

Conditional Privatization of Religion: How Host-Society Structures Condition Migrants' Religious Lives in Latin America

Privatización condicionada de la religión: cómo las estructuras de la sociedad receptora configuran la vida religiosa de las personas migrantes en América Latina

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how symbolic-cultural and material-relational structures in host societies shape the religious lives of Peruvian migrants in Córdoba (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay), and under what conditions religious privatization becomes context-dependent rather than individually chosen. Using a comparative qualitative design grounded in lived religion, the study analyzes 22 in-depth biographical-narrative interviews, complemented by key informant interviews. Data were coded through an iterative constant-comparative strategy. Findings show that material constraints limit communal participation in both cities, while contrasting plausibility structures produce different trajectories: Córdoba's more religiously receptive environment favors public and communal continuity, whereas Montevideo's secular context encourages individualized and domestic practices. The study proposes conditional privatization as a distinct form of religious privatization: one driven not primarily by modern individualization or declining institutional authority, but by socio-structural constraints that restrict public or communal religious expression. This conceptualization offers a new framework for understanding migrant religiosity in Latin America.

Keywords: 1. migration, 2. religion, 3. Latin America, 4. secularization, 5. individualization.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo las estructuras simbólico-culturales y material-relacionales de las sociedades receptoras configuran la vida religiosa de migrantes peruanos en Córdoba (Argentina) y Montevideo (Uruguay), y bajo qué condiciones la privatización religiosa depende del contexto más que de una elección individual. Mediante un diseño cualitativo comparativo, desde la perspectiva de la religión vivida, se analizaron 22 entrevistas biográfico-narrativas y entrevistas a informantes calificados mediante una estrategia comparativa constante. Los resultados muestran que las restricciones materiales limitan la participación comunitaria, mientras distintas estructuras de plausibilidad generan trayectorias divergentes: Córdoba favorece la continuidad pública y comunitaria, mientras Montevideo impulsa prácticas individualizadas y domésticas. El artículo propone la privatización condicionada como una modalidad distinta de privatización religiosa: no originada principalmente en procesos de individualización o debilitamiento institucional, sino en restricciones socioestructurales que limitan la expresión religiosa pública o comunitaria. Este concepto aporta un marco para comprender la religiosidad migrante en América Latina.

Palabras clave: 1. religión, 2. migración, 3. América Latina, 4. secularización, 5. individualización.

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INTRODUCTION²

The relationship between religion and migration is essential for understanding the lived reality of millions of migrants across the world. Migration has economic, political, and social implications (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021), and migrants carry their beliefs into contexts where host societies shape or transform their lived religion. Despite this growing recognition, research still focuses largely on macro-level factors, overlooking migrants' micro-level experiences (Díez Jiménez, 2009; García, 2014). Their beliefs and practices often undergo transnationalization, conversion, or renegotiation in new cultural contexts (Odgers Ortiz, 2007), making religion an important resource for adaptation and belonging.

This article builds on these insights to introduce the concept of *conditional privatization of religion*, a framework for understanding how migrants' religious practices are shaped not solely by personal agency or modern individualization, but by socio-structural constraints embedded in the host society. Understanding whether religion functions as a resource for integration or a source of tension requires attention to the sociocultural and institutional frameworks of the receiving society and to migrants' living conditions. Precarious employment, limited networks, and lack of time or resources may constrain religious expression. These dynamics raise broader questions about the role of structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1991; Archer, 1995; Ammerman, 2003; McGuire, 2008), particularly how plausibility structures (Berger, 2016) and material conditions contribute to forms of privatization that are structurally induced rather than individually chosen.

Building on these questions, this article analyzes how socio-structural factors shape Peruvian migrants' religious experiences. To do so, two types of socio-structural factors are considered: 1) symbolic and cultural (such as the social visibility and legitimacy of religious expressions and the expected place of religion in public life); and 2) material and relational ones (such as available time, financial resources, geographical proximity and access to temples, working conditions, and the strength of social networks and community ties).

The empirical focus of this study is Peruvian migrants in Córdoba (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay), for several reasons. First, Peruvians represent well-established migrant communities in both cities, with Córdoba experiencing two significant migration waves (in the 1960s and the 1990s) and Montevideo seeing an important influx of Peruvian migrants during Uruguay's shift from negative to positive migration balances in the early 2000s. Second, the religious diversity of both host societies—and of Peru—makes this case particularly compelling for a comparative analysis of how local religious contexts shape migrant religious experiences.

A recent study on lived religion in Latin America (Rabbia et al., 2019) revealed, in this sense, significant differences: Lima is characterized by historical popular religious expressions, Córdoba

² This article is based on a chapter of the author's doctoral dissertation (completed and submitted for evaluation in 2022, originally written in Spanish). AI-assisted language tools were used exclusively to support the translation and stylistic refinement of the English version of the manuscript. No AI tools were used in the development of the theoretical framework, data analysis, interpretation, or conclusions.

by a mix of diverse Catholic practices and growing disaffiliation, and Montevideo by a more secularized environment with low public religious expression and a high proportion of religiously unaffiliated people.

Third, Peruvian migrant religiosity has been widely studied (Cerruti, 2005; Paerregaard, 2008; Pereira Arena, 2024; Takenaka & Paerregaard, 2012; Wright, 2011), particularly its strong public expression and transnational reach through practices such as the *Señor de los Milagros* procession and the formation of religious brotherhoods abroad.

Focusing on Peruvian migrants in Montevideo and Córdoba, this study contributes to the understanding of intra-Latin American migration by exploring how religious practices are sustained, transformed, or constrained in diverse environments. Comparing these two cities—shaped by distinct secularization processes and religious landscapes—offers a unique opportunity to examine how symbolic-cultural frameworks and material-relational conditions influence migrants' religious agency.

This article therefore addresses two central research questions: 1) how do symbolic-cultural and material-relational structures in host societies shape the religious experiences and trajectories of Peruvian migrants in Córdoba and Montevideo? and 2) under what conditions does religious privatization take the form of a context-dependent, conditional privatization rather than an individually chosen or modernity-driven shift?

