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# The Chilean Military after Antuco: Shortcomings of a Post-Secular Discourse

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**Abstract:** In their two hundred years of existence, the Chilean armed forces have had a close relationship with the Catholic faith, especially with a local version of the Virgin Mary (Virgen del Carmen), who is held as the patroness of the military. After its greatest tragedy in peacetime, when 44 soldiers—half of them Christian evangelicals—died buried in the snows of the Antuco volcano, the army and other branches of the military felt compelled to add Protestant chaplaincies to their repertoire of religious assistance, hitherto reserved for Catholics. This has been understood as a move towards a more egalitarian and inclusive understanding of religious freedom, but also as opposing exclusivist versions of liberal neutrality, in which the state fulfils its duty by taking religion out of the public sphere altogether. According to the times' intellectual climate, the Chilean authorities have been framing these developments—not only in the military, but elsewhere—as the embodiment of a post-secular strategy, in which religion (all religion) should be welcomed back into public life and state institutions. This article presents five concerns with this chosen strategy: (a) whether inclusive secularism is a practical impossibility, since there is no way to accommodate all religious and non-religious expressions; (b) whether a post-secular narrative is adequate for states that have not gone through the previous (secular) phase; (c) whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are adequate in countries without religious pluralism; (d) whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are not actually disparaging for non-religious people; (e) whether sponsored religious expressions and practices within public institutions put undue pressure on dissenters. This way, I offer the case of the Chilean armed forces as a proxy to illuminate the normative problems that an incipient process of growing religious pluralism and a move towards religious egalitarianism, framed as a post-secular discourse, faces in hegemonically Catholic countries.

**Keywords:** religion; military; church and state; post-secularism; Latin America

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On 18 May 2005, 474 conscripts of the Chilean army attempted to walk 28 km along the side of the Antuco volcano, in spite of terrible weather conditions. Most of the soldiers were only teenagers. As a storm struck, the conscripts were completely disoriented by a *viento blanco* (whiteout) of swirling and frozen snow. Although most of them were able to hike out or hole up in shelters, 44 conscripts and one sergeant died of hypothermia or were buried in the mountains. As the whole country mourned and criminal investigations were announced, the army's high command arranged a massive funeral according to the Catholic rite—as the protocol established. However, nearly half of the conscripts were Christian evangelicals, which led their families to claim religious discrimination. This fact was not surprising: according to the 2002 census, one in four military personnel professed a Protestant creed—mainly Pentecostals, Methodists and Baptists, all of which I refer to interchangeably as

evangelicals or Protestants.<sup>1</sup> As reported, these soldiers understood their faith as almost clandestine within a traditionally Catholic organization such as the army (Escobar 2009). Since the tragedy, evangelical spokesmen have invoked the Antuco case at every opportunity to argue for a more robust policy of religious inclusion, especially within public institutions. In 2008, the first evangelical chaplain was officially appointed in the Chilean army. The other branches of the military—the navy and the air force—followed suit. This was not an isolated policy, but it has been interpreted as part of a broader policy in which state institutions were purposefully made more inclusive to non-Catholic denominations, especially through the appointment of chaplaincies, the official celebration of religious festivities, and the display of religious symbols in government buildings (Bellolio 2019).

This paper agrees that the way in which Chilean authorities—in general—and the Chilean military—specifically—have framed these policies corresponds to a more egalitarian and non-discriminative understanding of religious freedom, which is already novel in the context of an historically mono-religious country. Likewise, the paper locates these policies and their justification within a so-called post-secular narrative, in which all religious expressions are (said to be) welcomed *back* into the public sphere. In this sense, in a context of growing religious pluralism, it distinguishes between a strategy of religious egalitarianism, inclusive laicism and post-secularism, on the one hand, and a strategy of religious neutrality, exclusive laicism and traditional secularism, on the other hand. The paper then presents five concerns with the former strategy, chosen by the Chilean military: (a) whether inclusive secularism is a practical impossibility since there is no way to accommodate all religious and non-religious expressions; (b) whether a post-secular narrative is adequate for states that have not gone through the previous (secular) phase; (c) whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion into the public sphere—are adequate in countries without religious pluralism; (d) whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are not actually disparaging for non-religious people; (e) whether sponsored religious expressions and practices within public institutions put undue pressure on dissenters. All in all, the article offers the case of the Chilean military as a proxy to illuminate the normative problems that a process of growing religious pluralism, a move towards religious egalitarianism, articulated as a post-secular discourse, face in hegemonically Catholic countries.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 describes the way in which the Chilean military has been historically and currently related to different forms of Catholic religiosity, especially Marian devotion. Section 2 depicts the broader egalitarian strategy that fosters the inclusion of alternative religious expressions in the public sphere, as a way of “inclusive pluralism” that is consistent with contemporary post-secular narratives. It also shows how this strategy conflicts with other secular principles associated with the liberal tradition. Section 3 details the five abovementioned concerns with the post-secular strategy adopted by the Chilean authorities, in general, and the Chilean military after Antuco, specifically.

