



Introduction. Lived religion in Latin America and Europe. Roman Catholics¹ and their practices

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Abstracts

Scholars in Latin America tend to agree that the religious landscape of the region is undergoing transformation. Yet, there are on-going discussions about the causes, depth, and direction of this change. There is evidence that the Catholic Church no longer holds a religious monopoly, but not much research on how Roman Catholicism is practiced today has been carried out. The Author introduces a series of papers that presents a broader qualitative, comparative study that investigates the lived religion of Latin Americans in a wider cultural context which accounts for the influences of Spain and Italy in South America.

Keywords: pluralisation, religious practices, personal religiosity, religious authority, individualization

Los académicos en América Latina tienden a estar de acuerdo en que el panorama religioso de la región está en transformación, aunque no hay acuerdo en torno a las causas, la profundidad y la dirección del cambio. Hay evidencia de que la iglesia católica ya no tiene un monopolio religioso, pero no hay mucha investigación sobre cómo se practica el catolicismo en la actualidad. El Autor presenta una amplia investigación cualitativa y comparativa sobre la religión vivida de los latinoamericanos en un contexto cultural que explica las influencias de España e Italia en América del Sur.

Palabras clave: pluralización, prácticas religiosas, religiosidad individual, autoridad religiosa, individualización

Gli studiosi tendono a concordare sul fatto che il panorama religioso della regione latinoamericana sia in trasformazione, ma per contro discutono ampiamente sulle cause, la profondità e la direzione di tale cambiamento. Vi sono evidenze che la chiesa cattolica non detenga più il monopolio religioso, ma al contempo non vi sono molte ricerche su come il cattolicesimo venga oggi praticato. L'Autore presenta un'articolata ricerca qualitativa e comparativa che cerca di dire come la religione sia vissuta dai lati-

¹ In the article, for the sake of brevity, the reference will be to Catholic, Catholics, Catholicism, etc.

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noamericani in un contesto culturale che risente delle influenze della Spagna e dell'Italia.

Parole chiave: pluralizzazione, pratiche religiose, la religiosità individuale, l'autorità religiosa, individualizzazione

1. Modernity and religion in Latin America and Southern Europe

Economic development, the emergence of democratic governments, and a growing middle class have changed the realm of spirituality in Latin America. Once dominated by Catholicism, today, Latin Americans are migrating from one religion to another, as they look for meanings that transcend the empirical world. However, secularisation theories do not account, satisfactorily, for religious phenomena as experienced in Latin America today.

Latin America is a context that has been either ignored or misunderstood by current debates concerning the transformation of the religious landscape. For example, scholars tend to assume that individuals practice a sole religion, clearly distinguishable from all others. This idea of exclusive commitment and belonging is based on Northern Atlantic religiosity and has been used uncritically as a yardstick by which to assess religion in other regions of the world. Many have failed to grasp factors other than membership, affiliation, and following, using conceptual tools limited by Eurocentric bias built to cater for the Northern Atlantic reality and, therefore inapplicable to other cultural contexts. The relationship between religion and society is culturally shaped and cannot, therefore, be described solely by applying Northern Atlantic parameters.

This special issue of *Visioni LatinoAmericane* gathers a group of studies that focus on *Lived religion in Latin America in comparison with Southern Europe*. We recognize that lived religiosity is an untidy, multifaceted mixture of beliefs expressed in everyday practices, in which people engage their bodies and emotions. Often these practices originate within a religious tradition, but they are creatively adapted, modified, and blended by the individual (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010). Defining religiosity in terms of close adherence to a set of dogmatic beliefs and practices leaves unstudied many of the ways in which regular people experience transcendence every day in urban



settings (Ameigeiras, 2008; Romero, 2008; 2014). This group of studies attempt to make visible the parts of people's lived religiosity that scientific categories have made invisible and recognize that, in their daily lives, people may consider practice to be more important than beliefs (McGuire, 2008).

These articles explore the experience of ordinary people, voices found beyond the borders of religious institutions, as religious institutions do not provide a full or accurate picture of the spiritual landscape today. Ordinary Catholics are our interlocutors. What matters to them spiritually is the object of this special issue.

