

Article

Non-Affiliated Believers and Atheists in the Very Secular Uruguay

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Abstract: In recent years, literature in the field of religion has presented attempts to understand and characterize people who define themselves as believers but are not affiliated with any religious institution, along with those who define themselves as non-believers, or “nones”. Several quantitative studies covering this phenomenon in Latin America show clear disparities between the countries of the region. This article draws on a qualitative investigation into the way in which individuals relate to the transcendental, or live as non-believers, in the city of Montevideo, Uruguay. The objective of the article is to know and analyze those who define themselves as religiously unaffiliated. In doing so, the analysis takes into account the cultural framework of Uruguay—a country that moved the religion from the public to the private sphere a century ago, establishing a model similar to French secularism and unique within Latin America.

Keywords: nones; non-believers; atheists; lived religion; Uruguay

1. Introduction

1.1. The Research

In recent years, scholars of religious studies have taken note of two recurring phenomena: people who claim to believe in God or in transcendence, but have no affiliation to a religious institution, and a second group of non-believers or atheists.

In the English language, the “nones” or “non-religion” category is generally used to refer to all three of these definitions, though the breadth of the category is a source of some dispute. The survey on Religion in Latin America by the [Pew Forum on Religion \(2014\)](#) shows that the percentages of these three categories vary greatly in the region, from Paraguay where all three represent 1% of the population, compared to Mexico (7%), Brazil (8%), and Argentina (11%). Uruguay is the country with the lion’s share of nones, with 37% of its population identifying with one of these three categories.

Far from a homogeneous mass, the nones in Uruguay are divided as follows: 24% are believers without institutional affiliation, 10% are atheists, and 3% are agnostics ([Pew Forum on Religion 2014](#)). In terms of the 81% of Uruguayans who believe in God, 41% are Catholics and 15% are Protestants/Evangelicals.

The figures from the Latinobarómetro report “Las religiones en tiempos del Papa Francisco” ([Latinobarómetro 2017](#)) are similar, indicating that 38% of Uruguayans are considered “atheists”. Unfortunately, this report does not include questions that allow us to differentiate among these three categories.

This article will focus on the analysis of two groups of particular interest in Uruguay, given the high number of atheists (10% of the population) in comparison to the rest of Latin America. The first consists of those who claim to believe in the existence of God but do not identify with any church or religious institution, and the second is the non-believers (or atheists).

This article was drafted as part of an international investigation supported by the John Templeton Foundation and entitled “The Transformation of Lived Religion in Latin America: A study of Contemporary Latin Americans’ ‘Experience of Transcendence’” in which 240 interviews were conducted with 80 people in the cities of Córdoba (Argentina), Lima (Peru) and Montevideo (Uruguay). Religious experts and leaders were excluded, as were journalists. This is a qualitative research project that puts the emphasis on trying to understand the experience of searching for transcendence in Latin America.

The investigation for this article is limited to the city of Montevideo, Uruguay, where twenty-eight people were interviewed, eighteen non-affiliated believers and ten atheists. The semi-structured interviews consisted of two personal encounters that explored various stages and moments of the interviewees’ lives and the meanings interviewees attribute to them, covering a range of issues in addition to personal itineraries in relation to beliefs/non-beliefs. The sample was intentional and attempted to capture the diversity of beliefs/non-beliefs in the city. In order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, their names have been changed.

The work draws on the theoretical perspective of what has been referred to as “lived religion” (Ammerman 2007, 2014, 2016) or “everyday religion” (McGuire 2008), which is “more an operative outlook than a paradigm”, (Morello et al. 2017). This outlook emphasizes the perspectives of people, not religious institutions or their leaders, exploring experiences and practices in day-to-day decision-making, interpreting, reinterpreting, appropriating, and combining the diverse elements that give meaning to their lives.

In recent times, a wave of research has focused on the phenomenon of non-affiliates and atheists, characterizing and conceptualizing the nones. Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme (2017), for example, point out common features in the way people in this group define their identity, such as social acceptance toward irreligion, irreligious socialization, intellectual disagreement with religious beliefs and practices, among others. The authors propose to distinguish between the “disaffiliated”, i.e., those who abandoned a religion and the “unaffiliated”, i.e., those who grew up without any type of religious identification. The understanding of these groups is still incipient and requires that researchers take inventory of the cultural particularities of each location. Instead of assuming a precise definition a priori, the aim here is to continue building the object of research in South America and, more specifically, in Uruguay, a country where the French *laïcité* (secularism) figures more prominently than in other countries (Da Costa 2011).

