

Brazil Scoping Exercise Report

What we (don't) know about “nonreligion” in Brazil: a preliminary report

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The following report includes: **1.** A review of surveys on religion/nonreligion in Brazil; **2.** An overview of the nonreligion Brazilian Censuses term; **3.** A review of Social Science literature on nonreligion; **4.** A review of the research areas and axes; **5.** Possible research questions; **6.** A bibliography.

1. Review of surveys on religion/ nonreligion in Brazil: The growth of nonreligion.

The first Brazilian National Census goes back as early as 1890. Since then, we have had twelve more polls occurring roughly every ten years, with a 30-year interval between 1900 and 1940 and a lost decade between 1940-1950. These surveys enclose a considerable amount of information about the Brazilian population in several axes (gender, race, class, religion, region, matrimonies, etc.). They can be used to do a statistical analysis examining nonreligious groups in relation to different indicators. There are also various recent Brazilian surveys about religious/nonreligious groups (1994-2016) (listed at the end) funded by private organizations and NGOs. Additionally, the *Understanding Unbelief* project (2019) is an international project funded by the John Templeton Foundation that collected some thought-provoking data in Brazil, mainly about atheists and agnostics.

The series of almost fifty titles listed at the end of this document was primarily spurred by the census data.

Changes in the Brazilian religious field began to accelerate in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the first academic works concerning “nonreligion”¹ appeared only in the 2000s. In 2000, the Census showed a remarkable growth of this group, from 7.5 million

¹ In order to be coherent with the project “Nonreligion in a Complex Future”, we chose to use the category “nonreligion” to address the Brazilian context. However, the Portuguese category developed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in the 1940s, “sem religião”, which became largely accepted in the academic field, means literally “without religion”.

people (4.8% of the Brazilian population) in 1991 to 12.8 million (7.3%) in the following decade. This decade was marked by pivotal studies by well-established authors in the field of religious studies, which analyzed the concomitant growth of evangelicals and nonreligious in the Census (FONSECA 2000; NOVAES 2002; PIERUCCI 2002, 2004, 2006; JACOB et al 2003 ; ANTONIAZZI 2003; MAFRA 2004; ORO 2004; SUEDE 2006).

In the next decade, the interest in the phenomenon of nonreligion was accentuated by the results of the 2010 Census, showing new growth in this category, reaching 15.3 million people or 8.1% of the population². Neri (2011: 7) suggests that between 1991 and 2000, none of the Census variables, including marriages, births, housing, occupation, income, and access to consumer goods, changed as much as the Brazilian religious landscape.

In general, a triad describes the changes in this landscape: the decline of Catholicism (from 83.34% in 1991 to 64.6% in 2010), the increase of evangelicals (from 9% of the population in 1991 to 22.2% in 2010) and the increase of nonreligion (1.6% in 1981 to 8.1% in 2010) (MARIANO, 2010).

