

## Political Bargaining, Religious Economy, and Constitutional Policy Outcomes: The Case of Santiago del Estero, Argentina (1939)

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**Abstract:** This study examines the dynamics of political bargaining and the application of religious economy logic in shaping constitutional policy outcomes in Santiago del Estero, Argentina, during the 1939 Constituent Convention. The research aims to understand how local political configurations enabled the maintenance of secular education in the provincial constitution despite strong institutional support for religious education from the Catholic Church, which was backed by ecclesiastical networks, Catholic media, and executive political maneuvers. Using a qualitative historical approach, the study analyzes archival sources, including official session minutes, debate transcripts, and attendance records of convention members. The findings reveal that the Catholic Church engaged in strategic *issue trading*—exchanging concessions on moral policies such as education for gains on other agendas like gambling prohibition—while local secular coalitions of teachers, intellectuals, cross-party politicians, and segments of the Catholic elite successfully defended the principle of educational neutrality. These results contribute to the literature on religion and politics in Latin America by highlighting how provincial-level dynamics can diverge from national trends when supported by effective coalition-building, public mobilization, and pragmatic negotiation strategies. The study's implications suggest that while such bargaining can produce balanced policy outcomes, it also risks fostering moral relativism and eroding institutional credibility when values are subordinated to short-term political gains. The originality of this research lies in its focus on a subnational case that challenges the predominant national pattern in Argentina's religious-political relations, offering a nuanced analytical framework for understanding adaptive and pragmatic interactions between religion and politics in localized contexts.

**Keywords:** Argentina; Catholic Church; constitutional politics; political bargaining; religious economy.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika tawar-menawar politik dan penerapan logika ekonomi agama dalam membentuk hasil kebijakan konstitusional di Santiago del Estero, Argentina, selama Konvensi Konstituante 1939. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami bagaimana konfigurasi politik lokal memungkinkan dipertahankannya pendidikan sekuler dalam konstitusi provinsi meskipun ada dukungan institusional kuat untuk pendidikan agama dari Gereja Katolik, yang didukung oleh jaringan gerejawi, media Katolik, dan manuver politik eksekutif. Menggunakan pendekatan sejarah kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis sumber-sumber arsip, termasuk notulen sesi resmi, transkrip debat, dan catatan kehadiran anggota konvensi. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa Gereja Katolik terlibat dalam tawar-menawar isu strategis—menukar konsesi terkait kebijakan moral seperti pendidikan untuk keuntungan pada agenda lain seperti pelarangan perjudian—sementara koalisi sekuler lokal yang terdiri dari guru, intelektual, politisi lintas partai, dan segmen-segmen elit Katolik berhasil mempertahankan prinsip netralitas pendidikan. Hasil penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi pada literatur mengenai agama dan politik di Amerika Latin dengan menyoroti bagaimana dinamika tingkat provinsi dapat berbeda dari tren nasional ketika didukung oleh pembangunan koalisi yang efektif, mobilisasi publik, dan strategi negosiasi pragmatis. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun tawar-menawar semacam ini dapat menghasilkan hasil kebijakan yang seimbang, hal ini juga berisiko menumbuhkan relativisme moral dan merusak kredibilitas institusional ketika

nilai-nilai dikalahkan oleh keuntungan politik jangka pendek. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada fokusnya pada kasus subnasional yang menantang pola nasional yang dominan dalam hubungan agama-politik di Argentina, menawarkan kerangka analisis yang lebih mendalam untuk memahami interaksi yang adaptif dan pragmatis antara agama dan politik dalam konteks lokal.

**Kata Kunci:** Argentina; Gereja Katolik; politik konstitusional; tawar-menawar politik; ekonomi agama.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between religion and the state is a complex phenomenon that varies significantly across time and space, shaped by history, political culture, and global dynamics. In some countries, religion serves as a source of political legitimacy and national identity—as in theocratic models or states with an official religion—while in others, strict secularism, such as the French *laïcité*, enforces a clear separation between the public sphere and religious institutions (Foret & Riva, 2010). These models are not solely formed by internal factors but are also influenced by interactions with the global system, colonial legacies, and nationalism, in which religious language and symbols often function as political instruments (Hammond & Machacek, 2009; Turner, 2006). The diversity of models is evident in Europe, which ranges from worldview pluralism in Belgium to public neutrality in France, while in the United States, the state acts as a neutral mediator among religious communities (D’Amato, 2015). In other regions, religion–state relations have undergone dynamic changes—for instance, Russia’s shift from forced secularization to mutual support with the Orthodox Church (Krindatch, 2006), or Indonesia’s adoption of a symbiotic model balancing religious diversity with national development (Safa’at, 2022). Such relationships also shape public policy issues, including education, family law, and civil rights, and influence public perceptions of minority religious groups, such as attitudes toward Islam in secular European states (Kaya, 2019). Therefore, understanding religion–state relations requires a multidimensional approach that simultaneously considers historical, political, legal, and cultural dimensions (Nieuwenhuis, 2012).

In Argentina, religion–state relations are shaped by a historical legacy that has positioned the Catholic Church as a central actor in public life since the colonial era, institutionalized through the 1853 Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion while mandating state support for the Roman Catholic Church (Padilla, 2013; Vives, 2018). The prevailing model, known as *laicismo subsidiario*, reflects a form of secularism characterized by formal separation but significant church influence in public policy, particularly in education, family law, and social morality (Esquivel, 2016). Historically, the Church has played a prominent role in the national education system (Prieto, 2014), including advocating for religious instruction in public schools—often sparking legal disputes up to the Supreme Court (Gabriel Carranza, 2018). In contemporary politics, the Catholic hierarchy remains a powerful force, influencing legislation on sensitive issues such as same-sex marriage and sexual education (Bonnin, 2013; Esquivel, 2017). Although secularization and religious pluralization have advanced (Mallimaci & Esquivel, 2015), the Church maintains its privileged position through religious regulations and governance at both the national and provincial levels, including in Buenos Aires, where religious actors are integrated into public policy processes (Mosqueira & Carbonelli, 2025). The tension between secular policy frameworks and ecclesiastical influence is a defining feature of modern Argentine politics, in which the Church often acts as a key arbiter in public debates and legislative outcomes, especially when moral issues and national identity are at stake.

Scholarship on religion–state relations in Argentina has highlighted historical, legal, public policy, and socio-religious transformation dimensions. Early studies focus primarily on constitutional frameworks and the historical involvement of the Catholic Church in state affairs. Vives (Vives, 2018) and Padilla (Padilla, 2013) demonstrate that since the 1853 Constitution, Argentina has maintained a unique model that guarantees religious freedom while sustaining state support for the Catholic Church, thereby establishing a regulatory system that distinguishes Catholicism from other religions. Prieto

(Prieto, 2014) traces how this relationship has shaped the national education system, while Esquivel (2009) links the secularization of the state to intersections between political culture and ecclesiastical power. While these historical accounts offer comprehensive macro-level insights, they tend to overlook variations in religion–state dynamics at the provincial level.

Other strands of research focus on the Catholic Church’s influence on public policy, particularly in relation to controversial issues such as reproductive rights and religious education. Esquivel (Esquivel, 2016) outlines the Church’s strategies for shaping legislation on sexual and reproductive rights, while Carranza (Gabriel Carranza, 2018) examines legal disputes over religious instruction in public schools. Esquivel (Esquivel, 2017) and Bonnin (Bonnin, 2013) add a public discourse perspective, showing how Catholic symbols and narratives are deployed to mobilize political support. However, these studies largely center on national-level processes and the role of ecclesiastical elites, leaving the responses of local communities and the balance of power in subnational political arenas underexplored.

Contemporary scholarship has expanded its attention to trends in secularization, pluralism, and religious governance. Mallimaci and Esquivel (Mallimaci & Esquivel, 2015) describe the shift from Catholic dominance toward pluralism and the individualization of religiosity, while Mosqueira and Carbonelli (Mosqueira & Carbonelli, 2025) map religious governance networks in the Province of Buenos Aires. Bossi and García Bossio (2024) highlight the distinctive normative framework of Argentina in comparison to other countries, and Caride (2015) identifies the challenges in implementing secularization policies. Nevertheless, few studies have examined in depth the cases in which secularism has been successfully upheld under strong religious pressure, particularly through political processes at the provincial level.

Accordingly, there remains a notable gap in research that integrates historical, political, and social analysis at the subnational level—especially regarding how political coalitions and civil society actors can defend secular principles in contexts historically and institutionally dominated by the Catholic Church. This study seeks to address this gap through a case study of the 1939 secular education debate in Santiago del Estero, offering a critical perspective on variations in religion–state relations in Argentina beyond the dominant national narrative.

The primary aim of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of the debates within the 1939 Santiago del Estero Constituent Convention concerning two central issues: the repeal of the prohibition on gambling and the proposal to abolish secular education in favor of religious instruction in public schools. The research seeks to identify the arguments and strategies employed by the two main political blocs—the Catholic faction, represented among others by Bishop Audino Rodríguez y Olmos and Orestes Di Lullo, and the socialist/liberal bloc—in advancing their respective positions. Furthermore, this study examines how the interplay between political interests, religious agendas, and the construction of local culture (*santiagueñidad*) shaped the ultimate outcome of the constitutional reform, particularly the decision to preserve secular education. It also uncovers the interconnection between religious and non-religious issues—in this case, gambling—as part of the political bargaining struck between the provincial government and the Catholic hierarchy.