## 1. Catholicism in the Chilean Military

A few weeks after the Antuco tragedy, visibly moved, the (then) Commander-in-chief of the Chilean army, Juan Emilio Cheyre, told the press: “I dressed the first dead body that we found, I put my socks on him, my underpants, my shirt . . . I made upon him the Holy Cross with my medal of the Virgen del Carmen” (quoted in Zapata 2009, p. 30) Translation is mine. However, as it was soon-after discovered, the ill-starred soldier was a Christian evangelical, whose local church does not celebrate

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<sup>1</sup> At a national level, the 2002 census showed that 70% of the population declared themselves to be Catholics, while 15% belonged to Protestant denominations. Atheists and agnostics were at 8.3%. By 2019, other surveys—such as *Latinobarómetro* and *Encuesta Nacional Bicentenario*—show that Catholics have fell to 45%, Evangelicals are between 11% and 18%, while Chileans with no religion -including atheists and agnostic- rose between 32% and 38%. Arguably, the rapid decline of Catholicism in Chile is linked to the multiple cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by the clergy, that have come to light in recent years.

the deeds of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let alone the Virgen del Carmen, which is a Chileanized version particularly venerated in the army.<sup>2</sup> Although this Marian cult can be traced back to the 17th century as an Augustinian import, the Virgen del Carmen's status as a national icon was earned during the Independence Wars that the Latin American nations fought against Spain. According to the legend, the Argentinian *libertador* José de San Martín chose the Virgen del Carmen as protector and patroness of the liberation of the Americas, while ordering his troops to swear fidelity to her. In 1817, the Chilean founding father Bernardo O'Higgins proclaimed the Virgen del Carmen as patroness and high general of the incipient Chilean army. In the exact site where independence was finally won in 1818, a vast temple in her honour was later built. This temple receives thousands of pilgrims every year. During the Pacific War against Peru and Bolivia, in the late 19th century, the Chilean military also entrusted its fate to the Virgen del Carmen. The Chilean Navy hero Arturo Prat was found dead in a Peruvian ship wearing a devotional scapular with her image, which he also encouraged onto his crew. After the Pacific War, Manuel Baquedano, the general who led the Chilean army into Lima and to the final victory, handed his sword before the image of the Virgin of Carmen, adding that he did not win the crucial battle, "but my lady of Carmen, who inspired me to execute actions that I would not have ordered otherwise" (quoted in Ramírez 1948, p. 200) <sup>Translation is mine</sup>. Though some of these events have not been verified by historians, they remain part of the local Catholic tradition.

More recently, the dictatorship that took place in Chile between 1973 and 1990 under the rule of Augusto Pinochet gave this Marian adoration a boost, both inside and out of the army. In fact, "the figure of Jesus was pretty much non-existent in the self-legitimizing discursive production of the authoritarian regime" (Lagos and Chacón 1987, p. 30) <sup>Translation is mine</sup>. As the former military vicar José Joaquín Matte stressed, the *coup d'état* that interrupted the Chilean democracy was to be interpreted as a "second independence" from Marxism, only made possible because thousands of citizens prayed the rosary and asked for the Virgin Mary's intervention (Lagos and Chacón 1987). This is not to say that the Catholic Church as such, led by the Archbishopric of Santiago, were sympathizers of Pinochet's dictatorship. Mostly, they were on the side of the victims of human rights violations, and provided a political space for critics of the military regime (Sigmund 1986). It was only natural that the military vicariate and the rest of the Church developed a tense relationship, if not one of conflict. Some people even referred to a "parallel Catholic Church" within the military (Lagos and Chacón 1987). This parallel Catholic Church claimed the Virgen del Carmen as a symbol of its own. This has not changed substantially in recent decades, under successive democratic governments. According to the current information found in the website of the Military Bishopric, the Virgen del Carmen is still invoked in Chile as "Mother and Queen, Patroness and Sworn General of the Armed Forces ... [all] titles conferred as special recognition for her protection throughout our national history" (Verdugo 2008, pp. 9–10) <sup>Translation is mine</sup>. As on every July 16, the army's official Twitter account recently posted: "For 209 years, we commemorate our Patroness and General of the Armed Forces of Chile, the Holy Virgen del Carmen, heritage of our history and spiritual guide of our soldiers" (Ejercito\_Chile 2019). In sum, it is hard to argue that non-Marian religious denominations feel at home within the Chilean military.

Beyond this emphasized Marian devotion within the military, Catholicism has been the prevalent religious force throughout Chilean history—as in practically all of Latin America— permeating its society and institutions. The state of Chile remained officially attached to the Catholic Church until 1925, when a brand-new constitution signed by President Arturo Alessandri disestablished it, through an agreement with the Vatican itself. Although the government was then constitutionally separated from the Church, it did not become secular all the way. The Catholic Church retained its position of political and cultural influence for decades afterwards. Only very recently, when a number of sexual abuses

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<sup>2</sup> In truth, the Virgen del Carmen corresponds to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the title given to the Virgin Mary in her role as patroness of the Carmelite Order. This denomination comes from its original veneration on Mount Carmel, near Haifa.

perpetrated by the local clergy became public, has this influence been undermined by the people's lack of trust. Nonetheless, Catholics remain privileged in many areas of public life. Even now, for instance, judges-to-be must swear "by God our Lord and by these Holy Gospels", while Congressional sessions open "In the name of God" (Bellolio 2019, pp. 233–34) <sup>Translation is mine</sup>. However, as a process of cultural secularization is ongoing—at least in the sense explored by Charles Taylor (2007): belief and unbelief are equiprobable—the military stands out as a redoubt wherein these changes have been slower, and to some extent, resisted.

There are competing hypotheses concerning this resistance. To begin with, a bicentennial tradition of institutional veneration of Marian symbols and celebration of Catholic rites. Next, a broadly conservative culture, which is even more conservative in the Navy. For instance, high officers need to be married and be perceived as family men (Diaz 2006). Until 2012, when an anti-discrimination law was enacted, homosexuals were unofficially barred from the military. According to an internal poll, 96.6% of the military rejected the presence of gays in the army (ABC 2012). Defending the ban, a congressman from the ruling coalition argued that "if the army welcomes homosexuals, our country will be easily invaded by Peru and Bolivia" (El Mostrador 2012). Although the situation has since improved for the LGTB population, cases of discrimination are still reported. In turn, resistance to more ecumenical forms of religiosity may be understood as classism, since most Christian evangelicals (disparagingly called *canutos*) come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Escobar 2009). Giving credence to each of these hypotheses, journalistic research has unveiled an internal instruction showing that the army's recruiting process discriminated on the basis of socioeconomic origin, sexual orientation and religious belief (Contreras 2012). Hence, even in the face of cultural secularization, liberalization of social norms and ecumenical pressures across the nation, Catholicism has managed to stay the primary moral authority within the Chilean military forces.