There are not many qualitative comparative studies that explore lived religion. Some research explores institutional statements and policies focusing on the macro level, or on the role of religious leadership in different contexts. We have polls and surveys that explore and measure the religiosity of the population, yet only on the basis of religiosity as defined by the parameters of Protestantism (like church attendance, or the relationship with the Bible). We lack studies that explore how the general population experiences the spiritual (whether people follow institutional precepts or not) and how this experience may, or may not, influence their daily lives.

We expect the comparison between Latin American and European cities to permit us to understand the general and particular ways in which modernity affects religious practices in different parts of the world. What is happening in areas of the Western world that share some cultural features? How do believers experience transcendence and connect within other modern Catholic cultures? The comparison between Europe and Latin America provides a better understanding of local religion as well as the relevance of history and space.

2. The lived religion of Latin Americans

These studies are part of a broader research project on lived religion that is still being carried out. From August 2015 to April 2017, 22 researchers from three continents (North America, South America, and Europe) interviewed 240 subjects in six cities: Bilbao, Spain; Boston, Massachusetts, Usa; Córdoba, Argentina; Lima, Peru; Montevideo, Uruguay; and Rome, Italy. The field research generated 480 interview transcripts that were analysed and then discussed during 28 hours of



Skype meetings and four international workshops. The main fund for the Latin American research teams was granted by the John Templeton Foundation. The universities where we work (Universidad de Deusto, Boston College, Universidad Católica de Córdoba, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Universidad Católica del Uruguay, Università di Roma Tre) provided additional funding and invaluable support. We are very grateful to each university and to the John Templeton Foundation.

The fieldwork was conducted in both large metropolitan areas like Lima (10.2 million inhabitants) and Rome (4.3), and in smaller ones like Montevideo (2.2), Bilbao (1.0) and Córdoba (1.2). Some locations are their country's capital (Montevideo, Rome, and Lima) while others are important regional centres (Bilbao and Córdoba). Each one will be introduced in the articles, so, here let me just present the current religious profile. The latest data on religious affiliation available for Córdoba indicate that 61% of its inhabitants self-identify as Catholics, 7.5% as Evangelicals, and less than 1% as members of other religions. Almost 30% of people residing in Córdoba self-identify as 'Nones' (Rabbia, 2014). The latest data available for Montevideo regarding religious affiliation (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, 2006) indicate that 42% of its inhabitants self-identify as Catholics, 15% as Evangelicals and less than 6% claim membership of other religions, 24% define themselves as unaffiliated believers , and 13% as atheists or agnostics. For Lima, data collected in 2012 (Ihrke-Buchroth, 2012) show that 78% of the population is Catholic, 15.7% self-identified as Evangelicals or other Christians, 3% do not belong to any religion, and 3.3% declare their membership of other religious traditions. For the Basque Country (El Correo, 2016), 55% of the population self-identify as Catholic, 38 as 'Nones' and 6% as members of other religious traditions. In Italy, 85% of the population self-identify as Catholics, agnostics and atheists total 9% and 6% belong to other confessions (Introvi-gne and Zoccatelli, 2016).

As we can see, Catholicism is the dominant religion in all the cities with Evangelicals and 'Nonaffiliated' on the rise. While Pentecostals represent the chief 'other' religion in Córdoba and Lima, Muslims are the 'others' in Rome while the 'Non-affiliated' are runners-up in Bilbao and Montevideo. The religious others in America are mainly Latin Americans who have switched their religious allegiance.



To explore individuals' religiosity, the researchers collected 'spiritual narratives' in each of these cities. A 'Spiritual narrative' (Ammerman, 2014: 9) refers to a story that says something about a reality beyond the immanent. This focus on stories reveals a 'weave' involving the mundane and the transcendent. Stories about those 'non-ordinary' realities, while how they interact with human beings need not be religious through and through, or even refer explicitly to religion. We found three main types of 'stories': 1) anecdotes or biographical stories, 2) narratives regarding a practice referring to the 'supra-empirical' world, 3) and explanations of a belief.

To collect these 'spiritual narratives,' we conducted two sets of meetings with the same individuals. The first, a semi-structured interview, provided an overview of an individual's daily routines and religious practices, of his/her pathway of faith, beliefs, decisions made, relationships with others (family, friends, and acquaintances), work and workplace, free time and their social and/or political involvement.

