

Politics, religions and (ant)agonism: democratic pluralism vis-à-vis the religious enemy

Política, religiões e (ant)agonismo: o pluralismo democrático em face do inimigo religioso

Gustavo Buss *
Katya Kozicki **

Abstract

The present article examines the interplay of moral and political authority vis-à-vis the growing polarization of the political landscape. The association between religious discourse and conservative forces in the public arena challenges the role of religions in pluralistic societies. We argue that liberal democracy seeks to balance freedom and democracy but never achieves a perfect equilibrium. The article is structured into three sections. First, it discusses the challenges within liberal democratic theory, focusing on Carl Schmitt's critical perspective. We explore the concept of the "enemy" and its implications for rethinking politics as a realm of antagonistic forces. However, the article argues that Chantal Mouffe's perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of conflict as agonism. The subsequent section emphasizes conflicts between religious orders and the rule of law. We draw on Ran Hirschl and Ayelet Shachar's insights to show how specific religious orders challenge constitutionalism by promoting normative claims that oppose the legal framework. At last, the final section explores possible pathways to reevaluate the democratic participation of religious actors in the political arena. We conclude that agonistic democracy, informed by religious and non-religious participation, can reaffirm pluralism insofar as no belief is discredited or impeded by prevailing elites.

Keywords: Politics. Religions. Antagonism. Democracy. Pluralism.

Resumo

O presente artigo examina a interação entre autoridade moral e política vis-à-vis à crescente polarização política. A associação entre discurso religioso e forças conservadoras na arena pública desafia o papel das religiões em sociedades pluralistas. Argumentamos que a democracia liberal busca equilibrar a liberdade e a democracia, mas nunca alcança um equilíbrio perfeito. O artigo está estruturado em três seções. Primeiramente, discute os desafios dentro da teoria democrática liberal, com foco na perspectiva crítica de Carl Schmitt. Exploramos o conceito de "inimigo" e suas implicações para repensar a política como um domínio de forças antagônicas. No entanto, o artigo argumenta que a perspectiva de Chantal Mouffe oferece uma compreensão mais matizada do conflito como agonismo. A seção subsequente enfatiza os conflitos entre ordens religiosos e o ordenamento constitucional. Lançamos mão das lições de Ran Hirschl e Ayelet Shachar para demonstrar como ordens religiosas específicas desafiam o constitucionalismo ao promover reivindicações normativas que se opõem ao arcabouço legal. Por fim, a última seção explora possíveis caminhos para reavaliar a participação democrática de atores religiosos na arena política. Concluimos que a democracia agonística, informada pela participação religiosa e não religiosa, pode reafirmar o pluralismo na medida em que nenhuma crença é desacreditada ou impedida pelas elites predominantes.

Palavras-chave: Política. Religiões. Antagonismo. Democracia. Pluralismo.

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* Doutor e Mestre em Comunicação Midiática pela PUCRS. País de Origem: Brasil. ORCID: 0009-0002-8824-5434. E-mail: gustavobuss@outlook.com.

** Doutora em Direito, Política e Sociedade e Mestra em Filosofia e Teoria do Direito ambas pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. País de Origem Brasil. ORCID: 0000-0002-2388-0499. E-mail: katya.kozicki@ufpr.br.

Introduction

The growing polarization of the Brazilian political context observed in recent years, with many parallels at a global level, often reveals how religious discourse has allied itself with new conservative forces. Various political leaders have given speeches whose axis is centered on moral authority. A new dimension for the dispute over power is thus evidenced. However, this scenario calls into question the notion of secularity usually associated with the constitutional model of liberal democracy. The claim of a well-defined division between public and private, or between politics and religious passions, can be challenged. It is imperative to recognize that both the spiritual and the political fields emerge as spaces of inextricable clashes between antagonistic world views.

At first, two definitions must be clarified: the political arena is here understood as the field propitious to clashes and to the dialogical edification of conventions safeguarding the functioning of the State and its institutions; as for the religious arena, it is here understood as the field affected by the dispute between different beliefs and positions directed to the explanation of life and human existence. This delimitation of the religious arena does not presuppose religion as a unitary or self-evident category. For the purposes of this article, religion functions as a plural field of competing symbolic-normative systems rather than a homogeneous whole, in dialogue with Hirschl and Shachar's (2018, p. 432) assessment of holistic alternatives to secular constitutional authority. This stipulative delimitation allows the analysis to proceed without adjudicating the broader meta-theoretical debate on the concept of religion, while still guarding against treating religion as a homogeneous bloc.

Moreover, the present discussion is inserted within the framework of liberal democracy, whose meaning has been enunciated by Chantal Mouffe as “a specific form of organizing politically human coexistence which results from the articulation between two different traditions: on one side, political liberalism (rule of law, separation of powers and individual rights) and, on the other side, the democratic tradition of popular sovereignty” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 18).