Turning to religious assistance, the Chilean army boasts of having the oldest chaplaincy in the world, established through a concordat-like agreement between the state and the Vatican in 1911 (López-Sidro 2016). Although this was not a concordat in a strict sense, it is nonetheless a concordat-like agreement to the extent that it represents a bilateral agreement between sovereign international actors (Precht 2006). Among other stipulations, it established that the head of the military Vicariate would have the rank of brigadier general, that he would be appointed by mutual agreement between the Holy See and the President of the Republic, and that he and his assistant chaplains would receive a salary—"according to their dignity"—from the public treasury (Precht 2006, p. 160). The organization of this military vicariate did not suffer modifications when the state of Chile was constitutionally separated from the church in 1925. The Catholic Church thus monopolized all forms of religious assistance within the military throughout the century (Tórtora 2012). Parliamentary efforts to incorporate other religious denominations to provide spiritual assistance began in the late 1960s. The Catholic opposition to those efforts argued that 1911's concordat-like agreement could not be changed unilaterally. This argument was already employed in 1932, when a socialist government attempted to suppress the military vicar's salary. But even the new constitutional order was deemed insufficient to derogate an international treaty (Precht 2006). In the seventies and eighties, when most evangelical leaders supported Pinochet's regime in the hope of getting Protestant chaplaincies in the military, the situation did not improve for their lot. It only became more auspicious with the so-called Law of Cults, enacted in 1999. This norm was explicitly devised, among other aims, to further the inclusion of non-Catholic faiths into the social and political life of the country. Hundreds of evangelical congregations were able to legalize themselves, and hence to benefit from a status that, until then, only Catholic organizations had—such as tax exemptions and the right to run schools with public funds. Likewise, the Law of Cults prescribed the right of every citizen to receive religious assistance from his/her own faith, wherever he/she is, including jails, detention centers, hospitals, and the armed forces. However, Catholic resistance to inaugurating non-Catholic chaplaincies within the military persisted, grounded again on the legal argument that an international treaty—such as the concordat-like agreement from 1911—is never affected by a domestic law (Precht 2006). This might

explain why, although the Law of Cults enabled non-Catholic religious assistance in the military, this was not immediately implemented. Until Antuco rushed things—it became too evident that the default position in the army favoured Catholics to the detriment of other religious denominations. A hidden discrimination became publicly visible, whilst political pressure from Protestant quarters intensified.<sup>3</sup> The first Christian evangelical chaplain was finally appointed in 2008. In May 2011, the first evangelical chapel was inaugurated at the military academy.

## 2. From the Egalitarian Principle to Inclusive Laicism and the Post-Secularist Narrative

It might be argued that the Antuco tragedy pushed the Chilean military to finally make some progress on religious freedom and equality: on the one hand, its evangelical personnel acquired the freedom to profess their cult within the specific conditions of seclusion that characterize military life; on the other hand, the possibility of exercising this religious freedom was equated with the freedom that Catholics already had, through the establishment of their own chaplaincy. Leaving some empirical cases of persistent discrimination aside, this seems like a fair assessment. Following Robert Audi's (1989, 2000) theory of institutional separation between Church and state, the military started to deliver on both the *libertarian* and the *egalitarian* principle. In Audi's terms, the libertarian principle "says that the state must permit the practice of any religion, though within certain limits" (2000, p. 32). Protestantism is surely within those limits. In this sense, it is a principle that recognizes a negative liberty, as it affirms "the inappropriateness of interference with that freedom by governmental institutions" (Audi 2000, p. 32). Its underlying core value is tolerance, since it does not imply state approval. However, religious liberty is not only about internal belief, but also about external acts of worship and active or passive engagement in practices and rituals. Thus, a mere right to negative religious liberty may not be enough, under the specific conditions of military life in which the private sphere is considerably shrunken and voluntary decisions are severely constrained. As Nahshon Perez has recently argued, "applying the model of non-interference to the military means a de-facto denial of the capacity of soldiers to practice their religion" (Perez 2019, p. 3). That is why it was imperative to move towards the egalitarian principle. According to Audi, this "says that the state may not give preference to one religion over another" (2000, p. 33). Its underlying core value is impartiality. Offering religious services and sponsored rites to one set of believers (Catholics) but not to others (Protestants) is a certain expression of state partiality. Audi's third principle is the principle of *neutrality*, which compels the state to treat religion and non-religion in an even-handed way, meaning "that the state should neither favour nor disfavour religion (or the religious) *as such*, that is, give positive or negative preference to institutions or persons simply because they are religious" (Audi 2000, p. 33). I shall say something about this later on. In the meantime, it should be remarked that this move towards a more "positive" understanding of religious freedom is not confined to the military, but it should be read as a broad effort by Chilean state institutions—traditionally linked to Catholicism—to realize Audi's two first principles, and especially the egalitarian principle: aware of the historical privileges of the Catholic Church within public and social life, the state actively opens public spaces—hitherto reserved to Catholicism—to religious minorities. As an example, Bellolio (2019) points to the extension of religious services and the display of religious symbols inside the governmental palace (commonly known as *La Moneda*). Representatives of both Protestantism and Judaism joined *La Moneda* in the early 2000s. In terms of religious festivities, *La Moneda* commemorates Christmas every December, deploying a sizable nativity scene in one of its courtyards. In the last few years, both Protestants and Jewish festivals have also had their celebration day inside the governmental palace, with the President of the Republic attending both. Before 2008, too, all religious holidays in the calendar

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<sup>3</sup> It is a good question whether these changes were nonetheless inevitable, given the growing clout of evangelical denominations in Chile. To my mind, without Antuco, they would have been delayed and resisted further by Catholic high officials and political authorities. Antuco rushed things in the sense that only then Chileans became aware of the victims' relatives' plight, that is, burying their dead according to an alien creed.

were Catholic. That year, a national holiday honouring evangelical and Protestant Churches was officially inaugurated.