By articulating these questions, this article seeks to clarify the socio-structural mechanisms through which migrants sustain, transform, or relocate their religious practices within contrasting Latin American host societies. The article is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework is outlined; second, the methodological approach is described; third, the religious and cultural contexts of Montevideo and Córdoba are presented; fourth, the empirical findings are analyzed; and finally, the implications of these results are discussed and concluding reflections are offered.

BACKGROUND

This section outlines the analytical tools that guide the study, integrating insights from the sociology of religion, migration studies, and the lived religion perspective. The concept of conditional privatization of religion is proposed here, understood as forms of individualized or domestic religious practice that emerge as adaptive responses to socio-structural constraints, rather than as expressions of individual preference or modern individualization. This concept highlights how migrants' religious practices are shaped by the availability of community networks, the legitimacy of public religious expression, and the material conditions of everyday life.

From a symbolic and cultural perspective, host societies function not merely as geographic destinations but as symbolic universes (Comas D'Argemir & Pujadas Muñoz, 1991) that shape what migrants perceive as legitimate or possible forms of religious expression. These environments influence migrants' social positioning and the continuity, transformation, or invisibility of religious practices (Odgers Ortiz, 2003). As Levitt (2007) notes, religious meanings

and practices are reconfigured as migrants encounter new cultural expectations and symbolic boundaries. To conceptualize these dynamics, this article draws on Berger's notion of plausibility structures: social environments that render beliefs and practices credible and meaningful (Berger, 2016). In highly secular contexts, public religious expressions may be perceived as inappropriate, while in more religiously expressive contexts, communal forms of lived religion are more easily sustained.

Migrants encounter these structures not only as external realities but also through their own perceptions, which mediate how they interpret the host context. Perceived differences in religiosity—visibility, legitimacy, and social acceptance—guide what is considered possible or advisable in the religious domain. As Hirschman (2004) emphasizes, even long-standing practices may acquire new meanings in new cultural contexts. Thus, plausibility structures operate as both symbolic conditions and interpretive filters contributing to conditional privatization.

Regarding material-relational factors, this article draws on the lived religion framework (Ammerman, 2014; Pereira Arena & Morello, 2022), which emphasizes how religious meanings emerge through daily routines, embodied practices, and relational contexts. This perspective highlights how migrants' religiosity is intertwined with work schedules, family responsibilities, spatial constraints, and access to religious infrastructures.

Structural limitations—such as long working hours, economic precarity, limited transportation, or scarce religious institutions—can restrict participation in communal religious practices. As Fortuny et al. (2014) show, these constraints often reduce the intensity of lived religion among migrants, particularly recent arrivals. These insights underscore the need to consider both the religious landscape of host societies and migrants' living conditions. Migrants do not practice religion in a vacuum; their practices are shaped by the opportunities and constraints of the host context.

While previous studies have examined the re-localization of migrant religious practices (Capovilla, 2022; Bertolani & Boccagni, 2023; García, 2014; Juárez Huet, 2009), few have theorized religious privatization as shaped by external socio-structural forces. The sociology of religion typically associates privatization with modern individualism, declining institutional authority, or subjective belief systems (Callejo González, 2010; Casanova, 1994; Hervieu-Léger, 2005; Luckmann, 1973; Mardones, 1996). However, this narrative insufficiently accounts for migrant religious experience, where privatization may result less from individualistic orientations than from host societies' symbolic-cultural and material-relational structures that constrain public or communal religious expression.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, comparative research design to examine how socio-structural conditions shape the religious experiences of Peruvian migrants in Córdoba (Argentina) and Montevideo (Uruguay). The analysis draws on twenty-two in-depth biographical-narrative interviews

with Peruvian migrants (11 living in Montevideo and 11 living in Córdoba), complemented by key informant interviews with demographers, civil society actors, and religious leaders. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure heterogeneity in gender, age, religious affiliation, migration wave, and length of residence, while snowball sampling helped access networks of migrants involved in diverse religious practices.

Although the sample is not statistically representative, its diversity offered sufficient analytical saturation for the themes examined. Interviewees range from recent arrivals to long-term residents and include Catholics, Evangelicals, members of Latter-day Saints communities, individuals with non-affiliated religiosity, and one atheist (ex-Catholic, converted in Montevideo). While the sample includes variation in gender, age, length of residence, and religious affiliation, this article does not aim to provide a systematic comparison across these variables. Future research could further explore how these factors shape migrants' religious trajectories and experiences of conditional privatization.

The study adopts the lived religion perspective, which guided both the interview protocol and the interpretive approach to the narratives. Interviews traced life histories and everyday contexts—work, family, leisure, and embodied routines—to identify the spaces where religious meanings emerge and are relocated in migration. The research design involved two interconnected levels of analysis: a contextual examination of the religious landscapes and plausibility structures of Córdoba and Montevideo, based on secondary sources and expert interviews; and an individual-level analysis of migrants' trajectories and religious practices.

Data analysis followed an iterative, constant comparative strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). Coding proceeded through open and axial stages, refining categories related to symbolic-cultural and material-relational constraints, and included systematic comparison across both cities to identify patterned mechanisms associated with conditional privatization. Triangulation and peer debriefing strengthened methodological rigor.

MIGRATORY PROFILE AND THE RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MONTEVIDEO AND CÓRDOBA

Although both cities share cultural similarities, their migration histories and religious landscapes differ, offering contrasting plausibility structures for migrant religiosity. Peruvian migration to Córdoba has been more consolidated and historically visible. Since the mid-twentieth century, Córdoba has received successive waves of Peruvian migrants: a student-oriented flow in the 1960s, followed by a predominantly female and highly educated labor migration beginning in the 1990s. According to recent census data, Peruvians represent the largest foreign-born group in the province (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 2024). Migrants have tended to concentrate in neighborhoods such as Alberdi and Alto Alberdi, where community networks facilitate employment, mobility, and settlement (Gómez & Sánchez, 2017). Despite these networks, many migrant women remain concentrated in domestic work, a sector marked by informality and limited opportunities for upward mobility (Qualified informant 1, personal communication, September 30, 2020).

