

# RELIGION AS POLITICS?

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• *Secularism, gender* •  
*and the peace process in Colombia*

## ABSTRACT

*The gender approach was an important element in the dialogue between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, as was reflected in the peace accords. However, it was also an issue that religious fundamentalists and some churches, especially the Evangelical Christian churches, refused to accept. Disguising the issue as the so-called “gender ideology”, these groups launched a “crusade” against the inclusion of gender equality in the peace agreements, which was evident in the nefarious and deceitful NO campaign in the 2016 referendum on the agreement. This article prompts a reflection on the interference of churches in politics, policy and state decisions. There is nothing more dangerous for social, democratic, pluri-ethnic, multicultural rule of law than the confusion between politics and religion and the violation of secularism of the state.*

## KEYWORDS

Secular state | Secularism | Gender approach | Separation of church and state | Peace agreements

Reflecting on women's human rights in a democratic society and a secular state is a fundamental part of the work we do at *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* – Colombia (Catholic women for the right to decide – Colombia, or CDD), a lay organisation created in the year 2000 by Catholic feminist women committed to social justice and to changing cultural and religious paradigms in society. In recent years, this issue has occupied an important place on the national agenda, especially during the peace-building process, as it became a decisive topic in the campaign and debates before and after the referendum held in 2016. In the plebiscite for peace, the question put to the people was: *Do you support the final agreement to end the conflict and construct stable and lasting peace?* The 'No' campaign ended up winning the referendum by a small margin. The lies around the supposed "gender ideology", which the final text was accused of promoting, played a decisive role in the results, as churches and religious leaders acted like politicians on a heated campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The debates in the post-referendum period in Colombia are undoubtedly creating challenges for our efforts to continue strengthening a just and collective commitment to the defence of democracy, building stable and enduring peace and the construction of a society that recognizes women as political actors.

For years, we have been expressing the hope that a peace agreement would be reached – one that would put an end to so many years of barbarism and ensure the transition to economic, political and social democracy, without, however, denying women and LGBTI people their rights. During the peace-building process, we did not expect these rights to be used as an excuse to regress or to demonise what we women and citizens have fought so hard to achieve.

## 1 • The peace process and the tensions with conservative religious groups

The process of dialogue between the FARC-EP and the government, which ended with the signing of the final agreement,<sup>2</sup> as well as the results of the 2016 referendum and the anti-corruption referendum held shortly after,<sup>3</sup> among other developments in Colombia's political and legal life, have triggered an endless array of reactions. These reactions reveal just how polarized Colombian society has become, as well as the numerous uncertainties that Colombian women and men are facing.

In view of the major tensions generated by this process, as *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir*, we focused our analysis on the events in the lead up to and after the 2016 referendum, especially on the role played by the churches, namely the Catholic and Evangelical Christian churches, as political and social actors. These churches influenced and intervened in their followers' opinions and decisions on how to vote, which led to the victory of the NO campaign, albeit with only a slight majority. The plebiscitarian process required at least one third of the electorate to participate in the vote (12 million people), which it did: 50.2% chose to vote NO, while 49.7% voted YES. The difference

between the two was 50 ballots. Even with this tiny difference, the result appeared to indicate that Colombia had opted for war. Even though reality indicates that this is not true, post-truth politics had already fulfilled its mission.<sup>4</sup>

The role that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church assumed during the campaign for the referendum on peace is questionable.<sup>5</sup> One of the principles of the Catholic Church's social doctrine is to strive for peace and a just order in society, which includes promoting social policies aimed at achieving equality, social justice and respect for people. It was obvious that contrary to this doctrine and in response to the tensions generated by the political position leading the NO campaign, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church assumed a "neutral" position, backing away from its commitment to build peace in Colombia. It decided to "sit on the fence" and invited its parishioners to exercise their freedom of conscience when deciding how to vote. This raises the question: why did the hierarchy of the Catholic Church assume this position at such a decisive moment for the country? And finally, who helped it choose such a position?

Various churches, especially Christian ones, and social actors known for driving campaigns against the rights of women and the LGBTI community went on a crusade full of lies, nonsense and slander to influence the opinion of believers and followers. They used a mix of homophobia, misogyny and discrimination to attack what they saw as the demonized "gender ideology"<sup>6</sup> in the peace agreement. This behaviour is cause for indignation. Yet, as the final agreement clearly states, it was actually based on a cross-cutting human rights approach whose purpose is "to contribute to the protection and guarantee of the effective enjoyment of the rights of all women and men". In essence, then, what the agreement seeks to do is to *eliminate the conditions of inequity and inequality to which women and groups considered minorities have been subjected* throughout the country's history. This is why for each of the agreement's points, actions aimed at generating conditions of real equality were included.