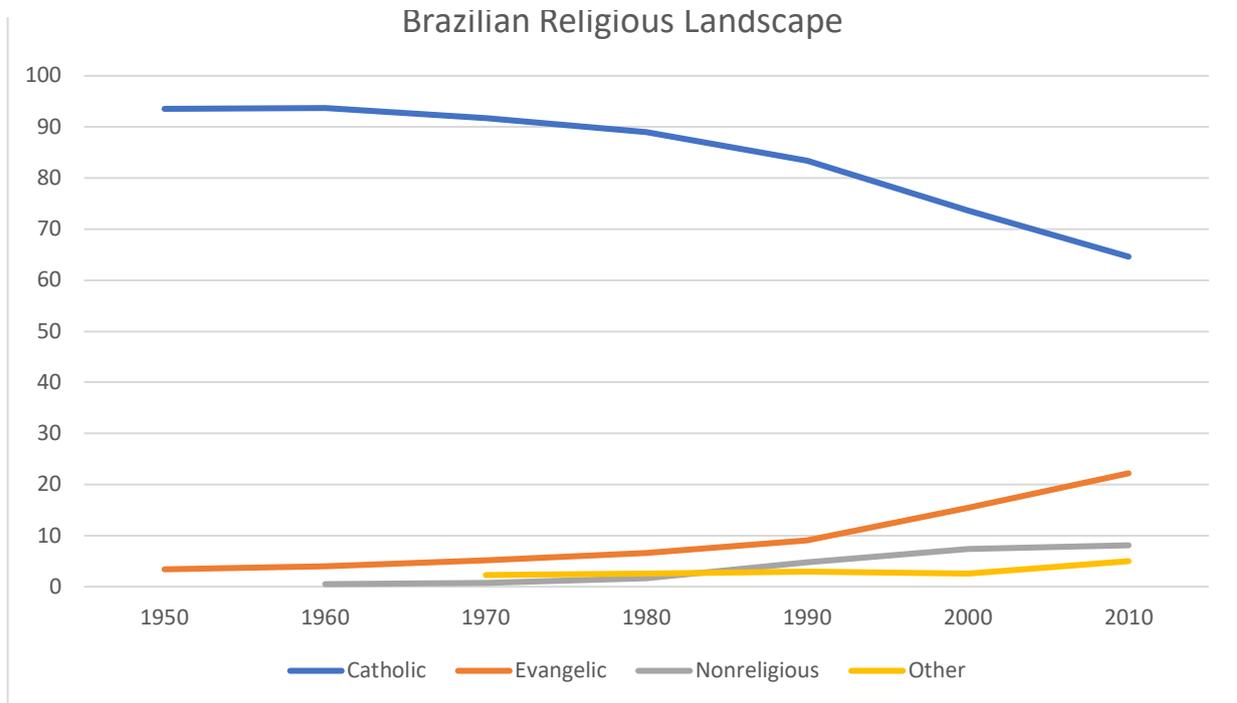
CHART I

Year \ Religions	1950	1960	1970	1980	1991	2000	2010
Catholic	93.5	93.1	91.8	89.0	83.8	73.8	64.63
Evangelic	3.4	4.0	5.2	6.6	9.1	15.5	22.16
Nonreligious	-	0.5	0.8	1.6	4.8	7.3	8.4

Source: IBGE, Demographic Census 1950-2010. Rodrigues 2012.

² In the preliminary survey of CAPES national database of theses and dissertations, Henrique Antunes notes that in the 2000s only two dissertations were published. In contrast, in the following decade, 11 research studies were developed. Most studies are in the field of Religious Sciences (seven), followed by Social Sciences (four), and studies in fields such as Communication (one), as well as interdisciplinary programs such as Development and Society (one).

DIAGRAM I



IBGE – Demographic Trends 1960-2010

Although demographically insignificant until the 1970s, by the 1990s, the nonreligious already represented, behind Catholics and evangelicals, the third-largest segment of the Brazilian religious landscape, above the sum of all other religious groups. Its most significant growth occurred between the 1970s and the 1990s. Although less accelerated, the curve continues to rise. In 2010, nonreligion represented almost the same percentage that evangelicals represented in 1990 (NICOLINI, 2017: 181).

2. Nonreligion: as a census term.

The data on the Brazilian religious landscape presented by the Census requires some consideration, mainly because the analytical framework and classifications of religions in Brazil has been changing along with the Census and its questions.

a) The evolution of the category “nonreligion” throughout the censuses.

As can be seen in the chart at the end of this report, in the only Census enacted in the imperial period (1872), Brazilian society appeared divided into only two worlds – Catholics and “others” (GORETH SANTOS, 2014: 18). In subsequent Censuses, Protestants began to appear in the Brazilian religious landscape. It is noteworthy that in the first census of the republican regime (1890), Protestants began to diversify into different denominations and, for the first time, were differentiated from non-Christian cults, such as Islam and the Positivist Church, in the religious spectrum. Later on, the category “undeclared religion” replaced the classification “non-Catholic.” The group “nonreligious” appears first in the 1940 Census, but not yet differentiated from those of undeclared religion. Only in 1960 are these two categories, “nonreligious” and “undeclared religion,” distinguished from one other.