Córdoba's religious landscape is shaped by a historical predominance of Catholicism and a strong institutional presence of the Catholic Church in public life. Although diversification and disaffiliation have increased, Catholic traditions continue to influence social practices, public festivities, and political debates (Esquivel, 2000; Vaggione, 2017). The Church maintains a significant role in education and the public sphere, and its symbolic presence remains highly visible. These conditions create a cultural environment in which public religious expression is relatively legitimate and socially recognizable, even as the city undergoes processes of pluralization and secularization.

Within this context, the religiosity of Peruvian migrants manifests through practices and devotions that serve as spaces of community cohesion. As noted above, the Brotherhood of the Lord of Miracles is a key example of Catholic religiosity becoming a cultural and social identity marker. Through the annual procession and other activities, these devotions reaffirm faith and strengthen the sense of belonging within the Peruvian community in the host society.

The presence of these religious manifestations in public space reflects religion's role in Córdoba's society, where Catholic festivities still hold significant social legitimacy and popular religiosity remains a key element of community life. Even Peruvian migrants who have converted to Evangelical Christianity continue to participate in these popular Catholic celebrations, reinterpreting them as expressions of their cultural heritage beyond denominational boundaries. Thus, the religiosity of Peruvians in Córdoba is shaped by the local religious landscape—open to public religious expressions—while also serving as a link to their country of origin and a means of integration into the host society.

On the other hand, Peruvian migration to Uruguay is a relatively recent phenomenon that has received little attention in the academic literature. While some scholars have studied the Peruvian community (Alfaro Scala, 2013; Arocena & Aguiar, 2007), no specific research³ exists into its religious dimension. The most significant influx of Peruvian migrants occurred in the 1990s, driven by the economic crisis and political violence in Peru (Falcón Aybar & Bologna, 2013). Early flows were gendered, with men concentrated in fishing and women in domestic work (Qualified informant 3, personal communication, May 14, 2020).

Despite harsh working conditions and labor precarity, many migrants settled, forming families and community networks that have sustained their presence in Montevideo. However, compared to other migrant groups, Peruvians in Uruguay have shown lower levels of religious organization, with few structured community expressions beyond the annual celebration of the Lord of Miracles at the Church of the Immigrants (Qualified informant 4, personal communication, October 16, 2020).⁴

Regarding the Uruguayan religious landscape, it has been shaped by over a century of secularization, creating a distinctive context for migrants' religious experiences. The country

³ Apart from that conducted and published by the author.

⁴ Interview with a representative of an international migration organization.

stands out in Latin America for its strong secular identity and a historical process of Church-State separation that has relegated religion to the private sphere (Caetano, 2006; Greising Díaz, 2023). At the same time, this configuration is closely linked to a strong tradition of laicidad (Blancarte, 2008), referring to a specific historical and institutional model of church–state relations in Uruguay that reinforces the limited visibility of religion in the public sphere.

Despite Catholicism’s decline as the dominant religion, 36.5% of the population still identifies as Catholic, a figure well below the regional average. Meanwhile, the proportion of nones—including atheists, agnostics, believers without religion, and those who respond “none”⁵—has increased significantly, from 30.9% in 1995 to 55.7% in 2024 (Latinobarómetro Survey, 2024). In Montevideo, the proportion of non-religious individuals is typically higher than in the rest of the country (Equipos, 2018).

Within this context, the Peruvian community in Uruguay experiences its religiosity in an environment where religious practice has little public visibility and religious support networks are less developed than in other migration destinations. While faith continues to play a role in migrants’ identities, structural limitations and the country’s cultural context have constrained the collective expression of their religiosity, as the following sections demonstrate. Beyond the cultural and linguistic elements shared by both host societies, these contextual differences shape distinct plausibility structures (Berger, 2016) that allow for an examination of whether religious privatization is conditioned by socio-structural factors.

RESULTS

Symbolic and Cultural Socio-Structural Factors

The symbolic and cultural characteristics of host societies shape what migrants perceive as plausible, legitimate, or socially acceptable forms of religious expression. These symbolic conditions are central to understanding conditional privatization, as they shape what can be publicly expressed and what is relegated to private or individualized spaces. To understand these symbolic and cultural factors, this section presents relevant context regarding the religious landscapes of both host and origin societies, as well as migrants’ perceptions of religiosity in their places of destination.

Religious Landscape of Host and Origin Societies

From a transnational perspective, both societies of origin and destination shape migrants’ religious trajectories, as they provide the broader cultural and symbolic contexts in which religious practices acquire meaning (Aparna & Schapendonk, 2020; Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Levitt, 2001, 2007; Odgers Ortiz, 2008). For this reason, a brief comparative overview of religiosity in Peru,

⁵ “None” is a regrouping developed by the author. It includes the response options used by Latinobarómetro: 1) “Believer, does not belong to a Church,” 2) “Agnostic,” 3) “Atheist,” and 4) “None.”

Argentina, and Uruguay is presented below to illustrate the plausibility structures migrants encounter in each context.

The empirical cases include both recent and long-term migrants. For this reason, Table 1 presents current religious data, which serve to illustrate the broader and more stable religious profiles of each country rather than to provide an exact historical snapshot of the moment when each individual migrated. While these profiles have evolved over time, their main cultural and structural features—such as Peru’s historically high levels of religiosity and Christianity and Uruguay’s profound secularization—remain relevant for understanding the plausibility structures that migrants encounter in host societies.

Table 1 aims to illustrate these significant religious differences through key data while acknowledging the influence of some historically and contemporarily relevant factors.

Table 1. Key Data on Religiosity in Peru, Argentina, and Uruguay

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Perú</i>	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Uruguay</i>
Catholics	63.8	63	33
Non-Catholic Christians	24.6	9.2	7.1
Other religions	0.6	0.8	2.4
Nones	9.8	27	55.7
The population that considers itself <i>very practicing</i> and <i>practicing</i> of their religion ⁶	50.8	20.9	16.3
Church-State relationship	Separation ⁷	Cooperation ⁸	Separation ⁹

Note: The categories in this table have been recoded from the Latinobarómetro Survey data. *Catholics* includes respondents who identified as Catholic. *Non-Catholic Christians* aggregates respondents who identified as Evangelical (unspecified), Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, or Protestant. The category *Other religions* includes respondents identified with Afro-American cults, Umbanda, or Judaism. *Nones* includes respondents who identified as believers without a church, agnostic, atheist, or none. Percentages do not sum to 100% as responses categorized as *I don't know* or *No answer* were excluded.

