

EDITORIAL¹

RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED: a topic for research

SEM-RELIGIÃO: *um tema para investigação*

SÍN RELIGIÓN: *un tema para investigación*

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The descriptor term *religion* is in the center of the concerns of the scientist of religion. As part of our academic work, we have identified that this descriptor as a term does not seem to belong only to the domains of the religiously affiliated beliefs and traditions. Recently, at least since the second half of the twentieth century, it has been noticed the increasing occurrence of people who do not feel connected with any institution, doctrine, or wisdom tradition. Theists, atheists, deists, agnostics, religiously unaffiliated with belief or without belief. The spectrum of what these non-affiliated people have also become the focus of the research concern of our Study of Religion discipline and others related. Outside the academy as well, the phenomenon of non-affiliated does not seem to be a topic that falls unnoticed by the common concern.

This debate leads us to the ongoing discussion about what is meant to be called religion. Regarding the expression *religion*, which today we see applied in a so-called universal way, we have its origin in the Latin language (*religio*) and its expansion across cultures was made possible by the colonizing process. This context should never be neglected. It is a term confined to a given culture, a term that carries all the marks of a

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cultural delimitation. Regarding what religion really is, especially concerning the concrete religions to which we, as scientists of religion, are devoted, it is necessary to identify as precisely as possible which theoretical, methodological, political, and cultural perspective is taken to refer to this object. Such position is necessary, either by the recognition of different cultures or by the consideration provided by the different perspectives of the disciplines that study the subject. And, also, it should be noted that a precise definition of the term in the abstract makes little sense, even for the most theoretical approaches. It will always be necessary to address the subject, to recognize a perspective, a place from where the phenomenon is observed.

The studies regarding the profile of religiously unaffiliated people are moving forward on different forefronts both in Brazil and abroad. Clóvis Ecco, from PUC Goiás; Alfredo Teixeira, from the Catholic University of Lisbon; Néstor da Costa, from the Catholic University of Uruguay; Lori G. Beaman, from the University of Ottawa, and an entire team of researchers associated with the project *The Nonreligion in a Complex Future* besides Marià Corbí, Marta Granés, Teresa Guardans and Queralt Prat-i-Pubill and a whole team from the Center for the Study of Wisdom Traditions, in Barcelona, these are some researchers interested in this theme, just to quote a few names from our network of academical contacts on this subject. Particularly, in our case, in the scope of the Graduate Program in Religious Studies at PUC Minas, through the Religion and Culture Research Group, with all the limitations of this complex approach, and guided by what the field proposes, we delimited religion to the institutional aspect relative to belonging, membership, community life, also as to adherence to doctrine, as well as to the link to the worship system.

In this editorial, I share some of the research experience that has been built in our group, which I am pleased to lead together with Prof. Fabiano Victor de Oliveira Campos. As part of the concerns of this research group, we have dedicated ourselves to the study of people who declare themselves to be non-affiliated. Indeed, most people that claims to be without religion maintain a belief or faith in what they recognize as God, but it is common that along with this self-declaration comes the notion of non-affiliation or non-belonging.

We have been organizing, through various Master's and Doctoral researches, a database that supports our hypothesis that religiously unaffiliated people see religion as an institution, as doctrine, and as adherence to the cult system.

Considering that the research in the Study of Religion is built between empirical, systematic, and applied approaches, let's look at three aspects of the problem from the

researches I have advised.

Initially, from an empirical perspective, we are interested to know how a person has built his or her trajectory, from and when not born as a non-affiliated. In this context, we have found in the field a lot of stories of *real people* marked by what the sociologist of religion Pedro Ribeiro has called religious *disaffection*. This process seems to be responsible, in part, for leading people without religion to *non-affiliation* and to a culture of the life of faith in a personal perspective. There is, in this case, an *individualization of the belief*. From a wider point of view, the data has been leading us to assume as hypothesis of the empirical understanding of this phenomenon the triad *disaffection-non-affiliation-individualization*. Would such a process be a consequence of the *secularization* phenomenon?

In secular societies, those in which religion ceases to occupy the centrality of the control of all the senses and spheres of life, in the Weberian sense, religion does not exactly disappear, it has been deeply changed in its role. In secularized environments, individuals feel autonomous for the management of the cultivation of their beliefs or of their non-beliefs. They break with the process of submission to the doctrinal orientations of a community, the *religion institution*. Before we bring attention to some data we have collected, let's look at a very particular story that could happen to any of us throughout the large urban centers of the country.