Liberalism and democracy, as distinct traditions, entail significant

differences that distinguish and constitute themselves. Therefore, by referring to liberal democracy, there is no ambition to state an exact overlap but only to address a constitutional trend rooted in an attempted association between the two. As stated by Mouffe, there is a standard view (embedded in modern ideals) that it could be possible to jointly advance political liberalism and the democratic tradition of popular sovereignty. Liberal democracy, thus, advocates a rational solution to everyday problems benefitting the entire community. Such commitment, however, can never be perfectly balanced, and either freedom or democracy will necessarily prevail over the other. The references to liberal democracy allow for the grouping of different convergent perspectives on the consensual solution of human conflicts, even if to reinforce a critical counterpoint.

A terminological clarification is in order before proceeding. Although the discussion below refers broadly to religion and religious orders, the empirical referent of this analysis is not religion as an undifferentiated totality, but the contemporary political mobilization of religious conservatism (encompassing evangelical conservatism, conservative Catholicism, and the diverse expressions of religious fundamentalism) that have most visibly entered into antagonistic confrontation with constitutional pluralism in Brazil and in comparable contexts (Lacerda, 2019; Vaggione, 2005). Other religious configurations remain, for the most part, outside the scope of the argument developed here.

With this theoretical framework in mind, the present article seeks to inquire: what is the political place safeguarded to religious expressions in a pluralistic democracy such as the Brazilian one? The question may seem dismissible and unnecessary to those with a strictly separatist view of secularism. Nonetheless, the hypothesis sustained here, concerning the theoretical discussion advanced by Chantal Mouffe, allows us to recognize that religious expressions assume a position of relevance when politics is read through the lenses of agonistic pluralism. Thus, the present article will be divided into three sections, starting from the introductory theoretical discussion of what liberal democratic commitments mean, then advancing to the analysis of the antagonistic posture assumed by religious discourses entering the political arena, and finally,

contemplating alternatives for the reaffirmation of democracy in the face of spiritual passions.

Initially, the article will focus on the problems deriving from liberal democracy, particularly emphasizing the critical view endorsed by Carl Schmitt. The revisiting of the author's thought, who joined the German National Socialist Party on May 1st, 1933, is still relevant in assessing the arguments against the association between liberalism and democracy. His idea of the "enemy" allows us to rethink politics as a field constituted by the dispute between antagonistic forces. However, this inherent antagonism will be mitigated by the conception of politics advanced by Chantal Mouffe, for whom the conflict amounts only to an agonism. Hence, the criticism of liberal democracy, despite its pungency, need not arrive at an absolute abandonment of the correlating values of freedom and democracy.

In the subsequent section, the religious dimension will assume center stage, starting with the possible opposition between religious orders and the rule of law. The anchor point for this problematization will reside in the analysis advanced by Ran Hirschl and Ayelet Shachar. For the authors, the normative claim of the current constitutional model collides precisely with a mimetic claim evoked by different religious orders. Undeniably, many religions are conceived as domains of social-life ordinance, with rigid rules and a strict hierarchy of power allowing the exercise of control. For those reasons, religious orders place themselves as actual forces of opposition to constitutionalism.

Finally, the last section of this article will point to possible paths for reevaluating democracy, considering the challenges imposed by the religious occupation of the political arena. Chantal Mouffe, in her recent work entitled "For a Left Populism", highlights essential tools for the construction of a pluralism that is not antireligious but that does not succumb to the illiberal and anti-democratic threat. Thus, it is possible to reinstate the agonistic value emphasized by the author under the perspective of democratic radicalization. Our effort will be to furnish such a position with new references and examples relating to those issues associated with religious movements in politics. In short, we propose a reflection that reaffirms pluralism, even in the face of religious participation in political life,

informed by the framework of agonistic democracy.

1 The articulation of the “Enemy” in the trenches of democracy

As a starting point for this inaugural section, it is pertinent to recover the arguments advanced by Carl Schmitt, especially to underline his considerations regarding the political nature of the State. His theoretical viewpoint points to a direct imbrication between state politics and social life. As a result, Schmitt focused much of his effort on demonstrating the flaws in the then-prevailing notion that the State should be neutral and depoliticized (Schmitt, 2007, p. 22). Such criticism is relevant because it demonstrates how the exercise of authority will never be entirely impartial and will constantly have to deal with the equalization of enmities. Understanding such a conflictual origin is necessary to avoid the romanticized version of a State free from dissent, where politics would be reduced to a natural consensus.

