

Editorial

# Why Study Religion from a Latin American Sociological Perspective? An Introduction to *Religions* Issue, “Religion in Latin America, and among Latinos Abroad”

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**Abstract:** This article introduces the *Religions* issue on Latin American religiosity exploring sociological perspectives on the Latin American religious situation, from a Latin American perspective. The Secularization Theory proposes “the more modernity, the less religion”, but in Latin America we see both, modernity and religiosity. The Religious Economy model, on the other hand, affirms “the more pluralization, the more religion”, but in Latin America there is not so much pluralization, and it is not easy to switch from one religion to other. Finally, the article presents a Latin American model, the “popular religiosity” one. The problem with it, is that it is mostly ‘Catholic,’ and so does not account for the growing religious diversity in the region. It also emphasizes the “popular” aspect, excluding middle socioeconomic status individuals and elites, assuming they practice “real” religion. This introduction presents a critical approach as a way to recover, describe, and understand Latin American religious practices. This methodology might be a path to creating sociological categories to understand religion beyond the north Atlantic world.

**Keywords:** religiosity; Latin America; modernity; sociology; secularization; religious economy; popular religion

## 1. Introduction

Why is it still relevant to study religion? A first answer has to do with demographics. The majority of the world’s inhabitants (about 90%) believe in something beyond this world, and about 85% identify with a religious tradition. And it is likely that this trend will continue, and even grow in the next 50 years, since believers are younger, tend to have more children, and generally pass on their beliefs to their offspring (Berger 2014; Pew Research Center 2014).

If you are a professional who lives in a Western city, this might sound foreign. Probably your daily interactions are mostly with “non-believers”. In some circles, such as upper socioeconomic status professional groups in the Western hemisphere, it seems that nonaffiliated people are more common than religious persons. And, in those circles this might well be true—professionals, especially scholars and the intellectual elite, tend to be non-believers or, in many cases, believers of some sort who do not identify with any religious tradition. They are known as “nones” (non-believers and nonaffiliated). The two other big groups of “nones” are the people living in China and Western Europe (Berger 2014). These three populations (intellectual elites, Chinese, and Western Europeans) have lower birthrates and tend to have a higher average age.

Another way of answering the question about the relevance of studying religion draws on historical reasons. As Christian Smith puts it, “a purely secular existence is not the human default” (Smith 2017, p. 235). History shows us that human societies, with the exception of some regimes in the twentieth century that banned religious activities, have always had some kind of religious practices.

We can assume that in the next fifty years human beings will be involved in religious experience in one form or another. Eventually various religious forms might disappear, and new religions may emerge. Certainly, in the future, existent religions will look different than those of today. Religion is not an unchanging entity that must be accepted or transmitted as a whole. It is a space for human ties and social life, open to changes and transformations, with old ties and new solidarities (Levine 2012). In any case, even though younger people tend to be less religious than older persons (Pew Research Center 2018) we can expect that religions will be important for some, and perhaps many, people across the world in the foreseeable future (Smith 2017).

Religions are important because they help people to define a core of values that are not negotiated, that give meaning and identity and guide their actions, a core that helps them to identify what is “right and wrong”, and that defines what is sacred for them (Knott 2005; Smith 2017). Of course, religious traditions are not the only things that give meaning, identity, or a moral conscience, and certainly, religion does not influence all people in the same way. However, religious experiences affect the ways in which religious people relate to others, and the ways in which these people make emotional, personal, political, or social choices. Religion mobilizes people as much as race, gender, class, and political ideas; it shapes the social imagination (Levine 2012; Morello 2007; Taylor 2004).

Researching religion may help us to understand many of the world’s inhabitants, and what religion means in their lives. At the same time, it might also help us to better understand the minority of non-affiliated persons: what does their non-affiliation tell us about religiosity in their society? How do they perceive each other, what are the differences among believers and non-believers in daily life? Finally, studying religion might help us to have a better grasp of other human ideas, experiences, and institutions that sometimes are associated with religious ones such as moral values, and political and social behaviors.