Using false and spurious arguments, some religious fundamentalists sowed total confusion among their followers in relation to the real reasons and content of the agreement. This type of manipulation contributed to the emergence of a conservative view from social sectors that somehow appeared to have been kept hidden.

However, days after the defeat of the referendum, there was a collective awakening in defence of the agreement. Mass demonstrations were held to urge the government to take steps to endorse the agreement by way of legislation. Many people who voted "no" in the referendum recognised that their vote had been influenced by pastors, religious leaders and spiritual guides who used arguments related to sexual morality and the family, when the only thing that the agreement sought to do was end the conflict that has been inflicting violence on millions of victims in our country for over 50 years.<sup>8</sup>

We, at CDD-Colombia, are concerned with the churches' interference in politics, policy and state decisions, as there is nothing more threatening to pluri-ethnic, multicultural, social and

democratic rule of law than this organised confusion between politics and religion. We feel that the churches are being incoherent and inconsistent when they use their spiritual power to lie to people and to impose hate and discrimination against sectors of the population who have historically been excluded and strongly victimized through acts of violence. There is no justification for presenting lies as the truth and personal and institutional interests as universal moral values.

## 2 • The Colombian constitution and secularism

The interference of religion in the state, politics and citizens' decisions makes the defence of the secular state in Colombia all the more valid and important.

Article 19 of the Constitution of Colombia guarantees freedom of religion and equality among different religious faiths and churches. Even though its preamble invokes the protection of God, this is a general reference; it does not refer to one church in particular. It is our understanding that the text refers to an abstract or general divinity, which is not a supreme source of sovereignty or authority; it does not establish the primacy of one religion over others.

The constitution establishes that the social rule of law in Colombia is pluralist in nature and religious pluralism is one of its most important components. The constitution also excludes all forms of confessionalism and guarantees full religious freedom and equal treatment for all religious faiths. This means, then, that in Colombia's constitutional system, there is a separation between the state and the church because the state is secular. In fact, this strict neutrality of the state in the area of religion is the only way to ensure that public authorities guarantee pluralism, egalitarian coexistence and the autonomy of the different religious denominations.

Therefore, defending secularism is fundamental if we want to advance as a society in the recognition and full enjoyment of rights and ensure that the decisions of the majority do not result in violations of minorities' rights and that our guiding principles are diversity, multiculturalism and pluri-ethnicity. These principles are the pillars of the social and democratic rule of law. They are the ones that are put at risk when one religion or certain religions seek to impose themselves on the rest of society.

## 3 • From the separation of church and state to the autonomy of religion in politics

Given the cultural presence of religion in the personal, political, social and economic sphere, the secular state has become a key issue in the current political debate. The presence of religion in public space is a reality that cannot be ignored, nor hidden. At the same time, it is necessary to ensure the coexistence of different cultural, symbolic, religious, philosophical, ethical and moral heritages in plural, diverse and democratic societies. Therefore, secularism

is a “process in constant motion, which faces new challenges daily and has to find responses that are adequate for everyone and in the public interest”.<sup>9</sup>

Secularism is, beyond a doubt, a concept under constant revision, which raises challenges for the defence of rights and freedoms. In secularism, politics is autonomous from religion, all individuals are equal and no discrimination is allowed. While a secular state has autonomy from religious denominations, secularism calls for full autonomy for the political sphere vis-à-vis religion. Therefore, secularism represents an important advance over the secular state, as it aims to prevent religious groups from interfering in politics, whereas the secular state looks only at the separation of state and church and does not concern itself with the actual interference of religious groups in politics.

Based on this, we can thus affirm that the secular state is the political expression of secularism; it is a legal-political instrument that serves to protect freedoms in a plural and diverse society. It is a state that is not at the service of a particular religious or philosophical doctrine; instead, it serves the public interest, guarantees the common good and fully respects and fulfils human rights.