The study argues that the debates in the 1939 Santiago del Estero Constituent Convention did not merely reflect an ideological conflict between religious and secular education, or between the prohibition and legalization of gambling. Rather, they embodied a complex process of power negotiation in which political and religious actors deployed moral issues as instruments to achieve broader strategic objectives. From the perspective of political exchange theory (Pizzorno, 1978), these issues functioned as “political currency” traded in the legislative arena to secure cross-group support. Likewise, religious economy theory (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) helps to explain how the Catholic Church sought to maintain its “market share” of moral influence through advocacy for religious education, while secular groups leveraged the symbolic capital of *santiagueñidad* to consolidate their political legitimacy. Consequently, the 1939 constitutional reform can be understood as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between ideology, practical interests, and cultural identity construction, rather than a purely normative contest over moral values.

## 2. Methods

The unit of analysis in this study is the process of political deliberation within the 1939 Constituent Convention of the Province of Santiago del Estero, focusing on two central issues: (1) the debate over abolishing secular education and replacing it with religious instruction in public schools, and (2) the repeal of the prohibition on gambling. These issues were selected because they represent critical junctures in church–state relations at the provincial level, while also reflecting the interplay of political, moral, and local cultural interests. The unit of analysis encompasses the political and religious actors involved—such as members of the convention, Bishop Audino Rodríguez y Olmos, Orestes Di Lullo, and the socialist/liberal bloc—along with their arguments, strategies, and interactions.

This study adopts a qualitative historical design combined with a *historical discourse analysis* approach. This methodological choice is guided by the research objective of reconstructing the political debate process and analyzing the arguments employed by key actors. The historical perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the social, political, and cultural context of 1939, while discourse analysis facilitates the identification of meaning-making processes, rhetorical strategies, and ideologies embedded in official documents, media coverage, and political interventions. This approach aligns with Pizzorno's (Pizzorno, 1978) conceptualization of collective identity in political exchange, as well as Stark and Bainbridge's (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) framework on ideological competition within the "market for beliefs."

The primary data sources consist of official archival documents from the 1939 Constituent Convention of Santiago del Estero, including session minutes, debate transcripts, and attendance records. Secondary data were drawn from local newspaper coverage in *El Liberal* throughout the convention period, which provides a media perspective on the education and gambling debates. In addition, the study incorporates scholarly literature on church–state relations in Argentina, the history of public education, and provincial political dynamics during the period. These sources are further complemented by prior studies addressing *subsidiary laicism* in Argentina and the role of the Catholic Church in legislative processes.

Data collection was conducted through documentary research, encompassing both printed and digital archival searches. The convention minutes were obtained from provincial repositories and university libraries in Argentina, while *El Liberal* editions were accessed through microfilm collections and digital databases. Document selection was based on temporal relevance (January–December 1939) and thematic focus (religious vs. secular education, prohibition of gambling). All collected materials were organized using a data extraction sheet that recorded the session date, issue discussed, actors involved, excerpted arguments, and page references.

The analysis employed *thematic discourse analysis*. The first stage involved open coding to identify core themes such as "cross-ideological secularism," "religion as national identity," and "political bargaining." The second stage applied axial coding to link these themes with the political strategies and ideological positions of the actors. The final stage, selective coding, entailed developing an integrative analytical narrative that combined historical evidence with the study's theoretical framework. The interpretation of findings was carried out by comparing the argumentation patterns of both blocs, situating them within the power dynamics and cultural context of *santiagueñidad*, and assessing their implications for church–state relations at both the local and national levels.

## 3. Results

### *The "Religious Question" Debate and Santiagueña Identity*

The debate over the *religious question* in the 1939 Constitutional Reform Convention of the Province of Santiago del Estero reflected an ideological tension between pro-religious and pro-secular blocs in shaping the province's political and cultural identity. The central issues triggering the debate were the inclusion of an invocation to God in the constitutional preamble and a clause affirming support for the Catholic Apostolic Roman cult. The divergence of views extended beyond legal and political considerations, touching upon the symbolic dimension of *santiagueñidad*—the collective identity of

Santiago's society, shaped by its colonial history, Catholic traditions, and the currents of modern thought. In this context, primary data drawn from official session transcripts and contemporary media archives serve as critical evidence for understanding how each side constructed arguments and defended their positions within the legislative arena.

The fourth session of the *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of Santiago del Estero in 1939 was held in the provincial capital with the agenda of revising the constitution, including articles related to the *religious question*, such as the insertion of an invocation to God in the preamble and the clause supporting the Catholic Apostolic Roman cult. The historical backdrop was marked by political change following the 1930 military coup that ousted President Hipólito Yrigoyen, opening the political field to new actors such as liberal and socialist intellectual groups, who competed with the traditional elite and increasingly active Catholic circles in public life (Achával, 1993; Alen Lascano, 1992; Melo, 1948). The primary sources for this study include the official transcripts of the 1939 constituent convention, earlier constitutional texts (1857–1924), and contemporary printed media coverage, particularly from *El Liberal*. These sources are especially relevant as they capture, first-hand, the oral arguments, interruptions, and rhetorical strategies employed by both the pro-religious and pro-secular factions. Moreover, they provide historical context explaining how the issue of *santiagueña* identity was framed in the debate. By integrating official documents with media archives, this analysis is able to trace in detail the ideological and cultural dynamics that shaped the final outcome of the constitutional reform.

The pro-religious bloc in the fourth session of the *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* in 1939 was dominated by figures from the political majority and the Catholic Church. Its central leaders were Monsignor Audino Rodríguez y Olmos, Bishop of the Diocese of Santiago del Estero, and Dr. Orestes Di Lullo, a physician, historian, and member of the *Partido Reformista Provincial*. They were supported by several majority delegates who regarded the inclusion of an invocation to God in the constitutional preamble as an irreplaceable historical legacy and moral symbol.

Rodríguez y Olmos responded to objections by asserting that the idea of God unites rather than divides humanity: "...if there is any idea in which all humanity converges, it is precisely this one..." He rejected the claim that invoking God was an abstract notion, countering that concepts such as humanity, justice, and mathematical theorems were likewise abstract. In his view, the idea of God was not merely an ideal form but part of reality itself. Thus, it was not an abstract idea but the concrete reality of the Supreme Being. In contrast, he argued, atheism was not a doctrine but a negation: "It is not a rational idea, it is not a human idea (...) it is an evil, it is a vice that can be cured..." (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939, p. 116). The discussion proceeded along these lines, debating whether the invocation of God should be considered an abstract, mystical, or concrete idea, without altering the positions of those aligned on either side.

Di Lullo, however, mounted the most vigorous defense of the pro-religious position, dismissing the socialist delegate's speech as "cheap history." He asserted that Santiago del Estero bore the "sign of the cross," evident in its popular culture. To substantiate this claim, he invoked the province's myths, which, in his view, evoked Christian virtues, as well as its popular songbook (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939), which made transparent -both religious and pagan- those virtues, in a sort of religious syncretism. His intervention gave rise to multiple interruptions on the part of Barraza, who pointed out the customs of Santiago as typical of a people tied to superstitions and ignorance, opposing the idea of considering humility as a virtue, but rather as a sign of humiliation.

In the deliberations on Article 8 concerning support for the *culto católico apostólico romano*, both figures expanded their arguments by emphasizing the Church's historical contributions. Rodríguez y Olmos praised the "heroic missionaries" who had founded cities in the Americas and integrated Indigenous populations into colonial social life. In his view, such contributions set the Catholic Church apart from other religions, which he described as "debtors to the generosity of the country" for enjoying equal religious freedom without having made comparable historical contributions (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939).

In his intervention, Di Lullo encapsulated this position with the slogan *Dios, Patria y Hogar* (God, Homeland, and Home), underscoring that Catholicism was not merely a religious institution but also

a moral foundation and a pillar of the province's identity. His speech was delivered amid frequent interruptions from opponents, particularly Barraza of the socialist bloc, who rejected the association of humility with virtue, instead framing it as a sign of regression. For the pro-religious camp, however, the Church's role as a moral guide, cultural shaper, and social adhesive constituted a legitimate reason to preserve religious symbols within the constitutional text.

Overall, the pro-religious bloc framed the *religious question* not merely as a legal matter but as an effort to safeguard the historical heritage and cultural identity of Santiago del Estero, which they regarded as inseparably bound to the Catholic faith. Theological arguments—such as the assertion that God is a “concrete reality” and the source of universal morality—were reinforced by historical narratives and local cultural symbols deemed consistent with Church teachings. This position cast religion as both the ethical foundation of the state and the social glue of the community. Yet, this worldview soon confronted counterarguments from the pro-secular bloc, which regarded the dominance of Catholic symbols and privileges as incompatible with the principles of state neutrality and religious freedom.

The pro-secular bloc in the Fourth *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of 1939 was led by prominent figures from the Socialist Party, including Dr. Humberto Barraza (President of the minority bloc), Ramón Soria (a socialist leader and convention member), Horacio Rava (an attorney), and delegates such as Córdoba. They opposed the inclusion of the invocation to God in the preamble on the grounds that state affairs should be based on public needs rather than individual beliefs. Soria, for instance, asserted: “...no queremos que se invoque a Dios porque queremos unir a todos los hombres bajo la protección de la misma justicia...” (“...we do not want God to be invoked because we wish to unite all people under the protection of the same justice...”) (IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939). He argued that, in the twentieth century, with the advancements of science and technology, the tradition of religious invocation had lost its relevance as a basis for supporting any particular doctrine or creed. This statement was delivered during the early debates on the preamble, when the minority bloc proposed an alternative formulation that referenced only the representatives of the people as the source of the constitution, without mentioning God (IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939).