Among the many ways of studying religion (you can look at it with theological, psychological, political, religious studies, and many other lenses), sociology does not concern itself with the sources of faith, with the accuracy of dogmas believed, or with the proper moral behavior that the followers of a tradition should adhere to. Sociology focuses on the social repercussions that religion has in the lives of people, and conversely, how transformations in social life affect people’s religiosity. It explores the interactions among religion and other social constructions such as politics, economy, or culture. In this volume of *Religions*, the authors propose an exploration of the interactions of two social constructions, religion and modernity.

So, what are we talking about when in sociology we talk about “religion”? For the scholar of Latin American religions Daniel H. Levine, religions are the beliefs, practices, and affiliations that group people together and help them to make sense of the universe and their place in it. Religion involves supra-empirical explanations and connections that are key to making sense of one’s life. The regular experience of religion is linked to the ways of managing ordinary life such as coping with disease, relationships, rough times, and work. Religion thus provides a context of ultimate significance to proximate and personal acts (Levine 2012, p. 8).

Sociologist Christian Smith tried a critical definition of religion focusing more on what religion is than on what its effects are. “Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad” (Smith 2017, p. 22). In his view, “religions” (or a religion) are the concrete, specific institutionalized denominations in a given time and place, such as Pentecostalism, Catholicism, or *Santería*. “Religiousness” (or religiosity) comprises the features of a concrete religious practice, the subjective appropriation of a “religion” by a person or a group. The example here would be the lived religion of Latin American Catholics (Smith 2017, p. 47).

Keeping in mind the points present in these definitions, and the articles in this volume, we can say that religions are cultural constructions based on a belief in the existence of supra-human powers

and formed by different elements (intellectual, emotional, social, moral) that constitute a system used (and modified) by practitioners, who relate with these powers to make sense of their lives.

## 2. The Enlightenment and the Spirit of Capitalism

By no means do I suggest that sociology has a neutral view of religion, as opposed to, let us say a “partisan” view from the standpoint of theology or religious studies. As with many other scientific disciplines, sociology has a perspective and a history that taints its view. As a product of the Enlightenment, sociology cast a mordant eye on religion from its very beginning. Religious institutions were seen as authoritarian organizations that imposed irrational, unscientific beliefs on people, backward and traditionalist institutions that jeopardized human freedom (Spickard 2017).

Sociology was born in the midst of the battle of the French Republic against the Church. The French Republic established a regime of *laïcité*, a specific model of church–state separation. People could do whatever they wanted in private, but no religious signs should be displayed in the public sphere, and religion and religious figures were avoided when discussing public issues. For the first generation of sociologists (August Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber), religion was a holdover of the “unenlightened past” (Spickard 2017, p. 52). The Enlightenment also privileged the idea that rationality and empiricism are the sources of knowledge. In its campaign against religious obscurantism, sociology emphasized the conceptual and dogmatic aspects of religions: to sociologists of the Enlightenment, religions were based on irrational beliefs instead of rationalized, empirically proven, scientifically discussed views of the world.

Because of that historical struggle, from the very beginning sociology was mostly interested in the institutional and intellectual aspects of religions (Spickard 2017). Sociology was shaped by a society that was looking for a progressive, rational view of human relations, as opposed to the authoritarian and fantastical stand of religion. The political model of that social organization, *laïcité*, a word without a proper English translation, expanded to Latin America (Blancarte 2006). In Latin America, it meant a very concrete model of church–state separation that advocated for the suppression of the Catholic influence in the public sphere and the control of the Church by the national state.

During the second part of the 19th century, Latin American states were struggling to build a national state with specific and exclusive spheres of influence. To do so they had to curb the power and the overwhelming social presence of the Catholic Church (Da Costa 2006). The fight started with a battle over education: when liberal governments tried to expand access to education through a public, mandatory, state-financed school system, they had to fight the power of the Church, which had been almost the only institution providing education in the region.