However, the German author sustains a vehement opposition to the idea of pluralism, which, in his view, would lead to party fragmentation and, consequently, would represent the denial of the political unity necessary to sustain a genuinely sovereign State. In this aspect, his theory radicalizes what is conceived as this latent enmity constituting the political arena. Although Schmitt admits the construction of antitheses, the political antithesis is unique because it is anchored in the opposition of two distinct groups: one belonging to and the other excluded from public life. Sovereignty, as a fundamental characteristic of the State, could only be achieved when a group reinforces the political antithesis, deciding, in critical and exceptional moments, who is the “enemy” for whom no political life is due (Schmitt, 2007, p. 39).

Schmitt criticizes liberal democracy, especially its ambition of a universal and global constitutional movement. He refutes the possibility of such universalization of political concepts, stressing that “to confiscate the word humanity, to invoke and monopolize such a term probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity” (Schmitt, 2007, p. 54). This view can result in dangerous interpretations regarding human rights, impeding the

advancement of a global system with minimal standards for all humankind. Nonetheless, even from the viewpoint of Schmittian politics, the destruction of the “enemy” is inadmissible. If hostility is the precondition for politics, it will always presuppose the valid existence of “us” and “them”. The group opposed to the powerholders is equally legitimate and must exist to reinforce the value of political imposition.

Although they appear interconnected, two issues arise from this theoretical perspective: authority and sovereignty. In particular, it is relevant to highlight that State sovereignty is linked, in Schmittian thought, to the possibility of issuing decisions on exceptional situations, which escape from the constitutional predictability usually aimed by liberal democracy’s neutral perspective (Schmitt, 2005, p. 7). When facing extraordinary cases, the powerholder must overcome the normative framework to impose itself and safeguard public and private interests that need protection. Authority, therefore, is an integral part of the State, and its existence consolidates sovereignty as a politically charged dimension of ruling power.

The dispute concerning power is the central force that moves the State; consequently, it can only be political. The exception reveals the prevalence of sovereignty as an institutional authority when the normative legal order no longer exists. Thus, “for a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists” (Schmitt, 2005, p. 13). In such a view, the political power is virtually unlimited, contrary to the liberal democracy standard of constitutional limitation. Schmitt rules out the possibility of building a State plastered by self-affirmed constitutional principles in favor of the recognition of personal and institutional authorities free from restraint.

It is important to note that the political field is conceived around an opposition between “us” and “them” or between “friend” and “enemy”. Hence, political action is that action that articulates the authority of the State as a sovereign entity. Moreover, this would lead to constitutive inequality and fundamental differences, which can never be eradicated but can only be negotiated in different ways. The relevance of Schmittian thought, as pointed out

by Mouffe, resides in showcasing the limitations of our democracies. Where politics exists, democracy may demand a strong sense of unity that rises diametrically opposed to the abstract defense of universal liberalism (Mouffe, 1992, p. 95).

In this sense, Chantal Mouffe recovers the criticism intended by Carl Schmitt: to affirm that, at the core of the liberal democracy and its constitutional project, lies an essential paradox. On the one hand, the liberal axis is tensioned to expand human rights beyond all frontiers. On the other, democracy must accommodate the idea of popular sovereignty inherently limited by geopolitical borders. The paradox is particularly latent when liberal democracy advocates the “idea that it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 4). When taken to their maximum instances, liberalism and democracy cannot be perfectly reconciled, indicating a constitutive tension that demands active and constant negotiation.

Antagonism, for Schmitt, allows the power dispute to be characterized as political. Politics can never be neutral. Sometimes, conflicts waged in other fields may rise to the political stage, demonstrating how distinct authorities are able to participate in public life (Schmitt, 2007, p. 37). In a similar line, Mouffe (2000, p. 56) emphasizes the importance of contestation and opposition for the promotion of democracy. Within a community, there are always going to exist disputing social forces competing for control. The historic attempts to reject the political nature of the State, in so far as to assert liberal democracy as an apolitical tradition, can be the most dangerous to constitutionalism. With the neutralization of the political arena, there is a significant loss in democratic identification, leading individuals to search for other communal spaces, such as the religious one, where their demands and disputes are better housed (Mouffe, 2000, p. 96).

Although it is not possible to rule out the chance of extreme antagonism, “the project of radical and plural democracy can acknowledge that difference is the condition of the possibility of constituting unity and totality at the same time that it provides their essential limits” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 33). If the merit of Schmittian theory resides in highlighting the dispute inherent to politics, the

value of Mouffian thought lies in safeguarding the necessary contraposition between highly conflictual politics and the constitutional imposition of pluralism. One cannot attempt to eradicate dissent through a democratic formula of public deliberation, contrary to what liberal democracy seems to propose. It is salutary that the political and antagonistic dimensions of power radiate from public life. Thus, the political field can be seen as a complex space, signified by multiple practices, discourses, and language games (Mouffe, 2000, p. 70).