Source: Own elaboration based on Latinobarómetro Survey (2024) data.

⁶ It is the sum of the responses to the question: "And how do you consider yourself... [in relation to your religion]?" (Latinobarómetro Survey, 2024). It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this measurement. Religious practice has traditionally been assessed through attendance at religious services, which may introduce bias in responses to this question, overlooking a broad range of practices that extend beyond institutional spaces.

⁷ The 1979 Political Constitution of Peru removed the official status of the Catholic religion in Article 86. However, it should be noted that Article 50 recognizes the Catholic Church as an important element in the historical, cultural, and moral formation of Peru and states that the State provides its collaboration. The same article also affirms that the Peruvian State respects other religious denominations and may establish forms of cooperation with them (Constitución Política del Perú, 1979, art. 86; Constitución Política del Perú, 1993, art. 50).

⁸ This "Cooperation" may be a point of disagreement among some scholars. In this case, I argue that there is no separation because, although Argentina is not a confessional state, the Catholic Church holds a distinct legal status compared to other churches and religious denominations. The fact that the State continues to recognize a special role for the Catholic Church contradicts the principle of separation and neutrality (Di Stefano, 2018). Nonetheless, freedom of worship is guaranteed through Article 14 of its Constitution (Constitución de la Nación Argentina, 1994, art. 14).

⁹ State and Church were separated in the 1918 Constitution, through Article 5, which states that "All religious beliefs are free in Uruguay. The State does not support any religion" (Constitución de la República Oriental del Uruguay, 1918, art. 5).

As Table 1 shows, the three countries present markedly different religious profiles. Peru remains the most religious context, with high levels of Christian affiliation and practice. Argentina combines a historically Catholic culture with moderate levels of religious practice and growing disaffiliation, while Uruguay stands out for its strong secular identity, low levels of religious practice, and a majority non-religious population. These differences reflect contrasting historical relationships between Church and State and help explain the distinct symbolic and cultural conditions that shape migrants' religious experiences in each host society.

Perceived Religiosity in Host Societies

Are these differences noticeable to migrants? If so, in what ways do they perceive them? Beyond mere perceptions, are these differences relevant for understanding the plausibility of religious experiences in each city? To what extent does the religious context of host societies influence migrants' practices and locations?

Perhaps just as important as the actual plausibility structures regarding religion in host societies are the perceptions that migrants themselves hold about them. These perceptions play a significant role in shaping how migrants act and behave religiously, as well as in determining how religion is ultimately re-localized within the host context. In the interviews, perceived religious differences between the place of origin and the host cities sometimes emerged through comparative questions about religion in origin and receiving societies, while in other cases they surfaced spontaneously as migrants narrated their religious experiences upon arrival. These perceptions were rarely expressed without reference to the religiosity of their home countries, forming a constant comparative exercise in which migrants marked the contrasts—and sometimes similarities—between the religious landscape of their host society and that of their place of origin.

Overall, Peruvian society was perceived as having a more prominent religious presence than Argentina and Uruguay. However, a key comparative finding emerged: while migrants in Córdoba expressed diverse and heterogeneous views about their host city's religiosity, migrants in Montevideo presented a more homogeneous and unanimous perception. In Montevideo, there was a clear consensus: for most interviewees, Uruguay was noticeably less religious than their home country. In contrast, migrants in Córdoba perceived fewer differences, and some even acknowledged the public presence and visibility of religion in Argentina, albeit to a lesser extent than in Peru.

Montevideo

In Montevideo, interviewees used terms such as “materialistic,” “humanistic,” “not in need of God,” and “indifferent to religion” to describe Uruguayans' relationship with religion. Their narratives focused on three main aspects: the religiosity of native Uruguayans, the characteristics of religious communities and institutions, and the role of religion in public spaces. Across these dimensions, religiosity in Montevideo and Uruguay was perceived as weaker than in the migrants' home country.

Regarding native Uruguayans, migrants frequently characterized them as less devout, particularly in public religious expressions and devotion to saints and religious images. Some interviewees, such as Rosa and Lucero, highlighted how Peruvian religiosity is deeply embedded in everyday life, contrasting it with the perceived lack of visible religious devotion in Uruguay. Others pointed to Uruguayans' general indifference to religious matters, particularly those engaged in evangelical outreach, who reported difficulties in discussing faith with locals. Evangelical interviewees, such as Flor María and David, described Uruguayans as intellectual but indifferent to spirituality, often openly rejecting religious conversations (Flor María and David, personal communication, September 15, 2020).

Several interviewees also associated this lack of religiosity with "humanism," which they saw as deeply ingrained in Uruguayan society. Some, like Antonio, noted that most Uruguayans they had met did not believe in God, making it challenging to form religious connections with locals (Antonio, personal communication, August 6, 2020). Others, like Elizabeth, observed that many fellow Peruvian migrants in Uruguay had distanced themselves from religion, possibly influenced by the broader secular environment (Elizabeth, personal communication, November 5, 2020).

Regarding religious communities and institutions, migrants perceived Uruguayan churches as less active and less engaged with society. Catholic interviewees noted that churches in Uruguay were often closed outside of mass times and had lower attendance compared to Peru, where religious services and events were more frequent and widely attended.

Evangelical migrants, while recognizing similarities with their home communities, identified differences in interpersonal relationships, religious musical practices, and long-term commitment to church membership, observing that many Uruguayans frequently switched congregations or left religious communities altogether. Additionally, some Peruvian migrants involved in local religious brotherhoods, such as the Brotherhood of the Lord of Miracles, expressed disappointment over the lack of cohesion and inclusivity within these groups in Montevideo. Others were entirely unaware of their existence, despite their long-standing presence in the city.

Finally, regarding religion in the public sphere, interviewees consistently noted its absence from Uruguayan streets and social life. Unlike in Peru, where religious celebrations, processions, and public expressions of faith are common, these practices were largely absent in Montevideo. Migrants also pointed to the separation of Church and State in Uruguay, which they saw as significantly stronger than in Peru. Some, like César, viewed this separation positively, even suggesting that Peru could benefit from adopting a similar model (personal communication, December 3, 2020).

