh traces the history of the church’s perennial struggle to maintain its constitutional rights and privileges, beginning with the anti-clerical liberal governments in the 1880s, who believed that the church impeded modern development. The church’s fortunes waxed and waned with governments throughout this century, reaching a low point in prestige and privilege during the first Perón administration in the 1950s.

During the Onganía dictatorship, which came to power in 1966, the church curried favor with Catholic nationalists in the military and enjoyed a period of prominence in national life. However, with the return of Perón from exile in 1973, the church’s relations with the government began to sour. The bishops’ published statements from the period indicate their fear that Perón would stop government funding of Catholic schools, overturn the church’s constitutional status as the state religion, and legalize divorce.

After 1974 the church fared no better under the presidency of Isabel Perón. With increasing social and economic disruption and run-away political violence, many of the bishops went on record favoring military intervention to restore order. Meetings between high-level military chaplains, some of them bishops, and junta leaders led to the widely held view that the church encouraged and supported the coup.

Whether members of the clergy were directly involved in planning the coup is doubtful. Yet evidence suggests that central conservative members of the hierarchy attempted to step into the ideological vacuum with the 1976 coup and supported of the proceso in hopes of recovering lost privilege. Many saw parallels to the church’s moves to fill the political void following Juan Perón’s ouster in 1955, when the bishops attempted to recover the moral leadership that the charismatic leader had taken from them.

As long as the Argentine Catholic Church continues to hold a constitutional position of privilege, it may legitimately claim for itself the historic right “to speak as the moral conscience of the nation.” However, the church’s behavior during the Dirty War may have permanently altered its ability to do so with the kind of integrity and respect the bishops so desperately sought. This study will address the church efforts not only to be the dominant voice in the moral life of the nation, but to define what it means to be Argentine.

Many writers, notably Nicholas Shumway, have described political events since the 1880s as an ongoing struggle among competing interest groups to define the national identity. Shumway argues in The Invention of Argentina (1990), that each political group seeks to impose its own “guiding fiction” that define the history and destiny of the

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20 Mignone, pp. 2-5.
21 Burdick, x.
22 Burdick, ix.
Burdick uses the phrase “legitimating myth” to describe the same dynamic as groups articulate their claims and vie for power.24

For the purposes of this study, the analysis of the bishops’ words will help determine the underlying nature of their discourse. While declarations issued by the bishops may seem on the surface to be purely pastoral, careful contextual analysis might indicate a non-religious agenda, such as reinforcing government censorship or bolstering episcopal authority against the eroding effects of liberalism, popular religion, or leftist ideology.

That the bishops’ discourse is theological by nature need not deter us from serious social and political analysis. Out of respect for their pastoral office and the moral weight of church teaching, one might be tempted to take theological language at face value. Yet acknowledging the special quality of religious language does not mean that we are freed from critical responsibility to question both the honesty of the language and perhaps reveal its non-religious agendas. Questioning the integrity of the discourse is the heart and soul of this study. Certainly there are progressive elements within the Argentine church who have attempted to push the hierarchy toward serious self-criticism of its role in the Dirty War. Yet the fact that military and the federal police issued auto-críticas a full year before the bishops published their own in 1996 indicates the degree to which church structures resisted such self-examination.25

According to Anglican bishop and theologian Rowan Williams, asking whether theological discourse has or lacks integrity is simply to ask “whether such a discourse is really talking about what is says it is talking about.” Granted these are not the usual questions asked by historians and social scientists. Yet without framing the question in terms of the integrity of their discourse, it would not be possible to understand whether the bishops’ statements serve any purpose other than what they profess. This seems to be the fairest way to approach an analysis of theological language. We can understand its declared pastoral and theological agenda without precluding frank discussion about its underlying social and political determinants.26

As the analysis will demonstrate, the bishops by the end of the Dirty War were fully aware that their image had been tarnished. The documents clearly spell out the church’s efforts to repair the damage to its integrity by explaining its strategies in dealing with the junta and advocating on behalf of the victims of repression. In the final balance, however, their integrity will be weighed more by their actions than their words.

23 Shumway, xi.
24 Burdick, p. 7.
25 “La Iglesia pidió perdón por sus culpas,” La Nación (April 28, 1996), p. 1. See also “Que Dios los perdone,” Página/12 (April 28, 1996), pp. 1-4. Earlier calls for a full examination of the church’s role in the Dirty War were met with
26 Rowan Williams, “Theological Integrity,” in Cross Currents (Fall 1995: vol. 45, no. 3, p. 312.