

## **Exploring the Symbolic Efficacy of Pope Francis's Religious Authority in Empowering the Poor**

Marie Thompson

### Abstract

This paper explores the paradox between Pope Francis's success as a critic of global markets and the limitations of his religious capital in his home country of Argentina. While for some observers it might be obvious that the pope can influence people's thinking about social and political matters, the findings of this paper highlight the role of 'non-specialist,' ordinary believers in setting limits to Francis's religious power. Using Bourdieusian theory and a 'lived religion' methodological approach, I explore the agency of ordinary believers in the religious field. By studying the limits regular believers established to the efficacy of Pope Francis's religious capital, we better understand how the agency of non-specialists operates in the religious field. This research is based on a non-random sample of semi-structured, in-depth interviews of 42 lower socio-economic status interviewees, self-identified as Catholics, Evangelicals, Others, and Non-Affiliated; conducted in Córdoba, Argentina from November 2015 to December 2016.

### Keywords

Bourdieu, Catholicism, Latin America, Religion, Secularization,

**Introduction**

Francis enjoys considerable symbolic power in the social sphere. A majority of citizens of the world, of different religious affiliations, view him positively (Gallup International, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014b). As a result, he has been able to criticize free markets publicly and successfully. Some see his encyclical *Laudato Si* (Francis, 2015) as an ‘anti-systemic’ declaration (Löwy, 2015) and worry that certain media outlets will prevent the Pope’s criticism from reaching the masses (Lahsen and Domingues, 2015), but even critics who usually resist interventions by religious authorities in the public arena have generally approved of Francis’s pronouncements on the free market (Burawoy, 2015; Glasman, 2015; Löwy, 2015).

This is the case in Latin America, where the majority of the population (68 percent) feels that ‘Pope Francis brings hope to the poor of the world’ (Rios and Swift, 2014). Latin American religiosity has changed in recent decades, of course, but it has certainly not disappeared (De la Torre and Martin, 2016; Levine, 2014). In Argentina, specifically, Catholicism has retained a privileged social position and important institutional presence (DiStefano and Zanatta, 2009; Ivereigh, 1995; Martín, 2017). This holds true despite the role that the Church played in facilitating the ‘Dirty War’ of the 1970s, when the government of Argentina terrorized, persecuted, tortured, and disappeared about 15,000 people, ostensibly to protect ‘Western Christian civilization’ from the Communist threat. The Church’s role in the Dirty War is still the subject of much criticism. Nonetheless, 71 percent of the Argentinean population continues to identify as Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2014), with Evangelicals (mostly Pentecostals), other religious groups, atheists, agnostics and non-affiliated believers completing the religious landscape (Mallimaci et al., 2015). Overall, 79 percent of

Argentiniens consider religion important in their lives (WVS, 2014).

When Francis ventures into the secular realm to criticize the economic system, he garners wide support. Because he advocates for the poor, and because he leads Catholics around the globe, we can assume that what he says about political matters exerts an influence on how people of lower socioeconomic status think. We can assume that people from a lower socioeconomic background, especially in a heavily Catholic society like Argentina, are willing to let Francis convert his religious capital into political capital. But to what extent? This article addresses that problem by asking two questions: 1) In what other fields can Francis effectively convert his religious capital into other forms of capital? and 2) How much agency do the poor have in this mobilization of symbolic power?

### **Religious field and religious capital**

Scholars have assessed Francis's public relevance from different perspectives. Cuda (2016) has studied it as part of the populist political tradition in Latin America. Martín (2017) considers it an 'avatar' created by the media. In this article, I'll examine it primarily in terms of his religious capital.

Most of the authors who discuss religious capital discuss it in terms of networks and relationships; that is as social capital. For Iannaccone, religious capital is the outcome of religious participation in a congregation: the accumulation of skills and experience acquired by membership and participation (Iannaccone, 1990). Wuthnow (2002; 2003) explored how participation in religious congregations helps members bridge (or fail to bridge) over social class, or overcome (or fail to overcome) status distinctions.

Stark and Finke (2000) and Finke and Dougherty (2002) understand religious capital as the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious tradition. But these authors focused solely on U.S. congregations and did not pay attention to the status nor the symbolic power that comes with being a religious person in non-U.S. contexts.

In this study, I focus on religious capital as symbolic capital. I follow Pierre Bourdieu, who contends that the struggle for social recognition is a fundamental dimension of all social life. (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990; 1991; Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, 1982). In that struggle, economic, social, and cultural institutions reproduce social inequality (Swartz, 1996) To explain that inequality, he extends the logic of economic exchange to other spheres of life, using the concept of ‘capital’ to refer to status, prestige, knowledge, and social relationships (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) (Todd, 2015).