In summary, migrants in Montevideo shared a largely homogeneous perception of Uruguay as a secular society marked by low religious salience, weak public visibility of religion, limited commitment to religious communities, and minimal religious influence in public life. This perception of Uruguay's secular character shaped migrants' religious experiences, highlighting the influence of host society contexts on religious practices, locations, and trajectories.

Córdoba

On the other hand, the perception of religiosity in Córdoba, compared to the migrants' places of origin, is more nuanced than the distinctions drawn by those residing in Montevideo. Unlike the Uruguayan case, fewer narratives explicitly highlight Argentina's religiosity as fundamentally different from Peru's. Instead, Argentine society is generally perceived as religious, albeit with variations in forms and intensity when compared to the migrants' home country. These accounts reveal spaces where migrants can practice their religiosity and engage with local traditions, indicating a higher degree of plausibility for shared religious life than that experienced by migrants in Montevideo.

Among Peruvian migrants in Córdoba, perspectives on host society religiosity are more heterogeneous, ranging from no perceived differences with their society of origin to narratives that recognize significant distinctions—though still acknowledging that Argentine society remains religious, if “less religious” than Peru. Narratives about native Argentines' religiosity vary. While some migrants describe them as “less religious” than Peruvians, others emphasize their encounters with deeply committed local believers.

These narratives often reveal not only an awareness of local religious expressions but also some degree of involvement in them. Cristina, for example, recounts being invited to participate in local processions, which she declines due to her personal beliefs. Nevertheless, she has occasionally taken part in public religious events—especially those involving her children, such as Corpus Christi and Via Crucis—indicating that religiosity remains both visible and socially accessible in Córdoba (Cristina, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

Other interviewees described more gradual processes of adaptation to local religious communities. Elías, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for instance, initially distanced himself from a congregation in Córdoba because its practices differed from those, he was accustomed to within the same religious tradition in Peru (Elías, personal communication, April 16, 2019). Over time, however, he chose to reintegrate, acknowledging that some differences persisted while still finding meaningful ways to participate and sustain his religious life.

Some narratives, though less frequent, describe Córdoba as a religious city—but not to the same extent as Peru. These differences are mainly observed in lower attendance at religious services and a more relaxed observance of major religious festivities such as Christmas, Holy Week, and Epiphany. Still, unlike in Montevideo, most migrants in Córdoba perceive Argentines as generally religious.

Descriptions of religious communities in Córdoba tend to emphasize similarity rather than difference. Some interviewees assert that there are no significant differences, attributing this to shared language and scripture. For Carmen, for example, the only change is the location: “The place changes, but not the word of the Lord” (Carmen, personal communication, October 29,

2019). This continuity in religious experience allows migrants to feel a sense of familiarity despite being in a different country.

Interestingly, some narratives highlight the successful integration of Peruvian religious devotions into Córdoba's broader religious landscape. Miguel, for instance, points out that some of the largest religious events in the city include Peruvian devotions such as *Señor de los Milagros* and *Virgen de la Puerta*, attracting both Peruvian and Argentine participants (Miguel, personal communication, November 28, 2019). Similarly, Julia, an Evangelical Christian, acknowledges the widespread presence of patronal festivals in Córdoba, even though they do not belong to her own faith tradition (Julia, personal communication, July 22, 2020). Her participation in such events underscores their social role in fostering a sense of community among migrants, despite differing personal religious identities.

Where differences are noted, they typically pertain to the number of participants and levels of engagement rather than the absence of devotions—unlike in Montevideo. Cristina, for instance, acknowledges the religiosity of some Argentinians but insists that Peruvians are, overall, more religious (Cristina, personal communication, October 17, 2019). She compares religious festivities in both countries, emphasizing the larger congregations and deeper engagement in Peru, where religious observance permeates both public and private life. She contrasts this with Córdoba, where, in her view, religious celebrations sometimes focus more on symbolic elements than on deep spiritual engagement.

Other migrants point to distinct perceptions of popular devotions and patronal festivals. While some note the presence of public religious expressions in Córdoba, others claim they are virtually nonexistent, contrasting them with the year-round patronal celebrations in Peru. Rocío, for example, describes her home country as “very, very religious” and finds the absence of frequent religious festivities in Córdoba striking (Rocío, personal communication, October 6, 2019).

Unlike in Montevideo, where religion is perceived as largely absent from public life, Peruvian migrants in Córdoba acknowledge various ways in which religiosity is visibly present, even if they do not personally participate. Carmen, for example, cites the prevalence of missionaries (Evangelicals, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses) going door to door in her neighborhood (Carmen, personal communication, October 29, 2019). Julia, an Evangelical Christian, points to patronal festivals and Catholic religious expressions as further evidence of public religiosity (Julia, personal communication, July 22, 2020). She also references Argentina's religious influence on a global scale, citing Pope Francis as an example of Catholic prominence.

Similarly, Rocío, a believer without a formal religious affiliation, asserts that religion is deeply embedded in Argentine society (Rocío, personal communication, October 6, 2019). She points to the abundance of churches, the presence of religious missionaries, religious images in businesses, and religious objects in the homes of her Argentine friends as indicators of this presence. Regarding religion's role in politics and social debates, two contrasting narratives emerge. Some migrants argue that religion plays a minimal role in political and social discussions, a perspective often extended to both Argentina and Peru. Cristina, for instance, believes that religion should

have a greater influence in public debates and education, expressing disappointment over what she perceives as its insufficient presence (Cristina, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

Others, however, highlight strong ties between religion, politics, and public debates in Argentina. They reference political figures visiting Pope Francis, the Catholic Church's influence in public discourse, and religious involvement in political affairs. Elías, for example, believes that Argentina gives preferential status to Catholicism in public life, while Julia points to religious actors' role in the country's abortion debates (Elías, personal communication, April 16, 2019; Julia, personal communication, July 22, 2020). Rocío perceives Catholicism as deeply politicized in Argentina, emphasizing how politicians leverage religious affiliations to gain support (Rocío, personal communication, October 6, 2019).