Barraza highlighted what he considered a logical contradiction in Article 8, which simultaneously recognized freedom of religion and granted official support to the *culto católico apostólico romano*. In his lengthy address, he traced the history of secularization in Argentina from the May Revolution of 1810, through the *Asamblea del Año XIII*, to the secular debates of the 1880s. He cited Catholic figures who, in the past, had supported secular laws in the interest of national progress: “...sinceros hombres, verdaderos patriotas, que supieron dejar de lado sus propias creencias...” (“...sincere men, true patriots, who knew how to set aside their own beliefs...”) (IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939). Barraza positioned himself as an heir to this tradition, emphasizing the total separation of church and state as an essential condition for ensuring the equality of all citizens before the law.

Delegate Córdoba added a socio-cultural dimension to the secular critique by linking the invocation to God in the preamble to what he perceived as the passive disposition of the local population. He described the *santiagueños* as “*apáticos, indolentes, siempre esperando que Dios resuelva sus problemas*” (“apathetic, indolent, always waiting for God to solve their problems”) (IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939). In his view, including such an invocation would only reinforce dependence and complacency, as people would continue to await divine assistance rather than striving for progress through hard work. This statement sparked heated debate, as it was perceived as an attack on the region's cultural character; however, for the pro-secular bloc, such criticism was necessary to underscore the urgency of secular education and a rational work ethic.

Horacio Rava, while adopting a more moderate tone, maintained a secularist line of reasoning. He acknowledged Di Lullo's contributions in documenting local culture but criticized the conflation of Christian rituals with popular festivities, which he argued lacked any genuine religious value: “...donde la gente bebía hasta emborracharse y bailaba hasta el amanecer, lo cual nada tiene de religioso...” (“...where people drank until they became drunk and danced until dawn, which has nothing religious about it...”)

(IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939). Rava used the example of the *baile de las almas* ("dance of the souls") to demonstrate that many traditions regarded as religious were, in fact, products of syncretism and public entertainment.

Through these historical, sociological, and ethnographic arguments, the pro-secular bloc consistently advocated for state neutrality, the institutional separation of church and government, and a public education system entirely free from religious dogma. Their position was grounded in the conviction that justice and social progress could only be achieved if laws and policies were based on rational and universal principles rather than on particular religious privileges.

The confrontation between the pro-religious and pro-secular blocs reached its peak when Dr. Orestes Di Lullo asserted that humility and meekness were Christian virtues deeply rooted in the traditions of Santiago's society. This statement immediately provoked interruptions from Dr. Humberto Barraza, the leader of the socialist minority bloc, who regarded the *santiagueño* character not as a reflection of virtue but as a symptom of social backwardness. Barraza refused to idealize humility, describing it instead as a sign of "*humillación*" ("humiliation") that should be eradicated from the public mindset. These interruptions were recorded in the transcripts with repeated notes of "[*interrupciones*]," underscoring the significant verbal tension on the convention floor (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939).

The debate further intensified over the inclusion of the invocation to God in the preamble. When Rodríguez y Olmos declared that the idea of God constituted "*la misma realidad del Ser Supremo, una idea perfectamente concreta*" ("the very reality of the Supreme Being, a perfectly concrete idea") (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939), Ramón Soria of the socialist bloc promptly countered by arguing that in the twentieth century, with the advances of science and technology, "*no es posible continuar con la tradición de invocar a Dios para sostener una doctrina*" ("it is no longer possible to uphold the tradition of invoking God to sustain a doctrine") (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939). Soria contended that such invocations merely reinforced societal dependence on divine intervention rather than encouraging human initiative. His remarks elicited spontaneous reactions from several members of the majority, accompanied by *murmillos* (murmurs) and *gestos de desaprobación* (gestures of disapproval), as noted in the official session records.

Tensions reached their highest point when Barraza accused the pro-religious bloc of employing "*historia barata*" ("cheap history") to justify state support for the *culto católico apostólico romano*. This accusation was directed squarely at Di Lullo, who responded by defending the integrity of his argument, asserting that the history of Santiago was living proof of the organic relationship between the Church and the formation of the *Patria* (homeland). The exchange unfolded in a heated atmosphere, marked by notes of "[*aplausos en la bancada mayoritaria*]" ("applause from the majority benches") when Di Lullo concluded his speech, and "[*protestas en la minoría*]" ("protests from the minority") from the socialist side—signs of the deep polarization among the delegates (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939).

After a series of protracted debates involving interruptions, rebuttals, and formal speeches from both blocs, Convention President Arnedo ultimately decided to submit the issue of including the invocation to God in the preamble to a vote. According to the official minutes, the majority of delegates supported retaining the traditional formula, which had been in place since the first national constitution of 1853. The official record states: "*Aprobada por mayoría la inclusión de la invocación a Dios en el preámbulo*" (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939).

In the deliberations on Article 8—concerning state support for the *culto católico apostólico romano* alongside the guarantee of religious freedom—the majority once again prevailed. Although the socialist bloc lodged a formal protest (*protesta*), the final outcome confirmed the adoption of the article without substantive changes to the clause affirming state support for Catholicism. The session minutes record: "*Artículo 8: aprobado en la forma propuesta por la mayoría*" (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939).

Regarding the gubernatorial oath of office, the convention resolved to retain the wording established in the 1924 Constitution, namely the oath "*por Dios y la Patria*" ("by God and the

Homeland”) or, alternatively, “*por la Patria y el honor*” (“by the Homeland and Honor”). This decision was adopted without objection from either the majority or minority during the relevant article’s discussion: “*Artículo 61: aprobado según la fórmula de 1924*” (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939).

As a preliminary synthesis of the primary data presented above, the overall dynamics of the debates between the pro-religious and pro-secular blocs in the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of 1939 can be systematically organized through a visual presentation. The following table summarizes the principal actors, their political or ideological affiliations, their positions, and the key arguments they advanced – whether related to the invocation to God in the preamble, state support for the *culto católico apostólico romano*, or the gubernatorial oath formula. Table 1 and table 2 is intended to enable readers to discern patterns, contrasts, and the intensity of the debates more concisely before moving on to the analytical discussion in the subsequent section.

Table 1 Summary of Positions, Arguments, and Key Quotations in the Debate on the “Religious Question”

No.	Figure & Position	Affiliation / Stance	Main Issue	Key Quotation (original Spanish)
1	Audino Rodríguez y Olmos (Bishop)	Pro-Religious Bloc	Invocation to God	“...no es una idea abstracta, sino la misma realidad del Ser Supremo, una idea perfectamente concreta”
2	Orestes Di Lullo (Physician, Historian, Provincial Reformist Party)	Pro-Religious Bloc	Santiagoña identity, role of the Church	“Dios, Patria y Hogar” and identity “marcada con la cruz”
3	Humberto Barraza (President of the Socialist Minority Bloc)	Pro-Secular Bloc	Article 8 – State neutrality	“...sinceros hombres, verdaderos patriotas, que supieron dejar de lado sus propias creencias...”
4	Ramón Soria (Socialist Leader)	Pro-Secular Bloc	Invocation to God	“...no queremos que se invoque a Dios porque queremos unir a todos los hombres bajo la protección de la misma justicia...”
5	Córdoba (Delegate)	Pro-Secular Bloc	Local social character	“...apáticos, indolentes, siempre esperando que Dios resuelva sus problemas”
6	Horacio Rava (Lawyer)	Pro-Secular Bloc	Syncretic traditions	“...lo cual nada tiene de religioso...” (on baile de las almas)

Table 2 Final Decisions of the Convention

Contested Issue	Majority Decision	Official Quotation
Invocation to God in the preamble	Approved	“Aprobada por mayoría la inclusión de la invocación a Dios en el preámbulo”
Article 8 – Support for the <i>culto católico apostólico romano</i>	Approved without amendments	“Artículo 8: aprobado en la forma propuesta por la mayoría”
Gubernatorial oath formula	Retained 1924 formula	“Artículo 61: aprobado según la fórmula de 1924”



In essence, the debates within the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of 1939 revealed two sharply opposing camps. The pro-religious bloc argued that the inclusion of religious symbols and formulations in the constitution—such as the *invocation to God* and support for the *culto católico apostólico romano*—was essential to safeguarding public morality, preserving historical heritage, and maintaining the cultural identity of *santiagueñidad*. In contrast, the pro-secular bloc insisted that the state must strictly separate the spheres of religion and politics, reject the granting of privileges to any particular faith, and uphold the principle of state neutrality as a prerequisite for both civic equality and social progress grounded in rationality and universal law.

From the data presented, at least four key patterns emerge in the debate over the “religious question.” First, values associated with *santiagueñidad* were invoked by the pro-religious bloc as a legitimizing argument linking regional identity to Catholic faith, whereas the pro-secular bloc challenged this construction of identity as an obstacle to progress. Second, morality served as a shared conceptual reference point, yet with divergent definitions: for the pro-religious camp, morality was rooted in Church teachings and Christian tradition; for the pro-secular camp, morality had to be universal, rational, and free from the dominance of dogma. Third, mass media outlets such as *El Liberal* and *El Momento* functioned as instruments for framing public opinion, either reinforcing support for religious symbols or critiquing Catholic privilege within the constitution. Fourth, despite its outward cohesion, the Catholic camp itself experienced internal fragmentation, with some Catholic figures—including intellectuals and politicians—openly supporting the principle of secularism as a means of preserving state neutrality.

The debates between the pro-religious and pro-secular camps in the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of 1939 demonstrate that the issue of religion versus secularism in Santiago del Estero was not solely rooted in divergent political ideologies or religious beliefs. Rather, it reflected a struggle over the right to define regional identity and moral legitimacy within the province’s political arena. For the pro-religious bloc, preserving religious symbols and formulas was tantamount to safeguarding historical continuity, affirming the Church’s role as a cultural architect, and securing the moral authority deemed essential for maintaining social harmony. This perspective aligned with the historical Church-State relationship in Argentina, where, since the 1853 Constitution, the Catholic Church has received financial support and privileged legal status while freedom of religion was formally guaranteed. The Church’s involvement in politics and public education—historically giving rise to a model of *subsidiary laicism*—further reinforced its legitimacy in influencing policy (Esquivel, 2016; Prieto, 2014).

