

## Article

# Religion, Human Rights, and Forensic Activism: The Search for the Disappeared in Latin America <sup>†</sup>

María Soledad Catoggio 

CEIL, CONICET, 1424 Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, Argentina; mscatoggio@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** This paper systematizes and analyzes the links and exchanges between the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF)) and the world of religion. My hypothesis is that these links are inextricable from the mode of operation that defined the EAAF, which can be called “forensic activism”. This kind of activism, outside the State, combined scientific expertise with humanitarian sensitivity, defined by its autonomy from the human rights movement and the national scientific system (both academic and university). Moreover, religion emerged constantly from the type of work undertaken, between the living and the dead. Thus, beliefs, with their prohibitions, rituals, and ways of making sense of suffering and their tools for coming to terms with grief, coexisted with the EAAF’s development. These findings emerge from a qualitative research design combining document analysis, in-depth interviews, and participative observation of scientific disclosure open to the public provided by the EAAF over the past three years.

**Keywords:** religion; beliefs; human rights; forensic activism; Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense; Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team

## 1. Introduction

The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense), or EAAF according to its acronym in Spanish, helped to form a network of teams in Latin America and the world. Their history includes many references to religious leaders, churches, and religious institutions or those who are part of the global social movement associated with religions that we can call “religious world”. I am referring to the set of international agencies, foundations, cooperatives, and so on who have some organic link with religious institutions either through institutional endorsement, membership, or financing. It is a vast network where avowed believers often join forces in solidarity with secular activists committed to humanitarian values with no religious affiliation.

References to this religious world are often portrayed as anecdotal, casual, and unsystematic in the many existent accounts of the origins and current performance of the EAAF. In this article, we aim to challenge this view.

Among the literature on the subject, an early set documents the history of how the team was formed and its first works (Stover and Joyce 1991; Cohen Salama 1992). In the same vein, a more recent set of papers focuses on the iconic character of the EAAF, highlighting its internationalization and scientific consolidation process as well as the resounding character of the cases it resolved (Clacso-Quilmes 2019; Celesia 2019). Another group of papers applies different approaches to document the developments of forensic sciences based on the work of the EAAF and the different teams that were established in the region, following its example. Some of these take a regional stance or comparative approach (Casallas and Piedrahita 2004; Dutrénit Bielous 2017; Garibian et al. 2017; Rosenblatt 2019), while others are case studies on Argentina (Bernardi and Fondebrider 2007; Salado and Fondebrider 2008;

Somigliana 2012; Levin 2015), Chile (Padilla and Revecó 2004; Bustamante et al. 2009), Uruguay (Marín Suárez 2016; López Mazz 2017), or Guatemala (Pinzón González 2007), among many others. Finally, there is a group of papers focusing on so-called counterforensics, i.e., the set of images, discourses, and evidence generated through the work of forensic anthropology as “politicized knowledge”, to make visible “what has been made invisible” through repressive and mass disappearance processes in the country and the region (Tcach and Iribarne 2014; Huffschiid 2015, 2019).

As noted earlier, these papers include many references to the world of religion and the diversity of beliefs that emerge during the process of searching for the disappeared and restituting human remains. However, there is a void with regard to systematic, comprehensive problematization of these emerging beliefs and connections. Indeed, the memorial narrative that can be read in these texts by following the different voices of the EAAF, victims’ family members, and other actors affords a glimpse of the systematic character of the modes of relationship of the EAAF with “the religious” over time. On the one hand, religious institutions or agencies are mentioned as part of the broader philanthropic network that nourished the EAAF with infrastructure and financial resources without questioning its religious origin. On the other hand, the role of religious leaders in mortuary rituals and/or evolving beliefs in the process of identification and restitution of human remains are treated as emergencies that are part of the usual cultural or folkloric background that every anthropologist has to take account of, along with attention to the particular people studied.

A fresh look at those exchanges reveals that beyond contributing infrastructure and essential financial resources during the early days of the team, this religious fabric played a key role and still does. My hypothesis is that the links with the world of religion cannot be dissociated from the work mode that defined the EAAF: forensic activism, as I call it. Indeed, I consider that this type of activism, outside the State, combined scientific expertise with humanitarian sensitivity and was defined by the autonomy of the human rights movement and the national scientific system (both academic and university)—from that time to the present day. This humanitarian sensitivity of the EAAF was akin to the religious solidarity of the religious world that I described above. Religion also emerged constantly from the type of work undertaken—between the living and the dead. Beliefs—with their prohibitions, rituals, and ways to make sense out of suffering, and their tools for coming to terms with grief—thus coexisted with the team’s development.

Within this framework, this paper proposes to systematize and understand the importance of these links and exchanges between the EAAF and the world of religion. It also analyzes the various ways in which religion—in its broader sense—emerges as an inherent part of the scientific work during the identification and restitution of human remains, and fulfills different purposes within this framework, thereby shaping forensic activism.

## 2. Results

Below, I will consider (1) how the EAAF arose within the global framework of articulation between scientific teams and human rights; (2) the specificity of the EAAF, constituted as an organization outside the State, associated with a religious framework and defined by “forensic activism”, and (3) the different ways in which the EAAF related to the world of religion through three different modes: *sponsors*, *insiders*, and *spiritual brokers*.

## 3. The Origins: Science and Transnational Activism Networks

In Argentina, the search for the disappeared and their children appropriated by the military dictatorship made use of the formation of transnational activism networks, which included victims, family members, exiles, religious actors, intellectuals, scientists, international organizations, and political figures (Keck and Sikkink 1998). These networks have been defined as those conducting campaigns or mobilizations simultaneously in different contexts with the aim of calling upon governments of different countries and international organizations to deploy different resources (Keck and Sikkink 2002). From this perspective, the logic of this type of network is often at odds with

the State regarding fundamental principles and is overtly distinct from the logic followed by other transnational actors that provide symbolic resources and materials for States (Keck and Sikkink 2002, p. 99). In Argentina, this type of network was key to achieving international denunciation of “human rights violations” committed by the dictatorship, and also to seeking answers to concrete situations of violence against and suffering of the victims and their families.