Perceived religiosity in Córdoba is expressed through more diverse and varied narratives than in Montevideo. Despite these differences, migrants commonly characterize Córdoba's religiosity as similar to Peruvian religiosity in many respects; present but with lower levels of participation and commitment; shaped by local devotions that are well known and incorporated into religious life; expressed in public spaces, though to a lesser extent than in Peru; and linked to politics and social debates, with a predominant role played by the Catholic Church. These findings indicate that, compared to Montevideo, Córdoba offers a more familiar and engaging religious environment for migrants, allowing for greater continuity between their religious practices in Peru and their experiences in Argentina.

Comparison

Based on what has been presented so far, migrants perceive differences in the experience and expression of religion in the host societies—perceptions that closely align with what has been discussed throughout this article regarding the cultural and religious context of both cities. For Peruvian migrants living in Montevideo—the country's capital, where the non-religious population outnumbers Catholics and where a strongly secular culture prevails—religiosity is visibly lower than in their places of origin. They perceive this distance across various dimensions: in their relationships with locals, within religious communities and institutions, and in the public expression of religion and its role in current social and political debates.

For Peruvian migrants residing in Córdoba, the perceived differences are present but less pronounced, as they find more points of connection with Peruvian religiosity. In their accounts, they acknowledge the beliefs of locals, local devotions, and even the significant role Catholicism plays in politics and socially relevant issues. These differential perceptions of host-society religiosity shape conditional privatization. In Montevideo, migrants' perception of a largely non-religious, secular environment—with little public religious presence and weak religious organization—makes communal religious life appear less plausible and socially appropriate, leading many to shift religious practice toward domestic or intimate spheres or to disengage from community participation.

In Córdoba, by contrast, migrants perceive a more religious landscape, where Catholicism remains visible in public spaces, local devotions are socially recognized, and Peruvian devotions can be incorporated into the broader religious field. Here, privatization is less a response to symbolic exclusion and more a consequence of material constraints related to time, work schedules, and spatial distance. Migrants' perceptions thus operate as a mediating mechanism through which socio-structural conditions translate into different forms of conditional privatization.

MATERIAL AND RELATIONAL SOCIO-STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Material and relational constraints—work routines, time availability, mobility, and access to religious infrastructures—play a decisive role in shaping migrants' capacity to sustain communal religious life. In many cases, these constraints generate forms of individualized or domestic religiosity that exemplify conditional privatization.

During the initial stages of settlement, many Peruvian migrants encountered significant obstacles to maintaining communal forms of religious practice. These challenges were often linked to socio-structural constraints—particularly those related to time, labor, housing, and social networks—which redefined the role and expression of religion in their everyday lives.

One of the most recurrent themes across interviews was the lack of time due to demanding work schedules. Mariela, a migrant living in Montevideo, explained: “I can’t go to church, I can’t go to the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah’s Witnesses because I don’t have time... although I know not everything is about work” (Mariela, personal communication, September 11, 2019). Mónica, also living in Montevideo, similarly stated: “I haven’t been able to join a community because of time” (Mónica, personal communication, September 16, 2019), while Felipe, a migrant living in Córdoba, admitted: “I stopped going to mass because I don’t have time” (Felipe, personal communication, November 4, 2019). These expressions point not only to the pressure of long working hours, but also to the emotional exhaustion and prioritization of basic needs that often accompany precarious labor conditions in the host society.

Moreover, migrants reported a loss of familiar religious networks, which further hindered communal religious engagement. Felipe, who lived in Córdoba, explained: “In Peru, I had friends who would call me to go to mass... Here, it’s not so common... I ended up getting used to how things work here” (Felipe, personal communication, November 4, 2019). Emanuel, also living in Córdoba, echoed this experience, noting that he had stopped attending church because he lacked the social ties that had once made participation meaningful: “Back in Peru, going to church was a reason to meet friends... Here, I didn’t find that kind of connection” (Emanuel, personal communication, November 13, 2019). These testimonies illustrate how the absence of pre-existing religious relationships and unfamiliarity with local communities can discourage participation even when religious commitment persists.

As a result, religious practice often became privatized and domesticated. Instead of attending collective rituals, many migrants adapted their devotional routines to the constraints of their new environment. Ángel, who lived in Montevideo, described his main moment of prayer as occurring “on the way to work” (Ángel, personal communication, November 22, 2020). Carmen, who lived in Córdoba, similarly explained that she prayed each morning for protection before starting her day: “I ask God to let me leave and return home safely” (Carmen, personal communication, October 29, 2019). This shift toward individual and often transient expressions of faith did not necessarily indicate a turn toward spiritual individualism, but rather a pragmatic adaptation to external limitations.

In this context, the reconfiguration of religious practice reflects a form of *conditioned religious individuation*—a process in which continuity of belief is preserved not out of personal preference, but in response to material and relational constraints in the host society. While some migrants eventually reintegrated into communal spaces of worship after achieving greater social and economic stability, for others, these individualized practices remained a lasting feature of their religious trajectories.

DISCUSSION

The previous section outlined how Peruvian migrants perceive and engage with religion in their respective destination cities, revealing both continuities and ruptures with their religious experiences in the country of origin. What remains to be explored is whether and how these differences—narrated in terms of proximity or distance from the religious context of origin and their past religious trajectories—affect migrants’ religious experiences, practices, and their localization. This section examines how local religious cultures operate as plausibility structures (Berger, 2016), shaping the possibilities for expressing, transforming, or maintaining religious beliefs and practices. Drawing on narrative analysis and attention to individual trajectories, it discusses how socio-structural constraints influence the lived religion of migrants and may lead to conditional privatization.

Religious Engagement with Natives

One of the clearest differences between Montevideo and Córdoba lies in migrants’ ability to establish religious connections with local populations. While both cities present varying levels of institutional openness, the symbolic and cultural socio-structural conditions in each context appear to shape the perceived legitimacy and plausibility of engaging in religious discourse with natives.

In Montevideo, many interviewees described significant cultural barriers to sharing their religious beliefs. Jorge Luis, for instance, noted: “Sometimes one tries to talk about God and they change the subject. It’s like they feel uncomfortable. I’ve never heard them speak about God” (Jorge Luis, personal communication, October 8, 2020). This sense of discomfort led him to self-censor: “So I limit myself from talking about God” (Jorge Luis, personal communication, October 8, 2020). His experience reflects not only interpersonal awkwardness, but a broader cultural

climate in which religious expression is socially marginalized or viewed as inappropriate in public or casual conversations.

