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FRANCISCA SUÁREZ GONZÁLEZ

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## Analysis of "Refutation" by Francisca Suárez

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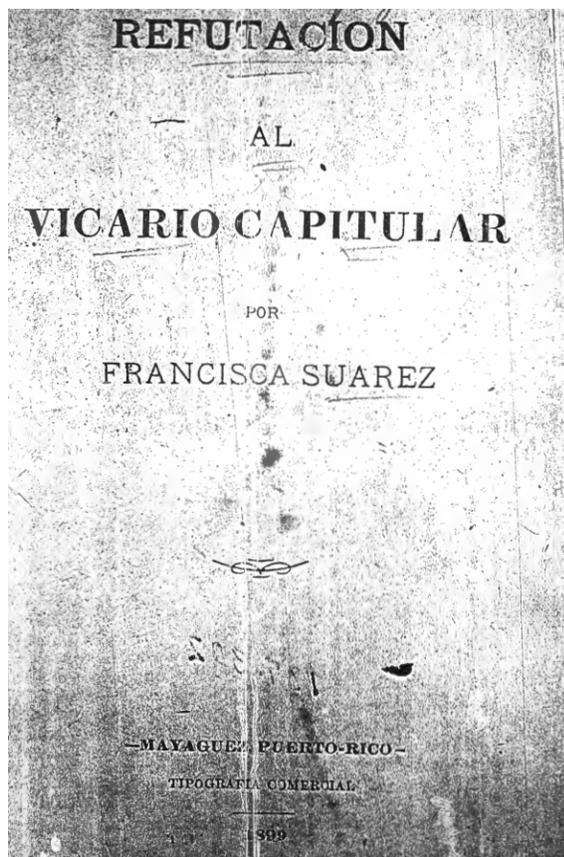
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## *Refutation to the Capitular Vicar by Francisca Suárez*

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 Translated by Henry Hirschfeld

On December 19, 1899, Francisca Suárez published a refutation addressed to the Capitular Vicar,



Dr. Juan Perpiñá,<sup>1</sup> who had published an article entitled “Cementerios” (“Cemeteries”) in the *Boletín Eclesiástico* (*Ecclesiastical Bulletin*). The newspaper *La Correspondencia* (*The Correspondence*), based in San Juan, republished the text on December 25, 1898.<sup>2</sup> The Spanish-American War had come to an end on August 12 of the same year.<sup>3</sup> Francisca Suárez’s article is particularly important because it captures the vital moment of the separation of Church and State on the Island as well as the debates that emerged as a result of the change in government. During that time, the Puerto Rican people, fed up with the relentless Spanish colonial regime, received the United States’ liberal and democratic ideology with hope. *Refutación* also demonstrates how the Puerto Rican woman benefited from the colonial transition. As Suárez explains, it allowed her to express her voice; a strong and well-grounded voice that made use of reason and freethinking Spiritism to make her opinion heard. Other important themes from this historical moment come to light in Suárez’s essay, including: the power and abuse of clergy during turn-of-the-century Puerto Rico, the identity of the

Fig. 1: *Refutación al Vicario Capitular*, Francisca Suárez, 1899.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The title of Capitular Vicar has all of the authority as the Bishop in governing the diocese when the Bishop is not present, in which case the Capitular Vicar holds the primary position of the Church. Thus, in her *Refutación*, Francisca Suárez confronts the highest authority of the Church in Puerto Rico during her time. Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *La Iglesia Católica ante la invasión de Estados Unidos de América: Lucha, sobrevivencia y estabilización (1898-1921)*, San Juan, Puerto Rico, Decanato de Estudios Graduados e Investigación de la Universidad de Puerto, Recinto de Río Piedras, Academia Puertorriqueña de la Historia, 2013, pp. 143-145.

<sup>2</sup> Francisca Suárez, *Refutación al Vicario Capitular* Mayagüez, P.R.: Tipografía Comercial, 1899.

<sup>3</sup> José Trías Monge, *Historia Constitucional de Puerto Rico*, Vol. 1, Río Piedras, P.R., Editorial Universitaria, 1980, p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> I am deeply grateful for Dr. Gerardo Hernández Aponte for granting me access and use of this photograph.

