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Political Action of the Catholic Hierarchy and the Use of Religion in Political Organizations (Peru, 1920–2021): Evidence and Long-Term Analysis

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Abstract: This article presents the characteristics that the Catholic hierarchy has displayed over the course of a century in the political arena, as well as the importance that religious elements have exercised over the legitimacy of some parties and governments in Peru. It specifically analyzes the clergy and their relation with the State, as well as interpreting how they understood their participation and influence in local politics. In addition, parties and regimes over the course of a century are analyzed, emphasizing the presidential election campaigns of 1990 and 2021, in order to discuss the limits that political organizations have experienced in monopolizing religious representations. This study will help to better understand the nature of Catholicism in Latin American politics.

Keywords: clergy; state; Catholic Church; Peru; politics



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1. Introduction

Nowadays, in Latin America, when studying the relationship between religion and politics, the presence of Evangelical collectives in public life is often mentioned. In almost all countries, this presence has been studied with great interest, also considering how some politicians, particularly during electoral campaigns, seek their support or ally themselves with some of their organizations. It also emphasizes how a kind of greater alliance of Evangelical groups is woven with traditional-minded Catholics around common public agendas (Carlin et al. 2015; Pérez and Grundberger 2019). However, beyond highlighting this Catholic presence, linked mostly to doctrinal convictions or political preferences, few individual studies exist of Catholicism in Latin American politics today (Hagopian 2009; Smith 2019). The same is true in the case of Peru, a prominent country in the region. Nonetheless, in Peru's 2021 presidential elections, the candidate Rafael López-Aliaga, who publicly highlighted his traditional Catholic traits, came in an auspicious third place, evidently through the combined votes of traditional Catholics and Evangelicals, with other social groups that felt represented by him. Academic interest in this politician, a member of Opus Dei, immediately arose (Pérez 2021; Ubilluz 2021).

What happened leads us to inquire about the characteristics displayed by Catholicism in Latin America in its relation with politics. There are two main aspects in the study of Catholicism and politics: first, the interaction with the Church as an institution, and second, the organizations and political leaders that leverage Catholic religious elements. Questions arise around how the use of Catholicism in party politics is configured or how the local clergy and hierarchy view their political activity. These are fundamental questions to ask, since Catholicism was recently seen as losing strength and public influence—such as the effectiveness regarding the labor of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or the parties' loss of interest in its symbolic elements (Parker 2012).

Studies on the relation between the Catholic clergy and politics, as well as on the use of religious components in political organizations, are numerous, though mostly historical or sociological for analyses of the twentieth century. Thus, in the relation between the Catholic hierarchy and political life, research has been carried out in Argentina, Chile,

Mexico or Brazil, studying, for example, the commitments or sometimes conflicts between bishops and authoritarian regimes, as well as with populist governmental movements such as Peronism and the Mexican PRI, among others (Blancarte 2004; Caimani 2010; Cancino 1997; Mainwaring 1986). All of the studies have emphasized the characteristics of these relationships, particularly the means of influencing public policies, organizations and regimes, emphasizing the traditional mechanisms of action, such as friendship networks, common interests and benefits, etc. Other studies have pinpointed the support or lack of it by the clergy for non-confessional political organizations such as Democracia Cristiana (Christian Democracy) (Botto 2018; Thayer 2002).

In Peru, the most important studies for the first half of the 20th century have been those carried out by Klaiber (1988) and García (1991), who have emphasized the emergence of confessional parties and their failure, or emphasized the terms in the relationship between the clergy and the Peruvian Democracia Cristiana, and, above all, their interest in supporting certain governments. Recent studies (Armas et al. 2008; Cubas 2018) have also outlined these findings. Less interest has been shown for later periods of Peruvian history, where the conflicts within the clergy in their relationship with the State have been mentioned, due to issues such as violence, human rights and others (Klaiber 1997; Pásara 2021).

Regarding studies of the use of religious elements by political organizations, an analysis of how they developed has been of interest at the Latin American level in the study of mid-century Argentine Peronism, or, in the case of Peru, e.g., in research on the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, or APRA) (Bianchi 2001; Vega-Centeno 1991; Zanatta 1999). All of these are mass organizations in the history of their respective countries, and all with a populist discourse and action. Some studies have analyzed only the religious elements incorporated into their partisan rituals, while others have gone further, suggesting the existence of political religions (Vega-Centeno 1991).

Additionally, it has been emphasized how these organizations tried to find recognition and legitimization by using these religious elements, and no work has been done on other aspects, which, in our opinion, are fundamental, especially in Peru, such as its durability in the discourse or the validity of its effectiveness in a context where societies are in constant transformation. We find this topic interesting, as it allows us to understand the dynamic nature of rituals in organizations or regimes.

Likewise, studies on the relation between the clergy and political action in Peru have not studied in depth certain aspects about the characteristics of this relation, such as the constant use of traditional methods of political influence employed by the hierarchy, or its weak relation with other forms of political presence such as Democracia Cristiana or their lack of interest in supporting confessional parties, and there is also the need for a systematic study on the clergy's strategies and an approach to understand their task in our contemporary political arena.

Taking into account these contributions, the goals for this article are as follows: first, to study the relation that has existed between the Catholic hierarchy and politics in the last century, and second, to study how religious elements have been used by political parties in Peru. Without exceeding the analytical depth that the study of these main topics provides, our hypothesis suggests that in the relation between the clergy and Peruvian politics, the use of traditional forms has predominated, e.g., to defend or promote changes in public policies. They have used the influence on individuals or on groups of politicians and institutions, rather than modern methods such as the confessional or non-confessional party. Likewise, we believe that the use of religious elements in contemporary political parties or movements has sought first and foremost legitimization, although the use of this element has shown, over time, secondary and less consistent use. In order to elaborate our goals, the methodology will employ a historical approach based on a long-term study of what has been stated, and will seek an analysis of selected facts to test our proposals. The period of a century is justified by the fact that it corresponds to the emergence and development of contemporary politics and democracies, which allows us to understand

current local processes. We will use various sources from the period, whether primary or secondary, such as research studies, ecclesiastical documents or newspapers, among others.