It is also interesting to note that in the 1980 Census, the category “nonreligious” includes atheists. Three decades later, in the 2010 Census, the class “nonreligious” is subdivided into three distinct subgroups: nonreligious, atheists and agnostics. Likewise, for the first time, the term “multiple affiliations” appears in the Census, associated with the category “undetermined religion.”

Some authors associate the advent of the nonreligion category in the 1960 Census with critical structural changes in Brazilian society. Among the changes mentioned earlier, the ones that seem most significantly associated with the phenomenon of nonreligion are a steady decline in the birth rate; an increase in non-legal marriages; increased education levels (ANTONNIAZZI, 2002: 87 *apud* CAMURÇA, 2017: 55); and dissociation between sex life and marriage. According to the academic literature, these changes indicate a decline in the weight of religious authority (NOVAES, 2013 *apud* CAMURÇA, 2017: 56). On the other hand, authors such as Antonniazzi (2003: 77) argue that the novelty indicated in the 1960 Census is not due to an increase in the actual number of nonreligious people, but to an increasing number of people who are no longer afraid to assume publicly such a position.

b) The Census category “nonreligion” in the academic literature.

In Brazilian censuses, the question asked is, “what is your religion or cult?”. Until 1981, respondents had to choose an answer from a fixed set of responses. From 1890 to 1960, the Census did not differentiate nonreligious from undeclared religion. The Census also attempted to refine its description of religious diversity by multiplying the number

of available responses. The prominence given to the delineation of various religious segments might explain why those who did not claim to be religious were classified as “nonreligious,” in the sense of “without religion.” Remarkably, as this demographic segment starts to become increasingly visible, the nonreligious category becomes incorporated in academic literature as an analytical framework and even a specific research field.

c) Criticisms of the category “nonreligion.”

Many authors tried to understand the particularity of the phenomenon of nonreligion in Brazil. They frequently point out that the Census question, “what is your religion or cult?”, does not take into account some already well-known characteristics of the Brazilian religious landscape, such as:

- Regardless of what people say to the Census, they are quite comfortable circulating through different religions (MONTERO; ALMEIDA, 2001; MATRIZ, 1994).
- The methodology of classification of religions does not capture the heterogeneity of the Protestant field, with its multiple belongings, transits, and syncretisms (TEIXEIRA, 2013: 77).
- Due to the phenomenon of syncretism, people who attend Kardecist and even Afro-Brazilian cults may declare themselves Catholics (RODRIGUES, 2000: 26).
- Evangelicals do not always discriminate which denomination they go to, so the classifications “generic evangelical,” “undetermined evangelical” (1991), “evangelicals without institutional ties” (2000), may overlap with nonreligious respondents. Evangelical census agents sometimes registered non-practicing Catholics as nonreligious (RODRIGUES, 2012: 1130).

Therefore, the growth in nonreligion may be due to, in part, a misclassification by census agents. It is impossible to know whether a person classified as nonreligious has a religious bond or not (MARIANO, 2010: 130). It is undeniable that the nonreligious category has encountered resistance in academic debate, because of this controversy. While some consider that it represents a valid social group, others state that it does not reflect reality, being, above all, a misleading census category.

Juliana Magaldi, the author of the first dissertation on nonreligion in Brazil, argues that “we are not talking about studies of an ethnographically situated group; on the contrary, what we have is a category that has no contours or precise definition”

(MAGALDI, 2009: 72). This critique questions the validity of the category, as it may be capturing a variety of indiscriminately grouped religious phenomena. Regardless of this criticism of the class “nonreligion,” the term has become widely used in academic literature.