Puerto Rican people, the all-at-once ecumenical,<sup>5</sup> local, and international perspective of Francisca Suárez, various key principles of Kardecian Spiritism, and the liberal ideology of the new democracy that embraced citizens' rights. Francisca Suárez's essay demonstrates political optimism, as well as her own discursive agency, which challenges with humor and rationality the Capitular Vicar's impertinence, an agent who quickly became obsolete in regards to the management of funds and public property. With clarity and vigor, Francisca Suárez dismantles the falsehoods in the Capitular Vicar's rhetoric, in turn raising a series of arguments that end up delegitimizing him.

To address the context of *Refutación*, it is important to describe the historical moment of the U.S. invasion of the Island in 1898 and its relationship with the Roman Apostolic Catholic Church. As historian Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte explains:

The invasion of the United States of America (U.S.A.) into Puerto Rico caused a long-lasting institutional problem within the insular Roman Catholic Apostolic Church. It threatened the Church's economic and social stability and magnified the challenges that the century-old institution had been confronting. The US government tried, with all its force, to aim its cannon upon the Catholic Church in order to reduce its influence on the Island in favor of Protestantism.<sup>6</sup>

Not only Protestantism, but also liberalism, Spiritism, and Freemasonry had been introduced on the Island before the invasion itself, which raised a wave of anticlericalism that combated the privileges of the Church, including its jurisdiction over schools, cemeteries, marriages, and burials.<sup>7</sup> The Church, united with the State under the Spanish monarchy since the beginning of Puerto Rico's colonization, made the instruction of Catholicism obligatory on the Island, in parochial schools as well as public schools. The Freemasons responded to the Church's monopoly on schools with strong resistance:

(...) We must establish secular schools...to combat the exaggerations of fanaticism; so that priests do not charge our children to learn not to eat meat during Lent; so that our children do not learn to pay money to get souls out of Purgatory, money that they probably need more than the priest who collects it; so that they do not believe in those miracles that are exploited to the detriment of good sense and logic; so that they do not believe that they are making amends with God by throwing parties in Hormigueros with dances, greasy pole games, and offerings for the priest; so that they question the so-called *infallibility* of the Pope; so that they know where San Pedro's money is going; so that they learn history as history is and not as priests teach it.<sup>8</sup>

The issue regarding cemeteries raised a similar problem. As Hernández Aponte explains, according to Catholic theology, the cemetery was considered an extension of the temple, a

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term ecumenical in its etymological sense of "universal" offered by Joan Corominas in his *Breve diccionario de la lengua castellana*, Third Edition, very well revised and improved, Madrid, Gredos, 1983, p. 223.

<sup>6</sup> Gerardo Alberto Hernández Aponte, *La Iglesia Católica*, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-59.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

spiritual foundation that began with baptism, continued with the sacraments, and culminated in the cemetery, a dignified place where the Catholic dead awaited the day of resurrection.<sup>9</sup> In light of this belief, those who were not Catholic —Protestants, freethinkers, Freemasons, spiritists, cohabiting couples, and those who died from suicide— could not receive ecclesiastical burial. However, the spiritists, Freemasons, and freethinkers proclaimed ideas of liberty, justice, and equality. It is within this context that Francisca Suárez wrote her *Refutación al Vicario Capitular* (*Refutation to the Capitular Vicar*).

### The Power and Abuse of Clergy

The debate that arises in *Refutación* focuses on the need, according to the Capitular Vicar, to keep Catholic cemeteries free from Protestants, suicide victims, and excommunicated people. Suárez, for her part, argues that the clergy, a group of men who lived off of the State to sell “the salvation of souls,”<sup>10</sup> should no longer have influence in government affairs:

You should have understood it that way, since our new constitution does not subsidize men who dedicate themselves to exercising religious ministry, given that the matter does not concern the nation, but rather the individual conscience, which is free to worship God in whichever way satisfies its reason or good sense.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Suárez defends the right to freedom of worship and burial, regardless of the authority of the clergy, based on the separation of Church and State. In addition to demanding the secularization of cemeteries, she asks that the parish archives be transferred “to the municipalities, for general benefit” and that “an inventory be made of the jewels and relics that belong as a popular donation to the Churches, of which the parish priest is nothing more than a mere custodian.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the ecclesiastical monopoly’s mechanisms of exclusion and control come to light, not only in terms of burials and the economic gains they yield, but also in terms of the Church’s control of information regarding parish archives. An important example of the impact that control of information had during the colonial period in Latin America is that priests kept three separate records of the population: one for the Spanish, one for people of mixed race, and one for the Indigenous people, thereby maintaining a strict racial and class separation.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Puerto Rico, parish records kept “white books, free black books; slave books and books of mixed whites, browns and blacks.”<sup>14</sup> These classifications, promoted by parish records, established social barriers that kept each sector of the population in its “proper place.” Recognizing the potential benefit that the free flow of information could bring to people, Suárez

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Suárez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Magnus, Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America*. Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1967, pp. 58-60.