We shall begin by explaining how the clergy's action in politics developed, as well as the use of religious elements over a long period of time, between 1920 and 1990. This will allow us to establish the fundamental features in both aspects in order to study the changes that occurred between 1990 and 2020 in a second section. This will allow us to conduct a detailed study on the characteristics arising from the political situation in 2021, marked by the general election campaign. The conclusion gathers the contributions obtained and raises several ideas to be taken into account for a broader analysis in the future.

2. The Political Action of the Ecclesiastic Hierarchy, the Consolidation of Traditional Forms of Influence and the Political Consumption of Religion, 1920–1990

The Catholic hierarchy in Peru at the beginning of the 20th century faced, as in all Latin America, the need to defend Catholic and Church interests. Even though Catholicism was considered to be an official denomination by law, the clergy were salaried by the State and the State protected the Church through the so-called *patronato*; the political context was a process of secularization in which the State—and, in a way, society itself—was developing and transitioning into a modern and republican society (Klaiber 1988).

During the so-called guano era (1840–1880) in the 19th century and during the Aristocratic Republic (1895–1919) at the beginning of the last century, several secularizing measures were carried out, leading to a more or less strong reaction from the clergy. The strategies implemented included pastoral letters, public protests and seeking the support of those in power—when new regulations came from the Congress. This occurred during the discussion of the marriage of non-Catholics (1897), religious tolerance (1915) and civil marriage and divorce (1918), among other measures (García 1991). By the turn of the century, another form of intervention was through the movement of the so-called militant laity, such as the Catholic Union, organizations such as the pious associations and even emerging workers' organizations. They also sought to increase their influence among the urban population by using the Catholic media and their presence in elementary and high school education (Cubas 2018; Iberico 2021). All of this allowed them to show—in this confrontational scenario against the liberalism in the Congress during the “Aristocratic Republic”—that they were capable of having influence in the public sphere, especially in the Peruvian capital of Lima.

In those times, confrontations were with the Congress rather than the governments who actually collaborated in educational activities, mission work in the Peruvian jungle and other Catholic activities. There is evidence of how there was a cordial relation with the ruling Civil party elite, who were interested in imposing the State throughout the national territory through material integration and literacy (García 1991). However, the constant confrontations with the Congress—where there were civilist factions who supported the prompt secularization of the State and society—led certain members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to promote the creation of Catholic parties in order to protect the Church's interests.

This is obvious, for example, after the Constitutional reform, which established freedom of worship (1915). In 1916, Catholic parties emerged in southern cities in Peru, such as Arequipa and Cusco. It was the work of their local bishops, especially Mariano Holguín, bishop of Arequipa (Ara 2019). Nevertheless, others did not agree with these proceedings and sought to continue exclusively with traditional forms of political action—in other words, through direct influence on politicians, whether members of the government or Congress, in spite of their proven ineffectiveness. In 1917, the bishop of Chachapoyas (in the Amazon region), Emilio Lissón Chávez, was the one who, in an episcopal assembly, rejected the creation of parties, which, in his opinion, would encourage divisions among Peruvians (Saranyana and Armas 2010). When he was named Archbishop of Lima in 1918, his influence within the hierarchy increased.

Episcopal change occurred around the same time as political change. In 1919, after the coup d'état promoted by Augusto B. Leguía, the so-called Aristocratic Republic collapsed. Leguía was a rich populist landowner and politician who knew how to weave alliances that allowed him to displace the Civil party from power. He remained in control of the State for eleven years (1919–1930) (Basadre 1983; Contreras and Cueto 2007). Leguía, a shrewd man, understood that in order to hold onto power in a socially fragmented country, he needed not only an alliance between urban landowners, bankers, students, workers and the middle classes and a State in full expansion with the capacity to integrate the country partially providing security, education and public infrastructure. He also needed the Catholic clergy on its side, or at least part of them, an element considered to be the backbone of society. This allowed Archbishop Lissón to distance the State from previous secularizing efforts. In 1920, the government did not approve the civil marriage and divorce law promoted in the last civilist Congress. Later, given the close relationship of Pedro Rada y Gamio, Prime Minister, with the Catholic hierarchy, there was an attempt to stop the new Congress from intervening in the election of bishops, as was done in the past, and to have the Judicial Power do so instead (AAL 1920, f. 1). Even though this was not achieved, the proposal set a precedent for change.

Despite the fact that political opposition to the regime grew over the years, due to its authoritarianism, good Church–State relations continued and the high clergy considered the president a good protector of the Church. Ceremonies, mutual recognition and other symbolic aspects reflected this relationship, such as the frustrated Consecration of Peru to the Sacred Heart in 1923, which evidenced Lissón's collaboration with the government (Klaiber 1980). Inside the episcopal assemblies, Lissón sought to impose himself on the attitude of Holguín, bishop of Arequipa, who continued to insist on the possibility of structuring Catholic party organizations, as in Western Europe. At the Provincial Council of Lima in 1927, Lissón's confrontation with the rest of the bishops revealed these rifts in the episcopate (Saranyana and Armas 2010). When, as a result of the economic crisis of 1929 and its social and political impact, the Leguía regime collapsed, Lissón's fate was sealed. His political abandonment and the return of civilist elements with the new government of Luis M. Sánchez Cerro, who took office in 1930, in addition to other administrative and pastoral matters, explain his resignation and later departure to Rome (Basadre 1983).