Conversely, the pro-secular bloc regarded state neutrality as a prerequisite for political modernization and civic equality, rejecting the exclusive claim that public morality could only originate from a specific religion. This position reflected the broader trend of secularization gaining momentum in Argentina, marked by increasing recognition of human rights, challenges to the Church’s privileges, and the growing participation of non-Catholic communities—such as Protestants and Evangelicals—in public policy debates (Esquivel, 2009; Jones, Carbonelli, & Cunial, 2017). At the same time, nationalist, Hispanic, and Catholic ideas, encapsulated in the slogan “*Dios, Patria y Hogar* [God, Homeland, and Family],” had been gaining traction among the military, particularly among Catholics from the ACA ranks, as well as intellectuals. These ideas were further strengthened after the 1943 coup and with the rise of Peronism to power. Thus, the debates in Santiago del Estero revealed that constitutional symbols were far from mere legal ornamentation; they constituted a contested arena imbued with cultural and strategic meaning, where each camp sought to monopolize the narrative of who and what truly represented *santiagueñidad*, while simultaneously reflecting the historically complex and contested dynamics of Church-State relations in Argentina.

Within the framework of Murray Edelman’s (1964) theory of political symbols, the debate over invoking God in the preamble and granting official support to the *culto católico apostólico romano* can be interpreted as a struggle to control symbols that generate perceptions of legitimacy and social cohesion. For the pro-religious bloc, these symbols functioned as *condensation symbols*—distilling historical, cultural, and religious values into legal formulas that were simple in form yet rich in meaning. This

perspective converges with Robert Bellah's (1967), concept of civil religion, wherein certain religious elements are integrated into state symbolism to construct collective identity and moral legitimacy, without explicitly adopting a particular religious doctrine as state law. In contrast, the pro-secular bloc viewed the maintenance of the state's symbolic neutrality as an effort to disentangle religion from formal political legitimacy, while asserting that citizenship identity should not be monopolized by a single religious tradition. In the Argentine context, this position challenged the historical configuration of *subsidiary laicism*, which has long accommodated the Catholic Church's dominant presence in the public sphere, and instead opened space for more pluralistic and inclusive interpretations of political identity.

### *The Gambling Issue as a "Political Trade-Off"*

The debate over gambling in the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of 1939 not only reflected divergent moral and legal perspectives but also revealed a more complex political dynamic involving strategic agreements between the majority bloc and the Church. The provincial government's proposal to repeal Article 35 of the 1924 Constitution—which explicitly prohibited all forms of games of chance—and replace it with a regulatory framework sparked lengthy debates on the convention floor. In practice, this issue became part of a political "trade-off," whereby the Church's support for lifting the gambling ban was reciprocated with the government's commitment to maintain religious education within the public school system. Primary source data preserved in the official transcripts show the involvement of key figures, both from the pro-gambling camp—who emphasized arguments related to social utility and anthropological realities—and from the anti-gambling camp, who stressed the detrimental moral, social, and economic consequences for society.

The *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, held in Santiago del Estero in 1939, devoted specific attention to Article 35 of the 1924 Constitution, which prohibited all forms of games of chance, including provincial and out-of-province lotteries. This agenda became particularly significant when the provincial government, through a draft submitted by the official commission, proposed repealing the article and replacing it with a new regulatory framework. The debate is meticulously documented in the official transcripts (*IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939), which record speeches, interruptions, and voting outcomes. These primary sources are essential for understanding the dynamics of the political "trade-off" between the government and the Church, in which the Church's support for abolishing the gambling prohibition was exchanged for the government's pledge to uphold religious education in public schools. In addition to the transcripts, local press archives such as *El Liberal* and *El Momento* serve as valuable references for examining how the issue was framed in the public sphere, reinforcing the view that the gambling debate extended beyond moral considerations to become an arena for bargaining over political and institutional interests.

The pro-gambling camp in the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* of 1939 was primarily composed of members of the majority faction closely aligned with the provincial government. One of its most prominent figures was Bernardo Canal Feijóo, a distinguished intellectual and delegate from the ruling party. In his view, gambling should not be abolished outright but rather regulated so as to yield indirect social benefits for the community. He asserted that "*lo más que se puede pretender es regular el juego y convertirlo en un beneficio social indirecto*" (*IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939). According to Canal Feijóo, games of chance were already embedded in social reality, making it more pragmatic to channel a portion of their profits into funding public programs rather than prohibiting them entirely. This argument aligned with the government's logic, which linked gambling revenues to the financing of social and educational projects.

Significant support for repealing the gambling ban also came from Dr. Orestes Di Lullo—a physician, historian, and politician previously known for his pro-religion stance in the *religious question* debate. In the deliberations on Article 35, Di Lullo argued before the delegates that gambling was a natural human phenomenon: "*El juego existe desde la creación del mundo. El juego es inherente a la persona; por lo tanto, para destruir el juego es necesario destruir al hombre, formarlo de nuevo e inculcarle el sentido de la moral que hoy no tiene, lo que no se consigue con una cláusula constitucional*" (*IV Convención Reformadora*

de la Constitución, 1939). Translated: “Games have existed since the creation of the world. Gambling is inherent to the human being; therefore, to eradicate gambling, one would have to destroy humanity, remake it, and instill in it a moral sense it currently lacks—something that cannot be achieved through a constitutional clause.” He emphasized that, although he personally disapproved of gambling, as “a man of science” he believed the issue could not be resolved merely through legal prohibition.

The political context underlying Di Lullo’s support became clearer when he referred to an unwritten agreement between the Church and the provincial government. According to his account, there was a mutual understanding with Governor Montenegro that the Church would not obstruct the repeal of Article 35, provided that the government retained the clause on religious education in public schools. This arrangement illustrates how the gambling issue was positioned as part of a broader “political trade-off,” in which the Church’s moral legitimacy was leveraged to secure majority support for the government’s agenda.

Shifting from the pro-gambling camp, which emphasized economic pragmatism and regulation as a viable solution, the debates of the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* in 1939 were also marked by the forceful voices of the opposition. This group—comprising mainly members of the Socialist faction and several independents—firmly rejected the repeal of Article 35 on moral, social, and public policy grounds. For them, gambling was not merely a technical matter that could be managed for state revenue; it was a corrosive practice that undermined public ethics, diverted government attention from meeting citizens’ basic needs, and exacerbated social inequality. Their arguments frequently clashed head-on with those of the pro-gambling side, producing sharp exchanges and frequent interruptions on the convention floor.

The anti-gambling bloc in the *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* was spearheaded by figures such as Sr. Ramón Soria (leader of the Socialist faction), Lázaro Criado (Socialist delegate), and José F. L. Castiglione (officialist). They consistently opposed repealing Article 35 of the 1924 Constitution, which prohibited gambling, grounding their objections in moral considerations, social concerns, and developmental priorities. In his intervention, Ramón Soria asserted that gambling was not a legitimate source of state revenue but rather “*un vicio que desvía al pueblo de su propio progreso*” (*IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939). “a vice that diverts the people from their own progress.” He made this statement in direct response to pro-gambling claims that legalization and regulation could channel profits into financing social projects, insisting that such reasoning merely cloaked a morally harmful practice in the rhetoric of pseudo-benefit.

Lázaro Criado reinforced this critique by highlighting the authorities’ inability to enforce the law even under the existing prohibition. He remarked that “*los lugares de juego son conocidos y concurridos por muchas personas, incluso políticos y funcionarios, y sin embargo la policía no interviene*” (*IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939) —“gambling establishments are well-known and frequented by many people, including politicians and officials, yet the police do not intervene.” His statement underscored what he saw as systematic toleration of gambling practices, which he argued would only become more widespread if legalized. Criado framed the issue as evidence of weak governmental and law enforcement integrity, warning that a regulatory approach would merely legitimize such institutional shortcomings.

Castiglione, who proposed an alternative bill to maintain the provincial ban on gambling, linked the issue directly to the state’s moral responsibility. In his proposal, he argued that the prohibition should remain in force “*mientras la Nación elimine el juego oficial de lotería*” (*IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939) —“as long as the Nation maintains the official lottery.” He stressed that the national government must serve as a moral exemplar before imposing regulations on the provinces. Castiglione described how provincial residents continued to participate in the national lottery, playing horse races in Buenos Aires and placing legal bets at the Termas de Río Hondo casino. In his view, loosening provincial laws would only expand such harm. For him, sound policy should aim to eliminate the sources of moral decline, rather than merely regulate them for fiscal gain.

Dr. Rava, although less focused than Castiglione on the legal aspects, offered a sharp critique of the government’s political priorities. Responding to the argument that gambling regulation could serve

as a source of state revenue, he stated, “...no se han preocupado por el pan, sino por el circo. Demos diversiones al pueblo para que el Estado, después de haber contribuido a empobrecerlo, (...) le dé generosamente la limosna de su ayuda con ello” (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939) — “...they have not concerned themselves with bread, but with circuses. Let us give entertainment to the people so that the State, after having contributed to their impoverishment, (...) may generously offer them the alms of its assistance through it.” This critique underscored his view that the legalization of gambling was merely a populist strategy to divert public attention from structural problems such as stagnation in the agricultural sector, the absence of adequate irrigation policies, and weak support for industry and commerce.