Instead of searching for an ideal of rational neutrality or perfect consensual harmonization, democracy must deal with its conflictive features by constantly seeking to integrate differences. Chantal Mouffe stresses that democracy must be effectively committed to pluralism in a way “that can recognize the other in all its fullness and, going beyond reason, can capture the importance of passions as the driving force of human actions” (Kozicki, 2004, p. 157, translated). In this sense, the opponent does not need to be seen as an enemy but should be seen as an adversary. The political arena is an encouraging space for channeling collective passions, aiming to achieve but temporary consensus without ever losing its highly conflictive driving force.

There is no single constitutional project compatible with the ideals of liberal democracy. Instead, there are different and opposing projects disputing the political meaning of the Constitution. The clashing point resides, therefore, in how specific configurations of power allow the prevalence of certain ones to the detriment of others. Pluralism arises as the critical element in a compromised political constitution, demanding an intricate articulation process among different actors constituting the political arena (McClure, 1992, p. 121). Consequently, there will be less political stability since democracy will open itself to an agonistic understanding of the political process, which will invariably admit the participation of different actors, each vocalizing colliding versions of the world.

Mouffe’s proposal advocates for a pluralism that has an indissociable agonistic feature. This means it recognizes the pragmatic dimension of politics, allowing for negotiating different positions and demanding that any compromises must always be precarious (Mouffe, 2000, p. 140). However, it is

impossible to radicalize such a theoretical perspective to nullify any attempt at consensual political arrangements. On the contrary, consensus remains necessary as a temporary instrument of social stabilization despite the conflictual boundaries that are inseparable from it. For this reason, the paradox must be faced without abandoning the constitutional commitments made.

The importance of criticizing liberal democracy and its consensual deliberative model lies in highlighting a particular power dynamic nurtured by conflict and opposition behind every political decision, even if they are presented as rational and universal. The disagreements exist as a constitutive part of the political arena, either as an unsurmountable clash of enemies or as a functional dispute between political adversaries. We advocate for the latter, assuming that conflict can be integrated and tutored by the Constitution. An agonistic re-reading of conflictual pluralism is needed, one that accepts the latent paradox of liberal democracy and assures the value of plural participation (Mouffe, 2000, p. 55).

In summary, this initial section evoked conflict as an integral part of public life. The tension between liberalism and democracy need not culminate in annihilating our political system. On the contrary, the paradoxical articulation between freedom and equality lies at the core of our constitutional compromise. For this precise reason, democracy should be rethought to accept its conflictive dimension (Mouffe, 1992, p. 96). As tempting as a universal consensus (overcoming all human differences) may seem, denying dissent will always result in a dangerous refusal of pluralism. The present section sought to recognize the agonistic nature of politics, starting from the Schmittian critique of modern consensualism and the Mouffian reappropriation of conflict. Thus, it is time to take a step forward to introduce the issue of religions in the fighting ring of agonistic pluralism. Therefore, the next section will highlight the possibility of religious speeches catalyzing these political disputes.

2 The clash between religions and constitutionalism

Political and religious power can present themselves in a partially complementary way, given that the conservation of both orders can be imbricated

in several contexts (Bordieu, 2007, p. 72). Nonetheless, there is a latent tension between the conservative religious mobilizations here under analysis and the constitutional order, primarily when understood as concurring projects regulating social coexistence. Such a perspective allows religious beliefs to be considered adversaries in the agonistic political arena. According to Hirschl (2010, p. 101), this clash stems from the very logic of the constitutional system because it “makes it an attractive enterprise to those who wish to contain religiosity and assert state or civil society authority over religious texts, worldviews, and interpretive hierarchies”.

On the other hand, it is equally possible to describe a movement of repurposing of typically democratic state structures in contexts of religious domination. Hirschl (2010, p. 2) identifies systems that link these two apparently irreconcilable dimensions, which he calls constitutional theocracies. Suppose the theocratic model is traditionally centered on a supreme religious authority dictating and regulating social life. In that case, the opening to a constitutional theocracy means recognizing new possibilities of intermingling between religions and the State. Thus, “power in constitutional theocracies resides in political figures operating within the bounds of a constitution rather than from within the religious leadership itself” (Hirschl, 2010, p. 2).

The model theorized by Hirschl, though focused on political frameworks in the Middle East, is a relevant mechanism for tracing approximations and clashes between constitutionalism and the religious authorities it purports to protect. Dialoguing with political contexts closer to the Western constitutional experience, Malik (2016, p. 214) identifies minority legal orders. They are spaces of non-state normative regulation in which institutions inherent to the religious hierarchical structure gain a place. Despite being formally distanced from the State, minority legal orders allow religious authorities to articulate, creating alternative control spaces. In such contexts, religious institutions may resemble official ones, at least in appearance, but norms are interpreted and applied according to their shared values (Malik, 2016, p. 214).