Symbolic capital is the acquisition of a reputation for competence, the accumulation of honor and prestige, a credit given to someone that might convert into political capital. It disguises the arbitrariness of possession and accumulation and at the same time its accumulation legitimizes the asymmetry of status. (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)

Capital can be defined as consisting of assets that allow one to keep or improve one’s position in a field. Because economic capital can be an obscene manifestation of social inequality, in some situations other forms of capital are more socially acceptable and effective. Because they misrepresent domination, they can appear as legitimate demands for recognition (Swartz, 1996). This is true especially of religious capital, since it gives social order the ‘supreme legitimation of naturalization’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 32), by converting social inequality into something that extends beyond human agency and

making domination seem part of a divine plan (Rey, 2014).

Capital operates differently in different fields. Fields are networks of relations (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) among social actors who dispute a specific resource. Entry into a field requires acceptance of the specific ‘rules of the game’ (Swartz, 1996) inscribed within the subject as practical knowledge, or ‘habitus’ (Urban, 2003). Religious habitus are dispositions to act and think according to the religious representation of the natural and supernatural worlds (Bourdieu, 1991; Martínez, 2011; Rey, 2014). Religion constitutes a field in which a group of specialists monopolize the sacred (the resource in dispute), which allows them to impose a religious habitus on believers.

Religious capital is subject to the same laws of accumulation and exchange as economic capital (Verter, 2003). Because we all inhabit multiple fields, our memberships often overlap, which creates possibilities of exchange between different species of capital (Todd, 2015). As long as there is a market for them, different forms of capital can be converted from field to field (‘transubstantiate’ is the religious metaphor Bourdieu uses). Religious capital can therefore be a currency in fields other than religion (Martínez, 2011; Verter, 2003). In this conversion, however, there is a contingent rate of exchange that must be paid (McKinnon, Trzebiatowska, and Brittain, 2011).

Many scholars argue that Bourdieu only understood religion in a limited way (Daintelli, 2003; Dillon, 2003; McKinnon, 2017; Rey, 2014) and never gave it more than marginal attention in his work (Diantell, 2003; McKinnon, 2017). When he did give it attention, he focused mostly on elites (Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, 1982) and the organizational structure of French Catholicism (McKinnon, Trzebiatowska, and Brittain, 2011), which he assumes is an instrument for upholding the status quo (Rey, 2014). In

general, when discussing religion he focuses on ‘reproduction and domination over production and resistance’ (Vásquez, 2011:247), leaving almost no room for non-specialists as actors who might create and reinterpret religious symbols (Dillon, 2003; Verter, 2003).

According to Bourdieu, religious non-specialists are ‘consumers endowed with the minimum religious competence, or habitus, necessary to demonstrate the specific need for its products’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 23-24). He asserts that a religious institution and its bureaucracy have the power to impose a religious habitus upon the non-specialists (Bourdieu and Saint-Martin, 1982; Dillon, 2003). In this view, agency (the ability to exercise control of the resource under dispute) is limited to religious bureaucrats, who compete among themselves to legitimate their vision of the sacred (Beltrán, 2010; Espinosa, 2010; Verter, 2003). The competition for religious capital therefore plays out between ‘priests’ and ‘prophets’, who fight to exercise power over the ‘laity’ (another Bourdieusian religious metaphor to name specialists and non-specialist in any field), not a struggle between the non-specialists and the specialists (Bourdieu, 1991; 1993). According to him, the ‘laity’ have no real agency in the religious field, because they cannot sacralise nor desacralize reality (Urban, 2003). Dispossessed of any power, they are mere consumers of what specialists produce (Dillon, 2003; McKinnon, Trzebiatowska, and Brittain, 2011). Religion, in other words, is what the holders of the sacred power say it is.

While Bourdieu did not give agency to the non-specialist, his theory does not preclude us from doing so. In fact, as Martínez (2011) has pointed out, Bourdieu’s ideas are very useful when ‘applied rigorously but with freedom’ (p.3). Urban (2003) for

example, emphasizes the agency of individuals who create alternative religious fields, and Dillon (2003) shows that educated lay Catholics have access to doctrinal knowledge and therefore Catholic capital. These studies focused either on ‘heretics’ who left the field or on elites who become ‘prophets’ fighting the ‘priests’.

When Bourdieu looked at the religious field, he did so from the centre (France) and the top (the Catholic Bishops’ Conference). In this article however, I study it from the margins (Argentina) and the bottom, by interviewing and studying believers of lower socioeconomic status, which allows me to explore the agency of non-specialists. I do this in particular to ascertain whether it is true, as the theory holds, that non-specialists are dispossessed of power and thus are more likely to be influenced by the interventions of a specialist. In this paper I will understand agency as the ability of non-specialists to resist the imposition of a habitus, to exercise some control of the resource in dispute and to define the boundaries of the field.