The confrontation between the pro- and anti-gambling camps reached its peak when Dr. Orestes Di Lullo reiterated his position that gambling was “*inherente a la persona*” and could not be eradicated through constitutional provisions, asserting that to eliminate gambling “*es necesario destruir al hombre, formarlo de nuevo y luego inculcarle el sentido de moralidad*” (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939) — “it is necessary to destroy man, remake him, and then instill in him a sense of morality.” This statement prompted *interrupciones* from the Socialist minority benches, who responded with vocal disapproval and visible gestures of dissent. The atmosphere grew increasingly tense when Ramón Soria accused Di Lullo of legitimizing moral wrongdoing for fiscal purposes.

In one heated exchange, Soria cut short Bernardo Canal Feijóo’s remarks promoting gambling regulation as “*un beneficio social indirecto*” (p. 304), emphatically declaring, “*no queremos que se fomente un vicio que desvía al pueblo de su propio progreso*” (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939) — “we do not wish to promote a vice that diverts the people from their own progress.” The official record notes *aplausos en la bancada socialista* [applause from the Socialist benches], followed by protests from the pro-regulation majority. This tension epitomized the fundamental divergence between the pro-gambling camp’s definition of “social benefit” and the anti-gambling faction’s conception of the “public good.”

A sharp exchange also occurred when Lázaro Criado alleged that gambling establishments were publicly known and frequented by politicians without any police intervention. Di Lullo responded in a raised tone, emphasizing that this reality was precisely why regulation was needed, rather than prohibition. The debate was accompanied by *protestas en la minoría* [protests from the minority] and *risas en la mayoría* [laughter from the majority], underscoring a polarization that was not only verbal but also emotional (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939). The transcript records indicate that the issue was not merely a matter of law or morality but also touched upon a strategic “political trade-off,” in which the Church’s support for lifting the gambling ban was exchanged for the government’s commitment to maintaining religious education.

According to the official minutes of the IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* in 1939, after an extended session marked by interruptions, rebuttals, and emotional responses from both camps, the President of the Convention brought the proposal to repeal Article 35 (the gambling ban) to a vote. The result showed that a majority of delegates approved the government’s proposal to remove the article and replace it with the regulatory framework outlined in Article 38 of the new draft. This decision is recorded in the official document: “*Aprobada por mayoría la supresión del artículo 35 y su reemplazo por el artículo 38*” (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939). Although the Socialist bloc and the official delegate who voted independently, José F. L. Castiglione, lodged a formal protest (*protesta formal*), the decision was nonetheless ratified and incorporated into the final text of the provincial constitution. The minutes also note that the new article opened the door for the regulation of gambling at the provincial level through secondary legislation, marking a significant shift from an outright ban to a regulatory approach.

With the completion of the voting process and the formal adoption of the decision, the overall dynamics of the gambling debate can be summarized more systematically. To facilitate readability and traceability of evidence, the primary data presented — ranging from the arguments of the pro- and anti-gambling camps, moments of confrontation, and the final decision — will be presented in a condensed tabular format. This table will help clarify the positions of each figure, the context of their statements, and the ultimate direction of the Convention’s decision.

Table 3 Key Actors, Statements, and Arguments in the 1939 Gambling Debate at the IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución in Santiago del Estero

Camp / Actor	Position / Affiliation	Key Statement (Quote & Translation)	Summary of Argument
<b>Pro-Gambling</b>			
<b>Bernardo Canal Feijóo</b>	Intellectual, delegate of the ruling party	<i>“Lo más que se puede pretender es regular el juego y convertirlo en un beneficio social indirecto”</i> — <i>The most one can aspire to is to regulate gambling and turn it into an indirect social benefit.</i>	Gambling is part of social reality; it is better to regulate it and channel revenues into public programs.
<b>Orestes Di Lullo</b>	Physician, historian, pro-religion politician	<i>“El juego existe desde la creación del mundo... lo que no se consigue con una cláusula constitucional”</i> — <i>Gambling has existed since the creation of the world... it cannot be eradicated by a constitutional clause.</i>	Gambling is inherent to human nature; constitutional prohibition is ineffective. Supported the Church–government agreement to preserve religious education.
<b>Anti-Gambling</b>			
<b>Ramón Soria</b>	Leader of the Socialist bloc	<i>“...no queremos que se fomente un vicio que desvía al pueblo de su propio progreso”</i> — <i>We do not want to promote a vice that diverts the people from their own progress.</i>	Gambling undermines public morality and hinders societal advancement.
<b>Lázaro Criado</b>	Socialist delegate	<i>“Los lugares de juego son conocidos... y sin embargo la policía no interviene”</i> — <i>Gambling venues are well known... yet the police do not intervene.</i>	Law enforcement is weak; legalization would exacerbate neglect and corruption.
<b>José F. L. Castiglione</b>	Officialist who voted independently	<i>“...mientras la Nación elimine el juego oficial de lotería”</i> — <i>The ban should remain in force as long as the Nation maintains the official lottery.</i>	The state must set a moral example; the province should not relax its laws while the central government legalizes gambling.
<b>Dr. Rava</b>	Socialist delegate	<i>“...no se han preocupado por el pan, sino por el circo...”</i> — <i>They have not cared about bread, but about the circus...</i>	The government prioritizes populist entertainment over the people’s basic needs.
<b>Argument Confrontations</b>			
<b>Soria vs. Canal Feijóo</b>	Socialist bloc vs. ruling party	Soria interrupted Feijóo’s remarks, rejecting the notion of gambling as a “social benefit.”	Fundamental disagreement over the definition of “social benefit” versus “public welfare.”

<b>Criado vs. Di Lullo</b>	Socialist bloc vs. pro-religion camp	Criado highlighted law enforcement negligence; Di Lullo argued regulation as the solution.	Clash between moral absolutism and regulatory pragmatism.
<b>Convention Decision</b>	President of the Convention	<i>“Aprobada por mayoría la supresión del artículo 35 y su reemplazo por el artículo 38” — Approved by majority: repeal of Article 35 and its replacement with Article 38.</i>	Total ban replaced with regulation; Socialist bloc and Castiglione filed formal objections.

The overall evidence indicates that the issue of gambling in the 1939 *IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* functioned more as a political commodity than as a matter of substantive morality. Although rhetorically framed within the discourse of public morality, the debate was, in practice, oriented toward serving short-term political strategies—particularly in the context of a “quid pro quo” arrangement between the provincial government and the Church. Moral values, which ought to serve as the foundation of policy, were instead negotiated and subordinated to the imperatives of political alliances, with the repeal of the gambling ban exchanged for the commitment to maintain religious education in public schools.

The data reveal a clear pattern: morality in the gambling debate proved to be flexible when confronted with political interests. For the majority bloc and the Church, moral principles that traditionally opposed gambling could be negotiated if doing so produced strategic benefits, such as ensuring the continuation of religious education in public schools. By contrast, the Socialist faction demonstrated ideological consistency by rejecting all forms of gambling—even when framed in terms of social benefit—labeling it a “scourge of society” that eroded public ethics and hindered societal progress. Meanwhile, the Church did not treat the gambling issue as an ultimate ideological end, but rather as a bargaining instrument, leveraging its support for the repeal of the ban in exchange for guarantees on a broader religious agenda.

This case illustrates that religious politics in Santiago del Estero was not monolithic, but rather permeated by strategic compromises that could override moral consistency when confronted with practical interests. The tactical alliance between the majority bloc and the Church on the gambling issue demonstrates that “Catholic politics” in this region cannot be understood solely as a homogeneous movement grounded in absolute moral principles. Previous studies affirm that religious politics in various contexts is often characterized by negotiation and strategic compromise, wherein religious groups are willing to sacrifice certain moral consistencies to achieve objectives deemed of higher priority (Canetti-Nisim, 2004; Potz, 2019). Within this framework, political compromise serves as an important instrument in democratic governance, yet simultaneously carries the risk of blurring the purity of principles when practical considerations take precedence (Rostbøll, 2017; Willis, Daniels, Disler, Khalil, & Zhou, 2017).

Strategically, the political participation of religious groups often entails a willingness to trade certain moral issues in exchange for legislative influence or to secure the implementation of policies aligned with their long-term agendas (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Hedges, 2019). The level of salience of a religious issue also affects the flexibility of such compromises: when an issue holds high symbolic value, compromise becomes more difficult; however, when an issue carries greater strategic significance, pragmatic considerations can override rigid moral positions (Zellman, Justwan, & Fox, 2024). Thus, the dynamics in Santiago del Estero reflect a pattern identified in numerous previous studies—that religious politics is not a uniform entity grounded solely in absolute moral principles, but rather a complex arena of bargaining in which symbols, policies, and power are exchanged within the framework of strategic negotiation.

*Religious Education vs. Secular Education*

This subsection provides a detailed examination of the debates surrounding the amendment of Article 111 of the 1924 Constitution of Santiago del Estero, which sparked sharp divisions between pro-religious and pro-secular factions. The central issue revolved around a proposal from the Church—backed by Pío Montenegro—to replace the term “*secular*” with “*integral*” or “*libre*” in the public education system, thereby allowing the introduction of religious instruction in state schools. The debate engaged not only political actors and church leaders, but also teachers’ organizations, intellectual associations, the media, and government officials. Set against the backdrop of ideological and social tensions in the late 1930s, the clash of arguments in the formal setting of the constituent convention highlighted the tug-of-war between claims of morality rooted in religion and the principle of state neutrality in education.