In the studies now underway in this nascent field, some researchers have posited that recognizing “non-religion” as a societal phenomenon implies a “sea change”—or revolution—in scientific thought on religion and modernity (Lee 2012). However, the terminology, still under construction, is acknowledged as imprecise; in this regard, Lee proposes to use the term “non-religious” instead of “atheism”.

In the United States and Europe, a number of articles and books have been written on the topic. Besides noting this wave of literature, Cragun (2016) also points out the imprecision of the concepts used and the lack of consensus surrounding the notion of “non-religion”, a term that is often used interchangeably with “secular”.

In a similar analysis, Zuckerman ponders what is known about non-religious people in a summary of the existing research on the subject in relation to Americans who reject a religious identity, referring to them as “secular” and “non-religious”, (Zuckerman et al. 2016).

While the discussion on how to refer to these categories continues, so do investigations that distinguish between groups like the non-affiliated versus the atheists, such as Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Blanes (2017). There are also those who maintain that the English-language category “non-religion” or “nones” can be attributed to the way the questions are posed in quantitative studies; these researchers have posited the need to reframe these questions, as they do not account for the present-day reality of these groups of people (Woodhead 2016).

Literature in the social sciences on religion in the region has also addressed the question of religious categories from various approaches (Da Costa et al. 2010; Esquivel 2013; Fernandes 2006,

2009, 2013; Giménez Béliveau 2012; Grigoletto et al. 2016; Mezadri 2016; Novaes 2004; Montero and Dullo 2014, among others).

In short, those who express a belief in transcendence without involvement in any religious institution—and those who do not believe in transcendence—are currently trending topics in the field.

1.2. *A Country with a Special Itinerary in Relation to Religion*

Given that Uruguay has a very different itinerary and place for religion than the rest of Latin America, some historical context proves essential. Article 5 of Uruguay's 1918 Constitution stipulates that people are free to worship the religion of their choosing in Uruguay and that the state does not support any religion. This constitutional tenet, referred to as a "secularization process", was thus enshrined as part of the birth of the modern Uruguayan state. The situation remains broadly the same to this day. More than secularism, it is necessary to talk about active lobbying to end ties between church and state, that is, a secularist process.

The aforementioned process, which began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and continued until the beginning of the twentieth century, was marked by political, ideological, and symbolic confrontations and a great polarization between the elites that were forging the new state. As these elites struggled amongst themselves to control various aspects of social life, the Catholic Church felt attacked and fought back.

Despite the confrontations in all fields, including the media, no blood was shed. This happened within the framework of creating what historians have referred to as "the first modern Uruguay", i.e., the consolidation of the state at the beginning of the twentieth century. During this time, a program that could be referred to as welfare was developed to achieve high development indicators and integrate the many immigrants who had come to the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The native people of Uruguay had been exterminated and the bulk of the country's population now descended from immigrants who had come to this land in search of a better future. In a modernized Uruguay, they found a place, sustenance, future and protection in the hands of a newly consolidated state with plans for the future. All Uruguay asked of these immigrants was to abandon the trappings of their origin and join a new "we" where egalitarianism played a very strong symbolic and ideological role.

The process of secularization entailed several instances. In the first, the state requested and obtained control of several areas that were in the hands of the Catholic Church, including cemeteries, the civil registry, marriage (imposing an obligation for couples to be married by law before they did so in church), and the establishment of public education free from religion. Other actions by the new modern state included the suppression of religious symbols in state and military honours, the removal of crucifixes from all state hospitals, and the secularization of holidays (Christmas became "Family Day", the week of Easter, "Tourism Week", and 6 January, the Day of Kings or Epiphany on the Catholic calendar, "Children's Day".) Finally, the state secularized the names of more than thirty towns and cities, changing names like "Santa Isabel" to "Paso de los Toros", to mention just one.

When the secularist process had finalized, sometime in the 1920s, the Catholic Church had been entirely displaced from the state and the public realm, relegated to the private, intimate sphere.