Paradoxically, the lights of Enlightenment blinded sociology: the same social actors who were fostering Enlightenment and human freedom were engaged in the colonialist expansion of Western European ideologies and empires in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Sociology was part of the colonial worldview, a way of understanding societies from a Western perspective that was imposed as the norm (Go 2016). Enlightenment’s social imagery was the only possible model of civilized human life. Progress, understood as scientific and technological development, was the new and true religion. The less religious a society, the more modern, progressive and civilized it was.

The first generation of sociologists were biased by their historical context when they tried to understand religion<sup>1</sup>. In many cases, what European scholars knew about religion outside Europe was second-hand. They had never conducted fieldwork outside Europe and usually relied on personal letters and other secondary sources. However, they established some of the perspectives and categories we still use to address issues of religion, such as the distinction between material and spiritual realities,

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<sup>1</sup> Among the classic sociologists, one who stands apart for using scientific empirical field work, is W. E. B. Du Bois. Unfortunately, evidence of his reception in Latin America is scarce. I could find only three translations of his works into Portuguese and Spanish (*A almas da gente negra*, Du Bois 1999; *Las almas del pueblo negro*, Du Bois 1995; *El Negro en Filadelfia*, Du Bois 2013). I found no use of his analysis or theoretical framework among works discussing Latin American religiosity.

sacred and profane, public and private, and modern and primitive forms of religion (Engelke 2011). Sociology's classic authors created a toolbox that we are still using. However, since it is based on colonialist accounts of "uncivilized" peoples, it has a colonialist and Eurocentric bias.

Let us take Max Weber's *"The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism,"* a classic of the sociology of religion. His thesis is that Protestant ethics and capitalism have elective affinities that made Northern European societies more modern than others. The book was published in 1905. This period was at the apex of the European colonial expansion in Africa and Asia, but Weber never mentions any force other than a specific form of Western religiosity, Calvinism (Carroll 2007), as the source of economic development (marked by the increase of savings and a robust financial system). He does not make a single reference to the role of colonialism in the expanding economy of Northern Europe in the late nineteenth century (Magubane 2005). According to his work, the success of Northern Europe was due only to Protestant ethics. The colonial exploitation of Africa and Asia had nothing to do with that prosperity. The categories he created, still unavoidable when studying the sociology of religion, completely ignore colonial relations.

The challenge of a critical sociology of religion is to provincialize the West, creating intellectual tools that, while helping to forecast or explain a behavior, are mindful of the silenced realities and conditions in which that knowledge was produced. Current social sciences have to look for ways of understanding the religious beyond traditional categories. Contemporary research should engage in a critical understanding of religion, and its benefits and harms for people (Bender et al. 2013; Levine 2012).

### 3. Why Do It from Latin America?

All knowledge is grounded. My point is that since religions are historical, they have to do with concrete cultural dynamics and therefore cannot be understood only with North Atlantic parameters. Since colonizers control the terms of the debate, the colonized are limited to using colonizer ideas and concepts in talking about their own situation. One of the problems in understanding Latin American religiosity is that we keep using categories that were not designed with the Latin American religious reality in mind. The conceptual tools that we use today were aimed at understanding the transformations that modernity provoked in European religiosity. The advantage of continuing to use these categories is that it allows scientific dialogue. The limitation is that they leave out cultural particularities typical of other regions.