If, as the theory maintains, non-specialists have little social and political capital, then logic would suggest that they are mere consumers. That, in turn, would mean that Francis should be able to convert his religious capital into other kinds of capital that he can spend to influence how these consumers behave in non-religious fields—especially if they don’t have the ability to create alternative fields or become an educated elite.

The respondents in this study, however, did not behave as mere consumers. Instead, they demonstrated that they have the power to set limits on Francis’s use of religious capital in other fields, and even; they hold agency by exercising control of the sacred. Moreover, I found what I called ‘symbolic debts’, that is, respondents identified themselves as creditors who seek payment in the form of accountability from religious

authorities.

Respondents in this sample will impose boundaries on the pope when he mobilizes his religious capital to other fields. I argue that the exploration of the agency of Argentinean believers (Catholics, Evangelicals, Others and Non-Affiliated) of lower-socioeconomic status will help us understand the dynamics of the religious field in a context other than France. In Argentina, and in Latin America, religion has been used as a tool of resistance and emancipation (Levine, 2012; Rey, 1998), and non-specialists have been creative in their religious practices (Ameigeiras, 2008; Semán, 1997).

To overcome for the limits of Bourdieu's theory in explaining the agency of non-specialists, I use a methodological approach known as 'lived religion' (Ammerman, 2014; Vásquez, 2011). Lived-religion scholars assume that non-specialists are not mere consumers of religious traditions but also are producers of it (Martín, 2009; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 1997). This approach is consistent with scholarship that highlights Latin Americans' autonomy in the religious field.

### **Research methods and data**

This study, which formed part of a larger research project on lived religion in Latin American cities, is based on 42 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with people of lower socioeconomic status in Córdoba, Argentina. Overall, 74 percent of Argentinians of lower socioeconomical status identify as Catholics, 16 percent as Evangelicals, 1 percent as Other, and 9 percent Non-Affiliated (Mallimaci et al., 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014a; Suárez, 2015).

The larger study was focused on contemporary, urban Latin Americans' lived

religion. In each city the researchers built an intentional sample applying two selection variables: four religious self-identification (Catholics, Protestants, Others, and Non Affiliated) and two socioeconomic status (upper/middle and lower). The socioeconomic status was determined according to local criteria. For the case of this subsample, researchers followed the Asociación Argentina de Marketing, (A.A.M., S.A.I.M.O. & C.E.I.M, 2006) which includes variables such as level of education achieved, employment and position, health insurance, employed members of the household, and state welfare received. The teams strive to balance the non-random sample in terms of gender, age and family situation (children or not, in charge of other persons or not).

The research team used a snowballing process to recruit participants. Because these referrals came from people the new subjects already knew, this ‘snowballing’ approach improved the trust that new subjects placed in the interviewers. While some may argue that interviews collect statements that do not necessarily reflect actions, discourse is an asset of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1990) therefore the agency shown in discourse is relevant to this theoretical perspective.

In order to gather the data (respondents’ narratives about what they do when they do religion) investigators hold two meetings with the participants. The first one was an in-depth interview, with a thirteen open-ended questions, that lasted about one hour. One of the open-ended questions was about the pope. While some participants in Montevideo and Lima did not elaborate an answer, in Córdoba, many talked about the pope before being prompted to answer.

At the end of this first interview, researchers prompted respondents to come to a next ‘object elicitation’ meeting with something (or pictures of objects, places, peoples)

that are meaningful for them. These meetings lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Both interviews were conducted in Spanish and took place in houses, classrooms, markets, squares, workplaces, and religious institutions. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and the interviews were transcribed.

Interviews were conducted between November 2015 and December 2016. The subsample I utilized here (lower socioeconomic status Argentines) consisted of 18 men and 24 women, 21 of whom self-identify as Catholics, 11 as Evangelicals, three as religious Others, and seven as Non-Affiliated. Ten were between 18 and 29 years old, 24 were between 30 and 59, and eight were 60 or older. These age ranges allowed me to include subjects at different stages of economic life (new to the workforce, at their peak potential, and in retirement) and family life (single, in a relationship with children, with grown-up children, and with grandchildren). I selected this subsample for the theoretical reasons mentioned above, to overcome Bourdieu's theory limits when dealing with non-specialists in the religious field.

I performed a narrative analysis of the transcriptions of this subsample. After multiple readings, I processed the transcripts with a qualitative software (Atlas.ti) and coded for the terms 'Francisco', 'papa', 'Roma', 'Vaticano', 'Santa Sede', and 'Bergoglio,' identifying 103 quotes from 35 different respondents that referred to the pope. I translated the excerpts for this publication.