When talking about the secular state, it is also important to affirm that we are not talking about indifference to religion, opposition to religions or spirituality, nor the absence of religious beliefs. Secularism is not constructed by negating religions. It is not a struggle against a church or churches. It opposes theocratic ideas on politics (a government acting in the name of God) and the authoritarianism of dogmas that try to impose themselves as the truth for all.

#### 4 • The secular state: between need and utopia

In light of the troubling role that some churches and conservative sectors have been playing in the public sphere, it has become extremely important for us to safeguard secular states in our region.

It is paradoxical that the people who attack secularism and the secular state based on their personal religious convictions end up compromising the very legal and political conditions that make it possible for them to practice their religious beliefs. As a result, religious political activism represents a real threat to democracy, the secular state and fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms that the churches themselves, their followers and their leaders enjoy. What they are proposing is a return to fundamentalism and the most heinous forms of exclusion, which is nothing but a return to obscurantism.

In the specific case of Colombia, using equivocal arguments, conservative sectors influenced the opinion of many people of faith, who ended up voting “no” to the final agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP. The reactions of fundamentalist and conservative sectors to the issue of gender in the peace accord are the cause of major concern:

1 - The “gender approach” category of social analysis was equated to the term “gender ideology”, which was used not only in a pejorative sense, but also by the Vatican for years to dismiss and obstruct progress on women’s rights.

2 - The fight to eliminate “gender ideology” also served the purpose of preventing women and the LGBTI population from receiving historical redress as victims of the armed conflict and of imposing one single, exclusively religious vision to regulate all spheres of social order and prevent women and other groups from enjoying their rights.

3 - The demand for broader recognition and guarantees of religious freedom, one of modern societies’ dearest achievements explicitly written into the Political Constitution of Colombia,<sup>10</sup> was not used to reaffirm the rule of law, but rather to obstruct the rights of women and LGBTI social sectors and the sexual and reproductive rights of the entire population.

## 5 • Conclusion

The guarantee of both freedom of belief and the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis religions has been threatened by the role that some churches and ideological movements have played in recent years to block the peace-building process in Colombia. Today, peace is also defended as a fundamental right.

There is a need to protect the freedom of conscience and the freedom of religion as fundamental rights. However, practices that violate these rights by attempting to impose beliefs that are only binding for the people who belong to certain religious organisations on all of society are unacceptable. Churches and religious movements must be aware that they too are called on to change elements within them that help to perpetuate patriarchy, violence against women, enormous social disparities, sexual abuse against children, discrimination against sectors of the population and fanaticism that gives rise to multiple forms of violate.

Women’ rights must not be turned into a bargaining chip for peace, the peace agreements and democracy. On the contrary, we should insist on obtaining respect and the implementation of the agreement, with its gender approach, as an act of justice that enables women, the LGBTI population and other sectors who are victims of the armed conflict to regain their dignity and guarantees the reestablishment of their rights on equal terms.

Women’s organising, unity, mobilisations and struggle for their rights show the path to follow to build inclusive, diverse societies focused on achieving harmony and balance with others and our natural surroundings.

Finally, it is important to reaffirm our total rejection of the distortion of the “gender approach” by certain churches and conservative sectors, which demonised it by associating

it to the malevolent “gender ideology” term. We also denounce the stigmatisation of the historical victories won by women that guarantee their rights as citizens in the exercise of true democracy. The recognition of this differential approach, especially the gender approach, is urgent, non-negotiable and the minimum that the Colombia government and the FARC-EP must do. It is also part of the long-standing debt that these two actors must take into account when compensating the victims of the historical violence in Colombia.

CCD-Colombia welcomes the debate on the gender approach used in the peace agreement. We are ready to offer arguments from a rights-based approach and based on the secular spirit of the constitution. Society must participate in this discussion using well-founded arguments and free from any kind of fanaticism or fundamentalism. We must remember that the opportunity to build sustainable and lasting peace lies in respect for plurality and diversity.

## NOTES

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1 • See, for example: Camilo Gonzalez Posso, “Los Problemas del Si en el Plebiscito,” Indepaz, October 19, 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, [www.indepaz.org.co/los-problemas-del-plebiscito/](http://www.indepaz.org.co/los-problemas-del-plebiscito/); “Ideología de Género: ¿Un Motín Político en las Elecciones de Latinoamérica?,” *El Espectador*, December 13, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/ideologia-de-genero-un-motin-politico-en-las-elecciones-de-latinoamerica-articulo-828914>; Olga L. González, “La Otra Subversión: La Emergencia del ‘Género’ en el Proceso de Paz en Colombia,” *TraHs Números especiales* n°1 (2017), accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.unilim.fr/trahs/index.php?id=415>; and “Obispo Desmiente ‘Ideología de Género’ en Acuerdos de Paz,” *teleSUR*, October 17, 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Obispo-desmiente-ideologia-de-genero-en-acuerdos-de-paz-en-Colombia-20161017-0039.html>.

