



## People without religion in the Brazilian censuses: sign of a crisis in institutional belonging

Os sem religião nos censos brasileiros: sinal de uma crise do pertencimento institucional

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### Abstract

This article presents the evolution and consolidation of the category of people who declare themselves as without religion in the Brazilian censuses since the 1960s. Although this group has been presented as homogeneous, the results of this research revealed a clearly heterogeneous group, consisting of different types of individuals and attitudes: from those seemingly secularized to those who mix different models of religiosity, reproducing some of the main tendencies of the current time, driven by an intense reflexivity that challenges dogmas and by the claim for liberty of faith and expression. Moreover, the category of people without religion marks the division between people who are identified with a religious group and those who keep away from the traditional religious institutions. Thus, getting closer or moving away from the transcendent becomes a matter of private choice, a decision up to each individual with regard to her/his intimacy, something which indicates a contemporary crisis in affiliation stimulated by the reevaluation of the traditional ties.

**Keywords:** Without religion; census; deinstitutionalization; crisis of belonging; detraditionalization.

### Resumo

Este artigo apresenta a evolução e consolidação da categoria de pessoas que se declaram sem religião nos recenseamentos brasileiros desde a década de 1960. Embora esse grupo tenha sido apresentado como homogêneo, os resultados desta pesquisa revelaram um grupo claramente heterogêneo, composto por tipos diferenciados de indivíduos e atitudes: daqueles aparentemente secularizados àqueles que misturam diferentes modelos de religiosidade, reproduzindo algumas das principais tendências dos tempos atuais, movidos por uma intensa reflexividade que desafia os dogmas e pela reivindicação da liberdade de fé e expressão. Além disso, a categoria dos sem religião marca a divisão entre as pessoas que se identificam com um grupo religioso e aquelas que mantêm distância das instituições religiosas tradicionais. Assim, aproximar-se ou afastar-se do transcendente torna-se uma questão de foro íntimo, cuja decisão cabe a cada indivíduo em sua intimidade, o que indica uma crise contemporânea da afiliação estimulada pela reavaliação dos laços tradicionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Sem religião; recenseamento; desinstitucionalização; crise do pertencimento; destradicionalização.

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## Introduction

The fuss about the growing number of individuals without religion in Brazil, highlighting their strong presence in the state of Rio de Janeiro, initially occurred through the publication of results of the last censuses, providing the basis for several investigations. The census categories are projected onto portions of the geographic space, mapped, and then arranged according to their demographic status, production and consumption conditions, culture, among other aspects. They are the composition by sex, age group, color or race, and the other variables, something which may facilitate the differentiation of human activities, both from the viewpoint of their sociological and economic study. We identify, by means of them, an urban or rural population, an ethnic or national community, at last, groups of individuals classified according to their natural characteristics that, if combined to economic aspects, enable analyzing social life from different perspectives over a given period.

In general, the study of population displacements is intrinsically connected to the study of sociological and geographical factors, since any migratory movement, which changes in intensity from a decade to another, may be combined to any of them. Thus, the figure, analyzed in a dynamic way, can translate particularities of groups of individuals. And that is what enables, for instance, comparing a census to another: a dynamic reading of their figures. According to Pierre George (1969, p. 82), figures produced by the studies of human geography may situate the research themes on Sociology. They establish the dimensions of various groups, determine relations to individuals, the amount of production or consumption, living statuses, etc. According to the same author, “demographics and statistics provide Social Sciences with a dimension whose variations are projected on the level of qualitative ratings” (GEORGE, 1969, p. 82), since combining the figures on human beings with economic figures may provide an overview of relations between groups. Thus, drawing the local demographic profile may contribute to the assessment of likely causes and

consequences of a certain population flow such as, for instance, the growth and decline of religious groups, or also measuring the religious diversity of a country at a given moment in history.

According to information from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), some objectives of a census are: studying population growth and evolution over time and providing means for the planning of public policies in the country, as well as defining their political representativeness, indicating the number of parliamentarians for each town or state. Their data involve the investigation of the characteristics of people, covering religion, indicators on family and occupied households classified by urban or rural area. It is worth remembering that, since the 1960s, some more specific information from the Demographic Census of Brazil, as in the case of those concerning religion, have been collected by sampling. To this end, people use extensive questionnaires distributed over areas relevant for the sample (those gathering groups of households), which constitute a numerically representative number of inhabitants of a given population. They are applied to 20% of households, in towns with up to 15,000 inhabitants, and to 10% in the others. Two sampling fractions were used in 1991 and 2000, with 10% reserved for towns with population estimated over 15,000 inhabitants and 20% for the others, adopting criteria that take into account representativeness by sex, age group, and location. Although censuses are an approved initiative, official<sup>1</sup>, and already incorporated into the routine of a country, their methodology, with apparent limitations, is not immune from criticism, as we will show below. It is, however, through instruments like this that it is possible to obtain information with regard to social and demographic changes, such as, for instance, the growing number of individuals without religion in various regions of the Brazilian territory.