The immediate trigger for the controversy over religious versus secular education in Santiago del Estero emerged from political maneuvering in the lead-up to the IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución* in 1939. When elections for members of the provincial constituent assembly were announced, Governor Pío Montenegro—leader of the *Partido Radical Unificado*—took a strategic step by inviting the local Bishop to be included on the official candidate list of his party. This move came with a highly specific political offer: the provincial executive’s support for amending Article 111 of the 1924 Constitution to replace the word “*secular*” (*laico*) with the term “*integral*” or “*free*” (*libre*), thereby creating a legal pathway for the inclusion of religious education in public schools (Tenti, 2004, p. 14).

Support for this agenda quickly crystallized among various Catholic groups, including *Acción Católica Argentina* (ACA) and the *Liga del Magisterio*, a Catholic teachers’ organization that formally proposed the replacement of the term. In early March 1939, the newspaper *El Momento* was launched, functioning explicitly as a pro-religious propaganda outlet until the end of July 1939. This medium not only published moral and philosophical arguments affirming the Church’s position, but also advanced political narratives equating religious education with the defense of Argentina’s national identity—linking secularism to the perceived threat of foreign ideologies such as socialism, communism, Nazism, and fascism (*El Momento*, 1939).

Through a combination of executive political maneuvering, institutional Church support, and media mobilization, the issue of amending Article 111 swiftly became one of the most contentious items on the agenda of the 1939 constituent assembly. It provoked sharp polarization between the pro-religious camp—which regarded secularism as a form of anti-nationalism and opposition to God—and the pro-secular camp, which maintained that public schools should remain neutral spaces, free from religious doctrine, in order to safeguard freedom of religion and equality among citizens.

The pro-religious camp was anchored in a network of Catholic institutions and Catholic teachers’ associations. *Acción Católica Argentina* (ACA) served as the umbrella organization for the movement, while the *Liga del Magisterio* (Catholic Teachers’ League) acted as the technical advocacy arm for amending the wording of Article 111—replacing the term “*secular/laico*” with “*integral*” or “*free/libre*” so as to permit religious education in public schools. From early March to late July 1939, the Catholic newspaper *El Momento* was published regularly as the movement’s campaign organ, framing religious education as a matter of “national defense” and warning against the dangers of secularism (*El Momento*, 1939). Usulan Liga—“mengganti *laico* dengan *integral*”—bahkan memicu respons sinis dari harian The League’s proposal—“replace *laico* with *integral*”—even drew a pointed response from the secular daily *El Liberal*, which argued that what was needed was “not integral education, but human education... so that children may become industrious and honest individuals” (*El Momento*, 1939). Institutionally, ACA consolidated its campaign materials in a pamphlet titled *Luchas por la libertad de enseñanza* (Catholic Action of Santiago del Estero Diocesan Board, 1940).

The central figure of this camp was Bishop Audino Rodríguez y Olmos. In the convention forum, he forcefully rejected the principle of school neutrality, asserting that “*escuela laica*” and “*pedagogía neutral*” were inherently contradictory terms (IV *Convención Reformadora de la Constitución*, 1939). He went further, characterizing secular or agnostic schooling as “*inepta e inhumana*” because it “*atomiza y desorganiza la estructura interior del hombre*”—fragmenting and disorganizing the inner structure of the

human being—and “empties the rational orientation of human life” (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939). Broadly, the bishop argued that every form of education embodies a philosophy of life; thus, “neutrality” was nothing more than an illusion that masked an underlying anti-religious bias.

At the grassroots level, the local Catholic community submitted an official memorandum to the Constitutional Reform Convention explicitly linking faith and nationhood. They described secular education as a contradiction and as “a position against God, conscience, and society,” further declaring that “*El laicismo... es antinacional. Recordemos que el catolicismo es el pensamiento y el corazón de nuestra vida y de nuestra historia nacional.*” A free translation reads: “Secularism is anti-national. Let us remember that Catholicism is the thought and the heart of our life and our national history” (El Momento, 1939). For this camp, the nation and Catholicism were inseparable; consequently, religious education was viewed as a state obligation—failure to provide it under the guise of “neutrality” constituted a moral transgression by the state.

In the public discourse, ACA, the *Liga del Magisterio*, and parish networks used *El Momento* to consolidate and refine their argumentative framework: (i) secularism was equated with relativism and opposition to God; (ii) religious education would strengthen work ethics and social order; and (iii) “neutral” public schools covertly promoted agnosticism. This argumentative package ran in parallel with the interventions of Orestes Di Lullo—a physician and historian who frequently appeared in defense of the Church’s position on education—while linking it to local traditions believed to embody the “moral sustenance of Christianity” (Catholic Action of Santiago del Estero Diocesan Board, 1940).

Internal fragmentation within the pro-religious camp was clearly evident. Several pro-government Catholic politicians—such as Bustos Navarro, Ábalos, and José F. L. Castiglione—openly expressed their support for the maintenance of secular schools, despite acknowledging that the majority of Santiago’s population adhered to Catholicism. These statements, delivered directly on the convention floor as both personal and institutional positions (see the education debate records in the IV CRC), indicate that Catholic identity did not necessarily imply support for amending Article 111. Thus, while the pro-religious bloc appeared cohesive in its institutional orchestration through ACA, the *Liga del Magisterio*, and *El Momento*, the coalition was far from homogeneous. A spectrum of views existed among Catholic politicians, ranging from those who believed the state was obliged to provide religious instruction to those who argued it was sufficient for the state to guarantee freedom of religion while maintaining the neutrality of public schools.

In contrast, the pro-secular camp formed a broad alliance that spanned professions and organizations to defend the principle of neutrality in public education. At the forefront stood the *Federación del Magisterio Santiaguense*, which quickly organized in collaboration with the *Asociación de Intelectuales, Artistas, Periodistas y Escritores* (AIAPE), the *Comité de Maestros por la Defensa de la Escuela Laica*, and the *Comité Popular para la Defensa del Laicismo*. Key figures such as Domingo Maidana, a socialist teacher, led the *Centro para la Defensa de la Democracia*, which became an early driving force in the secularist campaign, while Domingo A. Bravo, a school inspector, and several AIAPE members expanded the movement’s base to include artists, journalists, and academics (Tenti, 2004). Support also came from government officials, including Minister of Finance Dardo Espeche, who formally signed the *Libro de Adhesiones* of the secular movement.

The primary strategy of the pro-secular camp was to establish popular centers across various regions of the province, serving as strongholds for the defense of secular education. These centers functioned not only as forums for discussion but also as bases for mass mobilization. A public assembly organized by the *Centro para la Defensa de la Democracia* was reported as “bastante concurrida” (very well attended), signaling significant grassroots support for neutral schools (El Liberal, 1930). The movement also made strategic use of the press—particularly *El Liberal*—to disseminate the results of a teacher survey showing that the majority of respondents favored secular schools. This survey was systematically conducted by the La Banda committee, which went so far as to launch a dedicated weekly newspaper to support the campaign (Tenti, 2004).



The ideological stance of the pro-secular bloc was clearly articulated in the *Manifiesto del Centro de Maestros Laicos*, which affirmed that “*la escuela laica no es una escuela sin moral, sino con moral sin dogmas, basada en los principios de la solidaridad humana, despertando el amor al hombre, el trabajo constructivo y la paz, y sirviendo a los altos ideales de la bondad y la belleza*” (El Liberal, 1930). In English: “The secular school is not a school without morals, but one with morals free of dogma, based on the principles of human solidarity, fostering love for humanity, constructive work, and peace, and serving the highest ideals of goodness and beauty.” The manifesto explicitly positioned religious education as the exclusive responsibility of the Church, not the state school, and asserted that public schools should be “*fuentes del patrimonio cultural del pueblo, guardianes imparciales de esa ciencia profana*” — “a source of the people’s cultural heritage and an impartial guardian of secular knowledge” (El Liberal, 1930). In this way, the pro-secular camp combined moral, cultural, and political arguments to defend the term “secular” in Article 111, firmly rejecting any integration of religious dogma into the public curriculum.

To fully grasp the polarization of views in the debate over Article 111, it is essential to present direct quotations from primary sources that explicitly represent the positions of each camp.

From the pro-religious side, the statement submitted by Catholic men’s and women’s groups in a memorandum to the *Convención Reformadora* asserted:

*...la educación laica es una contradicción, porque lo que está bien definido no puede ser neutral; y la educación neutral es una posición firme, contra Dios, la conciencia y la sociedad. El laicismo no es más que una negación: la de los derechos de Dios sobre el Hombre y su actividad. Por eso es antinacional* (El Liberal, 25 February 1939).

...Secular education is a contradiction, for that which is clearly defined cannot be neutral; and neutral education is a firm stance against God, conscience, and society. Secularism is nothing more than a denial of God’s rights over humankind and its activity. This is why it is anti-national.

Meanwhile, from the pro-secular side, the *Manifiesto del Centro de Maestros Laicos* offered a defense that emphasized morality need not be grounded in religion:

*La escuela laica no es una escuela sin moral, sino con moral sin dogmas, basada en los principios de la solidaridad humana, despertando el amor al hombre, el trabajo constructivo y la paz, y sirviendo a los altos ideales de la bondad y la belleza* (El Liberal, 13 June 1939).

The secular school is not a school without morals, but one with morals free of dogma, founded on the principles of human solidarity, fostering love for humanity, constructive work, and peace, and serving the highest ideals of goodness and beauty.

These two quotations not only underscore the ideological chasm between the two camps, but also reveal that the terminological contest over Article 111 reflected a deeper divergence regarding the relationship between the state, religion, and education.

The deliberations on Article 111—concerning religious versus secular education—took place in a tense atmosphere, laden with political intrigue. According to the official records, the debates were held late into the night and continued into the early hours of the morning, with a special quorum filled predominantly by the majority bloc. Minority members, such as Orestes Di Lullo, were reportedly notified only by telephone and therefore arrived late to the session, fueling suspicions among the pro-religious camp that the agenda had been expedited to minimize opposition (Tenti, 2004, p. 14).