It might be argued that these innovations were not carried forward to comply with Audi's egalitarian principle, but rather as a response to the growing political influence of certain religious minorities. In the case of Christian evangelicals, they are currently perceived as a strong electoral force—as they have proved to be in many corners of Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Presidential candidates—especially right-wing ones—usually feel compelled to abide by their conservative agenda. It is difficult to know whether Chilean authorities are attracted to the normative appeal of the egalitarian principle, or are rather granting more spaces and benefits to Protestant churches because of their growing political weight. It is safe to argue that the case of the military is but one expression of a phenomenon that encompasses other institutions of the country's social and political life. The case of the military serves as a proxy to illuminate similar debates about the role of religion in the public sphere. Here, the crucial question is whether the gradual inclusion of religious minorities in the name of equality and non-discrimination can be reconciled with liberal notions of state's laicism and neutrality towards religious matters.<sup>5</sup>

In this sense, I distinguish two ways in which the liberal state is said to be politically secular: an *exclusive* and an *inclusive* view. Following Faviola Rivera-Castro (2017), the *exclusive* view requires the plain exclusion of religious contents and expressions from the public sphere. In Rivera-Castro's account, this "traditional view" was adopted since the late 19th century across Hispanic America, "not originally motivated by the political problems posed by religious pluralism or by a subjective attitude of hostility towards religion as such [but it] constituted a response to an ideological and political conflict between two institutions: the state and the dominant church" (2017, p. 45). In other words, religion—meaning Catholicism—had to retreat from public life if the nascent sovereign state was to assert its primacy.<sup>6</sup> In turn, the—more recent—*inclusive* view of laicism "ceases to call for limits to the expression of religious content in some areas of public life, and begins to welcome different types of religious expression in all social domains" (Rivera-Castro 2017, p. 44). In a similar fashion, Wibren van der Burg distinguishes between two basic versions of state neutrality towards religious matters. On the one hand, *exclusive* neutrality contends that "the state should be completely blind to religious differences, and every religious expression, in terms of arguments, organizations and symbols, should be excluded from the public sphere" (Van der Burg 2011, p. 4). This resonates, according to the author, with the French model of *laïcité*. On the other hand, *inclusive* neutrality "maintains that, both in political discussions and in laws and government policies, there is room to take account of religious differences. Citizens are free to express and organize themselves in the public sphere on a religious basis and the state supports some religious activities" (Van der Burg 2011, p. 4). Inclusive neutrality can be further divided into *proportional* neutrality and *compensatory* neutrality (Pierik and Burg 2014): while the former means that the state should make room for religious expressions in accordance with

<sup>4</sup> Pentecostal Christians, who make up a quarter of the Brazilian electorate, were recently crucial in Jair Bolsonaro's victory. See (Hunter and Power 2019).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I use laicism and secularism as interchangeable terms, since they refer to the same broad idea of institutional separation between church and state, and even more broadly to the autonomy of the political (temporal power) from the spiritual (eternal power). Most debates around political *secularism* in Anglo-Saxon literature are framed as debates around political *laicism* in a Latin American context.

<sup>6</sup> As Rivera-Castro acknowledges, "the liberal regimes did not apply this policy strictly", but, at least in principle, and if consistently carried out, "the policy of religious neutrality would lead to the invisibility of religion in public institutions and in official discourse" (Rivera-Castro 2017, p. 47). This might have been the "traditional view" in Mexico—Rivera-Castro's prime example- and other Latin American countries, but it was not—at least not straightforwardly—in Chile, wherein a policy of exclusive neutrality within public institutions was neither the principle nor the practice. A model of *laïcité* such as the French was never implemented. This is not to argue that Chile had no political and intellectual movements that pushed for a secular state in the 19th century, but the results were more nuanced. According to the historian Sol Serrano, Mexico was the exceptional case, since there "Catholicism and the Church were not only violently expelled from the state but from civil society too. In the rest of Latin-America, and certainly in Chile, the secularization of the state did not mean absence from the public sphere" (Serrano 2008, p. 23) Translation is mine.

their share of the population, the latter means that the state should give smaller religious groups more than its proportional share as a way of levelling the playing field.

As recently underscored by [Levrau and Loobuyck \(2020\)](#), both the inclusive and the exclusive understanding of neutrality are, in principle, legitimate options from a liberal perspective. As I have presented them here, both the *inclusive* and the *exclusive* view preclude religious discrimination. Taking together, their creed is *all or none*. But once they are disaggregated, inclusive laicism stands for *all*, whereas exclusive laicism stands for *none*. The inclusive view is grounded on the empirical fact of religious pluralism, on the one hand, and the normative conviction that treating citizens with respect entails offering them the chance to express their faith beyond the private realm, on the other. The exclusive view, in turn, is also grounded on two arguments: on the one hand, the practical impossibility of accommodating *all* religious expressions; on the other hand, the difficulty of representing non-religion in the same way. The inclusive view, in this sense, matches Audi's egalitarian principle: here, the state does not favour nor harm any religion in particular, but it treats all of them in a similar way within public institutions. Exclusive laicism, as understood here, is closer to Audi's principle of neutrality: in order to show respect to non-religious people, the only way to remain neutral is to exclude religious expressions from the public sphere.