Over that time, in the 1980s, a group of women from the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo Association (Asociación Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo) approached experts in the field of genetics with concrete questions. Can a grandmother’s blood be used to identify her grandchildren abducted during the military dictatorship (1976–1983)? Is it possible to ascertain, based on DNA analysis, whether or not a body has been in a coffin? Is it true that babies’ bones disintegrate? Can it be ascertained, based on an analysis of bones, whether a woman has been pregnant? (Di Lonardo et al. 1984; Stover and Joyce 1991; King 1992). These women, who were mostly housewives and had no personal connections to the world of science, made use of the local networks woven and accumulated over previous years during which they had searched for their disappeared relatives. Help from Isabel Mignone, who at that time was living in USA, was to be key. Isabel was one of the daughters of Emilio Mignone, a renowned militant from the world of Catholicism dedicated to the struggle for human rights as a result of the search for another of his daughters, Mónica, who had disappeared along with a group of catechists, youths belonging to Catholic Action (*Acción Católica*) and two priests, during two operations conducted on 14 and 23 May 1976. Isabel put the Grandmothers in touch with Eric Stover, journalist and Director of the Science and Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) (Celestia 2019, p. 20). Stover contacted Cristián Orrego Benavente, a Chilean geneticist living in USA, who in turn, by recommendation of Luca Cavalli-Sforza, contacted US geneticist Marie Claire King of University of California in Berkeley. Also via Stover, grandmothers Isabel “Chicha” Mariani, Estela de Carlotto, and Nélida Navajas contacted Víctor Penchaszadeh, an Argentine geneticist exiled in New York. Penchaszadeh put them in touch with hematologist Fred Allen of the Blood Bank Center. Shortly thereafter, Argentina’s defeat in the Malvinas (Falklands) War hastened the downfall of the dictatorship, and on 10 December 1983, the democratic government of Raúl Alfonsín took over. In this new scenario, Stover received a letter from Ernesto Sabato, who at that time was president of the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (*Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP)) requesting technical assistance with exhumations from N.N. tombs, that is, of unidentified bodies (Cholakian and Guglielmo 2017, p. 45). This initiative was also by request of the Grandmothers, who by then knew that it was possible to determine from bone remains whether a woman who had been pregnant when abducted had given birth (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 120). This was when Clyde Snow appeared on the scene. Snow was a US forensic anthropologist specializing in the identification of victims of aviation accidents based on their skeletal remains, and also known for his forensic work in notorious cases (Stover and Joyce 1991; Bales Foote 2014).

This group of experts shared a common feeling: to the Americans, in addition to the anti-Vietnam sentiment shared by many at that time, there was the fact that their own careers were marked by contact with Latin American reality under the military dictatorships of the 1970s. Eric Stover had traveled in Latin America and experienced state repression himself, Marie Claire King had lived through the dramatic coup in Chile that put an end to the “socialism via democracy” experiment of the Popular Unity (*Unidad Popular*). Penchaszadeh had been exiled from his country to escape situations of repressive threat from paramilitary groups such as the Triple A before the dictatorship (Cholakian and Guglielmo 2017, pp. 33–47). Although Orrego Benavente had not lived through state repression himself, he had been born and raised in Chile, where he had begun his university training before moving to the USA following the job opportunities of his father, a prestigious musician, in the early sixties. In the USA he studied biochemistry at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, which he defined as a center of resistance against the Vietnam War and where his political outlook was shaped (Riordon 2018). Snow may have been the exception: he was an American who did not know about

Latin American reality, but who called himself a Texan and as such, claimed to share the “anti-Yankee” feeling (Celesia 2019, p. 82).

Two institutions arose from this network of transnational activism. Their stories are inextricable, though different. One is the National Genetic Data Bank (*Banco Nacional de Datos Genéticos*, (BNDG)) created by law 23,511 in 1987 within the framework of the State (Catoggio and Irrazábal 2020), and the other is the EAAF, which for years maintained a difficult, conflictive relationship with the State. Established as a non-profit scientific association, also in 1987, the EAAF’s long, difficult road to the creation of its own genetic laboratory made use of the permanent deployment of transnational activism networks connected to associations of victims’ family members, agencies from the world of religion, international bodies, and other States, which at last, in 2005, were joined by the Argentine State (Fonderbrider 2019). During this process, as we shall see, the State itself was one more link in a preexisting chain of solidarity—not the primary partner. In such regard, while the BNDG arose as a State policy, the EAAF had to navigate obstacles and conflicts with the very same State (Cohen Salama 1992).

#### 4. Anti-State Policy: EAAF Forensic Activism

The origins of the EAAF date back to the visit by the first AAAS delegation, requested by the CONADEP, which took place in May 1984. Its members were the aforementioned Eric Stover, Clyde Snow, Marie Claire King, Cristián Orrego Benavente, and it also included forensic odontologist Lowell Levine and forensic pathologists Luke Tedeschi and Leslie Lukash. However, the delegation was not welcomed by many of the family members and organizations of affected parties, who shared a deep mistrust of US help, as a result of US foreign policy being accessory to the dictatorships in the region (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 120). To this “anti-Yankee” sentiment was added a feeling of rejection against the CONADEP, shared by most of the human rights organizations, which had campaigned for the creation of a bicameral commission to elucidate the issue of the disappeared (Crenzel 2008, pp. 61–62). Finally, the search for the remains of the disappeared was in conflict with the political slogan “Return Alive” (*“Aparición con vida”*) and the resistance of victims’ family members against echoing military and political discourses that considered them to be dead (Catoggio 2019). In this context, the delegation made a series of recommendations to the State. In particular, it recommended the creation of a national interdisciplinary center to conduct pre mortem investigations with family members, exhumations, and the preservation, transport, and custody of exhumed materials. For such purpose, it recommended the creation of a bank in which to store the remains from N.N. tombs. However, this recommendation was ignored. Other disagreements followed. CONADEP initially requested the intervention of Snow as expert in exhumations. In response to that request, Snow called upon the Anthropology Graduate Association (*Colegio de Graduados de Antropología*), seeking to establish a team of professionals. This endeavor was unsuccessful, and the EAAF arose from a group of curious, active students (Cohen Salama 1992, pp. 146–47). For a long time, the EAAF would be viewed by the academia more as a cause of human rights activists than of scientists (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).<sup>1</sup>

The government decided that the work begun by the CONADEP should be continued by the Secretariat of Human Rights, directed by Eduardo Rabossi, who had been a member of the Commission. The new Undersecretariat not only refused the EAAF permission to consult the CONADEP files, which were essential for the pre mortem investigation, but also archived Snow’s ambitious Project to create a databank in which to store N.N. remains and refused to finance or provide a minimum structure to enable the team to operate and develop (Stover and Joyce 1991, pp. 254–55; Cohen Salama 1992, pp. 154–55).