Seven interviewees did not answer the question, arguing either that they were not Catholics, they have no opinion, or that they did not care. Sixteen respondents gave only favourable opinions about the pope, eleven offered both positive and critical statements, and eight had mostly critical opinions.

**Findings: Assessing Francis's religious capital**

Analysing the interviews, I have attempted to define what constitutes Francis's religious capital, how it works, and what happens when he tries to 'transubstantiate' (mobilize) it into other fields.

The religious capital that Francis possesses can be defined as the status, prestige, knowledge and social relationships that accrue to him as pope—that is, the recognition of his power in the Catholic religious field. Here I present how Francis's religious capital is constituted both in terms of his position in the field as specialist, and his own performance in that position, meaning the perception of what is he doing with that power. Then I evaluate how well he mobilizes that religious capital into other fields, and the exchange price he has to pay for that: namely, what happens to his religious capital when he makes economic or political statements.

***Francis's religious capital***

Being the head of the Catholic Church gives Francis institutional credit, he enjoys the accumulated symbolic labour that constitutes the capital of the institution. He is 'the biggest referent in the Catholic church' (Guillermo, Catholic), which gives him a position of social recognition. The ordinary believers interviewed for this project feel that the pope understands his power and uses it to extend his influence beyond just the religious field. For example, Carlos (Evangelical) explained, '[Francis] is aware that with so many Catholics in the world—I think they are more than 1 billion—his opinions have an influence on politics. It has always been that way. And if he uses it to drive a Christian agenda -it will be very positive'. Carlos and others respondents perceive the pope as

aware of the potential efficacy of his religious capital.

Not surprisingly, given that Argentina is predominantly Catholic, some respondents view the pope as the religious field's most important authority. Mario (Catholic), for example, stated, 'I am not sure, but I think that there are other representatives for the Muslims, the Evangelicals, and so on ... However, the pope is still the most important one'. This kind of thinking extends beyond Catholics, as Abraham (Evangelical) made clear when he told us, 'The dude is great! Even if he is Catholic and in our church they criticize him.' Gabriela (Evangelical) made a similar point: 'We [Evangelicals] do not follow Catholic rules, but I do think the pope ... has the spirituality to spread love to everyone'. Being the pope gives Francis efficacy in the religious field.

Some of Francis's institutional capital derives from believers' sense that his appointment was a supernatural intervention. Lucy (Catholic) recalls, 'The day he was named, when they were about to give the name of the new pope, my husband and I said "Bergoglio". In our heart we felt it, and together, at the same time, we said "Bergoglio!"' Even for some Evangelical respondents, Bergoglio's becoming pope was an answer to their prayers. As Olivia (Evangelical) put it, 'We pray a lot for the pope. In the process of the election, when nobody knew who would be the pope, we prayed for him as a church, we prayed God to put him as authority'. Olivia feels she contributed through her prayer to the election of a Catholic pope.

Francis's religious capital consists of more than just institutional capital. He also enjoys substantial personal religious capital, which is key to understanding how our respondents relate to him. As has been portrayed in the international media, some believe him to be 'one of us'—an outsider transforming the Vatican. For Marcela (Catholic),

Francis is 'our pope'. Selena (Non-Affiliated) offered, 'He is a good guy, and I like the fact he is Argentinian.' Since respondents of lower socioeconomic status are outsiders at the bottom of the social hierarchy, these sorts of statements suggest that Francis embodies symbolic vindication, in that he resituates the respondents as insiders. 'He is a Latin American pope,' Antonio (Non-Affiliated) said, adding 'Never happened before.'

Claudio (Catholic) explained the 'he is one of us' feeling more fully: 'He left behind that sense of "I am the pope, nobody should touch me" and is closer to the people. And the people need him. Do you understand me? He left the jewellery and his position to come down closer to the ones who really need him, so the people can touch him, contact him.'

Many respondents agreed, approvingly, that Francis is transforming the church. Carlos (Evangelical) described him as a 'reformer ... much better than the other popes'. Antonio (Non-Affiliated) said, 'He challenges lots of things within the Catholic Church, and I like that. He wants renewal and I think that's positive.' Sandra (Catholic) expressed similar feelings: 'He is more open-minded. I think it is fine what he is doing.' Some respondents explicitly endorsed his approach to the care of children. Carlos (Evangelical) likes how 'he has gone after the paedophiles', and Marcela (Catholic) likes how he has allowed children from divorced parents to 'be baptized or to receive first communion'.