3.Review of Brazilian Social Science literature on nonreligion

Several qualitative studies of nonreligion had been conducted in Brazil since the end of the 1990 decade. The fact that the first data on nonreligion came to light from censuses has inevitably stimulated attempts to define this segment. The effort to depict nonreligion as a group was based on how members of the group responded to questions of location, age, gender, race, class (ROMERO JACOB, 2003), and also through opinion polls (on abortion, voting, family, politics, public policy, science, and customs).

As a result, based on the 2000 and 2010 Census reports, some studies emphasize that the nonreligious are young (with an average age of 26 years), predominantly male (9.7% are men, compared to 6.4% women) (FLAVIO Ribeiro 2014: 327), not racially differentiated (3.78% black and 3.19% white), with education levels between incomplete elementary (39.2%), complete elementary and incomplete high school, (20.2%), complete high school to incomplete undergraduate (25.2%). In terms of income, the poorest stands out as the largest segment of nonreligious.

There are very few respondents who declare themselves nonreligious that did not grow up in a religious family (VILLASENOR, 2011: 3). The majority of nonreligious, approximately 70%, grew up in families with a religious affiliation (DENISE, 2012: 1141). They are more present among the urban population (8.5%) than the rural community (5.3%). Excepting the South region (4.8%), the nonreligious are close to the national average in the Southeast (9%), Northeast (8.3%), North and Midwest (7.7%). But, for reasons that still have to be explained, 16 of the 27 Brazilian capitals surpass the national average of 8.04% of self-declared nonreligious:

CHART II

Capitals with Non-Religion rates above National Average

Region	Capital	Percentage
North and Northeast	Salvador	17.64
	Rio Branco	15.93
	Boa Vista	11.19
	Recife	14.59
Southeast	Rio de Janeiro	13.59
	Vitória	10.73
	São Paulo	09.38
South	Florianópolis	11.93
	Porto Alegre	10.69

- In the North and Northeast, four capitals present rates above the national average: Salvador (17.64%), Rio Branco (15.93%), Boa Vista (15.19%) and Recife (14.59%).

- In the Southeast, three are above the national average: Rio de Janeiro is in sixth place with 13.59%, Vitória in eighth place with 10.73%, and, finally, São Paulo in 12th place, with 9.38%.

- Nonreligion located in the South region, whose province rates are lower than the national average, include Florianópolis with 11.93% in seventh place and Porto Alegre, with 10.69%, in ninth place (FLAVIO Ribeiro 2014: 327).

One can also note other differences within the Southeast region. It is the region of the most Catholic state in the country (Minas Gerais, with 70.43% Catholics and 20.19% evangelicals); and a slightly less Catholic state than the national average (São Paulo with 60.06% Catholics and 24.08% evangelicals), and two far less Catholic and more evangelical states than the regional average (Rio de Janeiro with 45.81% Catholics, 29.37% evangelicals, and 13.59% nonreligious; and Espírito Santo, with 53.29% Catholics and 33.12% evangelicals) (NOVAES, 2013: 180).

Schultz's work (2005: 28) develops the hypothesis that the percentage of nonreligion in a state is directly related to the proportion of Catholics and evangelicals:

the more Catholic a population group is, the lower the percentage of nonreligion. On the other hand, the more balanced the ratio between Catholics and evangelicals, the more significant the proportion of nonreligion. Therefore, the decline of the Catholic population, associated with the increase of the Christian community, is accompanied by a growth in nonreligion in Brazil.

The Understanding Unbelief Project (2019), funded by the John Templeton Foundation, also collected some interesting data in Brazil, mainly about atheists and agnostics that are a specific segment, and not at all very significant in numbers, of the nonbelievers. Some of the key findings of this project confirm the results of Brazilian literature, such as a majority of unbelievers were brought up as Christians; family and freedom are the two central unbelievers values; and only a minor segment of them hold the idea that the universe is “meaningless.”

4. Review of the research areas and axes of research

(source: Ph.D. theses and dissertations on nonreligion registered on CAPES national database).