<sup>1</sup> During those early years, the exception was academic Francisco Carnese, head of an anthropology department at Buenos Aires University, who was to call upon the EAAF in 1989 to make their work known in the academic sphere (Celesia 2019, p. 122).

The reason for these tensions between the EAAF and the newly-democratic State are explained by Migdal (2001), considering the complexity of the multiple centers of power in tension that make up the image of the State, which should be unequivocal. Indeed, Argentina's return to democracy in 1983 did not bring about a magical transformation of the State, but rather a complex web of wills, mainly democratic, but neither univocal nor free from authoritarian tensions. It consisted of structures populated by actors and bureaucracies, of which many carried over the practices of the preceding military government and/or whose democratic will was not necessarily accompanied by consistent practices. To understand these dynamic tensions, Migdal proposes to focus on the set of interactions, charged with conflict, of multiple informal guidelines on how to behave, which were promoted by social groups within the State, all of which employed sanctions, rewards, and even violence to get their own way. To sum up, Migdal shows how the univocal, coherent image from which the State projects itself and is perceived contrasts sharply with the image of a contradictory entity whose actions often turn against itself (Migdal 2001, p. 22).

Some of the historical team members recounted that they had several clashes with Snow to convince him that "they could not expect anything from Rabossi" (Interview with EAAF founding member, 2020). They concluded that to the State, "it was not the same to look for the living as to look for the dead" (Interview with EAAF founding member, 2 September 2020). Even so, the good relationships established with second-line officials of the Undersecretariat of Human Rights, such as María Julia Bihurriet, were key to liaising with municipalities in order to enable N.N. tomb locations to be mapped and to prove the importance of the undertaking in the social and political spheres (Snow and Bihurriet 1992). Moreover, thanks to these dynamics of multiple interactions, they received first a small amount of financial support from Elba Roulet, vice-governor of Buenos Aires Province and aunt to one of the EAAF members (Celesia 2019, p. 106), and later, help from Luis Brunatti, governor of Buenos Aires Province, during the exhumation work at Avellaneda cemetery in 1988 (Celesia 2019, p. 116).

These exceptions coexisted with a scenario marked by tensions. The EAAF was constituted as an independent agency in absence of state policy favorable to its endeavor, with no recognition from the local academic and scientific system, and forced to negotiate publicly expressed rejection from at least one part of victims' family members: the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Madres de Plaza de Mayo). However, this independence was co-managed with the support of other victims' family members and their activism networks, among which the world of religion was a key player. Thus, the EAAF largely maintained the logic of political action against the State which was typical of these transnational activism networks created under the dictatorship, but redefining that logic based on their own expertise: forensic work. This enabled them to gain autonomy from human rights activism and to develop their own action mode: forensic activism. Throughout these events, confluence with the world of religion did not occur merely by chance. At that time, not only did the world of religion have hegemony over mortuary rituals, but also, it had transnational networks and institutions which already had their own history of handling the political suffering of many of the victims of dictatorships in the region and the country, even despite the complicity of domestic ecclesiastical hierarchies (Catoggio 2014, 2016a). Following Levine (2012), as from the 1970s, religious actors participated actively in the international field of human rights. From their standpoint, the adoption of a practical vocabulary of rights by part of Latin American Catholicism was central to driving both denunciation of dictatorships and promotion of local and global efforts of collective organization. This confluence of the EAAF and the world of religion took on at least three different modes, which I shall analyze below.

#### 4.1. Sponsors: Infrastructure and Material Resources

The EAAF's first venue, located at Solís 936 in Buenos Aires City, was provided by the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (Movimiento Ecuménico de Derechos Humanos (MEDH)). The MEDH was formally established in February 1976, one month before the coup. It arose as a joint initiative by representatives of Protestant (Evangelical) churches and members of the Catholic church—both priests



and laypersons. A few months later, Jorge Novak was named bishop of the recently created Quilmes diocese, which formally joined the MEDH.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, the MEDH was sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC)—the global organization gathering of Protestant churches since post-World War II, with headquarters in Geneva (Switzerland) (Piñero 2012). The WCC had created a human rights department to respond to the requests for solidarity for victims of state repression and their families in Latin America (Interview with MEDH member, 10 July 2020). Apparently, the EAAF's need for a venue arose during discussions with the CONADEP<sup>3</sup>:

Some MEDH members worked in the CONADEP: Hugo García, administrative coordinator of the MEDH; Daniel Llanos, member of the MEDH Communications team and one of the authors of the report known as “Nunca Más”. And, in particular, Hugo knew members of the EAAF. We were very interested in their work and learned about their need for infrastructure. That's why the possibility of cooperation from the MEDH arose (Personal conversation with a MEDH director, 17 September 2020).