As the Catholic theologian and researcher Alberto Antoniazzi has recalled, who has published an analysis of the 2000 IBGE Census with the title: *Why has the religious panorama changed so much in Brazil?* José Álvaro Campos Vieira, in his doctoral research investigated some of these people in the suburbs of Belo Horizonte, he has chosen an area where the average number of people without religion reached almost twice the national and local average, taking as a reference the IBGE Census published in 2012. José Álvaro collected several data through structured questionnaires, confirming the process of disaffection with religious institutions. In another doctoral research, at this turn concentrated in the university environment, among people without religion, as reminds the researcher Claudia Ritz, inspired by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, there may have been a serious failure in the process of transmission of religious memory - a fact that can be observed in the Christian history in Brazil and stressed, among other aspects, by the urbanization process, this is what Claudia Ritz highlights in the research currently in progress.

In these and other field research studies, we have been faced with the following description of a person without religion: young, without religious memory, critical of the institution, critical of the role of religious leaders, expressing religious disaffection, believing

in his or her own way and in a way that does not seem linked to any doctrine, without regular participation in services. This description is not all that can characterize a non-affiliated person, since the phenomenon is much more complex, would agree with the researcher and columnist for *Senso* magazine, Beatriz de Oliveira Pinheiro.

As we said above, from the point of view of the empirical studies, one of our concerns is to know how the trajectory that leads a person to recognize himself/herself as a person non-affiliated is made up. But, besides this, we want to know something more, if there is something that can be identified as a *non-affiliated spirituality*. This is what we try to do from the perspective of a systematic approach.

First, however, we would like to warn that when speaking about *non-affiliated spirituality*, we are not defending any attitude of criticism or rejection of the legacy of made-up religious institutions or traditions. We do not share any apologetic interest in defending this practice at the expense of others. Nor is there any judgment of value on our part regarding this experience. Besides all of that, we reinforce that our interest is fundamentally based on empirical data. In other words, we are reflecting from listening to lived experiences, from reports, and from the understandings of real people who identify themselves as being non-affiliated.

With this expression, we seek to identify people who recognize themselves as without religion or as non-affiliated, the features of the experience of faith and beliefs that are held, and that could be recognized as religious or spiritual in a common sense. However, because of the self-declaration of non-affiliation, we name this type of experience as *non-affiliated spirituality*.

With this expression, we meant to refer to a very limited and restricted aspect of a very diverse and complex phenomenon. Strictly speaking, even considering elements of disaffection, non-affiliation and individualization of belief, we did not find in the field a very standard and regular behavior. There are many shades and variations, the reason we are trying to broaden the mapping of different groups: rockers without religion, with Flávio Lages Rodrigues; sex workers without religion, with Beatriz Pinheiro de Oliveira; feminist women without religion, with Renata Maia de Andrade; gay men without religion, with Sandson Rotterdam; unaffiliated gay Jews, with José Flávio Nogueira Guimarães; terminal illness people without religion, with Fabiana de Faria; adolescents without religion in the school environment, with Paulo Vinícius Faria Pereira; or even Yoga as spirituality without religion, with Rudra Das. The multifaceted and spectral phenomenon allows only approximations, such as those I have just mentioned, because it is composed of individuals

and not of institutions, organizations, or organized groups. In this sense, to ensure a certain perspective of reading, we have delimited the phenomenon of the non-religion and the spirituality without religion as a fruit of the secularization process, identifying traces of religious disaffection, non-affiliation, and individualization of beliefs.

The situation of people without religion is not only multifaceted, and complex. But the *spirituality* category itself is in fact polysemous. Many studies refer to spirituality, and these concepts are not always well defined. The researcher Mary Rute Gomes Esperandio, a researcher at PUC PR and founder of the *Institute of Spirituality and Health*, has contributed with exhaustive research on the meaning of the term spirituality, including several articles reviewing this literature. A huge degree of inaccuracy has been found and discussed by the researchers and shared with the other research centers in this field. There is a tendency to perceive spirituality as being “a reference to the dimension of the human being that involves the search for meaning and purpose in life, a search for self-integration and self-fulfillment; a search for satisfying human relationships and a sense of connection with the self and others, with the universe, and with the transcendent (which may be a Higher Being or force in which the person believes). It is, therefore, that human dimension that is concerned with the deepest questions of existentialist and ultimate reality,” said the researcher in an article published in the journal *Horizonte - Revista de Estudos em Teologia e Ciências da Religião*.