Some respondents even credit the pope with transformations that he has not endorsed. Marcela (Catholic), for example, said, 'He supports same sex marriage. He agrees with that'. Claudio (Catholic) has a similar understanding: 'Perhaps there was a transgender person, and he or she was discriminated in the church. Now, even when they may not like it, they welcome her'. Some respondents are also aware that renewal is not easy. Carlos (Evangelical) said, 'He is doing good things, even when the Catholic faith

limits him a lot.’ Likewise, Lucy (Catholic) said, ‘Francis brought change. But he can’t go faster. He has to go step by step. Everything is very complicated. And he can’t do miracles.’ Francis can ‘change things’, Olivia (Evangelical) said, because he is perceived as an outsider who does not give in to the pressures of the Curia (the bureaucracy of the Roman Catholic church that administrates The Vatican City). Cayetano (Catholic) agrees: ‘He is freer. John Paul II wasn’t; he was controlled. The power always constrains you’. Gustavo (Catholic) told us something similar: ‘He speaks his own mind. He doesn’t allow others’ expectations to influence him, you know?’ These respondents clearly approve of these transformations.

Summing up, Francis’s institutional religious capital is composed by his position in the religious field, and the out-of-the-ordinary circumstances attributed to his appointment. His personal religious capital is built upon his effort to renovate the church by bringing it closer to the people, a lifestyle that is consistent with his claims, and a perception among ordinary lower-socioeconomic status believers that even in his powerful position he is ‘one of us’. Overall, his religious capital is substantial and accepted not only by Catholics but also other believers. In theory, then, given the sacred power Francis holds, he should be the one defining the religious field for Argentinians of lower socioeconomic status, and should be able to transubstantiate it to other fields.

### *Transubstantiating religious capital*

Because individuals inhabit different fields, and a different kind of capital is used in each, there is the possibility of exchange among different forms of capital. Religious capital therefore can potentially be converted into capital in other fields. Mallimaci et al.,

(2015) have shown the difficulties of converting religious capital to the field of personal morality (sexual practices). In this section, I investigate whether it is possible for the pope to transfer his religious capital to the economic and political fields, two secular fields par excellence.

Francis's religious capital is efficacious for some respondents when he criticizes the economic system and stands for the poor. Marcelo (Other) explained, 'He speaks against the mercantilisation of capitalism, of this capitalist system that is devouring human lives (...) I think his claims in favour of the refugees are wonderful.' Carlos (Evangelical) sees him as fighting for 'human lives' against the economic powers that be 'the financial system and the banks that are so negative for humanity'. Like many others, Gabriela sees Francis as an advocate for the poor: 'He talks a lot with the poor people. He stands for the poor'. Carlos (Catholic) agrees: 'For that reason, I love the pope. He is a very socially minded pope ... He is committed to the poor, that they get the equality they deserve.' Antonio (Non-Affiliated) sees him in this regard as a 'revolutionary'.

Many respondents accept the transubstantiation of Francis's religious capital because they think he shares their criticisms about the free-market economy. As Carlos (Catholic) puts it, 'He is scolding the presidents, so the people will criticize them and say, "Hey dude! It is true what Francis is saying."' Because people listen to what Francis says ... Imagine he says to [Argentine president Mauricio] Macri, "Stop making budget cuts that go against the poor and look at them as your weaker siblings"' (Carlos, Catholic).

It is not only Catholic believers who accept the mobilization of his religious capital to the economic field. Marcelo, a Buddhist (Other), supports Francis's criticism of capitalism: 'I think his humanism is attuned with Buddhism. We share a vision that the

human being should be above the market, the nation, race, and faith—to protect human life, to make it as a supreme value’.

Some respondents understand that a cost of exchange needs to be paid for mobilizing religious capital into other fields. And some of them like that Francis is willing to pay these costs, risking his religious capital, in order to speak out for the poor. As Olivia (Evangelical) put it, ‘Some try to silence the pope when he speaks. If he gets involved, they say, “What are you doing? Mind your own business!” When the pope tries to get involved in social issues, some people like it, but 90 percent criticize him and think it is wrong that he gets involved’.

Francis’s religious capital depreciates among some Evangelical respondents because they perceive him as worshiping images of the virgin Mary (Olivia, Evangelical) or a crucified Christ (Leandro, Evangelical); and it is not effective either among some Non-Affiliated respondents: ‘I don’t like the political role of the pope ... like the role the church has of approving or disapproving certain things.’ (Nicolas, Non-Affiliated)

Other respondents distrust Francis’s capital in non-religious fields precisely because he is a religious specialist. Gloria (Non-Affiliated) made this point emphatically: ‘I don’t like priests. I don’t know what they hide beneath the cassock. I just don’t like them -Aagh—it just makes my skin crawl!’ Ceci (Catholic) also rejects his capital for the same reason. Laughing, she said: ‘I think that—how can I say it? It’s He’s just a guy, you see (...) I don’t like the fact that anyone just because he is the pope -he is a regular guy and -we just believe him because he is the pope, no?’ Maria (Catholic) said she doesn’t really care about the pope and what he says because he is ‘so estranged from us’. For these respondents, Francis is not ‘one of us,’ and his capital therefore loses efficacy.