In the review of theses and dissertations undertaken by Henrique Antunes, which were gathered in the national database, it was possible to delineate some of the main analytical frameworks, arguments, and approaches developed in different fields of studies of nonreligion in Brazil. Three main axes divided this research field: a) works dedicated to investigating the category “nonreligion”, focusing on studies of deinstitutionalization and religious mobility; b) works on atheism in Brazil; c) works that examine the issue of religion (or its absence) in relation to topics such as health and life quality.

a) Non-religious group affiliation studies.

Studies on religious disaffiliation are older, dating from the 1980s. Until 1985, researchers’ primary interests were the conversion and recruitment of evangelicals (FRIGÉRIO, 1993, quoted by LUIZ, 2013). In the Social Science literature of the 1980s, the consensus was that deconversion would break affective community bonds and lead individuals to view the world more subjectively.

Thus, the debate concerning religious deinstitutionalization is earlier to the problematization of the category “nonreligion” in the academic literature. Before the consolidation of nonreligion as a category in the academic field, these segments had been

defined within the framework of studies of new religious movements, and portrayed as “disaffiliated” (PIERUCCI, 2004b) or deconverted (FRIGÉRIO, 1993).

A significant number of works focused on the theme of religious disaffiliation, influencing the debate on nonreligion in Brazil. This literature presents a set of descriptive elements and categories that were later incorporated into dissertations and theses on the subject of nonreligion.

Among the significant theoretical references that guided this debate, it is useful to highlight Pierucci and Prandi’s (1996) work. Their book presents the results of the first research that sought to map the Brazilian religious landscape based on census data. This work echoed throughout the academic literature, becoming the first attempt to profile nonreligion based on statistical elements. Pierucci's later works (2004, 2006) are also recurring references in dissertations and theses on nonreligion, especially researches that focus on the crisis of belonging that affects the main religious traditions in Brazil. These works describe a scenario in which traditional ties lose meaning and affiliation as religious traditions decline, giving rise to new forms of bonding, especially those associated with a globalized, fluid, and individualized society (MAGALDI, 2008: 76).

At the same time, research based on the 2000 Census were conducted in states where the presence of nonreligion was significant. That methodological choice is discernible in the works of Novaes (2002, 2004, 2006), Fernandes (2009), and Rodrigues (2012), who studied the social profiles of young people from the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Regina Novaes, for example, emphasizes the tendency of young people to adopt new forms of religious belief, while they reject what they understand to be religion – that is, any belonging to religious institutions (NOVAES, 2004).

Here one finds the argument that we now face a new configuration of a globalized society, in which beliefs circulate and are appropriated by individuals as if they were consumers of religious goods, without traditional institutional mediations. According to authors such as Rodrigues (2012: 1143), the unconverted are not turning against religion, but against religious institutions. Based on this assumption, more recent studies have been devoted to describing “the religion of the nonreligious” (NOVAES, 2004; CAMURÇA, 2006; RODRIGUES, 2007; 2011; 2012; LUIZ, 2013; BROTO and OLIVEIRA, 2018). In works that emphasize disaffiliation, the nonreligious are distinguished from atheists because the former claim to believe in God, and take pride in their relationship to him, although they are not affiliated with any religious institution.

Moreover, the rising numbers captured by the Census concerning nonreligion have been directly associated with the phenomenon of Protestant disaffiliation. Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira (2012) suggests that “disaffiliation”, “undetermined evangelical” and “nonreligious” Census categories are ambiguous. Hence, there is a positive correlation between the growth of Neopentecostal Protestantism and the growth of nonreligion. One can say that, initially, the category was associated with people with previous familial or ecclesiastical experience in the evangelical universe³ (LUIZ, 2013).