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<sup>1</sup> Feelers and other techniques constitute a response to the demand for knowledge by key authorities (public and private) on the characteristics of the population and on its ideas.

## 1 Religion: a self-declared category

Census categories, such as the subject religion, like the subjects color or race, are self-declared. However, the complexity of the process for preparing, executing, and interpreting censuses may collide with unplanned interference, more precisely unique frameworks, something which would lead to a discussion on the various interpretations given to the concept of religion, which is not the purpose of this article. From this perspective, we resume, for instance, the impact of some news in a magazine with national reach highlighting a northeastern village as the most Atheist in the country. The perverse effect of this information – the protest of its inhabitants – exposed a situation in which, perhaps, the respondent was not registered according to her/his statement, but by means of the classification by the person in charge of the interview. This was the case in Nova Ibiá<sup>2</sup>, a village with 7,000 inhabitants in the cocoa zone of the state of Bahia that, due to the high number of individuals without religion (59.85%), has received the stigma of the “most Atheist town in Brazil”. This unwanted title generated dissatisfaction among residents, who began to complain, saying they knew very few Atheists, some of which were even leaving atheism. A reporter was sent to investigate the facts and found a town that had no bank agency, hospital, or magistrate, but it had 12 churches, 3 of them Catholic and 9 Evangelical, plus 1 Candomblé yard, something which suggests its religiosity. Registers from Census 1991 show that, on occasion, the population of that town consisted of individuals without religion (6.35%) and Catholics (83.35%), which reduced their representation to 16.02% in 2000. Reflecting the context in the country, the Evangelicals living there had jumped from 9.69% in 1991 to 23.65% in 2000. In face of this, suspicion regarding the mistake in the classification of residents in Nova Ibiá was attributed to the census agents from IBGE. The local priest justified that the technicians were Evangelicals and, due to their understanding of the meaning of religion, when the respondent said to be Catholic, but not practicing, they registered

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<sup>2</sup> See the report “Como a fé resiste à descrença” [“How faith resists disbelief”], published in the magazine *Veja*, n. 2,040, Dec. 26, 2007. Available at: <[http://veja.abril.com.br/261207/p\\_070.shtml](http://veja.abril.com.br/261207/p_070.shtml)>. Accessed on: December 8, 2012.

her/him as a person without religion, something interpreted there as lack of belief. That is, the understanding that not engaging in the religious activities of an institution as lack of religiosity interfered with this result, generating oscillations in the census: the increased numerical representativeness of a category and the consequent decrease in the others, from which some individuals had migrated.

Initially, this research on individuals without religion was based on results from the various demographic censuses conducted by IBGE in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1960-2000), often cited by the media. They present the category without religion, which until the 1950s was nonexistent, counted along with the individuals who had no statement concerning religion, combining both situations. Since 1960, this group was redefined, isolating only those who declared themselves as without religion, who began to gradually increase, until coming from 1.6% of the Brazilian population in 1980 to 4.8% in 1991, and 7.3% 2000<sup>3</sup>. From 1970 to 2000, the censuses already showed that the average annual growth of Catholics was much slower than that of the total population in the country. Although still prevalent in Brazil, between 1980 and 1991, the Catholic religion has suffered a loss of 5.7% of believers, in contrast with an increase of 2.4% of Evangelicals and 3.1% of people without religion. In 2000, this loss increased to 9.4%, representing only 73.9% of the population (3/4 of it), compared with an increase of 2.7% of people without religion and 6.6% of Evangelicals. Recently, Census 2010 showed that, despite all the revitalization brought about, mainly by the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the decline in the number of Catholics reached 64.63%, while Evangelicals rose to 22.16% and those without religion rose to 8.04%, something which provides the pace of the previous census fluctuations with continuity. A comparison of the evolution of percentages of the groups Evangelicals and people without religion besides those of the Catholic majority, at different periods, clearly illustrates this variation of the Brazilian religious profile and the fluctuations here commented (Table 1).

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<sup>3</sup> We referred to the demographic censuses of 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1991, 2000, and 2010, the latter two online.

**Table 1 – Comparison of demographic censuses from 1950 to 2010**

Religions	Censuses (%)						
	1950	1960	1970	1980	1991	2000	2010
<b>Catholics</b>	93.5	93.1	91.8	89.0	83.8	73.8	64.63
<b>Evangelicals</b>	3.4	4.0	5.2	6.6	9.1	15.5	22.16
<b>Without religion</b>	*	0.5	0.8	1.6	4.8	7.3	8.04

Source: Prepared by the author.