In sum, Francis is able to effectively mobilize his religious capital well among Catholics and Non-Catholics when, standing for the poor, he criticizes the financial markets and puts the wellbeing of human beings above economic decisions. He is less able to transubstantiate it among Non-Affiliated believers, and also among respondents who challenge his privileged position within the religious field. To them, he is a specialist, one who takes power away from the non-specialists.

### *Conversion rates*

Some respondents feel the pope is using his religious capital wisely. Antonio, for example, (Non-Affiliated) declared, ‘Between you and me, I think he is a good politician. A hell of a politician!’ Those who feel this way tend to appreciate the pope’s opposition to the government headed by Mauricio Macri, and his support for Christina Kirchner, the former president. Marcela, for example, laughingly said, ‘I like how he deals with Macri. Yeah, I like how he treats him!’ Also laughing, Alejandra (Evangelical) said, ‘I like him because he is *Kirchnerista* like me!’

However, the rate Francis has to pay to use his religious capital in the political field is too high, that its efficacy is almost gone. Mario (Catholic), for example, said, ‘I prefer church and politics separated, politics completely separated from religion ... What the pope is doing—it is politics!’ Elizabeth (Other) added, ‘Sometimes I think he is a bit of a demagogue.’ Nicolas (Non-Affiliated), told us that the pope complains about politicians using him, but then added that ‘he is doing the same with the church’.

All of these comments suggest that many respondents feel that the pope’s capital depreciated when he involves himself in Argentinean partisan politics. As Nicolas (Non-

Affiliated) put it, ‘There are people who will appropriate his discourse and use it as they want’. Argentinean politicians, in particular, are willing to trade religious capital for political capital, in ways that respondents feel devalue the pope’s religious capital.

Ainhoa (Catholic) put it this way: ‘They are using the pope, and the pope is using the politicians ... The political power is always mixed with the church, and the church with the political power.’

Paradoxically, the symbolic efficacy of being ‘one of us’ works against the mobilization of the pope’s capital in the political field. In their view, the pope should be a neutral figure, but they believe Francis is not. Hernán (Catholic) affirms, ‘He has been so, so involved in Argentina, in Buenos Aires.’ Some respondents feel that he is working actively to oppose the Marci government, which strikes them as a misuse of his religious capital.<sup>1</sup> Claudio (Catholic) explains, ‘I understand that the pope, the head of the church, might disagree with the new government. But he has to move on, as the representatives of the church and the government they have to reach an agreement.’ Other Catholic respondents see him as actively endorsing Kirchner, which also strikes them as a misuse of his capital. Olga (Catholic) explained, ‘I liked him at the beginning, but then everything changed. I don’t like him now. I don’t care anymore.’

When Francis mobilizes his symbolic power from the religious to the political field, that power loses its efficacy, even among Catholic believers, and it almost disappears in the national political field. Those who accept it do so because of their political opinions, not because of the pope’s religious position.

### *Symbolic debts*

In expanding the idea of economic exchange to other spheres of social life, Bourdieu was interested in unveiling how forms of symbolic capital conceal social inequality. He focused on how that inequality is produced and reproduced through the accumulation and monopolization of the resources in dispute in the field. His primary focus was the specialists in the field who monopolize the resource in dispute.

In analysing these interviews, I focused on the non-specialists. And in doing so I recognized that it's important to think not just in terms of symbolic capital but also symbolic debts—arrears that make the holder of that capital accountable for the inequality. Some respondents consider the accumulated capital of the Catholic Church to be dues. For example, Ainhoa (Catholic) holds the pope personally responsible for not having distributed the Vatican's wealth.

'How is it possible that there is a pope dressed in white in his car saying, "Oh my brothers don't kill each other," in that filthy rich Vatican City! I sound like Maradona<sup>ii</sup> talking! And then you see, he goes to Africa and touches the head of a malnourished boy ... I couldn't do that! And then goes and sits at the table! I would have made the kid sit at the table, took what is mine and told him "eat with me".'

Respondents also question the procedures to appoint a pope. Laughing, Nicolas (Non-Affiliated) said, 'I mean, if you became the pope of the Catholic Church, it's already a very sad thing'. Non-specialists like Nicolas see the election of the pope as an opaque process, contaminated with politics. The conclave that appointed him followed the institutional rules. However, the very nature of the procedure (a *con clave*, Latin for 'locked away') fosters suspicion that behind the scenes there is a fight for power:<sup>iii</sup> As

Gloria (Non-Affiliated) put it,

‘I don’t understand what dark thing is behind this appointment of Bergoglio as pope. Like he is now pope and became “Francis”, a peaceful guy, a man of reconciliation and mercy ... I don’t get it. Where is he going with it? ... I have no [expletive] idea what he has done in his life, how he became pope, what did he promise. I just don’t like him’.