For migrants like Jorge Luis—or for those actively engaged in evangelizing practices, such as Flor María and her husband—these symbolic conditions of low religious salience have a direct impact on the relational dimensions of religious life. They reported sustained difficulties in continuing their efforts to share the Christian message and in forming collective spaces of religious engagement (Flor María and David, personal communication, September 15, 2020). Their narratives reveal how the perceived secularism or religious indifference of the host society operates as a plausibility structure, shaping what kinds of religious expression are seen as acceptable or meaningful.

By contrast, migrants in Córdoba provided more accounts of open religious interaction with locals. They did not report the same type of restraint when speaking about faith, nor did they feel the need to censor themselves. Beyond this openness, many described concrete involvement in religious communities and devotional practices—both local and Peruvian—often alongside Argentine participants. These accounts suggest not only greater institutional receptivity, but also more favorable symbolic and cultural conditions: religion is more visible in the public sphere, more commonly discussed in daily life, and more socially legitimate as a topic of interpersonal exchange.

The contrast between the two contexts illustrates how plausibility structures—rooted in broader symbolic and cultural attitudes toward religion—can act as enabling or constraining forces. In Montevideo, these structures tend to discourage outward religious expression and complicate relational engagement, especially for migrants whose faith involves sharing or witnessing. In Córdoba, on the other hand, religion retains a stronger public presence, creating a more accommodating environment for both interpersonal and institutional religious integration.

Participation in Religious Communities and Devotions

When comparing the religious trajectories of Peruvian migrants in Montevideo and Córdoba, differences emerge not only in their engagement with local populations but also in the frequency and intensity of participation in religious communities and devotional practices. While migrants in both cities attended religious services, those in Córdoba did so more regularly—typically on a weekly basis or more—whereas those in Montevideo reported monthly or even less frequent attendance. This reduction was often described as a rupture from their patterns of religious practice in Peru.

In both cities, this drop in frequency was most pronounced during the first five years after arrival, a period marked by significant material and relational socio-structural constraints. As Fortuny et al. (2014) also note, recent migrants tend to show limited involvement in institutional religious life. These findings resonate with theirs: participants frequently linked their reduced

engagement to factors such as unstable employment, demanding work schedules, precarious housing conditions, limited transportation access, and the lack of social networks.

Material and relational conditions typically constrained mobility and time availability for religious practices outside the home, while the symbolic and cultural conditions of host societies shaped migrants' perceptions of what forms of religious participation were realistically possible. In this sense, participation in institutional and community spaces—such as choirs, Bible study groups, youth groups, or service activities—was also more prominent among migrants in Córdoba. A key difference, however, lay in the density of participation: migrants in Córdoba tended to be involved in multiple community spaces, whereas those in Montevideo often mentioned participating in none or only one. As Mónica, a Catholic living in Montevideo, put it: “It’s hard for me to participate in the Church here, because people in Uruguay have lost a lot of that” (Mónica, personal communication, September 16, 2019).

Her perception speaks not only to individual barriers but also to symbolic and cultural socio-structural conditions: a religious landscape perceived as less devout, less socially embedded, and therefore less inviting for communal expression. In contrast, migrants in Córdoba described not only greater recognition of Peruvian devotions and local religious expression, but also stronger involvement in them—suggesting a higher degree of plausibility for sustaining religious practices.

Devotional life showed similar patterns. While participation in local devotions was relatively low in both cities, it was notably higher in Córdoba, particularly in relation to Peruvian devotions such as the Señor de los Milagros or the Virgen de la Puerta. One contributing factor was the spatial distribution of the migrant population. In Montevideo, Peruvians tended to be concentrated in central areas, often facing the pressures of urban precarity. In Córdoba, by contrast, the Peruvian population was more dispersed across neighborhoods yet remained connected through religious networks. As Miguel, a Catholic in Córdoba, recalled: “Before, the whole Peruvian community lived in Alberdi. Then they spread out... but still, they always come together. Especially for religious festivals” (Miguel, personal communication, November 28, 2019).

These gatherings illustrate what Jofre Cabello (2000) calls complex social environments: dense social ecologies that allow for both intra-group cohesion and interaction with the host society. In this study, such environments were reported more frequently by Córdoba residents and were virtually absent in the Montevideo narratives, where fragmentation and limited ties with other Peruvians were often noted. Some interviewees referred to explicit internal divisions, while others simply described the lack of sustained contact.

This symbolic fragmentation, combined with material precarity, may help explain the weaker collective devotional life found among migrants from Montevideo. In contrast, the Peruvian community in Córdoba was described as more organized, more visible, and more anchored in the city's religious landscape—possibly due to earlier waves of migration dating back to the 1960s, which laid stronger communal foundations.

Interestingly, participation in Catholic devotions in Córdoba also transcended denominational lines. Two Evangelical interviewees reported attending celebrations for the Señor de los Milagros, reflecting the broader social and cultural function of these events. As Falcón Aybar (2009) suggests, such devotions operate as spaces for reinforcing national identity, cultivating solidarity, and enacting mutual recognition among migrants through shared rituals, food, music, and festivity. Beyond national identification, these practices may also reflect flexible and situational boundaries between religious traditions, where participation is experienced less as a contradiction and more as a form of cultural continuity, belonging, or collective memory.

*Religious Trajectories Under Structural Constraints:
Continuity, Reconfiguration, and Disengagement*

While much of this study focuses on how socio-structural constraints lead migrants to privatize their religious practices, it is equally important to examine how these same conditions shape broader trajectories of religious continuity, transformation, and disengagement. Viewed through this lens, both religious change and persistence emerge not merely as personal choices, but as context-dependent outcomes deeply influenced by the material, relational, symbolic, and cultural environments of host societies.

In both Córdoba and Montevideo, most migrants reported a high degree of continuity in their religious beliefs. However, over time, many described a gradual incorporation of local religious symbols—such as saints, Marian images, or representations of Christ—into their devotional lives. This symbolic adaptation occurred across both sites, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between inherited traditions and the surrounding religious culture. It also underscores that continuity does not imply stasis, but often involves micro-transformations aligned with available cultural and symbolic referents.