Mariano Holguín assumed the administration of the Archdiocese of Lima between 1930 and 1933. In the political arena, the period was marked by instability and confrontation, in the context of a world crisis, as in most countries in the region. The presence of liberal elements in the governments and in the Constituent Assembly, which was responsible for the elaboration of the new Constitution of 1933, led the hierarchy and some lay sectors to revive the idea of a political party. This materialized as Unión Popular, an organization with very little importance in the elections of 1931. Although it was not a confessional party, it showed its allegiance with Catholic proposals (Klaiber 1988). But the irruption of the great mass parties, such as Unión Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Union, or UR), a far-right party that became populist and fascist over the years, and APRA, a center-left party, changed the political panorama. In the same way as the more conservative elites, who supported the authoritarian regimes in the following years, the hierarchy and the clergy reinforced traditional political approaches, especially during the long episcopate of Archbishop Farfán de los Godos (1933–1945) in Lima, and of other prelates in the provinces.

Therefore, between 1933 and 1950, the action undertaken by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the bishops and the high clergy consisted in approaching regimes such as those of Oscar Benavides (1933–1939) or Manuel Prado (1939–1945), from whom they obtained many advantages. They implemented a system where bishops were appointed by the government, assisted by the Ministry of Justice and Worship; Catholic religion kept its protected status, and the State continued to support educational and missionary work, in addition to the State's social and territorial integration plans (Klaiber 1988, 2000). Taking into account the world economic crisis and the emergence of mass parties that had proposed reforms in the economic and social spheres—especially the APRA party—which questioned the

foundations of the established order, it became essential to foster nationalism and national unity, and to promote progress as a goal. Collaboration allowed the condemnation of communism, as well as the more radical “*aprimo*” that promoted the separation of Church and State, and, through pastoral letters, sermons and other public interventions, the need to support the authorities was stressed (Armas 2000; Episcopado Peruano 1938; Klaiber 1980, 2000). In this sense, the attitude of the Peruvian clergy did not differ from that of their counterparts in other countries in the region and the world.

However, although the State was controlled by conservative authoritarian regimes, the political field was dominated by mass parties. Both parties, the UR and APRA—which together won the sympathy of more than 80% of the electorate on average in the elections of 1931, 1936 and 1945—understood the importance of religion. The vote was largely urban: in 1931, 320,000 people voted, and in 1945, 760,000 people voted, for a country that reached more than 6 million inhabitants (Contreras and Cueto 2007). This electorate showed its historical and traditional Catholic preference: according to the 1940 census, 98.5% of the population identified as Catholic (Marzal 1995).

Of course, even then, intellectuals such as Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre or Luis Alberto Sánchez had already noticed that, alongside the orthodox and sacramental Catholicism practiced by the clergy and the elites, there was a more diffuse but widespread popular Catholicism linked to popular festivities and local traditions while being distanced from the rules of the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Sánchez 1974; Vega-Centeno 2008). The construction of symbolism and mass-based political parties’ imaginaries was therefore nourished by some of these elements.

After 1933, when the UR political party was controlled by Luis A. Flores (he led it towards fascist ideals), the party discovered the foundation and consistency to reach its adherents with its doctrinal message in constant allusions to Christian symbols and narratives. Molinari (2006, 2008) has studied these allusions in poetry, pamphlets and speeches, showing how Christian elements were incorporated. Similarly, in the study of the APRA party, an organization controlled by Haya de la Torre and his circle of collaborators, it has been shown how Christian elements were present in hymns, songs and other manifestations of his party narrative, with clear messianic overtones. These elements have allowed us to speak of the emergence of a civil religion or political religion, depending on the case (Klaiber 1980; Vega-Centeno 1991, 2008).

However, outside of the symbolic terrain, in practice, neither of the two parties won the public support of the Catholic hierarchy, which was more interested in a close relationship with state power. In this sense, we can argue that the hierarchy, linked to the State through *patronato* and other privileges, proved the existence of a state Catholicism or Corporate Catholicism.¹ Some members of the clergy, because of their conservative, traditional, anti-communist and anti-Aprista convictions, supported the UR in some public acts, but in a personal capacity. After 1945, the dissolution of the UR caused the loss of any other viable political party option. In the case of the APRA, its distance from the clergy before 1945 was due to its ideology and praxis, since it was considered a left-wing organization that endangered national stability (Klaiber 1980). Therefore, APRA received support from some Protestant intellectuals (Gutiérrez 2016, 2019), but never enough to interest the party leadership in a more effective collaboration.

After 1945, some changes occurred. The alliance and support from the APRA party for the government of Bustamante y Rivero (1945–1948), which brought about a short-lived democratization of the country, led him to rethink his old perception about the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This government, made up of independents and members of the Catholic militant laity, convinced the APRA leadership of the possibilities offered by friendship with ecclesiastical or lay leaders. Furthermore, after 1950, after the party’s turn towards a more evidently conservative position, some sympathies among the clergy increased, although they depended on family or friendly connections (Klaiber 2000).

Hence, two dynamics were constructed or confirmed between 1920 and 1950. On one hand, the emerging political parties incorporated elements from Catholic religiosity into

their narratives in an effort to legitimize themselves to citizens. After 1950, this continued to happen, although in a less evident way, in other mass parties such as Acción Popular (Popular Action, or AP) and even within subversive organizations from the radical left, such as Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), which, in its most violent years of action—between 1980 and 2000—used elements taken from popular religiosity to affirm the messianic and voluntarist character of its discourse, mainly in aspects concerning political rituals (Portocarrero 2012; Degregori 2011). This was non-existent before 1920, especially in the secular Civil party. The ritual and doctrinal complexity of modern parties needed them.