2 • “Texto Completo del Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera,” OACP, 2017, accessed July 31, 2019, [http://www.altocomisionadopalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Paginas/Texto-completo-del-Acuerdo-Final-para-la-Terminacion-](http://www.altocomisionadopalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Paginas/Texto-completo-del-Acuerdo-Final-para-la-Terminacion-del-conflicto.aspx)

[del-conflicto.aspx](http://www.altocomisionadopalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Paginas/Texto-completo-del-Acuerdo-Final-para-la-Terminacion-del-conflicto.aspx).

3 • A popular referendum is a mechanism of participatory democracy recognized by the Constitution for consulting the people on an issue of national interest. In this case, on August 26, 2018, seven issues related to the fight against corruption were submitted to public scrutiny with the goal of forcing the legislature to adopt laws to impose harsher sanctions and conditions for serving sentences, ban substitutes for incarceration and adjust the procedures for recuperating stolen public resources. A total of 11,645,000 votes were cast during the referendum, which meant that it did not obtain the minimum of votes required – 33% of voters – in order for the results to be binding: it fell short by only 450 votes. However, given the strong popular support for these changes, all political parties and even the government itself adopted this issue as a cause and promised to push it through Congress. One year later, no initiative has been approved on this issue. On the contrary, it has been met with stiff opposition from the party in government and the executive branch, which says in public that it supports this cause, when in practice, it opposes it.

4 • María Fernanda González, "La «Posverdad» en el Plebiscito por la Paz en Colombia," *Nueva Sociedad* no. 269 (mayo-junio de 2017), accessed July 31, 2019, <https://nuso.org/articulo/la-posverdad-en-el-plebiscito-por-la-paz-en-colombia/>.

5 • Hermann Rodríguez, "La Iglesia Católica Frente al Plebiscito." Jesuitas Colombia, September 9, 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://jesuitas.co/la-iglesia-catolica-frente-al-plebiscito-20848>; and "Iglesia no Induce por el Sí o No en el Plebiscito: Conferencia Episcopal," *El País*, August 18, 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.elpais.com.co/proceso-de-paz/iglesia-no-induce-por-el-si-o-no-en-el-plebiscito-conferencia-episcopal.html>.

6 • Sonia Corrêa, "A 'Política do Gênero': Um Comentário Genealógico," *Cadernos Pagu* no. 53 (2018), accessed July 31, 2019, [http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0104-83332018000200401&script=sci\\_arttext](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S0104-83332018000200401&script=sci_arttext).

7 • The agreement recognised that "*human rights are equally inherent to all human beings, which means that they have these rights because they are human and therefore, their recognition is not a concession. They are universal, indivisible and interrelated*

*and shall be treated in a fair and equal manner*". Documento final del Acuerdo, p. 193.

8 • "Las Polémicas Revelaciones de Promotor del No sobre Estrategia en el Plebiscito," *El País*, October 6, 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.elpais.com.co/proceso-de-paz/las-polemicas-revelaciones-de-promotor-del-no-sobre-estrategia-en-el-plebiscito.html>; and Juan Manuel López, "La Política en Colombia es la Capacidad de Manipular Emocionalmente a las Masas." *Las 2 Orillas*, September 12, 2018, accessed July 31, 2019, <https://www.las2orillas.co/la-politica-en-colombia-es-la-capacidad-de-manipular-emocionalmente-las-masas/>.

9 • Roberto J. Blancarte, *El Estado Laico* (colección Para Entender) (Mexico City: Nostra Ediciones, 2008).

10 • "*Freedom of religion is guaranteed. Every individual has the right to freely profess their religion and to disseminate it individually or collectively. All religious faiths and churches are equally free before the law.*" ("Artículo 19," Constitución Política de Colombia, 2016, accessed July 31, 2019, <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/inicio/Constitucion%20politica%20de%20Colombia.pdf>, italics added).



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