RELIGION AND DEMOCRATIC CONTESTATION IN LATIN AMERICA:

Rights and Justice Claims around the Environment and Gender/Sexuality

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Project Summary

This initiative seeks to improve understanding of religious responses to emergent rights-based social justice mobilizations in Latin American democracies. Building on a now completed project focused on the relationship of religion to violence in Latin America under both dictatorship and democracy, the present project seeks to analyze how religious actors, organizations, and hierarchies are currently participating in transnational, national and local advocacy associated with two widespread sources of conflicts characteristic of the region’s democracies: 1) conflicts over extractive resources and relating to environmental and climate justice; and 2) contestation relating to gender and sexuality. In so doing, this initiative will assess the extent of continuity and change in religious approaches to rights and justice in Latin America, from the past to the present.

The environment and gender were chosen as topics in light of the evident public debate and social contestation these two questions generate in Latin America today, and our assessment that public perceptions of these issues are changing. This project gives particular attention to interactions between religion and governments, religious and civil society actors, and local and transnational advocacy networks, including the role of religious actors in the creation and application of the law. One project goal is to identify and explain the range of variation of religious orientations to rights, justice and to the law. Another goal is to identify the sources of specific conceptions of rights and justice for religious advocacy, as articulated by doctrinal or theological concepts and positions, by local and national engagements, and by religious participation in transnational advocacy networks dedicated to these issues. To summarize, this project is concerned with:

• Continuities and differences between past and present religious approaches to rights-based advocacy in Latin America, particularly as related to and framed by the pursuit of social justice;

• The development of religious doctrine and practices, including specific religious conceptions of both rights and justice, as pastoral priorities pursued through diverse collaborations with governments, with civil society, and issue-specific networks, for advocacy work focused on the environment, gender-based and sexual identity claims and legislation;

• Interactions between global, regional and local religious approaches to both environmental and gender-based advocacy, in order to improve current understandings of the ways pastoral agents participate in transnational and humanitarian advocacy networks;

• The similarities but also differences between the cases of religious approaches to environmental justice and support for gender rights in the region, with the goal of an appreciation of the range of variation in religion’s role in these two broad areas of contestation.
**Topic and Context**

We frame these concerns in the context of the region’s concerted movement toward regime democratization over the past several decades and post-transitional popular mobilizations focused upon social justice. At present, religious thought and intervention in debates about both the environment and sexuality are having important and enduring consequences for policy outcomes and for community and public life in Latin America. Moreover, religion’s engagement with disputes regarding the environment and sexualities impacts the fortunes of governments compelled to navigate these hotly contested issues and the accompanying attitudinal currents that inform political behavior. Often in collaboration with religious actors, governments can be moved to put forth concrete legislation and legal judgments that affect the lives of millions of people and strengthen or undermine the legitimacy of individuals and institutions – including religious and political leaders.

Both within and beyond Latin America, evolving interactions between churches, governments, and civil society, and active religious participation in transnational networks, are key emergent features of popular mobilization and policy debates around the environment, gender and sexuality. This mobilization also generates new alliances and articulations of rights and justice, and often entails uses of local and transnational ideas and discourses, including but not limited to the “human rights” to be protected from violence, expropriation and denial of recognition. This project promises to elucidate the intersections of religious concepts, actors, and advocacy with rights-based social justice efforts, in order to better identify the ways religious groups are participating in, and promoting, but also at times undermining these efforts. In ways continuous with but also distinct from the history of pastoral agency in the region, religious actors now engage with a landscape of intensifying sociopolitical mobilization on multiple scales that encompass local communities, countries, and transnational actors.