<sup>14</sup> Mario A. Rodríguez León. *Los registros parroquiales y la microhistoria demográfica en Puerto Rico*. San Juan P.R.: Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe, 1990, p. 88. For the racial classification according to the Parochial Records (whites, mestizos, freed dark-skinned people, mulatos, freed blacks, slaves, chained slaves), see Graphic No. 8., p. 90.

reclaimed parish archives.

Suárez denounces the class injustices perpetuated by the Church when she points out how the clergy charged fees for the rites of baptism, marriage, and burial. She says: “They have raised their rate so much that few, very few, are the parishioners who will be able to purchase what they offer as a ritual of faith. Poor Catholics who do not have enough money have been forced to stop baptizing their children.”<sup>15</sup> The economic argument is important because, from Suárez’s perspective, churches are not owned by clergy, “nor by any individual corporation that has built them with their own funds, as is the case with certain religious societies. They are the property of the State, and the citizens who belong to our nation, whether they are Catholics or Protestants, have the right to go there if it pleases them.”<sup>16</sup> Returning to the issue of the secularization of cemeteries, she summarizes, with a certain humor: “the most significant images in the churches are not of those who were buried; they are of the taxpayers who died. Therefore, the cemetery belongs to the People and not to the Church.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Identity of the Puerto Rican People**

Puerto Rican identity is another important topic in her essay to refute the complaints of the Capitular Vicar. Regarding the exclusion of Protestants and suicide victims from Catholic cemeteries, Suárez argues that not all Puerto Ricans are Catholic: “we are all very convinced that the greater proportion of educated Puerto Ricans are not Catholic, and since education is currently free, the number of people who worship that religion will soon be reduced.”<sup>18</sup> Later, she humorously comments on the Catholics’ sense of exclusivity: “the clergy say that on the final judgment day we will all resurrect; wait, therefore, to see if the Catholics are unwell because Protestants were buried next to them. They will know how to get away; do not rush, though, because the circumstances of the war intended for that to happen.”<sup>19</sup>

As part of her discussion on Puerto Rican identity, Francisca Suárez revisits the story of the decimation of the indigenous people in the name of evangelization.

The six hundred thousand indigenous people who populated this Island have come to know Catholicism at too great a cost. If the Spanish had not forced their religion upon them, their race would probably still exist. They, being idolatrous because they were unaware of Christianity, did not follow the example of civilization modeled by their conquerors, and thus were resigned to death.<sup>20</sup>

Here, she ironically enhances her decolonizing perspective, which captures what Aníbal Quijano has called the coloniality of power: a new world order that began with the conquest of Latin America, and culminated 500 years later with a global power whose process involved a violent concentration of the world’s resources, under the control and for the benefit of a European

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<sup>15</sup> Suárez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

minority.<sup>21</sup> It is as a result of this new world order that colonialist discourses, including the ecclesiastical one, became naturalized in Puerto Rico as inviolable.

Very different from the Spanish Creole identity, the Puerto Rican identity that Suárez describes in *Refutación* is that of a humanitarian people, with their own opinions, united as one nation. Thus, debating the Capitular Vicar's arguments, she says:

Our humanitarian people par excellence would be incapable of harming the cadaver of a wretched man who had not supported Roman ideas, unless someone stubborn, like a Catholic minister, had dragged him along in order to inoculate him against his anti-Christian instincts, as you aim to do. You would not be able to do it, though, because we know too well the opinions of the Puerto Rican people.<sup>22</sup>

### **Christian, Ecumenical, and Spiritist Perspective**

Suárez resists Apostolic Roman Catholicism with an ecumenical, Christian and spiritist perspective that includes local and international contexts. She uses the Gospel and the stories of Jesus to normalize an ecumenical Christianity that defies Catholic rites and dogmas. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well with Jesus will serve as an example:

Do you think that, according to the prophet Jacob, God should only be worshiped on this mountain of Jerusalem and in Solomon's temple? To which Jesus replied: there will come a time when God will neither be worshipped on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, nor in the temples, because the Supreme Being must be worshiped in Spirit and in Truth; that is why we believe that the best temple to freely raise our prayers is the Universe; in it there is room for the Catholic, the Protestant, the Buddhist, the Israelite, and the Muslim.