In the social sciences, we usually understand "modernity" to mean: the separation of social functions and the specialization of the spheres of value (i.e., a sphere for economics, politics, science, and religion, each with its own rules, independent of other spheres); the dynamics of economic capitalism (industrialization, urbanization, scientific development); and, the ideas of human, civil, political, and social rights within the framework of nation-states. In spite of having an experience of modernity different from that in Europe or the United States, the aforementioned cultural trends are also present in Latin America. In the region, we tend to use "hybrid", "baroque", "incomplete", or "forced" etc., as particular adjectives for describing this specific form of modernity. However, the substantive term "modernity" remains (Echeverría 2000; García Canclini 2001; Martínez 2012; Ribeiro 1971). Nation-states and their bureaucratic organizations, economic development, democratic governments, and a growing middle class are all modernity dynamics that affect religion. The Secularization Theory, a hegemonic paradigm in the social sciences developed to explain the interactions between modernity and religion, has as its basic affirmation, "the more modernity, the less religion". The theory argues that modernity brings religious diminishment, including decline in memberships and general weakening of religious institutions' influence in the public sphere (Berger 2014; Bruce 2011). However, it is clear that modernization reached different contexts in different ways. In many cases, it was as a hegemonic cultural force, imposed by military or economic power, which belittled the local culture as backward. And it came through varied concrete agents. The very same bourgeoisie who fought for *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, against the Crown and the Church during the French Revolution, were the ones

that held on to colonialism and slavery during the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) against the French Republic. My point here is that, in each situation, there are crystallized concrete values and different ways of being religious. Latin American societies have different histories and therefore different manifestations of modernity, and because of that, different religious responses to it (Casanova 1994; Garrard-Burnett et al. 2016; Morello 2015; Ravagli Cardona 2013; Semán 1997; Serrano 2006).

The Secularization Theory emerged as an explanation of the situation in Western Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries and shaped the discussion about religion in the social sciences. Secularization theorists set the dichotomies we use to discuss the experience of the divine (religious/profane, public/private, spiritual/material), as well as determining what counts as a religion, who belongs to a religious group, and how to measure such belonging. Though widely challenged, it is an unavoidable perspective when discussing the religious situation of Latin America. In the following pages, I present a critical analysis of it from a Latin American perspective. I do not pretend to assess critically the theory with all its variables and modifications, but only its application to the Latin American religious situation.

In general, there are two main criticisms of Secularization Theory that will become relevant when the model is used to describe, explain, and understand religion in Latin America. On the one hand, some authors use Secularization Theory more as a normative view of the society than as a conclusion based on empirical data. The model of *laïcité* that defines specific functions for the state and the church in a non-religious public space is regarded as an aim, a norm for a society to follow in order to become modern. It imposes a model of how a society should locate religion in the public sphere in order to be considered “modern” (Blancarte 2006). On the other hand, authors mean many different things when they talk about secularization. Some will emphasize the institutional differentiation, the separation of religion from other secular spheres (Casanova 1994; Dobbelaere 1999), the deregulation of the religious field (Hervieu-Leger 2007), or the individualization of belief (Mallimaci 2008) (Parker Gumucio 1993). Others highlight the consequences of that differentiation, a diminishment of religious authority (Morello and Mallimaci 2018; Zanca 2012), or a decline in the value of religious capital (McKinnon 2017; Morello 2019). It is not clear what secularization means beyond the generally agreed “less religion”.

The multiple uses of the term and its ideological normative bias make it insufficient to explain the Latin American religious situation. Secularization Theory fails to explain why the religious quest has not diminished in Latin America, where, in 1910, 95% of the population believed in God and identified as members of a religious institution. A century later, this percentage has dropped only three points to 92%, which is within the range of the error margin in statistical analysis (Pew Research Center 2014). In Latin America, and perhaps in other parts of the world too, modernization has transformed religiosity (the idea of God, the practices, and the role of religious institutions) rather than privatizing or suppressing it. (Levine 2012; Morello 2018; Parker Gumucio 1993).