**The Environment, the Economy and Climate Change**

Concerns about the environment have risen to the top of the region’s agenda today, and conflicts over natural resources are the primary challenge that many governments encounter as they seek to retain public legitimacy. In large part these concerns reflect the importance of extractive industries for the economies of a growing number of Latin American countries. An intensifying reliance upon natural gas, oil revenues, and mining, fueled by growing demand for these commodities from China and Asia more broadly, has brought about rates of economic growth not seen since before the debt crisis of the 1980s. This has enabled governments of both right and left to draw on the bonanza of abundant natural resources to balance state finances and to invest in a broad array of public policies aimed at advancing economic development and, in much of the region, reducing income inequalities. For the first time in a half-century, Latin America’s extraordinary income inequality has been decreasing, and this is in part due to state-led redistribution of revenues secured through booming extractive industries.

Yet the extractives-driven economic model has also led to contentious social conflict between states and corporations, on the one hand, and local communities on the other, most often over control of non-renewable resources and over the impact that their extraction can have on environmental sustainability. Struggles over land, water and competing models of economic development are foremost among these conflicts, often couched in the terms of indigenous rights, environmental justice or climate justice. One focus of this project, therefore, is with church pastoral work among indigenous, Afro-Latino, and other minority cultural communities, both supporting and advocating for their rights to territory, resources, and self-determination, often against government and corporate policies and interests. This includes consideration of local, non-Christian and syncretic conceptions of nature and of the rights of
nature, as religious advocacy in the region combines these concepts with transnational formulations of environmental rights and climate justice. It also includes the ways that religious groups have at times participated in shaping particular conceptions of nature, of rights, and in some cases creatively asserted the rights of nature itself.

But other grievances are also being voiced, and shared among both rural and urban working and middle classes questioning the fairness and benefits of extractive economies. These include a rejection of the position of Latin American economies in the global economy as suppliers of natural resources and voices insisting upon a more thorough and equitable social redistribution of the wealth these economies generate. Closely related has been concern for the perceived unfair burden of the costs of climate change, as these costs have become increasingly evident in the region over the last decade. The dynamic around the climate problem is revealing: its causes are predominantly global and systemic, and yet its effects are experienced chiefly at the local level. How then do particular societies envision just responses to climate change and how do they assert these visions using transnational discourse? Specifically, how are religious belief and practice part of efforts to pursue a more “just and equitable agreement” on climate change in Latin America?

It is apparent that religious organizations in Latin America sometimes link environmental stewardship to concerns for equity by using the language of human rights. Such interventions by religious groups, aligned with popular struggle in efforts to combat social, political, and economic injustices associated with poverty and marginalization, draw upon an established history of pastoral agency in Latin America, which date at least from the authoritarian era of the 1960s and 1970s and inspired by Liberation Theology. But much less understood are the ways that contemporary Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelical actors are engaging with new kinds of rights-based concerns for social justice in the region, as represented by conflicts over environmental rights. This initiative focuses on identifying the distinctive contributions of religious advocacy to current efforts to promote a more equitably sustainable future in Latin America, and evaluates the extent to which such efforts represent a continuation of, or break from, an earlier generation of pastoral work on behalf of justice in the region.

At present transnational religious groups oversee tremendous monetary flows, while functioning as important conduits to advance conceptions of rights and justice locally. Religious groups are key actors in such areas as conflict resolution, human rights, and sustainable economic development. But there exists little understanding of how conflicts around the environment in Latin America are articulated by local, national and transnational religious actors. This project, therefore, focuses upon religious contributions to transnational civil advocacy dedicated to the pursuit of justice around the environment and climate change in the region, which up to now has remained largely unmapped.

Gender and Sexuality

If Latin American countries are now governed by democratic regimes, albeit often imperfect ones, the region continues to be amongst the most violent in the world. One prominent feature of this landscape is pervasive discrimination and violence based upon gender and sexual orientation. Despite democratization, all too often violence against women or lesbians, gays, bi- and transexuals (hereafter, LGBT groups) has received inadequate public attention in Latin America, is informally tolerated, and omitted from studies of violence and from policy initiatives designed to reduce societal violence in the region. Historically, legal concepts of violence have yet to come sufficiently to terms with gender-specific forms of violence. Instead, public victim-blaming among politicians and journalists, insufficient police, judicial and governmental response, and a legal culture that continues to view violence against women as domestic, and so “private,” combine to continue to keep gender violence on the margin of public debate.
At the same time, the last twenty years have seen an increasing number of movements in Latin America advocating for greater equality for women and LGBT groups, along with often pioneering municipal and national anti-discrimination laws in such areas as employment, housing, and family law. The Catholic Church historically has opposed broad rights-based protections that pertain to sexuality. And in several Latin American countries we are witnessing a notable backlash against women’s rights, characterized in particular by systematic legal and constitutional efforts to limit or to eliminate women’s reproductive rights and to roll back the rights of LGBT groups.