We held a second meeting with each interviewee which consisted in a 'participant-driven object-elicitation' interview. We asked our subjects to come back with objects, garments, images, or photos of people, symbols, things, or places in order to explore the meanings those objects have for them and for their spiritual/religious personal narratives. Using the objects we were able to register meanings and emotions (Ammerman, 2007; Ammerman, Williams, 2012; Porr, Mayan *et al.*, 2010; Williams, 2010). We chose the object-elicitation method, rather than photo-elicitation, because we wanted to encourage participants to show us something that is meaningful to them in terms of their spirituality. We did not want to narrow the range of items that people may bring to the second meeting in order to allow the significance of the objects to emerge naturally. However, most of the people came with pictures of the objects taken with their mobile phones.

3. Sample and methods

3.1. The respondents

We conducted a qualitative, transnational study that compared different socioeconomic status (Ses) groups, whose primary religious ori-



entation was Catholics, Protestants (including main-line Protestants, Pentecostals, and neo-Evangelicals), Other Traditions (Jewish, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Adventists, Muslims, Afro cults, Native American spiritualities, and New Age), and 'Nones' (disaffiliated or unaffiliated believers, agnostics and atheists). We used the main religious orientation self-reported by those subjects at the beginning of the interview.

By means of a stratified by-quota sampling, we assured the inclusion of people of minority religious groups that may be underrepresented by a conventional convenience or purposeful sampling technique we obtained significant information to describe variations within these groups while guaranteeing the comparability of the data between the different cities in the study (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We also understand that more segmentation variables might have led to a more complex sampling. Therefore, religious self-identification and Ses were our segmentation variables. We strove to include a balanced sample based on gender and age to ensure a comparison between different inhabitants and different generations (3 cohorts: 18-29, 30-59, and 60 and older) within the same city. Each city has its own sample of participants adjusted to cater for local differences, but using the same basic criteria for the distribution of the participants.

The total sample in each city was of approximately 80 persons. We recruited the sample by snowballing, filling the quotas we designed. Some interviews were discarded because the quota assigned had already been fulfilled, the interviewers did not ask the indicated questions, or the interviewees were unable to answer them whereby the interview was interrupted and cancelled. The data we collected are fascinating and vast. In this special issue, we present a preliminary analysis of partial results for the subsample of Catholics in the five cities.

4. Very preliminary findings

From the very beginning, the attitude of the persons towards the interviews called our attention. When recruiting participants, Bilbao had problems to get subjects between the ages of 35 and 55. People in this age-group did not want to talk about their religious practice. Mean-



while, in the Latin American cities as well as in Rome, people were usually willing to talk. The difficulty the teams faced in Latin America was to find atheists among the lower classes.

The interviews were conducted in university classrooms and offices, religious facilities, bars, markets, homes and many other different places. The conversations were 'semi-public,' where people talked freely with a researcher about their private beliefs in a space of reflection and introspection rare in daily life. The interview appeared as a non-existent though highly desired space. Many interviewees admitted that they did not usually talk about their religious quest with their families or friends. People thanked the researchers for the opportunity to do so provided by the interview. They wanted to talk about religiosity and it was, for some of them, a way of legitimising their beliefs in front of another person.

Many subjects were moved during the interview. They were grateful because they could talk about what is broken in their lives, their emotions, and held that by telling their stories to a stranger they were making sense of their own lives and seeking coherence. In many cases, they adjusted their religious self-identification during the interview, expressing variations of, 'I am a Catholic but...' We heard this for all religious categories.

To be a believer means having doubts. People were comfortable talking about their doubts. Beliefs are a 'work in progress,' a fact that challenges social approaches to religion that focus heavily on the intellectual aspects of religiosity. People are on a religious pathway, find themselves in a certain 'spiritual location,' but have not necessarily reached a 'destination,' nor have they achieved dogmatic clarity.

In the cities we studied, history matters. As I mentioned before, the Catholic Church still enjoys a rich and significant institutional presence. However, Catholic believers do not place religious institutions at the centre of their daily lives. In general, Catholics are not largely against the church, but they are disappointed with it. Among the lower classes, Catholics are pragmatic and make use of what is available to them whether it be a Catholic, Pentecostal, or a non-confessional temple. If they live in its vicinity, they will use that institution, attending a Pentecostal celebration or volunteering in a secular Ngo. They rarely leave their own neighbourhood, therefore to find an outlet 'near my



house' is a significant datum when exploring religiosity in daily life. This does not signify double affiliation, but everyday convenience.