On the other hand, the hierarchy's belief in the use of the old means of political action persisted: influencing current government and collaboration as a mechanism for influencing public policies and obtaining better benefits. In contrast to the liberal and secularizing civilism at the beginning of the century, it was more widely received by the authoritarian governments of Leguía, Benavides and Prado, who were interested in their own political projects of national affirmation. These forms of influence would continue in the dictatorship of Manuel Odria (1948–1956), the new government of Prado (1956–1962), the government of the leader from AP, Fernando Belaúnde (1963–1968), and later in the authoritarian and populist government of the armed forces between 1968 and 1980. This collaboration was aided by the existence of the *patronato*, which tied the State and the Church together, allowing the clergy to deal directly with those who controlled state power, in contrast to what the party system could offer. It should be noted that in this period, from 1920 to 1980—with the exception of the governments of Bustamante (1945–1948) and Belaúnde (1963–1968)—all were authoritarian regimes, meaning that laws and privileges were decided by the government rather than the Congress (which was quite mediatized whenever it existed). Hence, a kind of intense statization of Catholicism was more than evident. A better example is that, during those years, several Catholic privileges were preserved—in protocol, education, public projects, etc.—in spite of the social transformations that showed a tendency towards religious diversity among Peruvians.

Nonetheless, the end of the *patronato* in 1980—as a result of the separation between Church and State established in the new constitution of 1979, after twelve years of military government, and as a result of an agreement with the Vatican in 1980—as well as the country's democratization in that decade, produced a change in the hierarchy and clergy of the time, who were also influenced by the Second Vatican Council and the collaborative ideals of the post-war period. Without losing their traditional tactics and political influence over the governments of the time—visible in the second government of Belaúnde (1980–1985) and less verifiable in the first government of Alan García, from APRA (1985–1990) (Armas 1999; Klaiber 2000)—they relied more on political parties, but above all on the media, businessmen and other opinion leaders, sharing a better understanding of political dynamics in a democratic regime in Latin America. No organization has been unappreciated, including the left-wing, which enjoyed the sympathy and even militancy in the 1980s of some lay people and members of the clergy influenced by the ideals of liberation theology (Pásara 2021).

Certainly, among clergy groups and Catholics with a greater tendency towards mobilization, there were different conceptions of their Catholicism—traditional, accommodated to the opening of Vatican II and the reality of the country, or groups sensitive to liberation theology, among others (Armas 1999; Pásara 2021)—but they agreed on the means of approaching their influence in the political field, considering themselves as just another actor on the scene. For some, their appreciation for parties inspired by Christian conceptions led them to maintain a closer relationship with these parties, but never to the point of excluding other political options.²

Therefore, the understanding of the possibilities provided by traditional means of influence—in the context of a democracy—was evident to the hierarchy. In that decade, although the *patronato* disappeared, they continued to maintain influence in public policies on healthcare, education and civil rights—engaging in some disputes with governments, without breaking any cordial relations—in addition to mediating labor conflicts and issuing

public opinions. The media even considered the hierarchy as leaders, considering them a guarantor of morality and justice in the country. Despite internal problems due to rifts caused as a result of liberation theology and some disputes with governments, the visits of Pope John Paul II in 1985 and 1988 showed the persistent rootedness of the clergy and the Catholic Church in public life ([Armas 1999](#)).

3. The Catholic Hierarchy and the State: From the Weakening to the Strengthening of Clerical Influence (1990–2020)

The 1990s showed not only a change in party organizations and political dynamics in general—if we compare this decade to the previous one—but also a change in the way that the clergy related to this field of action. To understand all this, we must take into account that the previous decade not only marked the establishment of democracy, but also the beginning of internal violence, as evidenced by the actions of Sendero Luminoso, the Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru (Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement) and the state response to them. It was also the decade of a deep economic crisis generated by the governments of Belaúnde and García. By the early 1990s, there was a hyper-recession and hyper-inflation. This was transferred to the political sphere, where the old parties were discredited, the left was dissolving in its internal fractures and a sense of weariness was taking hold of the electorate. In the electoral campaigns, both for the 1989 municipal elections and for the presidential and congressional elections of 1990, the electorate was leaning towards independent and anti-systemic candidates. The party system, developed in previous decades, had collapsed ([Crabtree 2005](#); [Crabtree and Thomas 1999](#)).

In the first round of the 1990 elections, Mario Vargas Llosa was the most candidate receiving the most votes, a liberal and leader of Frente Democrático (the Democratic Front, or FREDEMO, a coalition of right-wing parties: AP, the Partido Popular Cristiano (Popular Christian Party) and other organizations). He was supported by the mass media, the business community and a number of influential sectors. The other candidate, with whom he was to compete in the second round, was Alberto Fujimori Fujimori, an unknown politician and a university professor, not a religious believer, who promised to stabilize the economy in a non-violent way, unlike the adjustments then promoted by the IMF in Latin America, which Vargas Llosa promised to carry out. His organization, Cambio 90, created only to participate in the elections, included some leaders of Evangelical churches. It was a recognition of the growing religious plurality in the country—in the 1993 census, 88.6% declared themselves to be Catholic and 7.2% Evangelical; in the 2007 census, the figures were 81.3% and 12.5%—but also of Evangelicals' lack of media support. However, this loneliness was his main weapon to obtain the votes of the poorest people, urban and rural, tired of the crises, corruption and disinterest of politicians regarding their needs ([Arias 1998](#); [Crabtree and Thomas 1999](#)).