Let us examine some explanations from Secularization Theory applied to Latin America. From 1910 to 2014, Latin American nation-states experienced an increasing differentiation of secular spheres and a growing presence of secular institutions that curbed the power of the Catholic Church. Democracy has been achieved in most countries, and subsequent transformation of the social, economic, and political systems has impacted social life. As far as secularization is understood as church–state separation (*laïcité*), Latin America is secular. It is the popular will that legitimizes Latin America’s political system; governments are not chosen “for the grace of God” nor do they look for consecration by the religious authority (Blancarte 2007; Da Costa 2011; Morello 2015; Oro 2006). The political system has been differentiated from the religious one, and the authority of religious professionals has diminished (Giumbelli 2008; Programa Feminista La Corriente 2013). However, in many cases religion is still a source of legitimation in secular “spheres of values” such as politics, economy, civil society, migration, human rights, and environmental issues (Levine 1992; Morello 2013; Oro 2006; Romero 2000; Wilde 2016). The authority of religion and its location in the public sphere has changed but is hard to say that societies are “less” religious. (Morello and Mallimaci 2018; Zalpa and Offerdal 2008).



The principal Latin American critique of Secularization Theory is that this paradigm assumes that “religion” and “modernity” in the historical experience of Western Europe are universal forms. Because scholars with a Western European background were mostly engaged in disputes with the churches, they understood the quest for the divine in the terms and categories set by religious institutions. This perspective, useful during the European Enlightenment, leaves unstudied many of the ways in which contemporary Latin Americans experience transcendence in everyday life (Morello et al. 2017). Secularization Theory’s main concerns have been the strength of religious institutions and the methodology employed to measure it, and what counts as “religion”, “religious institution” and “membership” are defined by Western European standards of Christianity (Semán 2001).

Following the idea of an exclusive membership, some scholarship assumes that a person practices a religion which is clearly distinguishable from the rest. Scholars focused on the demands that the institutions placed on their members, and not on the responses of ordinary people (Parker Gumucio 2006). This conceptual focus is troublesome when it comes to understanding the daily religiosity of Latin Americans. People worship pop singers in Catholic rituals and venerate the Christian god with Native American rituals and practices. It is true that Pentecostal believers have problems with Afro religious practices, and they make a clear distinction between Evangelism and what they consider idolatry. However, these attitudes do not hold for many *Santeros* and *Umbandas*, who have no problem in practicing and even identifying with Catholicism. Since such responses do not fit within clear patterns of membership, they are disregarded as “popular religiosity”, a sort of second-class religion that has been ignored by both scholars and church leaders.

Similar problems arise with scholarly works that try to measure religious vitality by registering the frequency of church attendance. First, this approach reduces “religious vitality” to simple church attendance, whereas some traditions do not require attendance (think about Judaism, Voodoo, or Native American folk traditions). Secondly, church attendance has been problematic in Latin America since colonial times, when the availability of Sunday Masses was uneven (Lynch 2012). Instead, the Church gave more importance to the feast of the patron saint, or the celebrations of the Holy Week. Rural colonial Latin America did not look like the French or the English countryside, where the presence of priests or pastors was taken for granted. Participation in *Cofradías* was much more important than Church attendance. For Latin American Catholics, participation in a weekly celebration does not seem to be an appropriate way of measuring either belonging or behavior (Romero 2017).

In addition to this, church attendance has never been recorded consistently in Latin America. Some polls started to ask about it in the mid-1980s, but only in some countries. Some surveys, such as one by the Pew Center that has made a groundbreaking contribution to the assessment of the religious situation of the continent, ask, “Excluding weddings and funerals, how often do you attend church?” The question makes two assumptions that are not necessarily true in the Latin American context. First, it assumes that marriages celebrations are religious, as in the United States, where you only have one ceremony, usually performed by a religious minister, that is valid for the state. This is not true in most Latin American countries where you have two separated celebrations, a civil one witnessed by a State official, and a religious one in the presence of a religious minister. So, you can go either to a religious or a “state” wedding. Second, it assumes that getting married or being buried according to a religious tradition does not mean much when we talk about religion, and that a religious commitment should only be “proven” by weekly church attendance. Attendance statistics might make sense in Protestant traditions but not necessarily in Latin American Catholicism or in Native American religiosity.