Thus, paradoxically, both obstacles and help for the constitution of the EAAF arose in the CONADEP. According to the MEDH, cooperation was mediated by consultation with family members. Since identification was a controversial issue for part of the affected agencies, they decided to consult with Families of Persons Detained for Political Reasons (Familiares de Detenidos por Razones Políticas (Familiares)) to whom they were especially close and with whom they shared a program to help enable relatives of political prisoners to visit them in prison.<sup>4</sup> Familiares was also open to the work of the EAAF. They had requested EAAF intervention in the massacre of Fátima, a case which, because of its scale and features would be emblematic in terms of challenges and lessons learned for the team.<sup>5</sup> The EAAF had also been requested to intervene in Córdoba, which gave rise to an overt refusal from the Undersecretariat of Human Rights for fear of sparking a new episode of the military issue at the hands of Luciano Benjamín Menéndez.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these cases taken on by the EAAF, the short-circuit between the EAAF and the Undersecretariat of Human Rights became an overt chasm. Firstly, the increasing closeness between EAAF and Familiares as a result of the Fátima case was viewed with mistrust by the Undersecretariat (Celesia 2019, p. 90). To this was added the fear of political (military) repercussions which might be caused by the exhumations in Córdoba. These breaks lent increasing urgency to the EAAF's need for its own more stable resources and infrastructure. Up to that time, the

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Quilmes diocese, the MEDH included the Río de la Plata Evangelical Church, the Reformed Church, the Methodist Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Waldensian Church, the United Lutheran Church and the Church of God (Pentecostal). Bishop Novak, Methodist Bishop Federico Pagura and Pastor Juan Van der Velde of the Reformed Church were elected as co-presidents. Individual persons could join as associate members.

<sup>3</sup> The CONADEP was conceived as a “committee of personalities” to investigate the past. It was presided by Ernesto Sabato and its members were Eduardo Rabossi, Gregorio Klimovsky, Hilario Fernández Long, Rabbi Marshall Meyer, Ricardo Colombres, Bishop Jaime De Nevares, Magdalena Ruiz Giñazú, René Favaloro, and Pastor Carlos Gattinotti, one of the co-founders of the MEDH.

<sup>4</sup> The MEDH, along with other organizations such as Familiares and the Argentine League for the Rights of Man (Liga Argentina por los Derechos del Hombre (La Liga)), provided support to enable family visits to distant prisons. The MEDH subsidized the journeys, Familiares supported lodging and La Liga provided funds to deliver to prisoners (Interview with MEDH leader, 9 July 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The Fátima massacre is the name applied to the murder of 30 persons between 19 and 20 1976, in Fátima, an area located in the district of Pilar. These persons were illegally held at the Superintendency of Security of the Federal Police and transferred to Fátima to be massacred. See <https://www.masacredefatima.com.ar/masacre-de-fatima/memoria.html> (accessed on 28 September 2020). The EAAF was asked to intervene by Raúl Schnabel, lawyer and collaborator of Familiares (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 180).

<sup>6</sup> The requests for intervention in Córdoba came first from María Elba Martínez, lawyer of Familiares, who requested investigation of some remains found near Lake San Roque, and then from Susana Míguez, also of Familiares, whose husband had disappeared in Córdoba (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 182). The military issue refers to the wave of rumors and threats ongoing since the reform of the Code of Military Justice in 1984, which established three levels of responsibility regarding state repression, and which later led to a series of military uprisings threatening the democratic transition process. The first military uprising occurred in April 1987, and was followed by another two in January 1988 and December 1988, with a final episode in 1990. Luciano Benjamín Menéndez was considered to be one of the hardliners of repression and had already led a military uprising during the dictatorship in 1979 (Canelo 2004, p. 227).

EAAF had been nomadic: meetings alternated between the private homes of team members and an office loaned by Julio César Strassera, who had been the prosecutor at the Trial of the Military Juntas (Celesia 2019, p. 89). Moreover, they had practically no subsidies, but only individual grants funded by the AAAS (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 181), and some equipment funded by the Ford Foundation (Celesia 2019, p. 82).

According to other sources and even according to the recollections of various EAAF members, the EAAF reached the MEDH via Familiares, among whose members, Tilsa Albani played a key role (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 185, Interview with EAAF member, 2 September 2020). Be that as it may, the fact is that Tilsa's trajectory was also marked by her strong links to the world of religion. She describes her family background as having been marked by the confluence of Catholic and Protestant beliefs, and recalls there being "a lot of discussion" but also "much respect for the other" (Interview with Tilsa Albani by Claudia Bacci, 5 May 2010, Memoria Abierta Archive). The tragic story of the disappearance of her son Daniel Crosta is also marked by strong religious commitment. At the time he was abducted, Daniel was living in the Parish of Wilde, of the group of worker priests identified with the Movement of Priests for the Third World (Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo) such as Eliseo Morales and Luis Sánchez. As a lawyer, Tilsa herself had begun to provide legal assistance to the "villeros" (shanty town dwellers) in response to a request from the priest Eliseo Morales (Interview with Tilsa Albani by Claudia Bacci, 5 May 2010, Memoria Abierta Archive). Although MEDH members do not believe that the link to the EAAF was formed through Tilsa Albani, they have good memories of her, as a key figure of reference and lawyer in Familiares, and adjunct professor to Rodolfo Mattarollo's Department of Human Rights at the Lomas de Zamora University, where the MEDH director at that time would later study law (Interview with MEDH director, 10 July 2020).

As we can see, whether via CONADEP—which included several members of the MEDH—or via Familiares—through Tilsa Albani—the EAAF set itself up at the venue of a religious body. Far from being unusual or anecdotal, this type of situation was, on the contrary, quite frequent in the world of human rights. These connections to the world of religion also gave rise to funding sources that were very helpful for establishing the team:

During those years, and now, too, Lutheran churches in particular provided much support to human rights movements around the world, especially ( . . . ) the World Council of Churches under which the MEDH acted. They provided our first funding. Years later, Swedish churches and [Catholic] German churches also supported us. Diakonia is another of them. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 2 September 2020).

This economic contribution from the world of religion involved no symbolic counterpart: there were no photographs, no joint public ceremonies providing any additional religious legitimacy to the forensic enterprise. From the beginning, the EAAF made use of multiple sources of income which enabled it to maintain its autonomy from the state apparatus and the judicial system. The decision to constitute itself as a non-profit organization independent of the Undersecretariat of Human Rights was accompanied by the decision not to charge for the expert appraisals before the courts. According to Cohen Salama, the decision was based on the fact that they did not consider themselves to be professionals available for work on just any case, but rather as persons who, through the exercise of their profession, served the cause of human rights (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 178).