In an environment of progressively globalized relations, religious authority finds the necessary tools for its own political claims in constitutionalism.

Religious constitutionalization brings moral authority to the public political arena in two ways: systematically defending fundamental spiritual values and introducing religious texts within the legal framework. On one side lays the constitutional order, anchored on universal principles to support its authority project. On the other, different religious expressions can permeate the constitutional framework, seeking social regulation through an authority figure distinct from the secular State.

Through the lenses of constitutional theocracy and minority legal orders, one can see how the religious authorities mimic the official one, gradually building a semblance of legality. As Burity (2005, p. 31, translated) points out, this imposes a risk because such a posture “can translate hegemony pretensions in terms of representation or direction of society, if they take advantage of pluralism to maximize their own objectives”. The religious experience, originally anchored on a guarantee of constitutional freedom, could become an effective source of antagonism advocating against the constitutional order. The risk rests precisely in using constitutional tools against pluralism so that other forms of religious or non-religious expression contrary to the prevailing one are no longer admitted.

Recognizing the possibility of a clash between religions and constitutionalism imposes the consequent overcoming of the rigid distinction between politics and religion that has often been associated with an unreflective concept of secularism. They do not oppose watertight ideas; politics and religion seek to achieve several common goals. From a teleological perspective, the two overlap and have a strong point of intersection, namely the orientation towards building a community strictly centered on a set of shared values (constitutional or religious). For this reason, Hirschl and Shachar (2018, p. 425) point to the existence of a concrete dispute between secular political authority and traditional religious authorities, as they are “diametrically opposed in many respects, yet at the same time sharing strikingly similar characteristics, each with its own sacred texts, interpretive practices, and communities of reference”.

Contrary to what the secularist narrative seems to imply, the issue of religion remains omnipresent in contemporary ideology, being one of the central

concerns for constitutional advancement. As Hirschl (2010, p. 17) points out, “some constitutions despise it, others embrace or even defer to it, and still others are agnostic but are willing to accommodate certain aspects of it, but not a single constitution abstains from, overlooks, or remains otherwise silent with respect to religion”. Religious expressions can assume extreme importance in the lives of individuals, justifying a constitutionally rooted fear that the secular authority may be overthrown. A fear that is not irrational since religions radiate conflictive positions based only on a feeling of their respective spiritual communities (Lima, 2011, p. 167).

The point of tension between constitutionalism and religions stems from a blatant proximity between two equally symbolic domains. Therefore, while constitutionalism is based on specific normative texts, rites, and hierarchical interpretations to regulate social life, many religions propose an equally hierarchical rigidity centered on its constitutive texts and interpretative rituals. There is a symmetrical yearning for handling the subjective experience of its faithful community, leading Hirschl and Shachar (2018, p. 432) to assert that “religion is one of the few symbolic metasystems that offer a holistic, full-board alternative to constitutionalism”. The conflict is latent because religious authority anchors itself in something supposedly more significant than the State: a metaphysical deity. Therefore, the control over individuals is rendered absolute, as obedience is derived not from the constitutional order but from the wills of gods (Berger, 2002, p. 46).

Religion ends up canvassing unparalleled popularity, especially when addressing existential questions that have always occupied the human imagination. These questions allow individuals to acquire a sense of belonging and significance, gradually building the foundations for an antagonistic enmity. Moreover, given its eminently transnational attributes, religions can build communities based on solidarity and moral authority beyond geopolitical frontiers. This means that religions will compete with local constitutional projects and place themselves as essential institutions of agency in a globalized public sphere.

Mouffe (2000, p. 96) states that “many people are increasingly searching

for other forms of collective identification, which can very often put into jeopardy the civic bond that should unite a democratic political association”. In the case of religious engagement, there is a pursuit of unitary meaning, against which a counter-model of enmity rises. For this reason, politics becomes umbilically linked to identity discourses that carry a defining mark of religiosity (Burity, 2001, p. 40). Identity legitimacy, in turn, allows the emergence of an institutional authority based on a rhetoric of antagonism to individuals positioned outside the community (Milot, 2011, p. 168). By establishing an authority centered on the ability to define the conflict over which the power dispute rests, religion becomes inherently political in the Schmittian sense of the term.