Because of its Enlightenment cradle, sociology of religion has emphasized ideas and beliefs over practices. Scientific models that mostly focus on religious beliefs might not be useful to properly comprehend religious practices that also have material, embodied, and emotional components. Defining the quest for the divine in terms of close adherence to a set of dogmas and commands leaves unstudied many of the ways in which regular people experience transcendence every day in their Latin American urban settings. And this is a real problem, because for many religious people a religious person is one who *practices* religion in everyday life (Ameigeiras 2008; Ammerman 1997, 2014; Mallimaci 2013;

McGuire 2008; Romero 2008, 2014). In this issue, authors explore different practices to call attention to this aspect.

Secularization Theory has looked at religion from a specific religious background (North Atlantic Protestantism), from the center (colonizer societies), and from the top (secular and religious elites). So far, the secularization story in Latin America has been written by intellectual elites from the center, looking at the regular people in the margins (Levine 2012, p. 59) and drawing distinctions between sacred and profane, magic and religion, church and sect that are not always helpful when applied to non-European societies (Ammerman 2007; Berger 2014; Engelke 2011; McGuire 2008; Parker Gumucio 2006).

There is an academic antecedent in the analysis of the relations between modernity and religion that helps when we are looking for analytical categories other than the ones Secularization Theory proposes. It comes from scholars studying the United States' religious situation, who observed that the religious landscape in the U.S. was not well explained with the European toolbox. The United States has so far been one of the most modern countries in the world, and yet religious strength is high. American religious history poses a challenge to Secularization Theory because it shows religious vitality paralleling increased modernization. From a secularization perspective, U.S. society was considered an "exception" to the rule. However, in the 1990s, American sociologists such as Roger Finke, Rodney Starke, and Stephen Warner ceased to consider the United States as an exception and looked for a new paradigm to better understand the situation of high modernization and high religiosity.

The new perspective, the Religious Economy model (RE), is based on the rational choice theory. It attempts to explain the vitality of religious institutions that operate in an open religious market. Instead of using the European religious market with its monopolistic national churches as a "rule", the focus instead centers on the pluralistic and flexible U.S. religious market (Chestnut 2003; Finke and Stark 1992; Warner 1993). The key to understanding the RE approach is the disestablishment of churches (Chestnut 2003; Warner 1993). The First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which disestablished churches at a federal level, had two implications, protection for individual freedom of religion and absence of protection for any specific institution, thus creating an open religious market.

This theoretical model considers that the religious system works similarly to the secular economy. Religious markets that are "free" (not regulated by the state) have multiple "suppliers" (organizations) that offer "products" (eternal salvation through doctrines and practices) to "consumers" (followers). Because consumers invest in what is reasonable for them, organizations adapt and compete for their preferences. The key point of the RE model is whether a market is unregulated or not (Stark and Finke 1999). For these theorists, modernity brought about an open market, and this was conducive to religious vitality. If the motto of secularization was "the more modernity, the less religion", the one for the RE explanation might have been "the more market freedom, the more religiosity". The RE explanation highlights discussions that were not present in Secularization Theory, including the distinction between monopolistic and pluralistic religious societies, the majority/minority market dynamics, and the different ways in which a state or a society can de facto regulate the religious market (Frigerio and Wynarczyk 2008).

When RE theory was used to explain Latin American religiosity (Chestnut 2003; Garrard-Burnett 2008; Gill 1998; Neuhauser 1989), the focus was on the churches. Therein lies the primary critique of RE: it is based on the model of institutions that are particular to the United States. In Latin America, religious institutions have not been disestablished in the American sense of the term. In many countries, the Catholic Church retains the status of an "official", "historical", or a de facto "national" church (Casanova 2008; Garrard-Burnett 2008; Gómez 2015; Lecaros 2019; Oro 2006). And the relationship with the state also holds true for the first non-Catholic Christians who officially came to Latin America in the 19th century. Since the opening of the Protestant religious communities were the result of treaties among states, those churches built their institutional identity and social role vis-à-vis the state, not the civil society (Di Stefano and Zanatta 2009; Freston 2001; Negrão 2008).