This push to secularize was motivated by a clearly positivist and enlightened vision, as well as an identification of religion with obscurantism dating back to the French Revolution. The imaginary that was born from the process of secularization, which coincided with modernization and with the ideological and symbolic meanings mentioned in the previous paragraph, became a kind of identity matrix in Uruguay. This implied a strong anti-religious and anti-clerical bias, leading many people to live their faith in an almost shameful way. Though this bias—and identity matrix—have weakened in Uruguayan society today, they remain strong among certain university elites and powerful sectors.

This historical-cultural overview provides a framework for understanding some of the aspects analyzed below.

2. Results

2.1. *The Non-Affiliated in Montevideo*

For the purposes of this article, the category of the “non-affiliated” includes those who express a belief in God and in transcendence, but without the mediation of any religious institution.

These non-affiliated believers present the search for a spiritual path of their own—and answers that are not pigeonholed or predefined by religious institutions or groups—as a matter of great importance. They also make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, even when varying definitions of the two concepts are given.

As these believers search for transcendence, they draw on elements from different religious or spiritual traditions. Several stated that Western religious institutions are mainly focused on promoting their institutional beliefs, rules or canons. In other words, these religions do not foster “finding oneself”, one’s inner being, in order to then find transcendence, meaning, and peace.

Spirituality, in the view of these believers, is a personal experience that has nothing to do with belonging to religious groups or institutions or adopting predefined creeds. This is presented as a clear difference between believers affiliated with religious institutions and those with no institutional affiliation.

As could be expected, the group of non-affiliates presents very heterogeneous experiences and perspectives. In order to try to better describe the diverse characteristics of this group, the focus here is on what they have in common. The three primary similarities include: the way they define “spirituality” versus “religion”, the ways in which they cultivate their spirituality, and their emphasis on spirituality as an experience for personal balance and inner peace.

2.1.1. Ways of Understanding Spirituality vs. Religion

The way in which non-affiliated believers understand spirituality and religion is of paramount importance because of the emphasis they place on experiencing spirituality. This group makes a clear distinction between the two terms, though their definitions of what spirituality means differ. They also have very similar perspectives on religion.

Spirituality and religion are two completely different things, though they do have a few things in common... I see religious people as maybe more closed-minded and a spiritual person as someone who can ... A religious person can also be spiritual, but not all spiritual people are religious. That’s my way of defining it: don’t tell me what is spiritual versus what is religious. But a spiritual person has a much more open heart and mind than a religious person. (Julio)

I associate a religious person with an institution. I associate it with a herd of people following a single person who preaches something without even knowing where he learned it. I associate it with manipulation. (Noelia)

I think of a religious person as someone pigeonholed within an institution or under the label of some religion, but I feel that someone spiritual may or may not be religious: someone spiritual is devoted to things that you can’t see, or someone who practices meditation, or someone who does good things but not in the name of any religion. (Paula.)

As can be seen in the responses of the interviewees, non-affiliated believers clearly differentiate between spirituality and religion. In their perspective, the two are almost in conflict with one another. Spirituality is fundamentally understood as an individual experience that fosters personal growth, interiority, balance, and inner peace as well as finding oneself.

Subscribing to religion, in contrast, is seen as taking away the possibility of personal growth. Religions are seen as disciplinary mechanisms that deny free thought, to the extent that they propagate existing institutional messages and try to get their flocks to accept these messages as well as certain

ways of believing and behaving. People affiliated to a religion are seen as obedient, non-critical people who need the institution to tell them what to do.

These views on religious institutions clearly draw from the cultural historical framework discussed in Section 1.2.

One aspect regarding ways of understanding and living spirituality that emerges in the testimonies is the claim for autonomy from institutions, as expressed by several interviewees.

Autonomy as a paradigm of modernity/postmodernity is increasingly present as a way to defend individual decisions over various kinds of institutional ones.

In this regard, and for the study and understanding of this phenomenon, we can think of autonomy as a master interpretive framework (Carozzi 1999). Likewise, and according to Glendinning and Bruce (2006), a key factor in explaining religious change as a move away from institutions and the emergence of alternative spirituality is the “subjective turn of modern culture” and the growth of individualism and self-realization (Glendinning and Bruce 2006, p. 400) or what others call “individuation” (Beck 2001).