At that time, the main sources of income were through connections with the USA via the Ford Foundation, links to the world of religion via the World Council of Churches, German Catholic foundations such as Adveniat-Misereor and Swedish Protestant churches such as Diakonia. These multiple sources of income enabled the EAAF to operate with political and scientific autonomy, but did not shield them from tensions. At that time, they were disapproved of by some human rights agencies because they accepted help from the Ford Foundation, which was associated with complicity

with the military dictatorship.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the help from the world of religion created tensions in the EAAF's memorial narrative, as reflected by the way in which, while some members were grateful for the support received from those churches, they still felt the need to emphasize the separation between the forensic scientific work and religious terrain:

Our exchanges were never religious. They would provide some information on persons we were looking for or support one of our projects, but they never considered us as a religious entity, which we are not (Interview with EAAF founding member, 2 September 2020).

The matter of identity in these tensions related to funding provided by the world of religion is resolved by a memorial narrative which, on the one hand, frames the relationship within ties of friendship, thereby conferring on the funding the status of "donation" with no need for any compensation, and on the other hand, limits it to the material plane, thereby preventing any religious content from slipping in with the money and infrastructure provided.<sup>8</sup>

However, among EAAF founders, this narrative coexists with another, which affords a glimpse of "a bonus", going beyond monetary support and even beyond friendship based on those donations from the world of religion:

The Swedish and German churches helped us immensely and I remember that with the World Council of Churches, they came here because they would kind of pay you 'a visit', but it was a visit where you felt it was not just a matter of numbers, but that they accompanied us to the cemetery, they wanted to see our work. In other words, there was very active participation of Swedish and German churches. You felt understood, I mean, it was not just a matter of them saying we spent a certain amount of money on this or that, but there was genuine interest in sharing our work. (Interview with EAAF founding member 9 September 2020).

This desire of the WCC to "understand and share" the work of the EAAF may be interpreted as a form of institutional recognition of forensic activism in a context in which the State—or State agencies linked to human rights—and academic institutions had turned their backs on the team. This recognition was no trifling matter to a small, newly formed group, which was still developing and intended to set out on a task which was to be—perhaps at that time unbeknownst to themselves—titanic.

Within this context, the EAAF opted for activism conducted outside the State rather than becoming professional technicians working for the State. This very same activist logic under which the EAAF grew and developed as a team led them to establish new links with the world of religion. As we shall see in the next section, exchanges with the world of religion went beyond the loan of infrastructure and the donation of resources, to become a driver for the development of the team beyond Argentina's national frontiers.

#### 4.2. *Insiders: Partners and Helpers*

In the early 1990s, the EAAF was called upon by María Julia Hernández, of Tutela Legal of the Archbishopric of El Salvador. According to Hernández,

<sup>7</sup> See paid announcement published by Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, "Luchemos por la vida, no los traicionemos" ("Let's fight for life, let's not betray them"), *Página 12*, 21 December 1989 cited in (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 246).

<sup>8</sup> The tie with the world of religion is also characteristic of other forensic anthropology groups created in the region following the EAAF model. The Chilean case is emblematic: the Forensic Anthropology Group, created in 1989, also had no economic support from the State and secured funding thanks to help from the Christian Churches Foundation for Social Help (Fundación de Ayuda Social de las Iglesias Cristianas [FASIC]), the aforementioned WCC and several Swedish NGOs (Padilla and Reveco 2004, p. 1102; Bustamante et al. 2009, pp. 74–75). A counterexample is the case of Uruguay, where the Forensic Anthropology Investigation Group arose in a university context in the framework of Universidad de la República and with state funding in 2005. However, after undergoing a strong crisis regarding legitimacy, in 2015 it incorporated representatives of four lines of the world of religion and one representative of Familiares: Ademar Olivera for the Methodist Church; Pedro Sclofsky for the Jewish community; Mario Cayota for the Roman Catholic Church; Susana Andrade for the Afro-Uruguayan community and Emilia Carlevaro for Familiares (Marín Suárez 2016, p. 49). This reinforces the argument I am developing herein.



Tutela Legal is basically an office that investigates human rights violations and provides legal defense for the victims. Nevertheless, specialization in the legal area has led to a profound relationship with the family members most involved in the process, with whom strong bonds have developed ([Hernández 2007](#), p. 43).

This time, the request for intervention by the EAAF arose explicitly from the world of religion.<sup>9</sup> The request for help from the EAAF by Tutela Legal was to elucidate the massacre in Mozote, in the Department of Morazán. It was later proved that on 10 December 1981, units of the infantry battalion “Atlacatl” massacred all men, women, and children in the place, who had offered no resistance. The massacre was part of a military strategy called “tierra arrasada” (“devastated land”), which consisted of perpetrating killings regardless of victims’ civilian status, sex, age, or health status ([Hernández 2007](#), pp. 37–38). Almost immediately, in January 1982, the massacre was denounced internationally by US newspapers such as *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. However, both the government of El Salvador and its political allies in USA denied it, and the judicial investigation of facts made no progress. Moreover, survivors and relatives of the victims were forced into exile in a refugee camp on the frontier with Honduras, wherefore their testimonies could not be taken until they were repatriated in early 1990, during and after the peace talks.<sup>10</sup> It was then that the Archbishopric became a protagonist, not only in gathering testimonies, but also in supporting the family members who were asking the Department of Justice for forensic experts to be designated “in the name of God”. According to Hernández, in April 1992, relatives of the victims delivered a letter to the judge expressing their belief that “God has placed into your hands an irreplaceable and ineludible responsibility, and you do not fulfill it, God Himself and the innocent children who were massacred shall be their own judges and shall cause the permanent unease of your conscience”.<sup>11</sup> The Archbishopric publicly supported the claim and had the EAAF designated as party-appointed expert witness in the case ([Hernández 2007](#), p. 39).