Then, we have two basic movements in the censuses: the recognition of a category of individuals who, for various reasons, defined themselves or were classified by census agents as without religion, and their continuous evolution in various units of the Federation. When we chose to investigate the census category of people without religion, the motivation was not only the scarcity of material on the theme, but also the obscurity in which it seemed to be immersed. We always knew that population information is dynamic and that, in subsequent censuses, the scenario could change. But we were more worried about their constitution and meaning than about making predictions concerning their position in the next census. During the research, we were soon faced with evidence of misinterpretation of the group, often mistakenly associated with the growth of an alleged atheism in Brazil, such as that we have mentioned, inconsistent with the trends of the diversified framework we know. So, we decided to start investigating their composition through the application and analysis of the interviews with individuals who defined themselves as without religion. From 2005 to 2008, we interviewed 102 individuals who declared themselves as without religion living in the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, the most representative in Census 2000, something which outlined a heterogeneous group, consisting of two different types. Thus we found: 1) Atheists or Agnostics, totally unbelievers or those putting belief in the transcendent into question, who are classified by us as individuals without religion “with no religiosity”; and 2) those who kept their faith in God or

some other transcendent force, classified by us as without religion “with religiosity”, whose numerical distribution is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Types of people without religion**

	Condition of religiosity		Total
	With no religiosity	With religiosity	
People without religion	48	54	102

Source: Prepared by the author.

In the first type, we gather those with no institutional ties to religions or a magical sphere; altogether, they adopted a completely materialistic approach to all things, rejecting the religious elements. In the second type, we gather individuals who did not reject the transcendent, only moved their religiosity to a very private sphere, establishing a personal or even intimate relation to their representations.

This signaled the detachment between beliefs and practices of the institutions. Thus, we find out that although this census category also consists of individuals who exercise their religiosity in a different way – with or without belief in a transcendent being –, they were all aggregated into a single block, which we understand as that of those who do not fit into the other religious groups.

It is worth stressing that our classification had as its starting point a self-classification by respondents – the native category –, which has been refined and organized into the types we propose. Throughout our investigation, we identified

various individuals without religion: Atheists, Agnostics, individuals who simply said they have no religion, secular Jews and, in the quantitative survey, one follower of Buddhism. Both secular Jews and Buddhists may be interpreted with regard to the ethnic religions; however, even these individuals, in this study, defined themselves as without religion. The first sees Judaism as a cultural reference, but without a religious nature, while the second, Buddhist, sees Buddhism as a philosophy of life and not as a religion. It is worth stressing that the identification as a Jew could fit him, within the official censuses, into the space reserved to the Jewish/Israelite religion. However, the Jews identified here classified themselves as Atheists, Agnostics, or, at most, without religion, something which excludes them from this reference and reduces their representativeness. They were secular Jews, therefore, had no ties with the religion of their culture. This suggests that within the group of those without religion there may be hidden other deinstitutionalized representatives, with a nuanced understanding of religion.

When we identify the motives of those without religion with religiosity, we find other explanatory variations with regard to their situation: a) those who have gone through many passages, various religious experiences, without, however, binding to any of them; b) those who believe in some divine force, but are not bound to any religious group; c) members of mystical or philosophical orders that are not regarded as religious groups; d) sporadic consumers of religious goods, as if they were therapeutic products. This is, in fact, the predominant type among those without religion. Given this, not belonging to a confessional community does not imply that every individual without religion is an unbeliever or that she/he has not developed a particular religion, something which shows a relative secularization of consciousness accompanied by a credibility crisis concerning the religious institutions. In short, we realize that the general framework of the census may be interpreted through a dichotomy: that of those who fall into religious groups and that of those who are away from them.



## 2 Representativeness and mobility of those without religion in the national census

Only in the edition concerning 2010 the census category of those without religion appeared, finally, as split into groups of Atheists, Agnostics, and without religion. However, even this way, it does not accurately translates their composition or representativeness, since this distribution depends on the information that the respondent spontaneously adds, specifying, for instance, if she/he is an individual Atheist without religion or, if Evangelical, to which denomination she/he is affiliated, providing her/his classification with a direction. But the Brazilian censuses keep attributing a single question to capture the diversity of the religious field, “what is your religion?”, something which limits the identification of the condition of religiosity of the individual and it may include situations of multiple affiliations, simultaneous practices or beliefs. If, in the case of those without religion, the respondent does not identify her/himself as Atheist or Agnostic, too, she/he is included into the larger group, the generic category of those without religion, where those who simply answer “without religion” are grouped. In Census 2010 those “without religion” – generic category – accounted for 7.65% of the group, besides 0.32% of Atheists and 0.07% of Agnostics, who declared themselves as such; but it does not ensure that the numerical representativeness of each type is exactly this. The same doubt with regard to the reliability that may be assigned to the distribution can be raised in relation to other groups, causing oscillations and even criticism from many leaders.