This opposition, however, has not been uniform across all religious denominations, for reasons that are not altogether self-evident and strikingly under-researched. In all Latin American countries religious hierarchies have maintained often categorical stances against abortion, including when the life of the mother is in danger. Yet, other religious voices have sought to support women’s rights in ways theologically inspired by Christianity, and activists who protest violence against women often utilize religious language and icons. In addition, the Argentine-born Pope Francis’s recent public criticism of the Church’s prioritization of dogma and moral doctrines at the expense of a stance of inclusiveness and service is an abrupt and remarkable turnabout, reminding us that religious attitudes and actions around controversial topics like sexuality are often more dynamic than we tend to assume. The Pope’s comments may signal a long awaited acknowledgment of changing societal norms in Latin America, where public positions around gender and sexuality become more plural than previously.

If these developments have yet to lead to notable changes in the formal positions of churches around sexuality, informally and strategically they have affected how some religious actors approach such questions. In Mexico and in Argentina, for example, groups of Catholic clergy, influenced by liberation theology and in dialogue with feminist and queer positions, now voice support for same-sex marriage and endorse women’s rights, though not reproductive rights. Even when actively resisting such developments, religious actors have begun to advance their arguments in more secular and legal terms, in recognition of the secular democratic state and successes of feminism. It is not clear to what extent these developments are precursors of more radical changes in church positions on gender and sexuality. But this project attends in particular to religiously-inspired advocacy focused on women and LGBT groups, giving attention to both the sources for, and changes in, pastoral attitudes and advocacy strategies, as these sometimes unexpectedly transcend familiar religious/secular and progressive/conservative divides.

If churches are important moral, political, social and legal actors in contestation around the rights of women and LGBT groups in Latin America, our understanding of the range of variation of the participation of religious actors in such circumstances is underdeveloped. This project gives attention to the complex articulations among religion, politics and popular mobilizations in the region around the status of women and LGBT people. Law has become the terrain on which these battles are most frequently fought. If highly visible social movements now demand attention to gender discrimination, comparatively little research has been carried out to determine how religious institutions and actors have sought to engage with the rights of women and of sexual minorities through legal frameworks, on all sides of these struggles. This is a gap that the present project aims to fill.

Of particular interest are religious uses and reconceptualizations of traditional religious values, such as the protection of the patriarchal family and the celebration of motherhood, as dimensions of their engagement with questions of gender and sexuality. Also of interest are religious strategies separating reproduction from sexuality, utilizing the concept of dignity, increasing appeals to natural law, and other religious influences in the construction of law, including the influence of transnational religious groups in shaping agendas around gender and sexuality in Latin America. In addition, more thorough research is needed to specify comparatively observable differences in the religious response to women’s reproductive rights as well as LGBT rights between countries where the Catholic Church is still predominant and where Evangelical groups have taken the lead.
Religious groups have been, and continue to be, active participants in contestation around gender-based rights across Latin America. This project seeks to identify key sources for attitudes and actions regarding women and sexual identity in Latin America in religious concepts and doctrine, and the ways such concepts are combined in arguments about these categories of person as rights-bearing subjects, in the course of religious, secular and legal advocacy. This project also examines the relationship-building and lobbying strategies of church groups with other social actors, with governments, and when seeking to influence the legislative process, and so, the rule of law. Finally, and most broadly, this project considers the diversity of responses to women’s and LGBT rights among different religious groups and in different national contexts across Latin America.