In this case, in addition, the exhumations performed by the EAAF began in the area known as “el Convento”, a small room which the priest in charge of El Mozote Church used as a bedroom. There they found the remains of children and babies along with remnants of their clothes, toys, and other childhood paraphernalia. Even though this evidence did not enable any identification, it was crucial to disprove the government version sustaining that they had been “victims of crossfire” and to hold accountable the concrete perpetrators of the massacre when the court case was reopened in the 2000s ([Celesia 2019](#), p. 164. Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

<sup>9</sup> The same occurred in other cases, e.g., in Chile, where the EAAF responded to the request from the Vicariate Vicaría de la Solidaridad, and in Guatemala, to the request from the Human Rights Office of the Archbishopric of Guatemala, (Interviews with members of the EAAF, 2 September 2020 and 9 September 2020).

<sup>10</sup> During those years, the EAAF made different trips to El Salvador, which served to approach the terrain and family members as part of the preliminary investigations prior to exhumations. The first trip was in 1991 during the covenant negotiation and consisted of the approach to the terrain. In order to perform the exhumations, they had to negotiate a range of legal, procedural and political obstacles. The second trip was in 1992, after the peace covenants had been signed, and with the EAAF designated as expert witness ([Celesia 2019](#), pp. 161–63). Even though they were able to conduct the exhumations and the Committee for Truth and Reconciliation (Comisión de Verdad y Reconciliación) took the Mozote case as paradigmatic, just five days after submitting their report, on 20 March 1993, a “Law of General Amnesty for the consolidation of peace” was enacted, which in practice revoked the victims’ rights to truth, justice and redress as well as the perpetrators’ liability, and the court case for the Mozote massacre was archived in September 1994. This case remains under active investigation in late 2020 (see [Rauda 2020](#)).

<sup>11</sup> Causa penal 238/90 pieza 1, folio 160, Juzgado Segundo de Primera Instancia de San Francisco Gotera, departamento de Morazán, cited in ([Hernández 2007](#), p. 39).

Support from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), an ecumenical NGO, was key to conducting the forensic work.<sup>12</sup> These links to the world of religion gave them *savoir faire*, which proved essential to acting at political-institutional level in the midst of an extremely hostile political scenario:

WOLA did not provide money; what WOLA did was to play a very active role when we began to work in El Salvador, which had made things very difficult for us, and ( ... ) WOLA had been working in El Salvador for some time. In fact, we resorted to them ( ... ) because we were desperate. It was not easy to endure newspapers publishing 'Argentine anthropologists paid 1000 dollars per skeleton exhumed'. I mean, it was highly aggressive. So WOLA helped us to understand and move about in a country that was not ours, [advised us] who to contact and who not to contact, what was worth fighting for, and what was better left alone. So, I recall WOLA as a shoulder to cry on, but they didn't give us money. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

As we can see, WOLA became a key ally to refute the fake news published by the Salvadorean government as part of a smear campaign against the EAAF, during which the accusation of "profiting from forensic work" came as a shock to a team taking its first steps outside its own country. As we have seen in previous cases, money condenses a set of moral meanings perceived as being at odds with the humanitarian cause of forensic activism. During this process, WOLA being "a shoulder to cry on" affords insight into the importance of this type of organization in the world of religion as partners and situated helpers for the development of forensic anthropology.<sup>13</sup>

I take WOLA as a very important hinge, because not only is it important to have money, but also good contacts. Contacts are what ultimately enable you to find money. But sometimes what you need is safety, is knowing what you've got into. Over the years I've realized that we run into highly generous people at high levels. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

This political capital secured through transnational actors of the world of religion complemented the exchanges with local religious agents, whose territorial and community management was crucial to performing the preliminary investigations required prior to exhumations.

In many countries around the world [the church] is the place where people go, not only for religious matters but also because the priest retrieves the names of the disappeared or helps them. It happened in Haiti, it happened in South Africa, and, very often, [the church] is the refuge for people in these situations of violence, a place where they can find some support, and there are many priests in those places with whom we have interacted, but always regarding investigation, from the information we needed, to the information we

<sup>12</sup> WOLA was founded in 1974 by leaders of different churches in USA who were concerned about repression in Latin America. Their main mission was to connect policy-makers in Washington with people who had first-hand knowledge of the thousands of deaths, disappearances, torture cases, and unfair imprisonments that occurred under the dictatorships of that time. It included many members or former members of religious institutions, especially Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, e.g., Joe Eldridge (director), a former Methodist pastor; Jo Marie Griesgraber, former Catholic nun; William Wipfler of the National Council of Churches, Tom Quigley of the Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Peggy Healy, who was still a Maryknoll nun, among others.

<sup>13</sup> In 2003, WOLA called upon the EAAF to participate in action against the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (Celesia 2019, p. 239). Moreover, during those years, the association with WOLA was key to persuading US senators to endorse the request for funding for a network of forensic anthropology teams, made up of the EAAF, the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Peruano de Antropología Forense (EPAF)) and the Guatemala Forensic Anthropology Foundation (Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (FAFG)). This funding enabled the EAAF to see its dream come true in 2006, when its own genetic laboratory was founded. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020). See also: <https://eAAF.org/laboratorio-de-genetica-forense/> (accessed on 28 September 2020). Finally, as from 2009, the EAAF has participated together with other religious organizations in Proyecto Frontera, created to form a regional system for the search for disappeared migrants. This is currently the EAAF's largest Project (Clacso-Quilmes 2019, p. 113; Interview with EAAF founding member, 14 September 2020).

exchanged. This has happened throughout most of Latin America. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 2 September 2020).

In particular, in the case of El Salvador, the rural priests who knew the territory and communities and had ties of confidence with the families took on the role of gatekeepers. “The priests in rural areas, in little villages, were crucial for contacting people and enabling us to interview the families” (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020). Thus, from their special position as insiders in the field, the priests were at the same time partners and helpers, regarding both family members and the EAAF itself.

The mediation links with victims’ family members were not only useful for conducting forensic work on the ground, but they also often served as liaisons to navigate the difficult process of restituting remains that were found—sometimes identified and sometimes not—without breaking any of the community’s cultural and/or religious traditions that link the living to the dead and to help victims’ families cope with grief.