Furthermore, the idea of a clash of civilizations, as advanced by Huntington, can reinforce the highly conflictive nature of religious discourses gaining social preponderance. The author recovers the dispute between Western Christianity and Muslim fundamentalism to exemplify how collisions can be seen inside strictly monotheistic religious traditions (Huntington, 1996, p. 210–211). Religious expressions contribute to the breakdown of tolerant coexistence by seeking different ways to regulate human life. Their political engagement is ultimately committed to maximizing the reach of a metaphysical truth uniquely revealed to them.

If, historically, religious disputes were primarily fought in search of greater territorial domination, the conformation of modern globalism has imposed that this dispute be taken to a different plane. Given the cultural relevance of religious expressions in State designs, it has come to reside in the exercise of de-territorialized political power. That is, the politics of religious authorities rests in the ability to define and influence policymaking regarding human rights, democracy, immigration, terrorism, etc. (Huntington, 1996, p. 212). The constitutional project counterpoints different religious views, which are, on their part, eager for greater prominence and, consequently, greater capacity to disseminate their self-revealed truth globally.

Recognizing the conflictive nature of religious expressions and their political vocation is paramount, particularly in a decisive moment where religious organizations constantly define new forms of antagonistic enmity. Even when

religious authorities seek to characterize themselves as inherently non-political, this will be, in itself, a political decision (Schmitt, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, it is vital to highlight the clash between constitutional and religious orders and evoke the antagonistic political inclination of many religious authorities. Consequently, this article's final and last section will outline a possible way to present this apparent antagonism as agonism. This means recognizing some legitimacy to religious disputes while at the same time promoting mechanisms for the strengthening of pluralism as an unassailable constitutional value.

3 How to radicalize a democracy with strong religious participation?

In recent writings, Chantal Mouffe has linked the confusion and disorder that seems to plague the political arena in different contexts to an inadequate conception of politics embraced by several actors (Mouffe, 2018, p. 9). The agonistic perspective remains relevant to stress the articulation of opposing interests at the heart of any political attitude. However, one can surpass the critique by inquiring about the possibility of an authentic agonistic political manifestation. For Mouffe (2018, p. 10), the solution must address the need for a democratic revolution, one that is radical and plural, “indicating that multiple struggles for emancipation are founded on the plurality of social agents and of their struggles”.

Tempting as it may seem, the centrality of consensus in our constitutional language imposes a considerable problem. By requiring all people to commit to rational arguments genuinely, some unbecoming with their own subjective experiences, liberal democracy has accentuated the disconnect between politics and the individuals (Mouffe, 2018, p. 10). The rise of an extreme-right discourse is an example of how the moral rhetoric of a unified community centered on the will of the “people” deconstructs the consensus of the liberal democratic elite. Moreover, neoconservative wings promote a strategic integration of political discourses and religious values to reshape and question the frontiers of the political arena (Lacerda, 2019, p. 30).

According to Juan Marco Vaggione (2005, p. 239), the religious articulation surrounding conservative rhetoric is justified by the need to react

politically. In this sense, reactive politicization is better understood through the lenses of political agonism described in past sections of this article. Although many agree that the advances in feminist and sexual minority agendas, for example, are imperative to maximize constitutional pluralism, it is undeniable that some religious communities feel uncomfortable with the apparent collapse of their moral traditions. If the opposition is seen as an agonistic clash of views, it could be, in principle, beneficial for democracy that every political wing participates in public debates. Nonetheless, the contemporary conformation of marked exclusion drives religious activism to totalitarian and annihilating contours. For this reason, any development on secularity cannot ignore the accentuated political inclination of religious discourse.

The concept of agonistic pluralism can be mimetically applied to religious studies, given how close rationalization and secularization are as parallel ideals of liberal democracy. Religious belonging has always been and continues to be essential for the organization of social life. This contradicts the view of a disenchanted secularity, in which religion would gradually disappear in the face of new rational consensus. Thus, agonism becomes relevant at the level of religious discourse, considering the existence of multiple forms of religious expression. Such plurality reveals the complexity of those different models aimed at controlling human life, with inevitable competition and clash among them (Burity, 2018, p. 43-44). If agonistic pluralism allows for the coexistence and dialogue between political adversaries, then in its religious dimension, it will require equating religious freedoms to reaffirm the plural value of democracy.

Mouffe (2018, p. 25) argues that the movement to strengthen political agonism demands the radicalization of democracy. In this sense, radical is not equivalent to the neoconservative inclination toward enemy destruction. On the contrary, democratic radicalization is anchored on pluralism to allow for deepened and broader conceptions of democracy where there is always room for maximizing participation, never suppressing it. We can redefine the adversary in non-excluding terms so that we accept that all beliefs (religious or not) are indispensable for the political existence of our society. The worldviews of individuals and their communities are naturally conflicting but can be

democratically accommodated in the political arena to protect pluralism as a founding constitutional value (Mouffe, 2018, p. 19).