In light of these conceptual categories, the case of the Chilean military is best represented by the inclusive view. In a context of growing religious pluralism, with Catholicism in decline and a sizeable evangelical minority, the chosen strategy has been to welcome religious expressions within the public sphere. This strategy might still be defended as neutral in a specific (inclusive) sense: The state is not endorsing a particular religion, only recognizing religion as such a role in public life. The fact that other minoritarian faiths and non-religious people are not offered the same resources—such as religious assistance through fully integrated chaplaincies—is not presented as a *real* problem. Regarding the former, religious minorities other than Protestant in Chile are just tiny, or far from interested in a military career, such as the pacifist Jehovah Witnesses. Regarding the latter, atheists, agnostic and other types of non-religious people do not seem to need the same kind of spiritual assistance. This way, the Chilean military can defend its after Antuco policy by appealing to a principle of inclusive laicism that is still neutral from a liberal perspective.

However, as suggested, while aligned with Audi's egalitarian principle, this policy of inclusive neutrality is not necessarily consistent with his neutrality principle. The latter says that "the state should neither favour nor disfavour religion (or the religious) *as such*, that is, give positive or negative preference to institutions or persons simply because they are religious" (2000, p. 33). Thus, whilst the egalitarian principle calls for state neutrality *among* religions, the neutrality principle calls for state neutrality *towards* religion. State institutions in Chile, as argued, are slowly moving to ensure neutrality *among* religions, but not necessarily to ensure neutrality *towards* religion. After celebrating both Christmas and Hanukah in the same week in *La Moneda*, the then-President Sebastián Piñera stated:

"There was a time when it seemed that public authorities could not speak of God . . . [but] this government is not neutral with respect to spirituality: This government strongly believes, as I strongly believe both as President as well as a believer . . . in the value of religious spirituality, and that is why we seek to promote it and speak of God". (quoted in [Cooperativa 2011](#))

As explicitly acknowledged, from the government perspective, (any) religious spirituality is better than none. Although the state does not promote a specific faith, it can—and perhaps should—promote religiosity as such. Presidential God-talk in Chile is thus ecumenical: it does not appeal to the god of Catholicism alone, but to any god ([Bellolio 2014, 2019](#)). This kind of God-talk, while consistent with the egalitarian principle, is inconsistent with a principle of strict neutrality. But this statement is interesting in another way: it assumes a change in the way public institutions and officials deal with religious matters. Seemingly echoing [Casanova \(1994\)](#) grand thesis, Piñera argues that there was a time in which religion was banned from the public sphere, but we are over it. This way, he challenges the Enlightened notion that whereas religion is the "conservative" idea, secularism is the "progressive"

idea. As if one could go *back to the future*, recognizing the role of religion in the public sphere should not be understood as a setback, but as a welcomed development.

This turn has been characterized as a transition from a secular to a post-secular era. Although the latter is a contested concept, post-secularism “may signify a scepticism and/or antagonism toward secularism in recognition of the persistence or ‘resurgence’ of religion” (Rectenwald et al. 2015, p. 8). As Rudas (2020) points out, the standard secularization thesis conflates an empirical and a normative claim: while the former heralded that religion would recede with the advent of modernity, scientific knowledge and capitalism, the latter stated that, as a consequence, religion *ought to* fade out from public life, especially as a rightful justification of political power. Post-secularism may be thus interpreted as twofold as well: on the one hand, as an empirical confirmation that religion, in all its complexity, is alive and well, and on the other hand, that it ought to be accommodated in public life—including state institutions—as it constitutes an inexhaustible source of individual and collective meaning. Post-secularism thus “accords to religion an enduring value, a place at the table in politics, a voice in the public sphere . . . ” (Rectenwald et al. 2015, p. 8). Towering figures such as Jurgen Habermas (2006), Charles Taylor (1998) and the very-late John Rawls (2005) of the revisited version of public reason have been all linked with this post-secular turn.

A detailed treatment of the post-secular thesis is beyond the scope of this paper. For its purposes, this broad-strokes conceptualization is useful to frame the discourse of the Chilean authorities and the historically situated way in which they justify strategies of inclusive laicism and neutrality within public institutions, which range from hosting a diversity of religious festivities in public buildings to the inauguration of non-Catholic chaplaincies in the military and elsewhere. Regarding the military, specifically, it can thus defend its after Antuco policy not only by appealing to a more egalitarian understanding of religious freedom, but also by appealing to a post-secular narrative, in line with the ideas of some of the most important liberal philosophers of the last decades. Having said that policies of inclusive laicism can be legitimate from the standpoint of political liberalism, the question that remains is whether these policies and strategies, covered in a post-secular narrative, are the best way to show all citizens—including members of the armed forces—equal respect, regardless of their religious beliefs.