#### 4.3. *Spiritual Brokers: Mortuary Rituals and Coping with Grief*

The mediation of religious agents in mortuary rituals by request of victims’ families as closure for the process of identification and restitution of the remains of their loved ones was present from the beginning of the team’s work<sup>14</sup>:

At first, a religious ceremony was always held, led by priest Luis Farinello, both in Avellaneda and in Lomas. I recall that he assisted us at four or five ceremonies. Remember that there were not many identifications during the early years. I couldn’t tell you exactly when the first one was, it must have been 1987 or 1988 ( . . . ) [Where he came from] I’m not sure, we may have met him in the MEDH. I couldn’t tell you, all I can say is that after him, for emotional reasons, he helped us a lot whenever a family member asked us for a priest (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

At least one of the identifications made while the team was working at the MEDH venue arose from these connections (Cohen Salama 1992, pp. 273–74). This was the case of Dora Badilla de Jaramillo, who was at that time cook at the MEDH, and whose husband, Luis, had disappeared. As recalled by one of the team members, even though they used to share lunch with Dora, “she took a long time before telling them about her husband” (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020). This delay speaks of the initial difficulty—and perhaps mistrust—that many of the victims’ family members felt regarding the work of the EAAF. When remains were identified, it meant ceasing to search for the disappeared alive, accepting their death and coping with grief. Apparently, according to other testimonies, Farinello’s ceremonies began with the restitution process of the remains of Dora’s husband:

The ceremony I recall is the one at Ezpeleta cemetery to bury the remains of Luis Jaramillo. Dora and her family arranged for Luis Farinello’s participation. It was a very moving ceremony. Farinello may have participated in other ceremonies inspired in this one, which was surely the first. Luis Farinello was closely associated to the MEDH. ( . . . ) He also belonged to the APDH [Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos)]. (Interview with MEDH leader, 9 July 2010).

As we can see, Farinello was a priest with his own history of links with families of the disappeared and the world of human rights. He was one of the rebellious, third-world clergy that was surveilled and repressed during the last military dictatorship (Catoggio 2016b).<sup>15</sup> Those shared feelings explain

<sup>14</sup> For other instances of emergence of religion and beliefs in the work of the EAAF, see (Clacso-Quilmes 2019, pp. 39–40). These topics have been discussed at length with EAAF members (14 September 2020) and will be taken up again in future writings.

<sup>15</sup> According to a fellow priest, “Farinello ordinarily received many threats, especially over the phone. Bombs were planted at the parish twice and once the front was machine-gunned. His house was broken into several times. He was often intercepted

why his ceremonies were requested by a group of relatives of victims to help them through that experience of suffering and coming to terms with grief. According to Cohen Salama, Farinello also performed the religious ceremony requested for the restitution of the remains of Luis María Roberto and Norberto Morresi. On that occasion, in his sermon, Farinello compared these disappeared/dead to Jesus Christ: “He, too, was abducted and murdered, although in those days there were no electric prods or injections—only nails”.<sup>16</sup>

The same occurred in the El Salvador case discussed above. The priest who officiated the religious ceremonies after the exhumations was a local priest who was close to the relatives. One of the team members describes him as

... one of those very informal priests, who don't wear priest's clothes, who are totally dedicated to the people ( ... ) Rogelio, they called him 'the tomato priest' because since he is Belgian, he would go as red as the sun. He conducted all the ceremonies when we were unable to identify these children that we exhumed, so he held a very large ceremony. He conducted the religious ceremony with all the coffins of the exhumed persons, mostly children, and, by decision of the locals, they were all buried at the same place. They are there, with a great monument and on the wall, on small wooden boards, are written the names of all the people who lived in that subdivision. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

Another of the emblematic scenes at that time, which helps to understand the role of these agents in the mortuary rituals and process of coming to terms with grief, took place at the MEDH during the restitution of the remains of María del Carmen Pérez, recalled by the EAAF founders as “one of the most difficult”:

In this case, she was murdered eight and a half months pregnant ( ... ) it was the first case where we found a fetus positioned for birth, i.e., the fetus was in María del Carmen's womb ( ... ) but my recollection of this case ( ... ) is that it was the first time that we had to notify someone that both her daughter and her grandchild had died ( ... ) The MEDH gave us what they called ... it was the room they called the multipurpose room and there was a whole ... like a setting prepared by everyone who worked at the MEDH, knowing what was going to happen ( ... ) 'Pola'—that was the name of María del Carmen Pérez's mother—( ... ) spent almost six hours clutching the urn, sitting on the floor and rocking it as if it were a baby ( ... ) we couldn't get Pola to let go of the urn and the people from MEDH were very kind. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

This scene shows that the MEDH not only lent their infrastructure but also provided the “setting” for the process of restitution of the remains of the disappeared. This setting was the place where some relatives were able to begin to come to terms with their losses and also—at least in this case—the means by which the EAAF cushioned the initial impact of reporting the atrocious death not only of the disappeared, but also of the grandchildren being sought alive:

the thing was that the mother of María del Carmen Pérez ( ... ) had received a letter ( ... ) saying that her daughter had given birth to twins. So, for a long time this lady thought she was the grandmother of twins and bought, for instance, two of the same [type of] toys for the time when she could meet up with them ( ... ) We had to tell her, 'Your daughter was murdered and they murdered your grandchild in her womb'. The restitution was very

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and insulted while driving his car. He got beaten up. He had to organize a group of people to accompany and protect him.” (Yorio 1996, p. 367). See Yorio, Orlando. 1996. “El obispo Jorge Novak frente al problema de los desaparecidos”. *CIAS* 455, pp. 355–62.