The notion of autonomy appears more and more strongly in the narratives of not only unaffiliated believers but also among believers with ties to different churches and religious institutions. These believers claim that their decisions do not depend on institutional belonging and that they also exercise autonomy in relation to the precepts of faith and also to the positions or proposals of religious leaders, as noted by Rabbia et al. (2019).

2.1.2. Links and Thoughts on Religious Institutions

Several of the unaffiliated believers believe that religious institutions allow no room for personal experience and quests. In their view, institutions are not focused on people’s growth and inner experience, but on imposing their own views while expecting believers to remain within these parameters and fulfill their obligations.

All they want is for you to go to their church and think the same as they do. (Paula)

I like sharing with people who are on the same wavelength in terms of love, friendship, celebration. I like sharing because all of us are connected and then we are empowered: group meditation is divine and chanting mantras together is divine and praying is divine, but there is something about the institutions that doesn’t convince me, something about the obligation, the formalities. I just don’t feel comfortable there, I just don’t feel the spark. (Irene)

These obligations to do things like... You have to go at a certain time, on a certain day, and whatnot. Because what if... what if I need it now, what happens then? Things like that... No, I didn’t like the way that priests did things, I mean... You couldn’t disagree with the things they said. A different way of thinking was wrong. Summing up, everything I did was wrong. So, well, it never meant anything to me... and as I grew up, I distanced myself further and further from the church. I do believe that God exists and I carry Him deep inside and He helps me every day—a lot! But I don’t... the Catholic Church doesn’t represent me. (Manuel)

Many of the non-affiliated went to Catholic school and/or grew up in a Catholic family, but their experience led them to conclude that what the Catholic Church proposed limited their personal search.

I went to catechesis and studied religious culture. There was one professor whom I liked very much, in my first year of high school. And I began to listen to him, really paying attention. And I liked it. It pulled me in. (Noelia)

(Topics) of religion were hardly discussed at all (in the family). (Javier)

I had a Catholic upbringing, and I was always the black sheep, since I had a lot of questions. I went to a school run by nuns, I questioned everything. I was very rebellious and they expelled me senior year. (Carmela)

There are some non-affiliates who grew up without any religion at all. In some cases, their families were strongly atheist and in others, religion just was not an issue.

I come from total atheism. My family has ties to Batllismo [a Uruguayan political group that fought hard for secularization]: they wrote “god” in lowercase. (Marisa)

My family... never had any of that (religion). They were never interested. (Mauro)

A good part of the non-affiliated believers interviewed have had experiences of institutionalized transcendental searches or experiences. For some, their experiences with religious institutions are what led them to distance themselves, while for others the motivation was simply to focus more on personal searches that had to go beyond the limits in order for them to continue.

After a certain stage of rejecting religion—almost becoming an atheist—I reencountered a spirituality that was free from the orthodoxies. That was like unlearning, freeing myself from both dogmatic and atheist convictions, and approaching it more like a question. That’s where I am now: taking a questioning look at these things. (Ignacio)

Negative experiences at churches, expressed with varying degrees of intensity and affected by the nonaffiliated, also appear as elements that led these believers to cultivate a relationship with God outside these institutions:

They were very cruel in my church because they used religion to put the fear of sin in the congregation. For example, I spent about two years sleeping [terribly]... because if you sinned, they said a snake would come at night and eat you. It would sneak in between the sheets and eat your legs. And for two years, I slept curled up in a ball. I did my best to get rid of all the guilt they put me through during years of catechesis, because that’s a load you carry with you. (Julio)

There are also some explicitly anticlerical stances among this group:

I am very anticlerical. For me, the Catholic Church has historically shat on our lives. The missionaries, the Inquisition, everything. All wrong. They ask for forgiveness from time to time, sort of, and they go on. Now the sexual abuse. Did you see the movie *Spotlight*? And let me tell you, Jesus is a character I like because I’m Western, because I was brought up that way. What bad things can you say about Jesus? Very little. (Roberto)

Some of the interviewees value the importance of religions or clarify that they do not see religion as alienating or as restricting freedom.