There is, in Mary Esperandio’s perspective, a relative independence between the understanding of spirituality and its link to a religious tradition. However, because of our focus on the use of the expression *non-affiliated spirituality*, our research intends to “emphasize the nature of spirituality as a way of living outside the religious institution,” as Beatriz de Oliveira Pinheiro points out. Therefore, it will not be enough to identify a way of living spirituality outside the institution without sufficiently questioning the links that the term has with philosophical and theological or religious assumptions, in a post-metaphysical vision, as Sandson Rotterdam claims.

Marià Corbí, the founder of the *Center for Studies on Wisdom Tradition, CETR*, based in Barcelona, contributes to this problematization by questioning the links that the term spirituality keeps with a dual anthropology (body/spirit), with a theology on human nature given by a God, as well as with the link between spirituality and extramundane asceticism, in my own words. In summary, these issues make the use of the term spirituality quite jeopardized when linked to a *certain notion* of spirit. Among the major consequences of this *reduction*, we have that, for the author, such understanding leads to a static vision,

whether of the spirit itself or of human nature. Dualistic anthropology hierarchically overlaps the spirit with the body. This view leads to countless other consequences that mark the overlapping of the spiritual with the corporeal, historical, and political spheres of the human animal that are conceived as a talking animal. With Marià Corbí, we learn that such a human dimension is nothing more than the result of a condition, the condition of predatory and incomplete animals that, through speech, find the means to survive and meet their needs. For Corbí, it is through *speech*, that it is possible to recognize that the *unique real* is *accessed doubly*, as a *relative dimension* (RD) to our needs and as a dimension that is not relative to our needs, the *absolute dimension* (AD). It is on this horizon that the anthropological data imposes itself. From this point of inflection, we try to overcome any speculations of a philosophical or theological nature of spirituality as a cultivation of human quality and deep human quality. Unfortunately, we cannot go deeper into these aspects here, but we have been dealing with this subject in partnership with Jonathan Félix de Souza, in an article already published about the theme in the journal *Theológica Xaveriana*, from Bogotá, and through his research on non-affiliated spirituality in organizations, based on the Corbian proposal. Milene Costa dos Santos, Thaís Fernandes do Amaral and Fabiana de Faria have also dedicated themselves to the understanding of the role of spirituality as a way to cultivate human quality and deep human quality, through studies on biblical literature in a non-mythical perspective, on the practice of filmmaking, and on health, respectively.

The challenge that is presented, finally, concerns how to collaborate, from the point of view of our discipline, the Study of Religion. Considering an applied approach, is it possible for the discipline to offer elements for the cultivation of spirituality as a human quality, particularly among people marked by the characteristics of a process of secularization, crossed by religious *disaffection*, *non-affiliation*, and *individualization* in their way of believing? Our discipline does not have a normative profile, so it cannot offer content for the cultivation of a type of spirituality. Such content may still be offered by wisdom traditions, their narratives, and their texts. How can we access them in a way that does not require some kind of submission, belief or adherence to the mode of doctrines, beliefs and worship? From the research and the understanding of the phenomenon, our discipline may offer, however, some formal elements for the consideration of the cultivation of spirituality without religion. From Marià Corbí's proposal, we can raise some elements. They are certainly not exclusives, because there are other schools that have proposed the cultivation of *non-affiliated spirituality* through other perspectives, such as *secular spirituality* or even *atheistic spirituality*, which we find in works such as those of Andrés

Comte-Sponville or Luc Ferry, among others. The culture of the human quality and the deep human quality proposed by Corbí starts from the principle that it is not because of some external element that human animals have sought to grow the absolute dimension of the real. This culture results from a biological characteristic of the human animal that speaks, which makes such a cultivation possible. How to nurture this culture without the referential that the institution of religion offers, without the parameter of the doctrines and the support that the worship provides to the communitarian experience of faith? Such cultivation is proposed as an unconditional concern for reality, detachment and silencing (UDS), lived as free inquiry, communication, and mutual service (ICS). UDS/ICS is cultivation of human quality and deep human quality, not necessarily in a religious-institutional way. We have not yet found evidence that cultivation of UDS/ICS is underway among people without religion being surveyed. However, from the perspective of the Corbian proposal, this is an alternative for cultivating human quality and deep human quality from a secular or non-religious perspective.

Let us consider, finally, that we have a complex reality to be investigated and a wide spectrum of possibilities to be considered, the scenario being opened by a non-affiliated spirituality, marked by the control of individuals and not institutions, that will be non-affiliated and that will not abide by any dogmatic or doctrinally predefined principle about the idea of God. To paraphrase an old German philosopher, we have an open sea ahead of us, and perhaps there has never been a sea so open.