<sup>16</sup> *Página* 12, 8 July 1989, cited in (Cohen Salama 1992, p. 232).

painful ... it was the first time that we called a psychiatrist and asked them to please be present while we notified her ( ... ). You can be very good at notifying, but the news was so harsh that we didn't know how she would respond. So, this doctor was present there and we did it at the MEDH. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

Thus, both the psychiatrist and the MEDH served as mediators-catalyzers of the dreaded "response" of victims' relatives when faced by evidence of the atrocious deaths of their loved ones that the team was in charge of imparting. An analogous form of mediation can be observed in the case of El Salvador:

when we worked in Central America, both in El Salvador and in Guatemala, the contact through the church was via local priests who were very close to the people ( ... ) in El Mozote they hold one or two masses or religious ceremonies ( ... ) where, much to our distress, we had to leave because ( ... ) you know, that business of 'we are scientists' and shouldn't get 'very close' to the victims' relatives, all the more so because that might be used to attack us. So we took all care [to appear neutral]. (Interview with EAAF founding member, 9 September 2020).

This case illustrates how spiritual brokerage closes the required distance that must sometimes be imposed from the victims' relatives "so as not to get very close" because "we are scientists". The expression "much to our distress, we had to leave" shows that mortuary rituals—whether or not religious—were also a means to make sense of and at the same time, provide closure for the work specific to forensic activism, whose foundational action maxim was Snow's statement that broke the taboo: "You can work by day and cry by night" (Clacso-Quilmes 2019, p. 19). According to the EAAF memorial narrative, Snow convinced them with this idea to follow him in his scientific proposal to find the disappeared.

## 5. Discussion

The search for and identification of human remains in scenarios of post-dictatorship, mass violence, and genocides has become a globalized phenomenon that includes exhumation practices within the framework of management policies for the traumatic past. This new context, which began in the last decade of the Twentieth Century and became consolidated in the new millennium, has been characterized by the emergence of a "forensic turn" considered by some to have brought with it the shift from testimonial paradigm to material evidence. According to this standpoint, in order to explain and understand the extreme violence undergone, focus on the accounts of survivors was shifted to the "material evidence" of human rights violations (Garibian et al. 2017, pp. 12–13). In turn, restitution and reburial of exhumed human remains emerged as a tool for redress for the victims and commemoration for post-traumatic societies. The EAAF, formed by Clyde Snow, is the main driver of this global turn. Due to the team's importance, as we have seen, there is plentiful literature on the team and the process of its formation, development, and internationalization. There are also many papers on its contribution to the world, both in terms of redress to victims and of the elucidation of human rights violations that occurred in different contexts and places. Within this framework, my paper addresses a dimension which so far has received little or no attention: the links between the EAAF and the world of religion, especially churches, ecumenical agencies, foundations, religious leaders, and so on.

This approach enables several contributions to be made. It shows that these connections were not mere monetary and material donations based on ties of friendship. Even when they coexisted with other philanthropic funding sources, they operated as *sponsors* who provided infrastructure and financial resources to the team, often accompanied by a guarantee and institutional recognition from churches and their foundations regarding the work conducted. This recognition was no minor issue for a team initially defined by autonomy from the state, without academic or local scientific recognition and with certain disagreements with the human rights movement. This vocation for autonomy was in turn combined with the rejection of straightforward professionalization as a party-appointed expert, as resolved by the establishment of a non-profit association. This modality of combining expertise with



human sensitivity, which I call “forensic activism”, had many connections to the religious world. The privileged position of religious actors, as territorial insiders and key actors within the social fabric, made them strategic partners for the EAAF and, at the same time, true “helpers” in contexts that were hostile to this forensic work. They played a key role in guaranteeing security on the ground, preserving the image of professional prestige in the face of defamatory campaigns by the perpetrators and/or local governments, and advancing with the work itself. Knowledge of the terrain and the established trust achieved with the victims’ families was a valuable asset that many actors from the religious world provided to the EAAF, functioning in practice as gatekeepers for the preliminary investigation of forensic work.

This article also discusses the restricted role often attributed to religion as an exotic feature of a foreign culture or a merely contextual factor. This position misses much of great importance. Rituals, prohibitions, and religious beliefs about life and death are an inescapable part of the work of alleviating the pain of the living and restoring the identity to the dead. I have shown that during the mortuary rituals requested by victims’ families, religious agents provided *spiritual brokerage* between the living and the dead, and ways of managing suffering that also helped to preserve the team’s scientific and humanitarian character. In other words, religious mediation preserves the necessary scientific distance from the suffering of the victims and their families but, at the same time, it reinforces the humanitarian sensitivity of the team that calls the priests or obtains the physical space so that the families can have the rituals they desire. These rituals also offer a valuable space for scientists that allows them to weep over the human suffering they witness in day after day of physically and emotionally exhausting work.

## 6. Materials and Methods

This article is part of a broader project called “Genetics and Human Rights: policies and management of health and identity in recent Argentina (1980–2017)”, financed by the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas), whose aim is to describe and understand, from a socio-historical standpoint, the relationships between genetics and human rights recently Argentina, focusing on policies and management of health, justice and identity from the 1980s to the present.

In this particular paper, I combined document analysis, observation, and participation in scientific disclosure events and talks, and in-depth interviews. For document analysis, I worked with a large corpus of sources that included journalistic articles, journalistic books and testimonials, scientific articles by EAAF members published in various academic journals, and periodic EAAF reports. Regarding scientific disclosure events and talks, I observed five EAAF public events, conducted during the past two years. Finally, I conducted five in-depth interviews with key respondents about various stages of the EAAF and three respondents from other human rights organizations, in addition to studying 10 interviews available from different sources. Within this framework, this paper was based on a qualitative research design using flexible patterns, which were redefined during the research process through constant comparison between theory and data (Mendizábal 2006). Flexibility refers to the possibility of noticing new situations during the research process itself, emerging from the interactive situation between the researcher and the object of study, and based on them, reformulating both the questions and the appropriate approaches to them. At the same time, this design admits a multi-method strategy enabling deployment of collection and interpretation methods adequate to the different levels of analysis (Patton 2002, p. 272). The strategy followed to define the final sample size was inductive, following criteria of theoretical relevance, which guide the fieldwork until saturation is reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Thus, the categories employed in the analysis emerged from the data and were not adopted beforehand a priori.

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