Verbal exchanges on the floor were frequently marked by interruptions and an emotional tone. Di Lullo accused his political opponents of producing nothing more than *historia barata* (“cheap history”) in their defense of secular schools, while the opposition dismissed pro-religious arguments as overly romantic and irrelevant to the needs of modern education (Catholic Action of Santiago del Estero Diocesan Board, 1940, p. 48). Di Lullo himself drew upon local cultural references as rhetorical devices—for example, describing rural children stepping aside on the road to request a blessing (*bendición*) from passersby, or invoking folk songs and *reza-bailes* traditions as evidence of the deep-rooted attachment of Santiago’s society to Christian values.

A striking paradox emerged when Di Lullo—despite openly declaring that he was not a Catholic and was “free from sectarian ties”—became the most vocal defender of the Church’s position in the official forum (IV Convención Reformadora de la Constitución, 1939, p. 559). He even claimed that his stance reflected the aspirations of his constituents, who, in his view, “had no need for secular schools.” This contrast illustrates how personal religious identity does not necessarily align with political positions, and how religious symbols and narratives can be deployed as instruments of legitimacy within the arena of constitutional politics.

After an extended debate interweaving theological, moral, and cultural identity arguments, the Constitutional Reform Convention ultimately decided to retain the term “secular” in Article 111. This decision meant that the bishop’s proposal—and the pro-religious camp’s effort—to replace it with the terms “integral” or “free” (*libre*) was rejected by a majority of the delegates. The vote represented a clear victory for the pro-secular bloc, despite the fact that the majority of Santiago del Estero’s population identified as Catholic. The outcome reaffirmed that public education would remain within a framework of neutrality, separating religious instruction from the authority of the state and leaving matters of doctrine and worship to the jurisdiction of the Church. For the pro-religious faction, the result underscored the gap between the political commitment previously promised by Governor Montenegro to the bishop and the political reality on the convention floor; for the pro-secular side, it was a principled victory that strengthened secularism’s standing as a constitutional pillar of the province.

As a conclusion to the preceding narrative, presenting the data in tabular form will facilitate a clearer comparison of the positions, actors, strategies, and arguments of both camps in a concise yet comprehensive manner. This table encapsulates the key elements of the Article 111 debate while serving as a bridge to the subsequent analysis of patterns and meanings in the following section.

Table 4 Comparative Overview of the Pro-Religious and Pro-Secular Camps in the Article 111 Debate (Santiago del Estero, 1939)

Aspect	Pro-Religious Camp	Pro-Secular Camp
<b>Main Institutions</b>	Acción Católica Argentina (ACA), Liga del Magisterio, <i>El Momento</i>	Federación del Magisterio Santiaguense, AIAPE, Comité de Maestros por la Defensa de la Escuela Laica, Comité Popular para la Defensa del Laicismo, <i>El Liberal</i>
<b>Key Figures</b>	José F. L. Castiglione* (liberal no apoyó la educación religiosa) (*some supported secular schools)	Domingo Maidana, Domingo A. Bravo, Dardo Espeche
<b>Strategies</b>	Pro-religious media campaign ( <i>El Momento</i> ), formal memorandum to the convention, framing Catholic morality as national identity, invoking local traditions for legitimacy	Public assemblies and creation of local popular centers, teacher surveys, publication of findings in <i>El Liberal</i> , ideological manifesto
<b>Core Arguments</b>	Secularism = anti-God and anti-national; nation and Catholicism are inseparable; religious education must be mandated in public schools; neutrality is an illusion	Secular schools uphold morality without dogma; morality grounded in solidarity and humanity; religious education is the Church’s responsibility, not the state’s public schools
<b>Media &amp; Publications</b>	<i>El Momento</i> (Mar–Jul 1939), publication <i>Luchas por la libertad de enseñanza</i>	<i>El Liberal</i> (campaign coverage, survey publication), weekly newspaper of the La Banda Committee
<b>Key Quotation</b>	“El laicismo... es antinacional. Recordemos que el catolicismo es el pensamiento y el corazón de nuestra vida y	“La escuela laica no es una escuela sin moral, sino con moral sin dogmas...” ( <i>El Liberal</i> , 13/06/39)

	<i>de nuestra historia nacional.” (El Liberal, 25/02/39)</i>	
<b>Outcome of the Convention</b>	Proposal to replace the term <i>secular</i> with <i>integral</i> or <i>libre</i> was rejected	Successfully retained the term <i>secular</i> in Article 111

The debate over amending Article 111 was intense, involving sharply defined moral, political, and cultural identity arguments between the pro-religious and pro-secular camps. After a series of sessions marked by interruptions, political maneuvering, and intensive media campaigns, the majority of convention members ultimately voted to retain the term *secular* in the constitution. This decision marked a victory for the pro-secular camp and ensured that public education in Santiago del Estero would remain within the framework of neutral schools, separating religious instruction from state authority.

The available data reveal three main patterns in the Article 111 debate. First, support for secularism emerged across ideological and denominational lines, including from several Catholic politicians who opposed the introduction of religious education into public schools—demonstrating that a pro-secular stance was not inherently synonymous with anti-religious sentiment. Second, the Church and the pro-religious bloc framed the issue as part of a broader defense of national identity—asserting that Catholicism constituted the core of the nation’s history and soul—while the secularist camp emphasized individual liberty and state neutrality as the moral foundation of education. Third, both the pro-religious and pro-secular sides relied heavily on media and public action as mobilization tools: *El Momento* served as the principal organ of the Church’s campaign, while *El Liberal* and the network of local popular centers functioned as key platforms for disseminating secularist ideas.

The decision to preserve secular education in Article 111 indicates that in Santiago del Estero, the political influence of the Church did not fully determine the direction of public policy. Although institutional support for religious education was strong—bolstered by Church networks, Catholic media, and executive political maneuvering—the secular coalition, composed of teachers, intellectuals, cross-ideological politicians, and segments of the Catholic elite, successfully upheld the principle of educational neutrality. This outcome stands in contrast to the national trend of the late 1930s, which tended toward accommodating religious education in public schools, illustrating that local dynamics can diverge from national currents when strategic consolidation, effective public mobilization, and the willingness of elites to challenge the hegemony of religious discourse in the political arena are present.

#### 4. Discussion

This study finds that religious politics in Santiago del Estero during 1939–1940 was neither singular nor homogeneous; rather, it was characterized by negotiation, compromise, and even resistance to the dominance of religious discourse. Three key findings emerge. First, the debates over Article 8 and the constitutional preamble revealed ideological contestation between pro-religious and pro-secular blocs, involving competing definitions of regional identity (*santiagueñidad*) and the moral legitimacy of politics. Second, the case of political compromise on the issue of gambling demonstrates that moral principles could be negotiated in order to advance other priority agendas, such as religious education. Third, in the discussion over Article 111, a secular coalition—comprising teachers, intellectuals, cross-party politicians, and segments of the Catholic elite—successfully upheld the principle of secular education, in direct contrast to the national trend at the time.

The debates in the Santiago del Estero Constitutional Convention of 1939 cannot be understood merely as a clash of values between religious and secular education or between the prohibition and legalization of gambling. The findings of this study indicate that these issues operated within a more complex framework of political interaction, where ideological dimensions intertwined with strategic calculations and pragmatic considerations. A key driver of this dynamic was the need for political and religious actors to secure cross-group support to ensure victory on what they considered their priority

agendas. In other words, principled differences could be softened—and even negotiated—when doing so created opportunities for achieving greater political gains.

From the perspective of *political exchange* (Pizzorno, 1978), the moral issues in these debates functioned as a form of “political currency” that could be traded within the legislative arena. The pro-religious camp—particularly the Catholic Church and its allies—was willing to soften its position on the legalization of gambling in order to secure support for religious education. Conversely, the secular bloc leveraged the gambling issue as a bargaining tool to preserve secular education in Article 111. This exchange mechanism facilitated the formation of tactical alliances that transcended ideological boundaries, resulting in compromises that, on the surface, appeared contradictory to each party’s moral principles but were strategically rational.

The *religious economy* approach (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) helps explain the Catholic Church’s motivation to defend the religious education agenda. Much like an economic entity seeking to maintain its market share, the Church viewed religious education as a primary instrument for preserving and expanding its moral influence in society. However, the local power configuration in Santiago del Estero posed a challenge: a secular coalition of teachers, intellectuals, cross-ideological politicians, and even segments of the Catholic elite successfully mobilized symbols of *santiagueñidad* to assert that regional identity was not exclusively under the control of religious narratives. This dynamic explains why, despite the Church’s extensive networks, secular education was maintained—an outcome that diverged from national trends at the time.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Esquivel (Esquivel, 2017), who demonstrates that the Catholic Church in Argentina has often engaged in active negotiations with political leaders to influence legislation. However, in Santiago del Estero in 1939, this process extended beyond social policy and into constitutional debates encompassing both education and gambling. A similar pattern is observed in Ben-Porat’s (2009) study of Israel, where cultural identity shapes political strategy, although the Santiago del Estero case placed greater emphasis on moral imperatives intertwined with locally grounded political–executive calculations. Parallels can also be drawn with Qian and Kong’s (2018) research on the resistance of religious educational institutions to state intervention, though in Santiago del Estero such resistance was manifested through cross-issue bargaining that produced strategic compromises.