Other research that focused on describing the nonreligious category sought to organize them into different typologies. Fernandes (2016) proposes four types: a) those who have their peculiar religiosity, appropriating elements and fragments from different religious traditions; b) nonbelievers and those detached from religious institutions to which they previously belonged; c) religious critics; and d) atheists. Since the distribution presented by the Census indicates that atheists (0.32%) and agnostics (0.07%) are minority subsegments of nonreligion, most studies have focused on examining a paradox: the “religion of nonreligion” (see the anecdote at the end).

CHART III – Nonreligious Population in Brazil-2000-2010

Year	2000	2010
Category		
Nonreligious	7.35%	7.65%
Atheists	-	0.32%
Agnostic	-	0.07%
Undetermined and multiple belongings	0.44%	0.49%

Source: IBGE, Demographic Census

b) Atheism.

Most of the research on atheism focuses on atheistic authors and groups. The common ground of this research is the discussion of atheism as an ontological and ethical possibility, defending the propositional capacity of atheistic thought, understood as a substitute for religion, to provide moral foundations.

³ This disaffiliation has been a main concern for Christian media, pastors, theologians, and researchers of religious sciences.

From a universe of 663 theses and dissertations surveyed by André Dirceu Gerardi, 23 met the criterion of having atheism as their main subject⁴. That is, the word “atheism” was incorporated in the title, abstract, or keywords. There are sixteen dissertations and seven theses distributed in six fields: Science of Religion (10), Philosophy (6), History (3), Law (2), Communication (1), Anthropology (1). The academic literature is recent, the oldest research being only five years old. In 2014, there were five senior theses; in 2015, three; in 2016, two; 2017, five; and in 2018, eight, suggesting a growing interest in the subject.

Rafael Quintanilha examined three research studies of reactions to the atheist movement in Brazil. Among them, two studies focus on the Brazilian Association of Atheists and Agnostics (ATEA). One examined the treatment given by leading media outlets in Brazil to ATEA, and on the institution’s public response as it resorted to alternative media as a way to bypass its lack of visibility. The other study on ATEA addressed its atheist discourse and critique of religion, and its legal activism, which focuses mainly on the constitutionality of public religious education in Brazil. Atheism in social media also appears as a new research theme. One work analyzes how social media has been used as a virtual outlet for atheistic proselytizing. These works indicate a growing interest in atheism in Brazil, attesting to the fact that its reactive and combative presence has been gaining popularity and visibility in the Brazilian public space.

In turn, the press has echoed themes of atheism, agnosticism, secularism, and the phenomenon of nonreligion since the 2000s. These topics entered the discussion in 2006, and more entirely in 2009. The growth in interest followed the publication of the Third National Human Rights Plan, which provoked strong reactions in Brazilian society; and the release of preliminary Census data in 2010, which signaled the growth of Christian and nonreligious populations. These events, among other controversial subjects, had an impact in the 2010 presidential elections. Since then, they remain a frequent topic on the media’s agenda. From 2000 to 2019, the newspaper “O Estado de S. Paulo” produced, for example, 1,233 articles on these issues, 51% of which were published from 2009 to 2013. Atheism and agnosticism were the subjects of 60% of the articles (742 of 1,233). In one-third of the sample, the terms “atheism,” “agnosticism,” and “nonreligion” appear together with the words “secularism” and “secular” (410 of 1,233).

⁴ Initially, it was intended to incorporate to the survey studies on humanism. However, these works seemed to move away from the debate on religion. One exception: J. Rolim's (2018) dissertation on Jacques Maritain’s Integral Thomistic Humanism.

c) Health

The issue of health is one of the least expressive when it comes to nonreligion. However, it is worth mentioning that we found some titles that address the issue of religiosity or its absence in correlation with the quality of life. One of the studies, for example, focuses on the quality of life of three main groups of young adults in the city of São Paulo: Protestants, atheists, and nonreligious. We also found a dissertation on psychology focusing on extra sensorimotor experiences and their relation with beliefs and well-being. Despite the low number of works, this new research could be seen as a possible new field of investigation focusing on the relation between religiosity (or its absence), and health and quality of life.

d) Law

Camila Nicácio's survey of the legal literature on nonreligion highlights two preliminary considerations. First, the majority of the works – books or articles – refer mostly to “religious freedom,” even though the search keywords used were “atheists,” “agnostics,” and “nonreligion.” Second, the research describes “nonreligion” as lacking political visibility. In other words, it is not possible to identify a political demand from a nonreligious segment that could become represented by a political group. This pattern is different, for example, from groups marked by other identity guidelines, especially those focused on gender and minority rights.