More explicitly transformative changes, such as moving between religious communities or denominations, were also present. While these shifts may be described as “conversion” from an institutional or denominational perspective, they can also be understood, within this framework, as forms of accommodation through which migrants regain access to communal religious life and to plausibility structures in the host context. In this sense, affiliation with a different religious community does not merely represent a change in belief, but also a strategy that enables migrants to re-situate their religious practice in a more public and socially supported form.

In one case in Montevideo and two in Córdoba, interviewees recounted moving from Catholicism to Evangelical Christianity. These cases illustrate how relational and material socio-structural conditions can act as enablers of religious reconfiguration. Personal contact with individuals—whether fellow migrants or locals—opened up space for interreligious engagement, while the presence of mission-oriented communities provided tangible support, emotional inclusion, and clear moral frameworks. These churches met migrants in public or neighborhood spaces, offering not only access to worship but also opportunities for participation, belonging, and visibility—conditions often less available in more institutional or less accessible settings. In this

sense, these shifts can be understood not only as spiritual realignments, but also as forms of accommodation through which migrants regain access to communal life and socially supported religious practice in the host context.

In contrast, some cases revealed processes of religious disengagement or individualized reconfiguration of belief, particularly where enabling communal and institutional supports were absent or where secular symbolic environments weakened the plausibility of continued participation. In Córdoba, Rocío shifted from Catholicism to a more private, unaffiliated form of belief after failing to find the communal and narrative support that had once sustained her religious identity (personal communication, October 6, 2019). Her experience illustrates how, when relational and institutional supports are absent, religious identity becomes harder to maintain—even when belief does not entirely disappear.

This aligns with Ammerman's (2003) notion of the "cocoon of faith" (p. 207), which refers to the dense network of family ties, habitual practices, and predictable religious routines that once surrounded individuals and made continued participation seem natural. As Ammerman argues, when people are no longer enveloped by that cocoon—no longer embedded in the relational and ritual structures that previously anchored their faith—they must actively choose how, and whether, to remain religious. Rocío's trajectory exemplifies this dynamic: deprived of the communal frameworks that had once made her Catholic identity plausible and sustainable, her religious life moved toward a more individualized and less institutionally anchored form.

César's case in Montevideo highlights how symbolic and cultural conditions can function as plausibility constraints. Unlike other participants, he explicitly linked his process of religious disengagement to the secular character of Uruguayan society: "Uruguay influenced me a lot. Living here gave me the freedom to shape my beliefs in a more open way" (César, personal communication, December 3, 2020). Again, once outside the cocoon of faith that had surrounded him in Peru, César experienced greater agency to decide how—and whether—religion would continue to shape his life. In a context like Montevideo, where public religiosity is low and religious expectations are minimal, stepping out of that cocoon did not leave a void to be filled; instead, it opened space for redefining his identity in non-religious terms. His trajectory illustrates how, under such conditions, disengagement from institutional religion may become a plausible and socially unproblematic outcome.

Taken together, these trajectories—of persistence, adaptation, and disengagement—demonstrate that migrants' religious lives are not only internally driven, but externally shaped. The availability of religious communities, the presence of supportive networks, the visibility of religion in the public sphere, and the symbolic legitimacy of religious discourse all function as plausibility structures. These conditions enable or constrain religious expression in ways that often lead not only to conditional privatization, but also to transformation or disaffiliation.

Thus, the comparative study of Córdoba and Montevideo reaffirms that religious trajectories must be understood within the interplay of symbolic and cultural, material and relational socio-structural conditions. Whether religion is maintained privately, transformed publicly, or gradually

abandoned, the surrounding context profoundly shapes what is possible, thinkable, and livable for migrants in each city.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines how the socio-religious contexts of host societies shape the religious trajectories of Peruvian migrants in Córdoba and Montevideo. Using a comparative qualitative approach grounded in the lived religion perspective, it shows that religious practices, beliefs, and affiliations are not merely individual expressions, but are conditioned by the symbolic, cultural, material, and relational structures in which migrants live.

The findings show that material and relational constraints—such as long work hours, housing precarity, limited transportation, and the absence of supportive networks—significantly limit migrants' religious participation, especially in the early stages of settlement. However, structural challenges alone do not fully explain the divergent trajectories observed. Migrants in Montevideo continued to face difficulties in sustaining collective religious life, whereas those in Córdoba encountered a more receptive socio-religious environment that facilitated communal participation. At the same time, while this article emphasizes socio-structural constraints, migrants are not passive recipients of these conditions: their narratives reveal ongoing processes of negotiation, reinterpretation, and selective engagement with available religious options (Pereira Arena & Morello, 2022).

This contrast underscores the role of symbolic-cultural plausibility structures. Montevideo's secular environment and low religious visibility tended to delegitimize public religious expression, reinforcing individualized or domestic forms of religiosity. Córdoba, by contrast, offered a more favorable symbolic landscape, where the visibility of religion enabled migrants to integrate their devotions into the local religious field.

These findings invite a reconsideration of prevailing theories of religious privatization. While classic perspectives interpret privatization as a product of modern individualism or broader cultural shifts (Luckmann, 1973; Wuthnow, 1979; Casanova, 1994; Beck, 2009), this study shows that, in migratory contexts, it may instead be structurally conditioned. Migrants described their turn toward individualized practices not as autonomous preference, but as adaptive responses to socio-structural constraints. Building on this evidence, the study proposes the concept of conditional privatization: a form of religious privatization shaped by socio-structural limitations that inhibit participation. In such contexts, individualized practices emerge as strategies that allow migrants to sustain meaningful religious expression under constrained conditions.

Private or individualized practices should therefore not be interpreted solely as personal choices, but as responses to environments that do not enable more public or communal forms. When opportunities for collective participation do arise, migrants describe them as meaningful, reinforcing religious identity and belonging. In sum, the host society is not a neutral backdrop but an active force shaping the plausibility and configuration of migrants' lived religion. These

findings suggest that conditional privatization may represent a relatively stable configuration of religious life under constrained circumstances.

Future research could extend this analysis to other migratory contexts and religious traditions, contributing to a broader understanding of how socio-structural conditions shape migrant religiosity.

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