### 3. Shortcomings of the Post-Secular in the Case of the Chilean Military

To my mind, there are at least five concerns that we should bear in mind in the face of policies of inclusive laicism and allegedly post-secular institutional arrangements. Most of these concerns are context sensitive, but others are not. Some of them may appear as interdependent, while others stand on their own merit. While I present them as a set of plausible concerns, some will suffice as single objections to cast doubt on the adequacy of inclusive laicism and post-secular politics in the case of the Chilean military. I do not claim that these are unsurmountable or invincible: some are stronger than others. But they share a common intuition: against the liberal promise of religious neutrality, the bare inclusion of religious expressions within public institutions is still problematic under certain conditions. In short, these concerns are as follows:

- (a) Whether inclusive secularism is a practical impossibility since there is no way to accommodate all religious and non-religious expressions.
- (b) Whether a post-secular narrative is adequate for states that have not gone through the previous (secular) phase.
- (c) Whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are adequate in countries without religious pluralism.
- (d) Whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are not actually disparaging for non-religious people.
- (e) Whether sponsored religious expressions and practices within public institutions put undue pressure on dissenters.

To begin with (a), this is a well-known objection that seems to apply to all contexts. This “impossibility objection” states that when facing an *all or none* disjunctive, we should go with *none* whenever *all* is impossible in practice. As Rudas points out, “it is virtually impossible for a state to accommodate all worldviews, religious and non-religious. If a state assumes the role of recognizing all moral worldviews then it will *inevitably* fail to respect some, or most, versions of them” (2020, p. 9) <sup>Emphasis is mine</sup>. This is the case in matters of symbolic establishment, wherein “it seems impossible to accommodate on equal grounds both iconographic and iconoclastic religion” (Rudas 2020, p. 9). In the same vein, Van der Burg argues that “it makes perfect sense to prefer exclusive neutrality with regard to religious symbols in the classroom and the courtroom, because it is usually *almost impossible* to construct inclusive religious symbols” (2011, p. 6) <sup>Emphasis is mine</sup>. The case of religious assistance and services within public institutions might be read along the same lines: it might just be impossible to offer them to all theistic and non-theistic, religious and non-religious denominations. As mentioned, *La Moneda* celebrates Christmas, Hanukah and a brand-new national holiday for evangelical and Protestant Churches, but it does not celebrate Ramadan or the Darwin Day. So, it is not really *all* instead of *none*, but more like *some* instead of *all*. This extends to the military, too. While it is true that some religious groups—such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, who disapprove of any relation with warfare—will not apply to the military, there might be other religious and non-religious sensitivities that will not—and maybe simply cannot—be addressed through the kind of services that a chaplaincy provides. In this sense, Rivera-Castro argues that “it falls on public institutions and officials to prove that they offer equal support and recognition to all religious institutions”. However, as she acknowledges, “the requirement that public institutions and officials prove that they offer equal support and recognition to all religious institutions would be *extremely difficult* to meet . . . especially the case when there is great disparity among the various religious institutions in the power that they wield in society” (Rivera-Castro 2017, p. 55) <sup>Emphasis is mine</sup>. Therefore, a policy that opts for *none* instead of *all* religion is not necessarily grounded on hostility to religion, but on the force of this impossibility objection. While this argument refers to a practical impossibility that might be read as an empirical observation without normative force in political philosophy, it is an empirical impossibility so definitive—in other words, that it *cannot* be otherwise—that “it amounts to a normative argument against the post-secular strategy” (Rudas 2020, p. 9).

Regarding (b), it should be understood as a conceptual inquiry: is it necessary for states to have gone through a secular stage to be called post-secular, once they welcome religion in the public sphere? The answer depends on the extent to which we understand the thesis as an historical development, as a transit through successive phases. As Rajeev Bhargava remarks, “the term ‘a post-secular age’ suggests that we have moved to a condition or perspective after of subsequent to the secular” (2015, p. 109). In this sense, a post-secular narrative only makes sense if religion actually *returns* after being exiled. But what if religion never left? As I have earlier explained, religion—meaning Catholicism—was never banned from the public sphere in Chile, let alone in the Chilean military, as least as it was in Mexico. Despite this fact, Chilean authorities have appropriated Rivera-Castro’s narrative to justify a role for religious spirituality within public institutions, as if we have turned from a (traditional) view in which religion was excluded, to a (new) view in which religion is welcomed in the public sphere. However, if this historical narrative turns out to be inaccurate, as I claim it is, the post-secular discourse breaks down: we cannot be post-secular if we have never been secular in the first place. I am not arguing that post-secularism *must* be understood in a historical way. For instance, Bhargava challenges this understanding. In his view, if the post-secular refers to an ahistorical scenario that claims “the acknowledgment of the continuous presence of . . . multiple religions, the recognition of their positive value, their coexistence with non-religious perspectives, and the imperative that state be designed to cope with and value this plural condition”, then his native India “has always been post-secular” (Bhargava 2015, pp. 110–11). Employed in this way, *always* serves to mark a sense of atemporality. What I argue is that if we take post-secularism as requiring a history of successive phases—one without religion in the public sphere, the next one with religion in the public sphere—then

Chile does not qualify for the label. This does not mean that we should reject Chilean policies of inclusive laicism, since they do not fit into the post-secular narrative as historically conceived. This is not a substantive concern. Chilean policies might be very much like Mexican policies of inclusive laicism and nonetheless only Mexico deserves to be called post-secular, but this is only to the extent that we accept the historical variable to define the transit from the secular to the post-secular. If we do not buy it, this ceases to be a concern.