For some of the Catholic clergy, particularly the recently appointed Archbishop of Lima, Augusto Vargas Alzamora, this was proof of the danger that the Evangelical presence posed to the political order and to the Church. Similar to other pressure groups, he decided to support Vargas Llosa in the run-off campaign, a campaign that was otherwise very polarized. He visited the right-wing candidate, authorized the early appearance of the procession of El Señor de los Milagros (the Lord of Miracles) in the streets of Lima—a Catholic procession that congregates multitudes in October—and pointed out that every good Catholic should not vote for those who supported the Evangelicals ([El Comercio 1990a, 1990b](#); [Vargas Llosa 1991, 1993](#)). The clergyman still considered Catholic versus non-Catholic, a strategy typical of the first half of the 20th century, and placed his trust in the traditional media and economic powers in order to stop Fujimori.

He and others—such as the prelate of Arequipa, who had identical practices—were wrong, as was Vargas Llosa's own campaign team, who attempted to capitalize on this help from the hierarchy.³ In the June 10th elections, the electorate voted massively for Fujimori. The reasons for this vote have been studied: the support of the APRA government, enemy of the right-wing candidate; the mobilization of the left-wing organizations facing a Vargas

Llosa who promised economic liberalization; the economic waste of FREDEMO's publicity campaign in the midst of the country's greatest crisis; the public perception of Vargas Llosa as a representative of the old politicians who remained in power in the 1980s—in contrast, Fujimori himself appeared as cautious, modest and relying on the popular sectors (Arias 1998; Crabtree and Thomas 1999). The Evangelical churches also supported him, providing him with part of the logistics he needed for his tours around the country; they called him Brother Fujimori, and he sometimes stayed in their church buildings (Degregori and Grompone 1991; Gutiérrez 2000).

But Fujimori showed his independence and autonomy in political decisions from the moment he won the elections. Before taking office on 28 July 1990, he had distanced himself from some of those who helped him, and moved closer to the United States, the IMF, the World Bank,⁴ the military, businessmen and other public authorities. While in government, he implemented a harsh program of economic adjustment and stabilization, and then liberalized the economy. Along the way, he eliminated left-wing elements and the Evangelical groups that had supported him—such as his vice president—although he kept some of his early supporters, more on account of their loyalty to his political leadership than for their belief in the ideas they represented. In 1992, he staged a coup d'état, closed the Congress and governed until 1995, when he was reelected president.

Fujimori practiced a political personalism with a strong dose of neo-populism (Crabtree and Thomas 1999; Weyland 1997). Thus, relations with the Catholic hierarchy were marked by personal relationships and loyalty, or by resentment and criticism. But even for relationships of the first type, they were subject to the autonomy of public policies, which, as in the "Aristocratic Republic" of the early twentieth century, were independent of such relationships. If, at the beginning of that century, these were guided by the positivist and secularizing ideas of the time, now, they were close to the ideas of the IMF, the World Bank and other multilateral organizations in economic, demographic, health and education policies (Wise 2010). For example, after restructuring the State, the Ministry of Women was created, more liberal health policies were established, and a program for the sterilization of peasant women was partially developed as part of a population control policy; likewise, in the field of education, education was liberalized, allowing the proliferation of many private schools and for-profit universities, with little interest in religious support in their approach.

Of course, the government was aware of the social role played by the Catholic Church, but it sought only ad hoc support. In 1990 and until the beginning of 1991, the Archbishop of Callao and president of the Peruvian Episcopal Conference, Ricardo Durand Flórez, collaborated in helping to support the aftermath of the economic adjustment and during the implementation of the first social programs. The social emergency seemed to justify these supports; the relationship with the Archbishop of Lima, Vargas Alzamora, was cold due to what happened during the electoral campaign. Archbishop Durand Flórez issued supportive opinions; he was invited to join social aid and peace commissions and the media sought him out as an authoritative ecclesiastical voice. During this period, in 1990, the Church succeeded in updating the tax exemptions that the Church already enjoyed under the 1980 Agreement. However, the demographic policy promoted by the government, aimed to control birth rates, as well as its intention to include some grounds for abortion in the Penal Code, led not only the hierarchy to criticize these actions "driven by international pressures and interests," but also led Durand Flórez to decline to join the governmental commissions (Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1993, pp. 36–74). At the same time, the Archbishop of Lima, after the 1992 coup d'état, entered a phase of constant disputes with the regime due to the withdrawal of tax exemptions for his archdiocese and the establishment of religious holidays as working days, and later criticized public policies on human rights and democracy as well as his authoritarianism; he also supported the political opposition against the ratification of the new Constitution in 1993, and campaigned against his reelection in 1995 (Armas 1999; Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1993, pp. 96 and 111). Until his retirement, Vargas Alzamora would continue to denounce the regime.

After the coup d'état, the cleric who began to receive media attention for supporting Fujimori was the Archbishop of Ayacucho, Juan Luis Cipriani, who, in 1999, replaced Vargas Alzamora as Archbishop of Lima. The government cooperated with his pastoral duties and he supported them with several statements in their favor (Pásara and Indacochea 2014). Only in one aspect did they disagree: birth control and reproductive sexuality policies. Fujimori ratified these in his message to the nation on 28 July 1995, criticizing the hierarchy of “sacred cows”; he implemented the Ministry of Women in 1996, and he attempted to create sexual orientation manuals in public schools, while the Ministry of Health developed a program of forced sterilization for the peasant population (Rousseau 2007). He received the rejection of the Episcopal Conference, and Cipriani, on this last measure. It was only at the end of that decade that health policy began to show setbacks.

As a result, the regime showed increasing autonomy in its public policies, and the position of the most conservative bishops in political matters—such as Cipriani and others—within the high clergy showed a rather divided episcopate. At the level of party-political life, the creation of various ephemeral and official organizations—Cambio 90-Nueva Mayoría, Perú 2000—was combined with that of other, theoretically independent ones, such as the Partido Renovación Nacional (National Renovation Party), to provide support for Fujimori. There were several young politicians who came from Opus Dei,⁵ such as Rafael Rey, and other Catholic organizations who personally showed their sympathy for some government policies in political or economic matters, in spite of their limitations in influencing others. It was also a time when various Evangelical figures militated in the pro-Fujimori groups, also showing their sympathies, sometimes generating ruptures and divisions within their churches (Gutiérrez 2000; Pérez and Grundberger 2019).