Whereas believers in the United States fluidly move among religious denominations, religious options and mobility are limited in Latin America (Frigerio and Wynczyk 2008). Switching from a Congregationalist to a non-denominational church in Boston, for example, is not like converting from Santería to Evangelicalism in Rio de Janeiro. Yet, among Latin Americans, practices from other traditions are often incorporated without signifying a change in affiliation (De la Torre and Martin 2016; Lecaros 2019; Negrão 2008).

Another limitation is that the RE model assumes a constant demand that is only supplied by organized institutions. However, in Latin America we can see steady demand (92% believe in God) but increasing numbers of non-affiliated persons (Da Costa et al. forthcoming). This means that people who did not find a supplier providing what they were looking for have left organized religion. This model does not pay attention to this growing number of Latin Americans who practice religion outside religious institutions.

Other criticisms have to do with the fact that emphasizing the rational aspects of religious choice might not be useful in understanding Latin Americans' religious practices, which also include material, corporeal, and emotional components (Ameigeiras 2008; Mallimaci 2013; Olmos Rebellato 2019; Parker Gumucio 2006). Finally, I also think that it ignores the local complexity—the conditions under which a person makes choices (Morello 2015).

As pointed out when discussing Secularization Theory, we should recognize that the U.S. experience cannot be uncritically assumed in the rest of the world. Religion is not limited to what is going on within Christian organizations. The American measure of religious strength is embedded in surveys about religion all over the world. For example, the Pew Center measures a variable on how many times a person reads the Bible (Pew Research Center 2014). Reading the Bible has not been an extensive practice among Latin American Catholics. The Catholic Church started to encourage it only after the Second Vatican Council in the late 1960s, and physical access to local (and therefore easier to understand) translations of the Bible came about only in the 1970s. Afro-inspired traditions, such as Santería, Candomblé, and Umbanda, do not have sacred texts to read. The survey also asked (Q 35) if a “priest” or a “pastor” has recently visited the home of the respondent. As the question was asked, it did not include the visit of a Catholic nun or a lay *catequista*, which are more present in the grassroots communities on the continent. I do not mean that we do not need surveys or quantitative data collection and analysis to study religion. I mean that when using those sources, we ought to be aware of the limitations they have, and the biases that taint those figures. The U.S. religious experience is a particular one, and it should not shape the understanding of what religion is and where and when we can find it (Bender et al. 2013).

There are two points that are highlighted by the RE model that, even though they were not fully developed when analyzing Latin America, I found relevant for our task. One point is the understanding that religion is dynamic, that religious allegiances might change, not just disappear. Secularization Theory treats religion as fixed, an “all or nothing” kind of construct, while the Religious Economy model allows us to think about religion within a fluid reality. The other point is the agency of the practitioners. Even when this aspect was not fully developed, the model put on the table the agency of the believer who can switch from one affiliation to another. These contributions open up space to think of religion as something that can change over time, and of believers as subjects whose agency and creativity play a role in crafting their allegiances.

Many Latin American scholars of religion use the concept of “popular religiosity” to describe the particular interactions of religion and modernity in Latin America. This includes a wide range of devotions and practices that merge indigenous peoples' spiritualities, popular culture, and Afro and Catholic traditions (Mariz and Campos 2011; Romero 2014; Sanchis 1997).

Popular religiosity emphasizes the tension between the believer and the institution and highlights the existence of a “communal” dimension between the individual and the institution. Its origin is linked to the colonial era. During those centuries, the monopoly of the Church was not as “strong” as imagined (Di Stefano 2013; Frigerio and Ludueña 2013). The Catholic Church has never been able to effectively



reach populations living in the countryside or the urban outskirts. This institutional weakness gave way to an a-clerical form of Catholicism, far from the regulations of the elites (Ameigeiras 2008; Da Costa 2003; De la Torre 2012; Garrard-Burnett et al. 2016; Hughes 2009; Lynch 2012; Negrão 2008; Parker Gumucio 1993; Romero 2009).