According to Census 2010, those without religion are present throughout the national territory, in various proportions, but it is in the Southeast region (8.96%) that they keep standing out, followed by the Central-West region (8.42%) and the Northeast region (8.29%). Conversely, these regions are those with the lowest percentages of Roman Catholics, respectively, Southeast (59.46%) and Central-West (59.55%). The South is the region with the lowest percentage of people without

religion (4.82%), but with one of the highest percentages of Apostolic Roman Catholics (70.09%), just behind the Northeast (72.19%). Evangelicals are represented more strongly in the Northern region (28.50%), followed by the Central-West (26.82%) and Southeast (24.58%), and their lowest percentage is in the Northeast region (16.39%). Those without religion stand out not only in major hubs, such as the state of Rio de Janeiro (15.60%), the highest percentage in the country, but also in states within the Northern and Northeast regions, such as Rondônia (14.34%), Roraima (12.98%), and Bahia (12.05%), occupying a prominent place in the national ranking<sup>4</sup>.

By analyzing data from the previous census, concerning 2000, Antoniazzi (2004, p. 46-47) realized that those without religion predominantly inhabited the suburbs of metropolitan regions of cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Recife, São Paulo, and Salvador. In its demographic profile, the group mainly consisted of men, between 16 and 30 years old, of all races (except the white). They had low education level and humble job (many without employment record book), and their wages are not high, too. Few were officially married, the majority lives in consensual union. Antoniazzi (2004, p. 18) warns that the Metropolitan Region of Rio de Janeiro, a space where those without religion stand out, was also the place where, conversely, the Catholics had their lowest percentages. Seemingly, the most disadvantaged segment of those without religion may be noticed as a contradiction, since many associate the lack of religious ties to rather intellectual populations and those enjoying a better economic status.

It is interesting to find out that the portion of those without religion that occupied the suburbs in the towns within the metropolitan regions, with a very low socioeconomic status, had as its neighbors Pentecostal Evangelicals, competitors in terms of percentage representation. According to Jacob (2003, p. 40-41), who had access to the micro-data from Census 2000, these Evangelicals were in the suburb

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<sup>4</sup> See Table 1,489 – resident population by race or color, according to sex and religion – general sample results (IBGE, 2010).

close to the central city in the metropolitan regions. In the capital city, they stood out in districts within the West Zone, such as Santa Cruz, Campo Grande, and Bangu, rather disadvantaged neighborhoods where those without religion were also present<sup>5</sup>. With a similar demographic profile, Evangelicals dwelt more urban than rural areas, they had elementary education, low income (domestic jobs, with or without employment record book), and they consisted of more black, mulatto, and Indian people than white people. The only aspects that took away those without religion from Evangelicals were sex, since the Evangelical population appeared in the census as consisting of more women than men; age group, because there were more children and adolescents than adults among them; and, to some extent, marital status, since a large part was married only in the civil sphere.

The similarity between demographic characteristics and sharing the same geographical space leads to suspicion of a possible relationship between the construction of the identity of some types of individuals without religion through deconversion from Evangelical denominations. Studies on religious passage, as that conducted by Almeida and Montero (2001, p. 98), show that adhesion and dissent seem to configure as a major responsible for variations in the oscillations of religious groups, many of them caused by deconversions, something which will be explained better below. For the authors, there are donor and recipient groups, incorporating into their contingent that coming from various confessions<sup>6</sup>. For instance, those without religion present themselves as recipients, while the Catholic do that as universal donors, a group which believers leave to join many other groups. We believe that the decline in the number of Catholics, even stronger in the last edition of the national census, may be associated not only with the proliferation of Evangelical churches, but also to the rise in the number of individuals who declare themselves as without religion. This move has also appeared in other surveys, such as that by

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<sup>5</sup> In Census 2000, in Rio de Janeiro, Evangelicals accounted for over 21% of the population and, like those without religion, they were present mainly in Baixada Fluminense.

<sup>6</sup> This flow may be associated with social, cultural, political, and economic changes, or even to subjective ones, difficult to measure with no support of a qualitative research.

Instituto Gerp, conducted in 2004, concluding that 20% of those living in the state of Rio de Janeiro changed their religion<sup>7</sup>. Among those who were converted, 21% came from Umbanda and Candomblé, 9% from Spiritism, 2% from Judaism, and other 2% had no religion. Among the newly converted Evangelicals, 62% came from Catholicism; yet, only 10% of those who were Evangelical changed their religion. The survey also highlighted that the Catholic Church was the institution that has lost more believers (56%), who mostly migrated to Evangelical churches.