We must unite and be global citizens par excellence, banishing traditional prejudices, and working for human progress and the success of all of civilization.<sup>23</sup>

In this case, Suárez radicalizes the figure of Jesus in order to return to the roots of Christianity and to universal unity. To amplify her ecumenical, spiritist vision and apply it to her time, Suárez offers the contemporary example of “Bocado de Pan” (“Mouthful of Bread”), founded in Paris by a rabbi, a Protestant, a Catholic priest, and a Freemason:

This association consists of three vice-presidents and a secretary who distribute bread to poor men, women, children, and older people regardless of religion or

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<sup>21</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad y Modernidad/Racionalidad”, *Perú Indígena*, vol. 13, no. 29, 1992, pp. 11–20. See also “Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina”, *Cuestiones y horizonte: De la dependencia histórico-estructural a la colonialidad del poder*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO 2014, 201-246.

<sup>22</sup> Suárez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

nationality; the objective is to satisfy the hunger of those who suffer. How great are those who have come to banish traditional hatreds in order to become apostles of Charity!<sup>24</sup>

Later on, she asks herself: “Why can’t the Spanish clergy think like that? Aren’t they ashamed to continue being the imitators of Torquemada?”<sup>25</sup> The reference to Torquemada, a Spanish inquisitor under the Catholic Monarchs, in opposition to the work performed in France by “the apostles of Charity,” is useful not only because it demonstrates an alternative Christian morality to that practiced by the Catholic clergy at the time, but also because it emphasizes the spiritist doctrine studied and promoted by Francisca Suárez, in which Spiritism and the Gospel were intertwined.

### **Free Thought and a Rhetoric of Delegitimization**

Throughout *Refutación*, Francisca Suárez adopts a democratic and liberal rhetoric to delegitimize the Capitular Vicar. I use the term delegitimize (*ningunear*),<sup>26</sup> because the term reflects what I think Francisca Suárez tries and manages to do in *Refutación*: to annul the presence and power of the clergy. It is not an act of indifference, but a deliberate plan that involves a certain amount of scorn or contempt. The rhetoric of delegitimization is important, especially because it was written by a woman in late nineteenth century Puerto Rico, in order to dismiss the Capitular Vicar who governed the Island’s Catholic diocese. Who gave Francisca Suárez the authority to dismiss the Capitular Vicar and the institution that he represents? Why was she so convinced that Puerto Ricans were facing a new era of so-called modernity? The change of government certainly had a positive impact on Francisca Suárez, because it brought the hope of a democracy ruled by the people. That is why she asks the Capitular Vicar:

Mr. Vicar, was it the Church that appointed the chairmen of the City Council or the popular vote? Do said members represent a religious community or the unanimous will of those who elected them to defend and uphold their rights? Are they obliged to give testimony before the Church that they know how to fulfill their assigned positions with dignity? They are worthy of your respect regardless of whether you consider them Catholic. Every person has a free conscience and can worship God in whatever way they want.<sup>27</sup>

The references to the popular vote, to the defense of rights, to freedom of conscience, and to free thought stem from a liberal and democratic ideology, which was encouraged by the presence of the United States on the Island. However, Suárez goes beyond a liberal, spiritist, and democratic rhetoric. She does the unthinkable for women of her time: she takes the floor and uses the press to delegitimize the Vicar Capitular:

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> the Spanish verb “ningunear,” which stems from “ningún,” meaning “none,” literally means “to brush aside” or “to dismiss.”

<sup>27</sup> Suárez, *Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

You say that no corpse can be buried in said cemeteries, without the consent or approval of the respective priests.

Well, corpses have already been buried without the approval of any clergyman.<sup>28</sup>

And later:

This will happen when the clergy have cemeteries, because the prelates do not exercise authority over our Constitution; therefore, wait for some religious association to name you Chief and it will have influence over what is yours.<sup>29</sup>

Evidently, Francisca Suárez's plan was to annul the power of the Capitular Vicar through word and reason. She uses delegitimization to show her contempt for statements that have sponsored significant injustices in the name of religion. More importantly, Francisca Suárez adopts a literary persona liberated from gender; a position that not only displaces the Capitular Vicar from his manhood, but also herself from her own femininity. She does so, we can assume, because she understands deeply that, as Spiritism preaches, the Spirit has no gender.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.