In their responses, both Nicolas and Gloria reveal that they feel Francis owes Argentinian society not only institutional but also personal symbolic debts. In their conversations, they referred to two main ‘debts’ owed by the pope: one for the role he played in the ‘Dirty War’, and the other against the struggle for reproductive and sexual rights.

Nicolas mentioned he had heard rumours of Francis’s complicity during the Dirty War.

‘I don’t know his story very well,’ he said, ‘but there were some public accusations that he betrayed some priests during the dictatorship ... Like he was a member of a right-wing Peronist faction, at odds with the priests who were supportive of Liberation Theology -Nothing good can come from there!’

Gloria, for her part, blames the pope for derailing progressive legislation on sexual and reproductive rights in Argentina. She brought the subject up when discussing the same-sex marriage law that was passed in Argentina in 2010. Some people expected the government to pass more progressive laws regarding sexual identity and reproductive rights after that, but it didn’t, and for that Gloria blames the pope. She reflected,

‘Obviously, the Catholic Church was uncomfortable, you see, very

uncomfortable ... and I am not sure what pressure the church put on the government ... I mean, when they were to the point that the Congress would have approved the abortion law, Cristina [former president Fernandez de Kirchner] went to visit Bergoglio, they became friends—and no abortion law was approved ... I don't know what happened in that visit, but she came back and that was it.'

In sum, although Francis can use his religious capital efficaciously in some fields, he carries some symbolic debts that mean he cannot use it well in other fields. The non-specialists we talked to perceived some of those debts as institutional, as when the Church is perceived to be making claims for the poor without distributing its own property, or to be interfering in the public square while being a 'dark' institution. But our respondents perceived other debts to be personal, stemming from Francis's rumoured involvement with state terrorism, or his rumoured lobbying abilities against progressive legal initiatives. These symbolic debts conceal economic, institutional, and political inequality, and respondents hold Francis responsible for paying them off—which makes it harder, of course, for Francis to transubstantiate his religious capital in Argentina's political field.

## **Discussion**

Bourdieu developed most of his religious sociology by studying the French episcopacy. Because he looked at it from the centre and the top (Bourdieu and Saint Martin, 1982), he was able to identify the internal struggle of the bishops, but he assumed that non-specialists, as mere consumers of the sacred, simply did as they were instructed by the elite. In this study, I built on this work by adopting the categories that Bourdieu

developed but then expanding them to explore religion from the margins, a regional Latin American city, and the bottom, respondents of lower socioeconomic status.

I chose this sample of non-specialists because theoretically they should be dispossessed of agency and therefore should be likely to accept religious capital when mobilized in other fields. But that's not what emerged from our interviews. Instead, our respondents tended to de-naturalize religious power, criticize the inequality hidden in it, and denounce the domination it represents.

Bourdieu helps us to understand the nature of Francis's religious capital. Because Jorge Bergoglio is the pope—a religious specialist who has more than one billion religious followers worldwide—he has inherited religious capital. In addition to that, he has accumulated more capital through his personal efforts as pope, among them his focus on renewing the church, ministering to the poor, and establishing personal closeness to ordinary believers. He is perceived as authentic and free from institutional pressures, a figure who is challenging the monopoly of the specialists of the Roman Curia in favour of the non-specialists. Non-specialists legitimise this effort for renewal, and they perceive that he is putting his religious capital at stake in that struggle. That investment pays off; many respondents approve of it.

Respondents are able to discern when, where, and how religious capital is efficacious in other social fields. They appreciate that the pope is risking his religious capital when he stands for the poor by criticizing the economic system. In this context, his capital transubstantiates well—some respondents feel he is 'one of us.' They have no agency in the global economic field, but when Francis makes pronouncements about economic inequality, they feel he is speaking their minds and giving them a voice. In this

respect, Antonio (Non-Affiliated) sees him as a ‘revolutionary’, because he is using religious capital to de-legitimize economic domination.

Non-Catholic respondents endorsed Francis’s efforts in this field, even though they set limits on what he is able to do. They don’t allow him to use his religious capital as efficaciously as Catholics do (because Evangelicals believe him to worships images, and non-affiliated respondents dislike the church’s interventions in the public realm), but they still appreciate his advocacy for the poor.