It’s a warning about what can happen to us, wherever we put our faith. That’s what it means to be conscious and protect the freedom of a spirit that seeks truth. Always needing to cling to something is a weakness, the product of the human vulnerability, and maybe that’s what makes us deny other things that can be valid and enriching. If we close ourselves off, we deprive ourselves of that. But the worst part of that is war, confrontation, closing yourself off to someone else, refusing to hear their truth. That is the stickiest part of it all, because if the question were simply becoming an atheist for a while, so be it, it’s another experience. But if I refuse to acknowledge that someone else believes in something else, it’s impossible for us to live together, impossible for us to get along. That happens when we believe we have a monopoly on something, on truth, and that is a sticky situation. (Irene)

In the process of coming up with their own answers, the topic of Gestalt therapy emerged for some of those interviewed. In one case, an interviewee recounted how a Gestalt therapist opened the doors to other spiritual searches, for example, Tao. Other interviewees talked about how Gestalt helped them find a way to integrate spirituality into their life, something that would perhaps have not been possible with psychoanalysis, which does not venture into spiritual perspectives or issues.

As can be seen in the positions and personal itineraries described in this section, the connections and positions on religious institutions are varied. On the one hand, there are those who say that religion is absent from their homes and therefore, insignificant; for this group, it is as if religion did not exist or were not present. There are others who also come from atheistic families and reject religion outright. Other perspectives collected from the interviewees are those relative not only to a position of atheism but to a clearly anticlerical position that is expressed very clearly, as has been illustrated in quotes from previous paragraphs.

In relation to affiliations and positions on religious institutions, there are those who have had negative experiences with a religious institution, including the instilling of fear.

Finally, some of the interviewees make a positive and broad assessment of religion, even if they are not affiliated and have no desire to be. According to these interviewees, religious institutions make contributions to humanity.

2.1.3. Elements of the Transcendental Searches of the Non-Affiliated

The spiritual searches of a good part of this group involve a wide range of proposals with different origins, emphasis, and expressions. There is space for experimenting with new directions and for incorporating elements that could be broadly characterized as part of the New Age symbolic universe. Some authors refer to the emergence of a different spirituality in the framework of what [Glendinning and Bruce \(2006\)](#) call the “subjective turn of modern culture”.

Thus, terms frequently mentioned as part of the searches described by those interviewed include energy, meditation, Taoism, Buddhism, yoga, reiki, akashic records, self-help, meditation, chakras, Bach flowers, California flowers, Brian Weiss regressions, God, and the universe.

We attribute the experiences to what the universe wants to teach us. We practice being thankful because it creates positive energy, in order to continue attracting and generating good. Though I don't associate it with any religion, I came to believe in energies, and in how they affect everything, how everything is transformed. It's like believing in a divine presence but without giving it a name or anything, nor associating it with any religion, but seeing it as a mixture of them all—it's like they are all the same, but with different names. (Paula)

I found meditation at a time when I was a little lost. And I don't believe in anything, in any religious institution, that is, I'm not Christian or any religion. And when I was introduced to meditation, I liked it, it made me feel good, it made me feel surer, more confident. I meditate every night; it makes me feel good. (Noelia)

It lasts an hour...at the beginning, they teach you how to be introspective and let's say it's not about just thinking, but about trying to feel. They teach you this method and there is even a special session to teach you what the Mahatmas did at the beginning. (Roberto)

I started reiki and continued to the second level. Reiki is really about the movement of energies. It's like acupuncture but they don't put the needles in. In other words, it works through your channels to the chakras. The chakras are points in the body and actually, your whole body is a chakra, and you have some main chakras. Reiki moves energy. For example, reiki can help a person assuage physical or emotional pain. (Noelia)

(on her religious experiences) I live it. I light candles, I talk to the Father, and I also meditate and do some indigenous rituals. (Irene)

I did two Brian Weiss regressions. After those regressions, I opened the (akashic) records. The records are more or less the same thing, it's like the book of your life. I say they're the same because the records told me the same things I had seen in the regressions. (...) The records raised a lot of issues associated with my past life, giving me insight into the problem that I was having at the time. (Noelia)

The universe of beliefs expressed by the interviewees is very broad. In fact, the Uruguayans interviewed use terminology that comes not from one of various institutional religious traditions but instead from the broad area known as New Age. “Energy” is a way of defining the transcendent and “divine presence”, a term referring to transcendence; however, these are used in codes of meaning unrelated to religious institutions, in reference to aspects that are always present. Meditation and the search for balance and peace are also part of the New Age: interviewees consider that cultivating interiority is part of the search for transcendence.