After the downfall of Fujimorism, the years between 2000 and 2020 meant a greater presence of the Catholic hierarchy in public decisions—ironically, much more than the conservative Cipriani had in Fujimori's authoritarian liberalism, which involved liberal Catholic sectors, former liberationists, institutionalists and some traditional and conservative sectors such as the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae (the Sodality of Christian Life, often referred to simply as Sodalitium). This occurred during the governments of Valentín Paniagua (2000–2001), Alejandro Toledo (2001–2006) and the second García administration (2006–2011).

Although clerical participation in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to elucidate the crimes of 20 years of violence was modest and had an unrepresentative bishop—Cipriani and others still had influence in Rome and pushed the episcopate to avoid a major commitment with the Commission as the government intended (Pásara 2021). However, during Toledo's government, there was the notorious influence of the former bishop of Chimbote, Luis Bambarén, with ideas closely related to liberationist currents, and who even became part of the so-called Acuerdo Nacional. His friendship with the president and his center-right government was the cornerstone of these relations, but Toledo did not hesitate to trust the Ministry of Health to medical doctors such as Luis Solari and Fernando Carbone, who were associated with Sodalitium and Opus Dei, who prevented some regulations in public health that went against believers' standpoints (Jaime 2015).

The consolidation of the latter position was reinforced during the García administration, a conservative regime that relied politically on Fujimorism in Congress and whose relations with the Catholic hierarchy were once again mediated by Archbishop Cipriani. We must remember in parallel that, since 2011, Fujimorism, now led by Keiko Fujimori, daughter of Alberto Fujimori, had ceased to be a small organization in the Peruvian political mosaic, instead becoming a vast organization as in the past, now identified with a conservative and traditional position, far from the secularism that had characterized her father's government. Keiko crossed her conservative discourse with the existing neoliberalism, and became a reference point in the Peruvian right-wing from the early 2010s onwards.

Therefore, in García's government, both in health policy and in other public aspects, there was pressure from Catholic sectors.⁶ In general, since 2000, a confluence of views has been taking place regarding the response towards health policies, reproduction and

sexuality, and eventually educational policies, where the most traditional sectors, with the support of European, North American and Latin American international Catholic organizations, emphasized a pro-life and pro-family campaign (Rousseau 2007). It was part of a global process that would deepen over the years and that, in Peru, sometimes made good use of the existing anti-Fujimorism to dismantle some of the public policies of the 1990s. In 2004, in response to the liberal policies of the new Minister of Health, Carbone's successor, the first "March for Life" was organized, supported by Archbishop Cipriani (Actores y Estrategias 2018).

Although it is true that the presence of Evangelicals in the Congress and the emergence of a strong current of progressive left-wing and a secular liberalism in intellectual circles, the media, social networks and others meant a certain containment of Catholic influence, there was, nevertheless, as can be seen, a change compared to the 1990s, and, overall, the influence of the Catholic Church in the life of the State has returned to what it was in the 1980s. Meanwhile, with the weakening of old mass parties, religious elements remained on the margins of political speeches and rituals, except for the personal allusions of some political leaders.⁷ The Fujimori political movements did not make use of them—they operated under a different conceptualization of their political representativity (Meléndez 2012)—and were more interested in the effective and social character of their actions. However, this was soon to change.

4. The 2021 Presidential Campaign

Since the 2000s, as in other countries, there have been several events in Peru that help explain the renewal of participation in politics among a lay sector of Catholics of conservative and traditional ideas.

First, the progressive actions of left-wing and urban liberalism, social networks and groups of intellectuals created tension in the democratic context of ephemeral and fragile parties and movements, which did not try and neither were they able to monopolize the public debates. Their political anti-Fujimorista positions were secular at times and questioned more traditional moral positions. This resulted in various urban debates on the need for an explicitly secular State, grounds for legal abortion, a gender focus in public policies and equal marriage, among other changes. These positions, unlike in the previous century, were given notice after the beginning of this century and some of their representative figures occupied public positions in the governments of Toledo and even García. Their influence became more noticeable in the second decade of this century. Furthermore, these collectives and leaders, along with other factors, were crucial in the final confrontation during the general elections of 2011 and 2016, and both the governments of Ollanta Humala (2011–2016) and Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (2016–2018) had to take them into account. Pressure groups not only actively participated in these polarized elections—both governments were elected after confronting Keiko Fujimori, conceived as a synthesis of corruption, the right wing and authoritarianism to be avoided—but their influence in the design of some public policies in education, culture and eventually healthcare was evident.

A second fact, linked to the first, was the slow construction of a symbolic enemy to fight against, by the political and social sectors that felt excluded in the process. In this scenario, for some traditional Catholic groups, the term "caviar" became a common way to define liberals and Lima's left-wing followers, a diffuse term that also included the governments of Paniagua, Toledo, Humala, Kuczynski and their successors, such as Martín Vizcarra (2018–2020) and Francisco Sagasti (2020–2021), though partially excluding the second government of García. Basically, the term referred to everyone that was not part of Fujimorism or the traditional right wing, who had neither controlled the State nor had a decisive influence on the social process since 2000. Furthermore, this religious imaginary, which was spread across debates, social media and press media, was born inside this political struggle, and served to symbolically group together those who considered themselves different and distinctive, a reactive feeling, while facing exclusion. The process did not

differ from that in other countries, which also saw the resurgence of a conservative right wing and, along with it, the activism of some Catholic groups (Smith 2019; Vaggione 2005).