These findings also align with Cui and Li’s (2025) study of the Maldives, which shows that religion can serve both as a unifying force and as a source of tension through political negotiation. The difference, and the novelty of this study’s contribution, lies in situating such dynamics within a provincial context that diverged from Argentina’s national trends, illustrating how local power configurations can alter the broader patterns of religion–politics relations. Accordingly, this research affirms that religious politics is adaptive rather than monolithic, and can operate through complex, pragmatic forms of political bargaining shaped by the balance of power at the local level.

The study’s findings also resonate with the *political exchange* framework discussed by Hammond and Machacek (Hammond & Machacek, 2009), which underscores that church–state relations are dynamic and contingent upon historical and political contexts. Much like the variations they identify in China, Brazil, and Poland, the Santiago del Estero case exhibits a distinctive mode of negotiation in which moral issues—such as religious education and gambling—function as “political currency” in the exchange of support within the constitutional arena. This pattern is also parallel to Barkey’s (2010), analysis of the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, where religion–politics interactions are constantly negotiated and contested, albeit in Santiago del Estero, occurring at the provincial level with a local power configuration capable of deviating from national trends.

Furthermore, Boer’s (2015) *translation model*, which conceptualizes religion and politics as two “languages” with overlapping yet distinct semantic fields, helps explain how the symbol of *santiagueñidad* could be articulated differently by religious and secular blocs to advance their respective strategic objectives. This approach is consonant with Turner’s (Turner, 2006) perspective on the relationship between religion and nationalism, whereby political discourse is infused with religious references to bolster legitimacy. The distinctive contribution of this research lies in its focus on a

provincial constitutional debate—rather than general public policy—and its emphasis on cross-issue political bargaining. This reveals that *political exchange* in a religious context entails not only ideological compromise but also strategic calculation, combining cultural identity with practical interests within the configuration of local power.

The findings of this study can also be interpreted through the lens of *religious economy theory*, as applied to the Catholic Church by Nilsen (2023) and Petrušić (2024), which emphasizes the Church's efforts to preserve and expand its "market share" of moral influence through strategies aligned with Catholic social teaching—such as the principles of human dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity. In the context of Santiago del Estero in 1939, advocacy for religious education can be understood as an attempt to maintain the Church's moral dominance in the public sphere, comparable to how the *Economy of Communion* or other alternative economic models described by Fernández Fernández and de la Cruz (2019) aim to preserve the relevance of Catholic values amid ideological competition. However, unlike those studies, which focus primarily on economic policy and business models grounded in Catholic social doctrine, the present research demonstrates that the logic of the *religious economy* also operates within the arena of constitutional politics, where moral values are traded as strategic assets in cross-issue political bargaining. This approach expands the application of the theory, showing that the "market" for religious influence encompasses not only economic or educational domains, but also legislative power dynamics that are strongly shaped by local power configurations.

The study further reveals that religious politics in Santiago del Estero in 1939–1940 cannot be reduced to a mere ideological confrontation between religious and secular camps, but rather constitutes a manifestation of *realpolitik* in which moral issues function as instruments of power exchange. Socially, these findings demonstrate that moral authority—even when supported by a powerful institution such as the Catholic Church—is not absolute, but can be negotiated when confronted with a cohesive local power configuration. The fact that the secular coalition was able to preserve neutral education despite a national climate favoring religious instruction underscores the importance of mobilization capacity, symbolic legitimacy, and cross-group alliances in counterbalancing asymmetrical political power.

Historically, this study contributes to the understanding that the relationship between religion and politics in Argentina is not linear in following national trends, but can undergo significant deviations when local contexts possess distinct power dynamics (Barkey, 2010; Hammond & Machacek, 2009). Santiago del Estero serves as a concrete example of how provincial constitutional drafting processes can yield outcomes that run counter to national ideological dominance, owing to the presence of political exchange mechanisms (Pizzorno, 1978) and effective identity framing strategies (Ben-Porat, 2009). This finding expands the literature on religious politics in Latin America (Esquivel, 2017) by positioning the provincial level as an arena no less significant than the national level in shaping the direction of public policy.

Ideologically, the study demonstrates that moral values—such as religious education or gambling prohibition—are not always upheld for the sake of ideological purity, but can be instrumentalized as "political currency" to achieve broader strategic goals (Cui & Li, 2025; Qian & Kong, 2018). This challenges the classical assumption that religious actors invariably act on the basis of non-negotiable theological principles. Instead, within the framework of religious economy (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987), the Church operates much like a market actor, adapting to ideological competition and prioritizing strategies that maximize its influence, even at the cost of compromising parts of its moral agenda (Nilsen, 2023; Petrušić, 2024). Thus, this study offers a more nuanced analytical framework for understanding the interaction between religion and politics—one that is adaptive, contextual, and often pragmatic, with outcomes determined more by power configurations and coalition strategies than by doctrine alone.

The findings of this study offer several positive contributions that can enrich both academic understanding and political practice in Argentina and comparable contexts. First, from a theoretical standpoint, the results expand the analytical frameworks of political exchange (Pizzorno, 1978) and religious economy (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987) by demonstrating that the provincial political arena can

serve as a unique laboratory for religion–politics interaction, where cultural identity and strategic calculation interact dynamically. Second, from a practical perspective, the findings illustrate that cross-ideological compromise can serve as an effective mechanism to prevent the absolute dominance of a single faction, maintain pluralism in the public sphere, and yield more moderate policy outcomes. In this context, the ability of actors to leverage local identity symbols as instruments of negotiation has the potential to strengthen social cohesion while preventing extreme polarization.

However, the study also reveals potential dysfunctions that warrant caution. First, the mechanism of trading moral issues as “political currency” can trigger moral relativism, wherein moral and ideological principles become subordinate to short-term strategic gains. Bilgrami (2011) identifies this phenomenon as one of the consequences of the intersection between secularism, liberalism, and relativism, which can generate conflicts between competing moral frameworks in political discourse. In the context of religious politics, such moral compromises risk undermining the credibility of both religious and political institutions in the public eye. As demonstrated by Young, Willer, and Keltner (2013), when absolute religious norms are transformed into pragmatic instruments, there is a shift from rule-based moral processing toward a more flexible utilitarian logic—one that is adaptable but vulnerable to ethical inconsistency.

Second, the success of cross-issue compromise strategies can create political precedents that encourage excessive issue trading. Haynes (2021) and Johnson (2012) have shown that in religion–politics interactions, religious actors acting as issue brokers often engage in negotiations that exceed the boundaries of their original moral agenda in pursuit of political gain. Such practices can obscure policy accountability and entrench transactional logic in legislative processes. If institutionalized, this dynamic would erode transparency and make it more difficult for the public to assess the consistency of actors’ moral commitments.

Third, the dominance of market logic within the framework of religious economy theory risks shifting the orientation of religious missions from moral–spiritual service to mere competition for influence. Palmer (2011) and Opfinger (2014) observe that when religious institutions fully adopt market logic—such as engaging in pluralistic competition to maximize their “market share” of adherents—the ethical and transcendental dimensions tend to become subordinated to strategies aimed at public appeal and short-term gains. In the long run, this dynamic can erode the institutional integrity of the Church and blur the distinction between spiritual motivations and political calculations.

In light of these potential risks and dysfunctions, a set of policy measures is needed to strengthen moral accountability and transparency in religion–politics interactions. First, the mechanism of trading moral issues should be regulated through a clear code of ethics for religion–politics engagement, ensuring that strategic compromises do not sacrifice fundamental ethical principles. Second, a public oversight mechanism should be established to enable civil society, independent media, and academic institutions to monitor issue-trading practices and identify deviations from the original commitments of both religious and political actors. Third, religious institutions should adopt internal checks and balances to prevent their spiritual mission from being reduced to mere market competition logic—for example, through periodic evaluations of program alignment with the institution’s theological values. Finally, it is crucial to develop cross-sector dialogue forums that foster cooperative alignment between moral agendas and public policy while safeguarding the ethical integrity of each party, thus allowing religion–politics dynamics to remain adaptive without losing legitimacy in the public eye.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relationship between religion and politics in Argentina—particularly in the province of Santiago del Estero—does not always follow national ideological trends in a linear fashion. Instead, it can deviate significantly when local power configurations allow for strategic consolidation, effective public mobilization, and the willingness of elites to challenge the hegemony of religious discourse. The findings reveal that *political exchange* mechanisms and *identity framing* strategies implemented at the provincial level were able to safeguard the principle of secular education in Article 111, despite strong pressure from religious institutions. The study further shows

that moral values—such as religious education or the prohibition of gambling—can be instrumentalized as “political currency” negotiated in pursuit of broader strategic objectives.

The scholarly contribution of this research lies in positioning the provincial level as a critical arena in the study of religion and politics in Latin America—an analytical perspective often dominated by national-level analyses. Furthermore, the study offers a more nuanced analytical framework by combining insights from *religious economy theory*, *political exchange*, and *identity framing* to explain the dynamics of moral compromise in political contexts. The findings enrich the literature by illustrating that religion–politics interactions are adaptive, contextual, and pragmatic, rather than driven solely by dogma or ideology.

Nonetheless, this study has certain limitations. The data are derived exclusively from the official archives of the 1939 Santiago del Estero Constitutional Convention, including session minutes, debate transcripts, and attendance records. However, since 86 years have passed since the event, there are no directly involved actors available for in-depth interviews. Instead, the study relies on published sources. This limits the depth of interpretation regarding the motivations behind strategic compromises. Moreover, the study’s focus on a single provincial case restricts the generalizability of its findings to other contexts. Future research should, therefore, conduct comparative studies across provinces or countries and integrate both quantitative and qualitative analytical methods to more comprehensively map the extent to which issue trading patterns and market logic within the religious economy framework operate in diverse political settings.

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