In this search, concrete experiences of various origins appear, such as Reiki, the Akashic records, Brian Weiss regressions and many other experiences for self-knowledge, personal balance and healing.

Interiority and balance are key issues that some interviewees believe is critical to their health. The search for spirituality, according to the interviewees, requires living a quiet life and being at peace with oneself and with others.

2.2. Atheists

As previously mentioned, the Pew Research Center’s survey on Latin American religion shows a high percentage of atheists in Uruguay. Around 10% of the population is atheist, making it the country with the highest percentage of atheists in the region by far: the second is Argentina, with 4%, followed by Mexico, with 3%; in Brazil, atheists represent 1% of the population (Pew Forum on Religion 2014).

It is difficult to discuss the evolution of atheism in Uruguay because since 1908, the national census has not included any questions on religion. In 2006, however, the state bureau in charge of statistics conducted a survey that included a question on religion, and other studies from 1954, 1964, 1994, 2003 and 2006 provide some insight into the religiosity of Uruguayans.

The 1954 survey, for example, did not use the categories “atheist” or “agnostic”: instead, it includes “non-religion”, with 27% of Uruguayans falling into this category that year (Equipos del Bien Común 1956). The 1964 study reported that 5% of Uruguayans were atheists (De Santa Ana 1965), a percentage that rose to 14% in 1994 (Da Costa et al. 1996) and then fell to 12% in 2001 (Da Costa 2003, 2006). The 2006 survey included atheists and agnostics in a single category that totaled 17% (INE Instituto Nacional de Estadística) and the Pew Research Center’s work in 2013 reported that 10% of Uruguayans were atheists (Pew Forum on Religion 2014).

Over time, then, it is possible to observe the persistence of atheism in Uruguayan society, which peaked around the time of the 1994 survey and decreased from then until 2013. It will be important to keep an eye on how this variable evolves in the future.

In terms of the interviews conducted as part of this study, some of the interviewees initially defined themselves as atheists, but during the interview, revealed themselves to be believers without an affiliation. Nonetheless, a decision was made to maintain the self-identification of the interviewees. A difficulty that arose during the study was finding interviewees who identified as atheists from lower social strata.

Two types of experiences could be distinguished in the life trajectories of the atheists interviewed. There were those who had had some degree of involvement with a religious institution at some point in their lives, and those who have had no such experience.

For the first group, the institution with which they were affiliated ceased to have meaning for them, as did the beliefs about God the institution expounded. For the other group, everything associated with religion sounds alien because it is not part of their life experience or meanings. Some of the interviewees described this as follows:

My mother is very, very atheist. I don’t think she’s ever been to Mass (...) she was raised that way and my grandfather wasn’t Catholic either. And that’s how we were raised. None of my cousins [are religious], nor is my brother. In fact, my brother is more of an atheist than I am. (Matias)

When I say religion was present [in my life], what I mean is that it was a topic of conversation, but not in the religious sense, because I come from generations of communists. My mother,

my father and practically all my grandparents are communists. Neither of my parents were baptized, and I think that none of my grandparents were either. So religion was only present in my life as a topic of conversations, that sort of thing. (Pablo)

I believe that the only time I entered a church was on two field trips, one in elementary school and one in high school. I haven't been in a church since. (Pablo)

Based on the percentage of atheists in the existing surveys on religion in Uruguay referred to above, and comments like those above, it is thus possible to speak of an "atheistic tradition" that involves intergenerational transmission over time.

The other group—the atheists with some connection to religious institutions in the past—also shared diverse experiences.