Enhancing pluralism within public law has been advocated as an exciting alternative to a monistic view of the State. According to Jaclyn Neo (2020a, p. 26–27), pluralizing our understanding of constitutional law is essential to achieve a more holistic perspective on how different traditions and authorities play a crucial role in shaping our political lives. Liberal democratic attempts to confine religion to the private individual sphere, in addition to being unfeasible, are harmful to constitutionalism. The improvement of our democratic commitment, as already emphasized, requires a solid political arena in which dissent can be nourished.

To isolate religious doctrines altogether also means the exile of diverse ethical orientations that would add to public debate (Connolly, 1999, p. 5). In this sense, it is paramount to develop tools to maximize religious participation in its inherently plural dimension. Therefore, we propose an alternative understanding to the secular monist State that allows for the dispute between religions and constitutionalism to be sheltered within the political boundaries of democracy. Since religious arguments are important vocalizers of dissent, they should participate in the political articulation of the precarious commitments indispensable to public life (Sorj, 2016, p. 143).

As highlighted throughout this article, politics is not only shaped by institutional authority but also by a plurality of other moral authorities. If the possibilities of agonistic intervention were reduced to such institutional spaces, it would not be effective in redefining political arrangements. On the contrary, it is necessary to recognize that all public spaces open to civil society are fertile ground for the manifestation of dissent (Mouffe, 2018, p. 28). In this way, the democratic advance, in the perspective of radicalization that we contemplate, presupposes the transformation of unofficial spaces where politics is latently present. Such spaces include all those where religious worldviews collide. One must fight the liberal democratic standard of religious disenchantment, or religious exclusion, for “the remedy does not lie in abolishing representation, but in making our institutions more representative” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 32).

Similarly, Jaclyn Neo (2021) examines the tension between religious and non-religious courts in Asian states to assess how pluralism can deal with competing authorities. Instead of imposing exclusionary solutions, it is vital to highlight the need for a complex understanding of how religions overlap and compete in our political life. This does not amount, however, to a refusal of regulation on the issues of faith. On the contrary, regulation is indispensable to achieve pluralism, especially when it allows for a shift in social perception towards religious freedom (Neo, 2020a). Pluralism can only be achieved in a regulated framework of public law that safeguards minority interests against dominant majoritarian authorities that hold power.

An exciting concept Burity (2018, p. 61) advanced is that of public religion. It crystallizes the trend here sustained: that religious expressions are inherently public. Under this theoretical strand, religious boundaries are dismantled, and accentuated incursions into political spaces are seen as natural paths for religious authorities to express themselves in a political society. However, such recognition is a two-way street: just as religions begin to lend discursive tactics to new political actors, the accentuation of their public presence leads to contestation on their own grounds by the opposition. Conflict cuts across all spheres of social life, so democratic radicalization demands recognizing the trenches and positioning oneself in the clashes waged (Burity, 2018, p. 62).

Additionally, one can resort to the phenomenon described as the folklorization of religions. It depicts the need to reformat the pluralism on which religious freedom sets its base. In a similar sense to democratic radicalization, folklorization indicates that religious freedom must be conceived in relation to the multiplicity of cultural manifestations and beliefs that evoke a religious authority (Barreira, 2010, p. 68). It attempts to illustrate the inherent complexity of religious expression, reinforcing religious diversity that does not conform to purely consensual political models. In this sense, pluralism admits that every religious worldview is dignified and community-edifying. Secularity, furthermore, assumes a contextual dimension that recognizes the existence of these different agents and processes competing for the formatting of the secular domain (Moniz, 2017, p. 137).

The recognition of religious diversity advocates for a polytheism of values. The use of the term polytheism, in this context, is not intended to contrapose the traditional meaning of monotheism; its use is not a reference to the number of spiritual deities governing the spiritual world. Instead, it points to recognizing different moral and ethical authority systems, which legitimately compete to regulate human life (Sorj, 2016, p. 133). While agonism highlights the conflictive dimension inherent to public religious life, the polytheism of values reinforces the need for a better understanding of pluralism. Democratic radicalization, when strongly associated with agonistic pluralism, ensures that no religious authority can impose itself politically as the sole *mora* dictator. Pluralism, interpreted as polytheism of values, demands robust mechanisms of agonistic coexistence. Moreover, it drives from the acknowledgment that different religious projects are in constant conflict, among themselves and with constitutionalism, reinforcing the notion of conflictive consensus subjacent to Mouffe's thought.