Now we move to a more context-sensitive concern. Following Rudas (2020), who in turn follows Alessandro Ferrara (2009) and Nadia Urbinati (2010, 2014), I will call it the “lack of pluralism” objection. It states that post-secular political arrangements might be the right choice in liberal democracies that actually enjoy a reasonable degree of religious pluralism, but not necessarily in the case of mono-religious countries; that is, countries in which there is only one historically hegemonic Church. It is based on the distinction between living in liberal societies “in which religious pluralism is both a juridical and a social reality”, and living in “those in which religious pluralism is protected by the law but [it is] not a social reality or an ethical culture that inspires the public reasoning of ordinary citizens” (Urbinati 2010, p. 5). Thus, according to this objection, post-secularist policies might well be suitable in the former case, wherein many religious denominations of a similar size and strength need to compete, bargain and compromise, thus moderating their expectations of influence in the public sphere. In this scenario, there is little to fear by welcoming all religious expressions. On the contrary, post-secular policies are not suitable in contexts without religious pluralism, since the dominant religion does not need to compete nor moderate its expectations to influence politics. Urbinati offers the example of Italy, a liberal democracy with an overwhelming Catholic majority—if not practicing, at least culturally. What Urbinati says for Italy, in which “one religion enjoys a strong majority and pluralism is only predicated in the constitution but is not a lived experience in society” (2010, p. 5), applies to most Latin American countries, including Chile. Being mono-religious, Rudas argue, “there is no pluralist-driven competition in Catholic countries, and therefore they are more likely to reach political deliberations without facing the need to compromise or bargain” (2020, p. 3). In this scenario, once allowed into the public sphere, it becomes too easy for the dominant religion to take advantage of the post-secular discourse to validate its proselytism with public resources. Without a pluralism of faiths, or at least a society in which no religion enjoys a de facto position of primacy, the crucial conditions for post-secular politics are not met.

The same predicament applies for policies sponsored under the banner of inclusive pluralism: in the name of including religious minorities, unless expressly conceived in a compensatory and non-proportional sense, we are giving the dominant religion leeway to fill all available public spaces. Framed in this nomenclature, Van der Burg argues that “situations with an almost homogeneous majority belonging to one dominant religion (such as France or Turkey in the early twentieth century) . . . may need another approach than in contexts with a plurality of minorities (such as in the Netherlands)”, arguing that “in the first context, there may be stronger arguments for exclusive neutrality than in the latter context.” (2011, p. 6). As I have described it, Chile fits the first context. In these cases, insisting on post-secularist discourses and policies of inclusive pluralism policies might end in an “adaptation of the old formula *cuius regio, eius religio*” (Urbinati 2010, p. 18).<sup>7</sup>

The “lack of pluralism” objection is especially forceful in mono-religious countries undergoing what Ferrara has dubbed as the “concordat-distortion”, to wit, countries in which the terms of religious neutrality have not been construed as the people’s right to public autonomy vis-à-vis the different religions, “but as a function of the more or less stable ‘negotiating’ balance achieved by two powers . . . one secular, the state, and the other religious, namely the Catholic Church, always rigorously used in the singular” (2009, p. 88). Ferrara is thinking, again, of Italy, but he acknowledges that

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<sup>7</sup> The slogan *cuius regio, eius religio* (in Latin, “whose realm, his religion”) was coined in the early 17th century to describe the key principle of the Peace of Augsburg, which gave the rulers of kingdoms and imperial estates the right to decide the official faith of the land, and in consequence of his subjects. The choice was reduced to either Catholicism or Protestantism.

this “concordat-distortion” is operative in other milieus as well. [Rudas \(2020\)](#) offers a survey of hegemonically Catholic countries in the Hispano-American zone that are vulnerable to the same distortion. As seen in the case of Chile, attempts to welcome religious minorities—basically, Christian evangelicals—in public institutions were fought back by the Catholic Church and its lay spokesmen in the political arena. They were always the strong negotiating party. In the case of the military, their key argument was the legal validity of an actual concordat-like agreement between the state and the Church, that supposedly guaranteed the exclusivity of the Catholic chaplaincy. Therefore, even a scenario of (timidly) growing religious pluralism should not be treated as actual religious pluralism, at least to the extent that the dominant Church is allowed to mobilize its resources to secure its pre-eminence. Indeed, one of the ways in which the Catholic Church has responded to this new religious pluralism has been promoting a variety of political actions “that would make it more difficult for evangelical Protestants to convert Catholics”, which has required the Church to behave “more as a specialized interest group” ([Gill 2002](#), p. 196). As young soldiers in a seclusion regime are an ideal captive audience, Catholicism does not gladly accept competition, while protecting its interests from a powerful bargaining position.

Question (d) digs into the difference between neutrality *among* religions and neutrality *towards* religion, or between Audi’s egalitarian principle and Audi’s neutrality principle. As acknowledged, by including Protestantism within its repertoire of religious offers, the Chilean military is making some progress regarding the former, but not necessarily regarding the latter. Before, it was fine to be Catholic. Now, it is fine to be Christian, whether Catholic or Protestant. But what about being an atheist? True enough, atheists do not need religious assistance. But if the internal narrative is disparaging against non-believers, it is hard to maintain that the military, as a state institution, lives up to the liberal ideal of religious neutrality. As Audi puts it, “if the state shows preference for religious institutions as such (or for the practice of religion in general), there may well be pressure to adopt a religion, and quite possibly discrimination against those who do not” (2000, p. 37). The only way to assess whether this is the case is attending to the specific context, to official regulations and informal practices, to systematic statements made by political authorities and, in this case, by the military hierarchy. We already met President Piñera’s apparently post-secular ideas regarding the positive value of religious spirituality, but this is not to argue—at least not straightforwardly—that religious unbelief must be politically downplayed, socially discouraged or penalized in any way.<sup>8</sup> In Audi’s account, a failure of even-handedness between religion and non-religions occurs when religious citizens are preferred over non-religious citizens in filling government posts that should be awarded on the basis of merit alone—such as promotions in the military—or when representatives of religious institutions are given statutory roles—such as chaplains in jails and detention centers. So, is the Chilean military discriminating against non-believers?