A third fact was the slow emergence of certain transversal social collectives within traditional Christianity, such as “Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas” (Don’t Mess With My Children) and other organizations, or events such as the March for Life, as well as various forums or virtual platforms, such as “Perú Defiende la Vida y la Familia” (Peru Defends Life and Family) or “Parejas Reales” (Real Couples), created to reject public policies in education, health and sexuality, or to confront the opposing collectives and their influences, contributing to the growing politicization of diverse, lay Catholic and Evangelical groups, who would converge on an electoral platform that they could support. It helped a great deal that, in 2014, Archbishop Cipriani signed with Evangelical leaders the so-called “Compromiso por el Perú” (Commitment for Peru), giving credibility to the joint initiatives (Pérez 2022).

Lastly, a catalyst to be taken into account to understand this eruption of activism by traditional Catholic elements was the political crisis of the State itself, illustrated during the Kuczynski government, which was weak in Congress, leading Martin Vizcarra to power, and his confrontation with two successive Peruvian Congresses. Also noteworthy is the global economic crisis for primary commodity-producing countries in 2014, which exacerbated the social crisis. Likewise, the pandemic of 2020 and 2021 and the public proceedings against corruption had an influence, produced after the dissemination of the “Panama Papers” and the “Lavajato” case, which involved the last governments, all of which provided opportunities, as happened in 1990, for the emergence of a diversity of political options, some of them new, or the recreation of entities already seen in previous years. Once again, the fragile party structure, after two decades, was put to the test.

This is the background and context as the 2021 elections were about to take place. The predictable result was citizens’ disaffection with the political campaign and a certain distrust of the candidates, reflected in the dispersion of votes and in the fact that, overall, the citizens participating in the electoral process only represented 57% of the total number of eligible voters—quite a lot in a country where voting is obligatory. The result of the 2021 elections was a dispersed Congress in terms of political representation, and two candidates, Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori, who obtained the first places in the presidential race.

However, in that first round, the candidacy of Rafael López-Aliaga, candidate of Renovación Nacional, who won third place (11.75% of valid votes) in the presidential elections, was outstanding. An associate member of Opus Dei, investor and manager of tourism projects, he had begun to participate in active politics years before. He was a municipal councilor in the city of Lima for Solidaridad Nacional (National Solidarity), a right-wing party that emerged in the 1990s, and later controlled this organization, changed its name and introduced as a symbol the color sky blue, similar to other pro-life political initiatives in Latin America. In the 2020 congressional elections, his party participated without much success, but now his candidacy has awakened interest among conservative Catholic and Evangelical sectors, right-wingers and among a large spectrum of people dissatisfied with “caviar” politicians, left-wingers or those seeking a “strong” government (Pérez 2021, 2022). In addition to various urban groups that supported his party, members of Opus Dei, groups of parishioners and members of the clergy with similar ideas collaborated actively in the campaign. In other words, many elements were combined behind a conservative and populist discourse. This sought to condense the anger of these sectors against the so-called “caviars”, “terrorists” (stigmatizing the left wing in general), politicians and journalists considered to be corrupt and profiting from public resources. The candidate presents himself as a businessman–entrepreneur, pledging to build a developed country (Ubilluz 2021).

It has been said that his discourse was in tune with Latin American authoritarian populism, mixed with neoliberal ideas, different from the European and North American far-right in several aspects, but with which he shared above all the rejection of the empowered leftists and the supposed new cultural order of gender ideology, feminism, environmentalism and what some call cultural Marxism (Kahhat 2019; Pereira da Silva 2018; Stefanoni 2021; Ubilluz 2021). One can even point out what aspects brought him closer to a

Latin American conservative populism, such as thinking about a Christian nation, wrapped in a capitalist and global discourse (Ubilluz 2021). However, his personality, which made it difficult for him to speak in front of the cameras, and the fact that his proposals were far distant from the expectations of many social segments, as well as the lack of support from mass media—who had their own candidates—all worked against him. Another, no less important, limitation was the fact that he never gained support from the high clergy.

First of all, after the arrival of Pope Francis in Rome, the winds had changed for conservative and traditional groups within the Peruvian Church. Cipriani was no longer archbishop, but rather, as of 2019, Carlos Castillo, a priest and intellectual with progressive ideas. The pope also appointed Pedro Barreto as cardinal, who was a bishop from the central region of Peru and an advocate for environmental concerns. Second of all, because these ideological distances between Church and State were coupled with the fact that, even for some clerics who aligned themselves with politicians' ideas, public support was not advisable. What happened in 1990, and awareness of the complexity in which influences move in the Peruvian political spectrum, prevented it from happening.

Therefore, López-Aliaga did not have hierarchical support, unlike Vargas Llosa back in 1990. Another problem for his candidacy was that his traditional Catholic discourse, such as referring to the Virgin Mary, celibacy or abortion, aroused controversy and distanced him from other Catholic sectors. Finally, his political and religious positions confined him to a certain electoral segment—though perhaps this was what he was looking for—although he gathered a lot of support in Lima and other cities in the north and south of the country. Ironically, in the run-off confrontation between Pedro Castillo and Keiko Fujimori, part of the electorate voted for the “communist” Castillo, verified in the south of the country, but he was also supported during the run-off by the so-called “caviars” in Lima⁸—a simple verification of the varied and complex nature of the supporters, as well as the attitude of the electorate.

As for the run-off campaign, both candidates used religious elements, seeking symbolic association and remembrance among their followers. Pedro Castillo, in a well-remembered and multitudinous rally in the populous Lima district of San Juan de Lurigancho, knelt on the podium and said a prayer together with an Evangelical preacher (El Popular 2021; Pereda 2021). The family of the current President Castillo belongs to an Evangelical church. In this way, he sought to emphasize his deep respect for religion. Keiko Fujimori obtained support from other Evangelical leaders, prayed and held a cross at a subsequent rally against her opponent (France24 2021). With a conservative and traditional position, she sought to capture López-Aliaga's more traditional voters.