Significantly, in this article we observe respondents setting limits on Francis’s symbolic power, which makes clear that that poor non-specialists have more agency than is often assumed. This is clear in how they think about symbolic debts that reduce his religious capital, or at least complicate his use of it. Some debts are about economic inequality (the wealth of the Vatican) while others are claims about institutional disparities (who elects a pope). In both cases, these debts challenge two assets of his personal religious capital: that he is ‘closer to the poor’ and that he was ‘supernaturally’ appointed. He also holds personal debts related to political inequalities (his lobbying capabilities used to delay gender rights but misused during the dirty war), that complicate the mobilization of his religious capital. These debts jeopardize the mobilization of his religious capital into the political sphere. The key issue here is that the nature of these debts challenges the people’s empowerment. His personal debts (the perception of him as a lobbyist) threaten the ability of the ordinary person to deal with the government, while the institutional ones have to do with the lack of transparency of an institution that wants to have a voice in the public sphere. In rejecting the symbolic efficacy of religious capital in these situations, and claiming for debts cancellation, respondents are exercising their

agency in the field.

In studying how specialists develop and maintain religious capital, Bourdieu links the efficacy of the capital to the position in the field. But in this non-specialist sample, symbolic efficacy derives from negotiations. There is inequality in the distribution of power, of course, but not as much as the theory assumes; laity have agency. They exercise power over Francis's religious capital in three main ways: *legitimizing* (e.g., his renewal plans), *sacralising* (e.g., stressing the value of human life against financial interests), and *setting limits* (e.g., not accepted in the political field). Non-specialists, in other words, have the power to delineate the borders of the religious field, which in turn determines how efficaciously Francis can use his religious capital in that field. In Argentina, they acknowledge its efficacy in the global economy but not in local politics, where Francis's main religious assets (his program of renewal, the sense that he is 'one of us', and his care for the poor) are lost. This field has its own dynamics, and within it even some Catholics refuse to accept the pope's religious authority.

The respondents in this study demonstrate clearly that religious non-specialist individuals exercise a considerable amount of power in the religious field. They are not passive consumers, nor are they uniformly obedient perfunctory followers of religious specialists. Instead, they are critically aware and reflexive. They have the agency to critically assess Francis's religious capital. We see respondents holding agency on the sacred, the primary resource of the religious field. They sacralise and de-sacralise, exercising an agency that has constraints as any human agency, but has not been taken away from them.

## Conclusion

The limits of this study are many. For reasons discussed in the methods section, the sample only includes individuals of lower socioeconomic status, and its results can't be applied to Latin America in general or other urban populations. Further research might include middle and upper-socioeconomic status respondents, and samples from other societies. However, the study does provide a thick description of the agency of non-specialists and the struggle of a religious leader to mobilize religious capital across fields. This is mostly an exploratory study about the conditions in which religious capital can (or cannot) transubstantiate.

The analysis shows that it is not accurate to take for granted the influence of the pope's statements on his followers. Francis does not hold unlimited religious power over his followers. We see that his religious capital is based upon his ability to renew the Catholic Church. This is a key asset of his religious capital. However, the expectation that he has this power can become a threat to his efficacy in other fields. If he cannot impose a new habitus within the religious field, then his symbolic power as critic of capitalism, for example, might depreciate. The process may even become circular: by intervening regularly in the local political field, he may diminish his capital in the religious field.

Finally, this study makes clear that non-specialists retain agency even under "unfavourable" conditions in which they appear to have very little power. Given the predominance of Catholics and other Christians in the sample, one might well expect that the pope—a widely admired specialist with more than a billion followers who has vast institutional and personal religious capital—might monopolize the religious field and use

freely his religious capital in other fields. Among our respondents, that turns out to be the case in the global economic field—but not in the local political field. This is a striking finding. Despite the pope's position in the religious field, non-specialist believers in Argentina turn out to keep agency on the resource in dispute and on the definition of the field.

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<sup>i</sup> The interviews were conducted after the presidential election of October 2015. In a runoff in November 2015, Mauricio Macri, the candidate that proposed neo liberal measures won over Daniel Scioli, the Peronist candidate who proposed to keep most of the left-wing measures established by Cristina Kirchner. In Córdoba, more than 70 percent of the electorate voted for Mauricio Macri. He assumed the presidency in December 2015 and in February 2016 he visited the pope for the first time. Francis's reception was cold and short, lasting about twenty minutes. In contrast, he received former president Cristian de Kirchner five times in warmer meetings, according to the media, that lasted for more than an hour.

<sup>ii</sup> Diego Maradona is a famous Argentinian soccer player, retired many years ago. In July 2000, he said that he stopped believing because when he entered into the Vatican, "I saw the golden roof. And I said to myself, how can you be such a motherf\* living under a golden roof and then go to the poor countries and kiss the kids with a big belly like that. I stop believing because I saw it." <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/2000/00-07/00-07-11/pag13.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> The process to elect a pope is beyond the scope of this paper. Without neglecting the partisan struggles with in a Conclave (Wilde, 2004), I just state that Jorge Bergoglio was appointed following the rules.

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