As a child, I attended a Catholic school so I had to unlearn of the teachings of official religions, of Catholicism I mean, because it is the most... Well, at least in my family, which is Catholic. (Rodrigo)

You go to a church and there is money everywhere. I attended the Universal [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus]. I went there for a while and everything was money, nothing else, they ask you for money, money for this, money for that, depending on how you are dressed... But God and Jesus, as I see it, never looked at how someone was dressed or anything. You know that you go to any church and you have to be well dressed, but Jesus never looked, on the contrary, he looked at the poor people, people who really had problems. That's the way I see it. (Richard)

This last quote highlights something that is especially emphasized among people from lower social strata: a focus on the wealth or money management of some religious institutions, and how this contradicts, in their mind, the core religious message.

It is pertinent to explore the motives and processes associated with the transition to atheism, when these are present. In almost all cases, the interviewees do not connect their transition to atheism with a single issue or event. Instead, they mention various factors including painful experiences and perceived injustices at religious institutions, criticism of the inflexibility of religious institutions, processes in which they widened their social universe, personal growth, etc. The trajectories of the interviewees are diverse, but at least three different trends can be identified.

First, interviewees who opted for atheism mention the inflexibility of religious institutions that at some point in their lives led to a break and rupture with the church. Here "inflexibility" is also understood as the church's insistence on a single way of living, with more emphasis on accepting one's truths than getting involved with people's life processes.

I began to question that their ideas were very... inflexible. There were other Christians who were much more flexible. (Juan)

The only thing they taught you... They'd give you a prayer book and teach you, and beyond the "Hail Mary" and "Our Father", I never learned anything. It was all very ritualistic and I didn't like it, so I left. (Agustina)

On the other hand, some interviewees described how experiences of personal losses affected the meaning of God and led to questions about whether He existed. In some cases, this led them to abandon their beliefs altogether.

When I was eleven, my six-month-old baby sister died. I think that was what triggered it, because as a child, you just believe. But that was when I said, God doesn't exist. If my sister dies and God allows it... you individualize it, and it means God doesn't exist. That's what led me to say, "That's it". (Augustine)

One day I said, “I just don’t get it”. I didn’t see anything and... I don’t know, things happened that made me ask, “Where is God?” Because my grandmother died when I was twelve years old and left me alone—I lived with my grandmother, so then, nothing. It’s like, where is God? (Marcia)

A third possible category has to do with criticizing the positioning of the churches in terms of social justice, a commitment to certain values associated with defending society’s most vulnerable members, and certain contradictions within religious institutions in this sense.

What happened to me was that I realized the contradiction of social issues, socioeconomic issues, social classes, you see? They act like they’re in the middle but they’re more on the side of the powerful. (Ramiro)

The surveys also revealed aspects that contributed to the transition to atheism. Never described as a sudden decision or attributed to a single cause, the transition is always described as a life process with several components.

When I was twelve or thirteen, I began to meet new people and find new materials, new things to read, and I realized there was another reality. I even had my own experiences and what I said about the union struggle, well, it was my own experience and I gradually disregarded many of the things that my parents, aunts and uncles had told me. (Agustina)

I was around sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, the time when adolescence begins, a stage where you open up and break away from your family. And for me, I also began to reject certain things that I associated with Catholicism or at least with the Catholics I knew—things that maybe had to do with dogmatism, irrational fear, guilt, and a series of values that I perceived as negative. (Ignacio)

I think it was a process all my own, one that got me thinking, a process nourished by readings, literature, and philosophy. (Ignacio)

The vast majority of those interviewed expressed that they were atheist by conviction, not because they were opposed to churches or believers, although some do reject Christianity.

You know... I don’t see it [religion] as something bad. I don’t have any resentment or any... I don’t have anything against the church today. (Juan)

And the more I studied history, another concept altogether, I went deeper into the meaning of not believing, of not having the need to believe, of not having the need for there to be something in the future when I’m no longer human. (Ruben)

Perhaps the following quotation best captures what the surveys revealed about non-affiliated believers and atheists:

I believe that the greatest value is related to independence, to being independent from “the establishment”. We’re always looking for a way to do things ourselves, to have the tools to do what we like without having to ask anyone for anything. There’s a motto, “do it yourself”, and that’s always been my main impulse for doing things. (Matías)

As Beck (2001) pointed out, “The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time”. As can be seen once again, the demand for autonomy to which we have already referred appears clearly. This demand for autonomy, which is clear in the case of non-affiliated believers, is also clear in the case of atheists and, as we mentioned, in the case of believers linked to a religious institution. It is a common cultural and epochal pattern that each group (unaffiliated, atheists and institutionalized believers) claims for itself, alluding, in some way, to the fact that the others do not do so and submit to external wills.