Most of the authors who use the concept of popular religiosity emphasize the “of the people” component of the construct. Popular religiosity is the way in which lower classes contest the dominant religious culture, a religious answer from the people to the challenges posed by modernity. Scholars assume that elites adhere to traditional, conservative, urban, heavily institutionalized religion. (Ameigeiras 2008; Martín 2009; Possamai 2015; Semán 2001).

A consequence of this association of elites with “orthodox” religion is that some scholars assume popular religion is a “syncretic” form of religiosity (Ameigeiras 2008; Freston 2008; Pedron Colombani 2008; Possamai 2015; Sanchis 1997). For them, popular religiosity is the religion of theologically uneducated people—a sort of “practical magic” rather than “ethical, rational religion” in the Weberian sense (Fernandes 2009; Parker Gumucio 2006). Labeling popular religion “syncretic” implies it does not comply with orthodox standards of religion (De la Torre and Martin 2016). This scholarship uncritically follows the rules established by religious institutions, resulting in a normative perspective of what religion should be. For that reason, other academics prefer “hybrid”, “*mestiza*” (mixed), or even “located” religion (Camurça 2009; Hughes 2009; Semán 2001). For them, popular religion is a concrete response that exists between assimilation and reaction to modernity, between adaptation and creativity. It is a universal religion tied to local culture and concrete historical dynamics (De la Torre 2012; Parker Gumucio 1993). These scholars argue that Catholicism has always been syncretic and there is no such a thing as “pure” Catholicism.

Popular religiosity has been depicted as a communal religiosity (Marzal 2002; Romero 2009). Because of its association with social strata, community, and location (the land, either a region or a country), “popular Catholicism” is often seen as a marker of social identity, characterizing a national, or even “the” Latin American culture, in opposition to foreign influence. Therefore, for some scholars, popular religiosity became the religious expression of cultural nativism and political populist movements. Popular religiosity is the religious face of “Latin Americanist” responses to colonialist modernity. It is conceived of as the religious result of the ethnic blend which gave birth to national imagined communities that overcame the differences among whites, natives, and blacks (Ameigeiras 2008; Camurça 2009; Cuda 2016; De la Torre 2012; Engelke 2011; Mariz and Campos 2011).

“Popular religion” does encounter limitations in attempting to make sense of the current Latin American religious landscape. In Latin American scholarship, “popular” is usually an adjective for the noun “Catholicism” (De la Torre and Martin 2016). Therefore, this conceptualization has left aside Pentecostals, other religious minorities, and the unaffiliated (Da Costa 2011).

“Popular religiosity” as a concept contributes a very modern feature of the religious subject: it brings into the discussion the idea of the agency of the believer, as opposed to the institutional focus prized by Secularization and RE theories. This perspective highlights the creativity of religious practitioners, their ability to produce and reproduce religion in relation with, but not necessarily limited by, religious institutions. It also pays attention to the community as a reality between the subject and the organization.

#### 4. Conclusions

So why is it important to study religion and why do so from a critical Latin American sociological perspective? Because religion is still important and relevant for the majority of the world’s population, and it seems likely to remain so for the near future. By studying it we better understand religious people, as well as those who do not believe. And studying it from a critical perspective will contribute to “decolonizing” sociology.

Latin America is a context that has been either ignored or misunderstood in the current debates about the transformation of the religious landscape. There has been a failure to grasp ways of

understanding religion other than affiliation, beliefs, and church attendance, with conceptual tools limited by this bias and therefore not applicable to other cultural contexts. Current theories do not satisfactorily account for the religious phenomena experienced in Latin America today, in part because the stories are those told from the center and by the religious and secular elites. If we listen to different voices, we may very well discover a very different story. The articles in this special issue of *Religions* want to tell that story. The task is to expand the sociology of religion toolkit so as to better understand the religious lives of Latin Americans and of peoples from outside the North Atlantic world (Blancarte 2007; Casanova 1994; De la Torre 2012; Garrard-Burnett 2008; Levine 2012).

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