Pushed by such a flow, we check among our respondents whether they received some religious guidance and from which groups they came. We found out that 70% of those who declared themselves as without religion were raised having a religion, according to Table 3. Among those raised with some religion, 59% were Catholic, 7% Evangelicals, 7% Jewish, 2% came from Umbanda and Candomblé, 4% were Kardecist Spiritualists, 15% were raised without religion, but having religiosity, and 7% were raised without religion and with no religiosity.

**Table 3 – Frequency of respondents by upbringing with religion**

<b>Raised with religion?</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	71	70
No	31	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Prepared by the author.

In the interviews, we noticed that a probable defection of a religious group such as the Evangelical, for instance, may be due to several factors, including failure to

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<sup>7</sup> This sample from Pesquisa Opinião do Rio, produced by Instituto Gerp in the first quarter of 2004, for publication in *Jornal do Brasil*, on April 26 – report “A multiplicação dos evangélicos” – is based on the evaluation of interviews with 400 individuals in the city of Rio de Janeiro. It had the following percentage distribution: 55% of Catholics, 24% of Evangelicals, 7% of Spiritualists, 4% of followers of Umbanda, and 10% of individuals without religion.

adapt to the rules imposed by a certain denomination – very strict – or due to disenchantment with regard to relationships within the group. A relevant part of deconversions we have identified was attributed to disappointments with the “brothers in faith”. If among the Apostolic Roman Catholics there is some flexibility with regard to religious practice, with no request for continued participation as a *sine qua non* condition to reaffirm religious belonging, the same does not seem to occur among Evangelicals, from whom it is required to comply with strict rules, a frequent attendance, and even “compulsory” contribution for the maintenance of their institutions. As not everyone can observe all of these requirements, they can end up getting away from the group without adhering, however, to another one or returning to the previous confession (for the cases of those who converted to Evangelical denominations), becoming individuals without religion. In face of this overview, we believe that the increased number of individuals without religion may be due to deconversions not only among Catholics, which is still the most numerically significant group, but among Evangelical groups, the fastest growing category. Moreover, the rise in the number of those without religion may also be related to passage – permanent or temporary – between various religious modalities, searching for that which meets their expectations and is able to provide a response to their existential issues. Since declaring to be a Catholic is no longer required, the individuals started changing more freely, in a succession of processes for deconversion and reconversion, taking other affiliations and styles of religiosity, something which made religious pluralism apparent, noticeable in the list of religious categories identified in censuses.

The processes for conversion and deconversion<sup>8</sup> have drawn the attention of many researchers, such as the anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio (1993), who prepared a literature review on these studies among new religious movements<sup>9</sup>. According to

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<sup>8</sup> Deconversion is classified by the anthropologist Alejandro Frigerio (1993) as leaving or abandoning a religious group (*defección*) or disassociation (*desafiliación voluntaria*).

<sup>9</sup> The so-called New Religious Movements are alternative groups, groups with high transience, such as, for instance, the Unification Church (the followers of Reverend Moon), Children of God, Hare Krishna, among others.

the author, between 1975 and 1980, the studies focused on the process for conversion and recruitment and only since 1985 the studies on deconversion or religious disaffiliation have emerged among these groups. Subsequently, there was a paradigmatic change in researches on this field (from conversion to deconversion), becoming as important studying the reasons why individuals leave religious groups as the reasons why these individuals join them. Frigerio (1993, p. 8-11) evaluates that there seems to be a consensus among many authors that the process for deconversion represents a break in strong emotional ties that requires a reconstruction of identity and personal worldview. This implies a conflict that intensifies when referring to the abandonment of community groups. From this perspective, moments prior to leaving the group are the most conflictive, as well as the first months after deconversion. Just like a divorced person, the individual is away from the affective and cognitive structure of the group without having found another one. Only later, in the case of those who voluntarily undergo deconversion, the individual reconstructs her/his life, adhering to new plausibility structures that provide her/him with a new identity and social relationships. In the case of involuntary deconversions, the individual tends to engage in active militancy in an anti-cult movement, which provides new motivations and a new social network.