It is true that different religious expressions, even by their evident moral inclination, seek to affirm themselves as the only possessors of the metaphysically revealed truth. This does not impede the radical democratization of the religious field currently considered. On the contrary, pluralism evokes the maximization of public participation and the political clash of religious worldviews. What liberal democracy and constitutionalism cannot deny, as a minimal commitment, is the idea that every individual is entitled to present their beliefs as possible candidates for the political truth (Balagangadhara, 2014, p. 48). Pluralism recognizes conflicting religious worldviews competing for the truth, but it also imposes, in a radically democratic way, that all possible manifestations of faith must be respected. Thus, maximization does not mean the unrestricted and uncritical participation of religious authorities in the public arena because the ultimate limit to political involvement rests in the impossibility of the abolition of the pluralist framework in which they are inserted.

Liberal democracy is criticized in religious studies for endorsing an exclusionary view of secularization, leading to the complete privatization of spiritual passions. The belief that all political actors should remove their religious preconditions to assume a rational commitment amounts to replacing religious

monotheism with another secular monotheism (Sorj, 2016, p. 140). Suppose the endorsement of a single religious authority fails precisely because it disregards the constitutional imposition of pluralism. In that case, the endorsement of a single anti-religious one will fall for the same reason. There will be no room for the adequate protection of democracy if the response to the agonistic religious conflict comes from annihilation. Democratic radicalization, interpreted as an undeniable constitutional postulate, requires the effective internalization of religious differences (Burity, 2005, p. 25).

The political redesign we contemplate in this article recovers the agonistic dimension of the conflict inherent to religious life in a complex political society. In this light, the religious other is no longer seen as an enemy, in the Schmittian sense, but as an adversary competing in the political arena, in the Mouffian sense of agonism. The clash between religious worldviews and constitutionalism is evident. However, to reaffirm pluralism, we must avoid the temptation of exclusionary discourses. Politics can open itself to disputes for control and power, including those from religious or cultural communities. Our idea of radicalization is achieved by maximizing religious participation, allowing for a true maximization of pluralism. In other words, the same act that imposes the maximum, that all religious worldviews influence public debate, demands the minimum, that none of them be peremptorily excluded from this process.

Conclusion

The present article began its course by recovering the criticism voiced by Carl Schmitt and later reappropriated by Chantal Mouffe, which points to an invariably conflictive dimension of the political arena. For the German author, sovereignty and authority are central elements on which politics rests, leading to an antagonistic clash. Liberal democratic consensus would, thus, be impossible. Mouffe takes the most significant step towards overcoming rationalist consensualism without jeopardizing the constitutional endeavor. Her proposal of agonistic democracy incorporates the Schmittian critique's relevant points without abandoning the necessary adherence to pluralism as a constitutional imposition. The dissensus is brought to the front under an adversarial dispute over constitutional meanings and processes.

The second section introduced the agonistic nature of political clashes in religious studies. We emphasized that every religious worldview bears a high antagonistic potential. This predisposition to dissent translates to an undeniably political attitude, confirmed by recent experiences of religious resurgence. According to Hirschl and Shachar, religion offers a contender to the constitutional order, which takes place in normative terms, as they confront different dimensions in regulating social life. Consequently, we can recognize how the religious discourses that are politically prominent today have shifted towards denying the very constitutional system in which they are inserted, evidenced by the association with an emerging neoconservative movement.

Finally, the closing section of the article advanced a tool for maximizing religious pluralism as a way of democratic radicalization. If the clash between religious authorities and constitutionalism is evident, a radical democracy points to an alternative path to mutual destruction. Such an extreme posture, *vis-à-vis* religious diversity, presupposes some empowerment to all religions and cultural expressions to have space and voice in the political arena. However, opening up cannot be translated as a naïve invitation for authoritarian religious discourses to take power by storm. On the contrary, the key to safeguarding democracy against religions rests precisely in a reinstatement that all of them must compete on an equal footing to build the precarious compromises that are necessary for the political continuity of the State. We have defended democratic radicalization at the religious level with two essential dimensions. On the one hand, it is democratic because it supports the polytheism of values on which the constitutional order is predicated. On the other, it is radical because it requires a militant defense of such pluralism to prevent any attempts at annihilating difference and dissent, which is the material heart of democracy.

The original contribution this article seeks to offer to the debate on the relations between religion and politics lies in mobilizing Mouffe's agonistic framework to account for the specific challenge posed by contemporary religious conservatism to constitutional pluralism. By recasting the religious other as an adversary rather than an enemy, and by proposing the polytheism of values as an operative criterion for democratic radicalization, the article advances an

alternative to both the uncritical accommodation of theocratic claims and the exclusionary privatization of religious voice. This is not a resolution of the tension between religion and constitutionalism, but a framework capable of sustaining that tension agonistically; one in which the political legitimacy of religious and secular actors alike is preserved precisely by denying any of them the power to have the final, unchallengeable word.

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