In this last stage of the 2021 campaign—despite the polarization in which Fujimorism, following the example of other recent campaigns in Latin America, such as in Colombia or Chile, accused Castillo of being a “communist” who wanted to turn Peru into Venezuela—a press release from the bishops in Peru condemned communism as an extreme form of liberalism, leading to the impression of explicit support for Keiko Fujimori. It was not a text written by Archbishops Castillo or Barreto, but by the Episcopal Conference, controlled by Miguel Cabrejos, Archbishop of Trujillo and representative of a moderate and institutional sector of the high clergy (Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 2021). Furthermore, other bishops joined the effort with public statements against communism.

But with the campaign over, neither have the Evangelicals gained support in Pedro Castillo's fragile government nor has Keiko Fujimori made any further progress in her religious loyalties. In our opinion, the ephemeral nature of the use of religious elements in the existing political groups was proven. But it showed the eruption of a group of Catholics in electoral politics, in alliance with other groups. In 2022, and already in the parliamentary game and the political struggle of various groups against the Castillo government, some of them have participated in recent events such as dismantling some reforms made by the “caviars,” including public education policies (Berríos 2022; La República 2022), but without showing any sign of seeking to consolidate a set of Catholic values as a distinctive element in their parliamentary activity. On the other hand, Cardinal Barreto, who represents a

tendency within the clergy, at times shows his closeness to the president, trying to exert some influence.

5. Conclusions

In the last Peruvian presidential election campaign, a candidate emerged who sought, among other loyalties, that of the Catholic electorate. He gained some support, but more for his conservative and populist political discourse than for his specific Christian affiliation, which did him little good. This brings us back to an old characteristic of Peruvian politics in the twentieth century: the impossibility of articulating a political party that would bring together, in a sustained way, a significant portion of the Catholic electorate. It also shows the kind of secularization in Peruvian politics, or what is effectively the same: that Catholicism is not represented in a concrete group, beyond symbols or rites that some groups have used, which seeks to remind the population of the Christianity of their beliefs. There are multiple causes for these political behaviors, but, in any case, we highlight the infeasibility of one option.

Mass-based parties back in the 20th century used religious elements in their political rituals. After their crises, these practices were almost absent. Renovación Nacional has reintroduced it, but there are differences: the rhetorical allusions are Catholic, but also diffusely Christian, and, in any case, they are part of a broader discourse on traditions and morals. There are differences that are also coherent with the country's change, the existing religious diversity and the loss of adhesion of the population to an exclusive confession.

On the other hand, what is highly productive for the ecclesiastical hierarchy is the continuity in the development of traditional forms of political action, such as influencing governors, ministers and other public figures. This also happened at the beginning of the 20th century, when liberal secularizing laws were moving forward. Later, when state power was concentrated in the government, from 1920 onwards, it allowed the clergy a close corporate relationship that was profitable for maintaining their privileges and public influence. However, the Second Vatican Council and its new conceptions of Church and clergy, the establishment of democracy in the 1980s, the separation of Church and State and then the Fujimori regime and its inclination towards neoliberal ideas and global modernization changed the course of these relations. Nevertheless, the high clergy learned to successfully relate to and influence multiple interest groups, particularly at the beginning of the 21st century. Governments and parliamentarians of various parties and members of the clergy of different political positions have practiced sometimes very fluid relations in recent years, which has allowed the influence of the Catholic hierarchy and its influence to remain remarkable and even be renewed, despite the social and political changes that have taken place.

From the current perspective in Peru, and moving away from both objects of analysis, public life shows various mobilized social and traditional religious collectives that unite Evangelicals and Catholics, such as "Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas," pressing for a change in public policies, obtaining some success by sharing similar ideas with many politicians in a rather weak Congress and government. This fact shows the resurgence, despite the limitations, of an old traditional Catholicism, as observed a century ago, and shows the notable absence of a Catholic progressivism, which, except in part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, shows the impact of the social change that has taken place. The process seems to be regional ([Hagopian 2009](#); [Vaggione 2005](#)), and allows us to appreciate how, in Latin America, in addition to the traditional methods of action of the hierarchy, there are also other tendencies of Catholicism in political spheres that can question or even surpass the old religious leaderships.

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Notes

- ¹ This is similar to other Latin American experiences. For the case of Argentina, see Zanatta (1996, 1999) and Zanca (2005).
- ² Therefore, collaboration with politicians with a Christian Democratic tradition dates back to the government of Bustamante (1945–1948), in which various lay members of Catholic Action and other organizations participated. It continued after the creation of Democracia Cristiana (1955), followed by the split of this organization in 1967 into Partido Demócrata Cristiano and Partido Popular Cristiano, both mesocratic parties with little popular support. These organizations were created outside the clergy and always claimed their independence from the institutional Church.
- ³ Regarding this, see the Message from the Bishops of Peru to the national electorate, April 1990 (Conferencia Episcopal Peruana 1993).
- ⁴ He made a trip to New York and Washington and held meetings with the U.S. government and bankers, changing his position on economic matters.
- ⁵ Regarding Opus Dei in Peru, see Pásara and Indacochea (2014).
- ⁶ In the first two decades of the century, the Ministry of Health was a battleground between their position and another one led by Pilar Mazzetti, who served several times as minister, and other actors linked to liberal positions in the medical field. These events are easily traceable in media news (La República 2004).
- ⁷ There was indeed an ephemeral attempt at an Evangelical confessional party by Pastor Humberto Lay (Amat y León and Pérez 2019).
- ⁸ See the voting information published by the electoral entity, ONPE, in both rounds for the aforementioned regions (ONPE 2021).

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