Among our respondents without religion who underwent deconversion, we did not find any person who has taken a bitter anti-cult campaign, but we found fierce criticism of religious institutions, primarily the traditional Christian ones. This suggests a crisis of religious belonging, mainly triggered by advances in the materialistic, rationalist, and scientific thought, aimed at secularism (anti-religious ideology). Some of them came to recall several negative historical events related to religious institutions, such as the Inquisition, for instance. Others generalized the criticism, accusing leaders and followers of fanaticism, intolerance, hypocrisy, falsehood, and, above all, inconsistency between religious discourse and practice. They complained of attempted manipulation and alienation of believers, information

obtained through contact with believers, personal experience, or even through access to information from behind the scenes of religious life, published both in History books and by the mass media, involving situations of corruption, misconduct, various kinds of excess, among other information having a negative impact. The French sociologist Sylvette Denèfle (1997, p. 155), in her research on French people without religion, has found strong anticlerical demonstrations among her group. All respondents adopted an anticlerical argument to justify their position or to comment on the relationships between society and religion, or between morality and religion. Some showed a relatively moderate discourse against the religious institutions, around one or two arguments, while others had several.

We may say that deconversion, or detachment, from a system of meanings is presented as a prerequisite to a new conversion, or alternation<sup>10</sup>, if we resort to the concept of Peter Berger (2004, p. 65) to designate this identity change. The author understands that the individual's life consists of a sequence of events whose sum makes up her/his biography, constituted by scattered data, reordered, since each new reality is taken and reinterpreted by the individual with regard to the current situation (BERGER, 2004, p. 73), providing another explanation for her/his existence and her/his world. Within the construction of an individual route, which marks the biographies, the relevant events may be marked as before and after a religious conversion, for instance. Or, also, as the alternation from a religious identity to another not necessarily religious, something which intersperses successive processes for conversion and deconversion. In general, the person who changes her/his system of meanings also changes her/his social relationships, redefining her/his identity according to the other, to a subculture. Then, a specific context for approving a certain lifestyle becomes a must, something which may be referred to the case of those without religion, whose dynamic environment having a high reflexivity enables their detachment from religious institutions.

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<sup>10</sup> Alternation is change from one system of meanings to another, and it may be even contradictory or not necessarily religious.

If, in some cases, deconversion was marked by a sharp break, with no possibility of return, in others occurred it took place as a softer detachment, gradual, which we address as leaving. Among our respondents who left, we found mainly non-practicing Christians, from various groups: Catholics, Evangelicals, Spiritualists as a whole. Among those who underwent deconversion – Catholics or Evangelicals – we find those who have left many religious groups, with a strong or weak association<sup>11</sup>, from more or less inclusive groups<sup>12</sup>, something which can make religious passage easier or more difficult. Some people attributed detachment, among other reasons, to lack of time to attend the rituals due to accumulation of assignments in professional or domestic life and, collaterally, unwillingness to engage. If among the Catholics there is some flexibility in religious practice, i.e. no actual participation is required as a *sine qua non* condition for the reassertion of religious belonging, the same does not seem to occur among Evangelicals, who are required to comply with standards of conduct related to clothing, besides frequent attendance to cults. As not everyone can adapt to these conditions, especially younger people, some of them may end up getting away from the group without adhering, however, to another or returning to the previous confession (for the cases of those who converted to Evangelical denominations), becoming people without religion.

Among those without religion, there are people who, in their route, alternate identities, from a religious to another non-religious, becoming Atheists or Agnostics, as well as those who change bonds with a religious affiliation inherited by the intimate exercise of religion or, also, engaged in a ceaseless quest for religious goods, named by us as seekers. Those who went through more changes came from various Christian religions (Catholic, Evangelical, or Kardecist Spiritualist) or raised without religion, but having religiosity. They were those who, driven by a sense of incompleteness, dissatisfaction with the religious guidance they received, looking for a response to

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<sup>11</sup> We name as a weak association that not requiring an intense participation of its follower; it is unlike the strong association, through affiliation, which requires confirming the bond through activity and contribution to the maintenance of the institution, as in the case of those who pay tithing.

<sup>12</sup> We call more inclusive the religious groups open to new conversions, such as Catholics and Protestants, and less inclusive those restricted to inherited confessions, such as Judaism, strictly speaking, due to ethnic ties.



their existential issues elsewhere. They experienced various beliefs without, however, binding to any of them, realizing the religious field as changeable, involving free passages, noticing affinities with their momentary expectations. Many of them participated sporadically in traditional cults, while others wandered by esoteric circuits, consuming “therapeutic products”, something which increases the intensity of religious flows. If, initially, the options were restricted to a Christian denomination, with the advent of the Republican environment the others, which remained anonymous to avoid public reprimands, started making themselves known, expanding the range of options that was available to any citizen in a new context, where freedom is the most desired good.

This new individual, aimed at her/himself and her/his previous search, discovered another way to relate to the transcendent, with no need to express publicly her/his faith or settle on one creed, with the possibility to wander as a pilgrim, a metaphor used by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999) to identify the one who moves in a fluid environment, enjoying the options that the current world offers her/him. In this scenario, the ideals are in crisis due to laxity of social ties, to which draw attention Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Bech, when speaking of the conditions of modernity.