Because Catholic rituals are mandatory, they are questioned. Mandatory religious rituals appear as practices hostile to the discovery of the self and at odds with the 'ethics of authenticity' (Taylor, 1992). What is really important for most of our interviewees is the personalisation of the experience. To some extent, believers are their own religious authority. For many in our sample, Church attendance does not matter. Instead, what matters is to practice what you believe is good. This, because religion, Catholicism in particular, in the case of this survey, means commitment to good. To be a good believer is tantamount to being good to others. In our interviews we found what Ammerman (1997) called 'Golden rule Christianity': what makes you a real believer is how you live your life. To be a good Catholic is to be a good person, to take care of people. This is also the rule some of our subjects use to evaluate their religious leaders.

We found strong evidence that for our sample ordinary life is the paramount reality. What matters is what you do in this life. Believers are interested in this world. In the answers we collected, we notice that most of our sample does not really care about the afterlife. However, this does not mean they live constrained by an immanent framework or that they live as if 'God does not exist' (Berger, 2014). We find that the ordinary world is not 'flat' for our interviewees. They understand Catholicism as something between immanence and transcendence. Transcendence is a dimension of daily life. For many of our interviewees, God's intervention in their earthly lives is constant and visible in many ways. Others foreground the presence of the transcendent when they talk about their jobs. The workplace, (a profane, immanent, public space par excellence), is a realm where religion is lived. It appeared as a space of many and diverse religious practices.

5. Conclusion

The comparative, qualitative nature of the research presented here makes a case for a 'lived-religion' approach which puts us on the pathway towards a new paradigm. Lived-religion is a new way by which to understand religion in America, Europe and other areas of the world



that acknowledges the influence of the transformations brought about by modernity in its different stages. At the same time, this model recognises the cultural particularities and the religious features of different geographies and histories.

Building upon explanations regarding secularisation, rational choice, and popular religiosity, we need to explore new ways to make sense of what we are observing. We are looking for a paradigm that addresses the shortcomings of the theories, acknowledges local particularities, and places the Latin American situation within the framework of a global discussion. This paradigm emphasises the idea of multiple modernities, allowing for comparative studies involving other regions of the world. The main contribution of the ‘lived religion’ construct is that, since it is not built around opposing terms, it avoids analytical bifurcations, like private vs. public, material vs. spiritual, religious vs. profane (Morello, Romero, Rabbia, Da Costa, 2017).

Latin American scholars have emphasised the creativity and autonomy of Latin American believers in past decades. The ‘lived religion’ approach stresses the agency of the actors since it observes the sacralisation process where actors enact rituals and symbols, or how particular people in particular places and times use the particular religious idioms available in their culture to express their relationship with the transcendent. The exploration of Latin Americans’ lived religiosity shows us how the whole human being – body, emotions, reason – is involved in the religious quest. Religiosity is not necessarily rational, but it is certainly reasonable for the believers who practice it. That reasonability involves emotions and embodiments.

The role of religious institutions in the public sphere has changed. Religion is not what it used to be, nor is it where it used to be. We must explain individuals’ autonomy *vis-à-vis* religious institutions, but also their connections with ‘spiritual tribes’ (Ammermann, 2014). Lived religion considers the institutional role, but acknowledges believers as legitimate creators of religious practices and is open to extra-ecclesial practices. It is interested in what believers can make of the religious traditions available to them. Lived religion allows scholars to be attentive towards the role of communities providing a common narrative, legitimising practices, and regulating them. At the same time, it acknowledges that the religious subject has become its own religious authority:



what makes sense for him or her, and then what is reasonable is accepted and incorporated into lived religiosity.

Finally, lived religion is an approach that allows us to grasp and understand the role of religious belief in the lives of social actors. It shows how subjects act in the public sphere in relation to a chosen community and to their degree of autonomy from religious institutions. If religious institutions are losing public influence (an aspect which varies according to regions and traditions), religious commitment may still inspire social and political action.

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