To answer this question, we should move to the last concern (e): whether religious expressions and practices within public institutions put undue pressure on dissenters, in a way that makes them either feel excluded or forced to join in. In principle, following Cecile Laborde’s “minimal secularism” approach (2017), a liberal state might legitimately endorse religious practices and expressions, as well as forms of symbolic establishment, to the extent that it ensures all citizens equal civic status. This is what Laborde calls the *inclusive* state, one of the four core liberal-democratic values that a minimally secular state should embrace.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the state fails to do this if it associates with one religious identity in a way that send a message of exclusion to dissenters and non-members. In this sense, the potential *wrongness* of religion has nothing to do with its metaphysical reach or its epistemic inaccessibility, but it is akin to the potential *wrongness* of race or cultural identity: it might be socially divisive. Thus, forms of symbolic establishment—such as hailing the Virgen del Carmen as Patroness

<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, according to [Bhargava \(2015\)](#), a truly post-secular approach is premised on the coexistence of religious and non-religious perspectives.

<sup>9</sup> The others are the justifiable state, the limited state and the democratic state. See ([Laborde 2017](#)).

and General of the Armed Forces—are unproblematic from Laborde’s perspective, as long as they are not meant to divide citizens—in this case, soldiers, cadets and members of the military in general—into first and second class. The mere availability of chaplaincies and religious services in the military does not send a message of exclusion to non-Christians and non-believers.

Things are, however, a bit more complicated in the Chilean military. There is a difference between offering religious services to public officials in a regime of seclusion, and promoting religious rites as if they were part of a soldier’s ideal professional training. Although there is no written rule in any branch of the armed forces suggesting that non-believers should not have the same career opportunities than Christian believers, there seems to be an unwritten model of a good soldier that is attached to certain religious virtues, mainly reflected in the reception of sacraments such as Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation, all of which are celebrated and encouraged within the Chilean military. These are presided over by the respective chaplain, and usually attended by hierarchical superiors who refer to these sacraments as components of a comprehensive military formation. In sum, the military sponsors religious ceremonies in an open and committed way, linking the professional qualities of the troop to its faith. This is consistent with the former Commander-in-Chief Humberto Oviedo’s statement when he met the Archbishop of Santiago, offering him “everything the army can do to help in the evangelizing work of the Church” (Iglesia de Santiago 2014) <sup>Translation is mine</sup>. Whether soldiers are free to opt out from this evangelizing work with no retaliation whatsoever is uncertain. Whether their career prospects might be damaged by their refusal to attend masses, receive sacraments and other (theoretically) voluntary services is uncertain too. To what extent religious dissenters or non-religious soldiers and officers are pressed to comply with social patters of religious observance in the military, or are discouraged to apply in the first place, are all questions that call for more empirical research. For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to show that there is plausible concern about a model of a good soldier that is religiously non-neutral, and might configure a message of exclusion to non-Catholics, specifically, and to non-Christians, in general. To the extent that an equal civic status is threatened for religious reasons within the military, the state fails to be inclusive even against Laborde’s requirements for a minimal secularism.

In sum, there are various concerns that can be articulated in the face of a strategy of so-called inclusive laicism and post-secular politics. Some of these concerns, particularly when they are context-sensitive, may be enough to propose an alternative institutional arrangement, along the lines of exclusive laicism and strict neutrality.<sup>10</sup> However, this paper does not necessarily contend that a full-blown policy of *laïcité* and exclusive neutrality is the appropriate institutional arrangement for the Chilean case. Depending on which and how convincing these objections are, specific reasons for exclusive laicism may consequently emerge. Even if these reasons sound theoretically appealing, they may face practical challenges all the same. In sum, the paper does not make a *positive* argument for exclusive neutrality; it presents the *negative* side of the argument by showing the weaknesses of a policy of inclusive laicism as described, and the normative and conceptual shortcomings of the post-secular discourse in the Chilean case.

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<sup>10</sup> With hegemonically Catholic Latin American countries in mind, Rudas has proposed a similar “alternative proposal”, that he calls “laicity as anticlericalism”, which is “characterized by the establishment of an institutional arrangement that strictly separates and excludes religious contents from state institutions” (Rudas 2017, p. 82).

#### 4. Conclusions

In their two hundred years of existence, the Chilean armed forces have had a close relationship with the Catholic faith, especially with a local version of the Virgin Mary (Virgen del Carmen), who is held as the patroness of the military. After its greatest tragedy in peacetime, when 44 soldiers—half of them Christian evangelicals—died buried in the snows of the Antuco volcano, the army and other branches of the military felt compelled to add Protestant chaplaincies to their repertoire of religious assistance, hitherto reserved to Catholics. This has been understood as a move towards a more egalitarian and inclusive understanding of religious freedom, but also as opposing exclusivist versions of liberal neutrality, in which the state fulfils its duty by taking religion out of the public sphere altogether. According with the times' intellectual climate, the Chilean authorities have been framing these developments—not only in the military, but elsewhere—as the embodiment of a post-secular strategy, in which religion (*all* religion) should be welcome back into public life and state institutions. This article presents five concerns with this chosen strategy: (a) whether inclusive secularism is a practical impossibility since there is no way to accommodate all religious and non-religious expressions; (b) whether a post-secular narrative is adequate for states that have not gone through the previous (secular) phase; (c) whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are adequate in countries without religious pluralism; (d) whether post-secular institutional arrangements—which entail welcoming religion in the public sphere—are not actually disparaging for non-religious people; (e) whether sponsored religious expressions and practices within public institutions put undue pressure on dissenters. This way, I offer the case of the Chilean armed forces as a proxy, to illuminate the normative and conceptual problems that an incipient process of growing religious pluralism and a move towards religious egalitarianism, structured as a post-secular discourse, faces in hegemonically Catholic countries.

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