### **3 Changes in the global order interfering with individual subjectivity**

According to Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 17), modernity promoted deep simultaneous transformations in the intimacy of the individual and her/his interpersonal relationships with regard to their various aspects and in the global social order, which involve the multiple spheres of life. Among them, the impetus for the search for self-fulfillment that, in the context of co-presence, establishes itself by opening the self to the other as a positive appropriation of the circumstances in which the globalized influences invade everyday life. Changes have emerged in the old models, even allowing the individual to move in a religious market, consuming those

offers meeting her/his expectations more closely, or even refraining from all of them, constructing her/his identity through other bonds of sociability. The dynamism, the separation between time and space – resulting in their emptying – and reorganization in a global scale enabled the connection of the local to the global, expanding the information flow. With the reflexive appropriation of knowledge, which marks contemporary subjectivity, the individual starts revising old theories and postulates and reevaluating her/his relationships according to her/his expectations. Absolute truths contained in dogmas become questionable and uncertainties are radicalized, promoting changes in the direction. Nothing escapes criticism, either institution, custom, or ideology. The doubt, which surrounds any and all knowledge, is present both among intellectuals and among the lay individuals, as this information comes into use in society. In this sea of instability, knowledge is understandable, but not frozen, and, thus, the more the individuals try to predict future events, the more the future surprises them. Social practices may be changed in face of new discoveries, conventions may be reviewed, something which applies to all aspects of human life. So, what characterizes modernity, according to Giddens (1991), is this indiscriminate reflexivity, introduced on the basis of the reproduction of social systems. Uncertainty could disrupt traditional systems and institutions, putting them to the test and, therefore, affecting relationships of trust, something which may trigger a crisis in institutional belonging. There is what the author defines as a process of unfitting and refitting, or uprooting of social systems, losing the hawsers from habits and practices hitherto consolidated, a movement that is named by other authors as detraditionalization (HEELAS, 2001; PIERUCCI, 2004), where the individual is faced with a list of options at her/his free choice. Thus, according to the terms of Giddens (2002), biographies or self-identities are constructed according to preferences, in a reflexive exercise of the self, present in the process for individuation. This process for individuation, distant from the processes for atomization or emancipation, is translated by Beck, Giddens, and Lasch (1995, p. 24) into disembodiment and reincorporation of lifestyles in the industrial society, producing, representing, and

accommodating these biographies. Thus, changes in subjectivity have impacts on the social environment, producing phenomena such as the installation and increased number of individuals without religion, found out in the various censuses, something which depends, at the subjective level of the individual her/himself, on declaring her/himself as a person without religion. This, in turn, resuming Peter Berger (2004), may be understood as the construction of an identity that depends on a context favorable to its manifestation, such as that of laity.

From this perspective, adhesion and dissent in the religious field, the main reasons for fluctuations in the censuses, in the form of alternations of identity or deconversions, temporary or permanent, seem to have been made possible by a historical process, triggered by the proclamation of the Federative Republic of Brazil (1891). Throughout the imperial period, both the clergy and its followers were highly benefited, preventing other expressions of religiosity to emerge, since the Brazilian State was officially born as Catholic. Before an official and compulsory religion, all those wishing to settle in Brazil were obliged to convert, either Jews, Muslims, or Africans (these, in this case, enslaved). Indians, native, were catechized by the Jesuits. With the advent of secularization<sup>13</sup> in the country, represented by the secular State, in theory, all religious expressions became allowed. However, as the assimilation of these changes is gradual, until the 1970s the Afro-Brazilian cults, for instance, were seen as a police matter. Only gradually secularization was consolidated in Brazil.

Laicization – singular expression of processes for secularization – is characterized by the creation of a neutral State, detached from any religious group that may affect its decisions (VELASCO, 2006, p. 15-29). It occurs with a different form, pace, and intensity in each place, always alongside historical and social transformations that interfere with the way how it is settled. Roberto Blancarte (2006, p. 150-151) links the notion of laity to religious plurality and the need for a supra-religious entity in a State supported on a national citizenship. The element that allows

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<sup>13</sup> The concept of secularization has a central core from which its more general meaning derives, primarily interpreted by making autonomous the various spheres of the social life within the tutelage of religion.