3. Discussion

The two groups analyzed in this work have their own characteristics with clear internal diversity. Beyond the fact that some quantitative investigations use the “nones” category for Uruguay, there is a clear distinction between non-affiliated believers and atheists. The classic limit between these two categories is the attitude of “believing”, an attitude that is stronger among non-believers who deny the beliefs of others and are against the very existence of religious institutions.

In summary, it is possible to say that the group of believers in Montevideo not affiliated with religious institutions are characterized by the search for interiority and transcendence. These searches require, in the experiences of these believers, more room for individual freedom and non-conformity with rules, standards, obligations or predefined truths. The emphasis is on each individual’s first-person experiences during that search.

These believers see religious institutions as restricting their searches and experiences by trying to convince people to assimilate what each institution proposes, not only in terms of faith contents, but also in terms of the set of rules and obligations they impose on people.

Their life itineraries show that these searches could be defined as eclectic since they build their own universe of meaning with elements from different religious or spiritual traditions. Living in balance, in peace and in harmony, carries a lot of weight in their searches. Interiority becomes the key.

In terms of inter-generational transmission, the range of experiences of these groups comes into focus. Many have participated in religious institutions, while others hail from non-religious backgrounds. The weight and importance of the atheistic and anticlerical tradition of the hegemonic culture already described generates the conditions of plausibility for an easy and legitimate step towards non-belief.

An analysis of the interviews with the group of the non-affiliated believers shows an attempt to distinguish between the concepts of religion and spirituality, as Heelas and Woodhead propose. In other words, these people are drawn to forms of spirituality that help them with the deepest and most sacred dimensions of their lives, but reject proposals to live their lives in accordance with external principles (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

In relation to atheism in Uruguayan society, it is a phenomenon that dates far back in Uruguay. Atheists can be classified into two groups, the inter-generational atheists and the “converts”, that is, people who did not grow up atheist but came to atheism after previous religious experiences of some kind.

At the same time, considering the way believers relate to or understand their belief in transcendence, there are also various postures that we could summarize in two categories, militant atheists and indifferent atheists. In the first case, individuals take a clear stance against religious beliefs and, at the same time, reject religious institutions or traditions such as Catholicism, Christianity, or others. The second position, indifference, involves not seeing other people’s beliefs as an issue one needs to reject or struggle against. This position evidences a transition in Uruguayan society, a transformation of ways of living as an atheist that used to involve only anti-religious and anticlerical stances in Uruguay. A previous study on university students showed a strong presence within this group of militant atheists, though there were indifferent atheists as well (Da Costa et al. 2010).

Among both atheists and the non-affiliated, one common thread was the importance of personal autonomy in order to live according to what they believe, be they believers or atheists. This prototypical demand of modernity (Beck 2001), even in times of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000), appears present not only among non-affiliated believers and atheists, but also across the whole religious universe, i.e., both those with institutional ties and non-affiliated believers, as mentioned by several works (Carozzi 1999; Glendinning and Bruce 2006). In other words, the demand for individual autonomy is a fact in contemporary societies that is also expressed in the sphere of constructing identities, among both believers and non-believers. These are the people who build their own universes of belief, plucking elements from diverse origins and applying them in a concrete way to their specific individual situations, grounded in the complexities of their daily lives.

In the way Uruguay has processed the place of religion, the resulting cultural matrix has led to more non-believers (atheists) and more believers without any institutional affiliation.

Uruguay's social, historical and cultural development, as outlined in the first part of this article, has facilitated either an outright rejection of religion or a distancing from traditional institutions such as the Catholic Church or historical Protestant churches. Another issue is that of neo-Pentecostal churches that have expanded, as they have across Latin America, although to a lesser extent in Uruguay.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, a political project was developed in Uruguay that aimed to obliterate religion—which was seen as backwardness or obscurantism—from social life, thus laying the groundwork for local culture's relationship to religion. Within this framework, the figures on the distribution of beliefs in the country are understandable, as are the phenomena of non-belief and non-affiliation that are addressed herein.

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