understanding this notion is legitimacy and respect for difference, where tolerance stands out, often encouraged by advertising campaigns for religious freedom on TV stations. It is worth highlighting that the term “secular State” is not included in the 1988 Constitution, but its content is present there, prohibiting the imposition, repression<sup>14</sup>, or subvention<sup>15</sup> of religious cults and churches by the Union, states, Federal District, or municipalities, except in cases of collaboration due to public interest<sup>16</sup>. If there is no longer obligation of fidelity to an official religion, nor of payment of wages to religious agents, there are still other traces that, in fact, mischaracterize a secular State. Although not compulsory<sup>17</sup>, religious education sometimes recedes, sometimes is affirmed in debates on education in the country, regaining its place in the school curriculum; in addition, religious symbols can still be seen in various public spaces, as well as religious agents are interconnected as pressure groups at parliamentary level, marking this presence in national decision-making processes. Sometimes, these actors interfere with themes that go beyond the sphere of religion, hindering the approval of laws that contradict their worldviews in the field of science, sexuality, in short, that diverge from their private morality. This suggests that, despite the installation of the secular State, religion was not eliminated from the Brazilian scenario, admittedly diverse, according to predictions made by the early theories of secularization. Despite the formalization of secular States, in the case of Latin America, according to Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2007), the proliferation of charismatic Catholic and Pentecostal Evangelical groups take place, which have an emotional religiosity and require a decrease in the intellectual activity, appreciating the affective experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The author explains that the relationship within these groups is constructed through what she names “theological minimalism”, when the believers adhere to a minimum creed (*God loves*

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<sup>14</sup> See Article 5 (head), with references to freedom of speech and thought (IV), to the obstruction of deprivation of civil and political rights due to religious choices, philosophical or political opinions, except in cases of invocation to exempt from universal legal obligation or refusal to comply with an alternative duty, provided by law (VII).

<sup>15</sup> See Article 19 (I) on the prohibition of financial assistance to religious worship or church, hinder their operation, or maintain relationships of dependence, except collaboration of public interest.

<sup>16</sup> See Article 72 (head), § 7, of the Brazilian Constitution.

<sup>17</sup> The Republican Constitution established the secular education in public schools, something which was opposed by the coalition between the Vargas administration and the Catholic Church, by decree, in 1931, and by constitutional provision, in 1934.

*you, Jesus saves, etc.*) that does not require theological explanation and whose practice effectiveness is personally experienced by each believer, individually. According to the author, this is a way that “enables the adaptation of content to the requirements of modern individualism, in terms of expanding oneself and personal fulfillment” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2007, p. 73). So, faith, as operator of an individual duty, is presented as the key motif of modern religiosity, present in many movements. Then, there is a “common creed whose very theological content decreases at the same time that the singular personal benefits that each one receives are shown” (HERVIEU-LÉGER, 2007, p. 73). In this current overview becomes evidenced a fluidity in the offer and, with it, that of those who look for meaning tuned with contemporary trends, related to the right of everyone to exercise her/his subjectivity. It is solely up to the individual to freely try, join, or leave a religious institution, or pass through many religious institutions, causing some of the periodic oscillations that, in a more or less correct way, are signaled by demographic censuses.

## Conclusion

From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we observed a series of transformations in the international religious scenario, permeated with movement, unfitting, and refitting that mark social relationships. Changes in the political scenarios, which fostered the processes of secularization and laicization, destabilized tradition and allowed making the established order flexible and, as a consequence, uprooting individuals. At this juncture, the passage flows have expanded, loosing the hawsers from the individual, those with a concrete or subjective nature that kept her/him connected to old models. Change has become the keyword of contemporaneity, despite all the risks that may be embedded in it, making room for the right to choose of a citizen who is aware of her/his freedoms, including that of thought, belief, and worship. In this context, traditional systems are put into question and lose space, at the same time they receive re-readings and adhesions in other

systems, signaling, in the sphere of religion, that there are metamorphoses and multiple ways of believing and ritualizing. With the decreased level of trust in institutions and the break with old paradigms, the different identities take provisional configurations, varying according to the trends of a globalized world, where borders have become less clear. Thus grows the pilgrimage of goods and religious movements, alongside breaks with the established institutions, generating fluctuations that, in the religious scenario, are translated into an intense movement which is mainly reflected on the regular Brazilian censuses. Attitudes change over time and, thus, a new type of individual emerged, completely autonomous, who reinterprets the meaning of religion according to her/his own way. Religiosity, which is sometimes perceived as a stage prior to institutional religion, or simply a “religious action”, seems to have been prioritized among certain individuals, something which denounces a contemporary crisis in institutional belonging. Many people discovered that they could provide their own interpretation to the sacred books and that ecclesiastical authorities had no right to interfere with the other spheres of life (different from religion). Thus, certain individuals go without intermediaries in order to seek their own pathway along with God or a Higher Power, reaffirming the famous sentence by the Indian pacifist Mahatma Gandhi: “God has no religion”. Then, we realize, emerging, the evolution and consolidation of the census category of those without religion not only as indicative of fluctuations in the religious scenario or of a detraditionalization movement, but as a sign of a crisis in the religious belonging of a type of individual who assimilated religious freedom, declaring her/himself as a person without religion.

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