One can also find works that stress the need to reduce the presence of religion in public affairs, and to draw a precise line between state and religion. These discussions are based on the idea that “secularism” and “state neutrality” are the primary means to protect religious freedom itself. These works belong mainly to areas of constitutional law, comparative law, and international human rights law. In this literature, religious freedom is described as a fundamental human right, protected by national, regional and global systems, which is subject to collision with other rights and guarantees, especially freedom of speech. This literature explores a wide range of issues, such as euthanasia, abortion, blood transfusion, religious teaching in public schools, religious proselytizing in corporations, and legal actions against the display of religious symbols in public spaces.

Although the category “nonreligion” is not addressed directly by the majority of these works, there are references to “the choice of no religion,” “those who have no

religion,” “no religion at all,” “unbelieving person,” “unbelief,” in addition to commonly used categories such as “atheists,” “agnostics,” “new atheists,” etc.

One could hypothesize that this gap in the legal literature is due to traditionalism, the normative stance of legal discourse (which is more focused on “what should be” than “what is”), and to the predominance of other scientific fields, especially the social sciences, regarding nonreligion.

It is pointless to argue that the low rate of nonreligion in Brazil (8.1% of the population in 2010) explains the limited interest in the subject. The lack of a proper definition of nonreligion seems to introduce another difficulty. What is “nonreligion”? On the one hand, it is settled in the literature that “religion” does not necessarily mean “institution” (DAVIE, 1990). On the other hand, people classified as “nonreligious” frequently are religious, or, to say the least, recognize themselves as having some religiosity, despite not having any institutional affiliation. These are, however, initial assumptions and deserve more investigation.

e) Media representation

Major exhibitions of atheism and nonreligious phenomena in the media increased after 2008. In an exploratory analysis of these themes in the *Estado de São Paulo* newspaper from 2000 to 2019, we found 1233 articles. Of those, 51% highlight the aspects of religious transition in the country (increased evangelical population and reduction of Catholic's followers). Journalists reflect on the subject and disseminate specific versions of the phenomena. Additionally, the nonreligious category was included in the 2014 and 2018 presidential polling. These are some initial observations which require further investigation.

5. Possible research questions

The existing Censuses are not yet fully explored. It is possible to address the issue “*Who are the non-religious in Brazil?*” using this data to better describe this segment in terms of region, class, education, race, and gender.

Are nonreligious youth very different from the overall Brazilian population? What are their views on subjects such as politics, justice, morality, pluralism, etc.?

The existing data indicate that the majority of Brazilians unbelievers believe in God. Is there a new kind of spirituality being shaped?

How are the nonreligious portrayed by social and popular media?

Law:

In the legal framework of religious freedom and pluralism, are the nonreligious protected as much as the religious? How, and through which arenas and tools, are the nonreligious organized to try to create inflections in the law, especially regarding the rights that involve life (euthanasia); sexual and reproductive health and freedom (abortion); or work (holidays, festivities and religious obligations within the workplace, etc.)? Do nonreligious organizations collaborate with progressive religious movements on social action? On what basis do they express their collaboration? While atheists are stigmatized in Brazil, the nonreligious are not. Atheists are consequently more visible in legal claims. How do they mobilize and interact with law? How does the legal system react to them? Does a secularist position towards religion dominate the legal system?

Education:

Following the decision of the Supreme Court on religious education, a new field of observation/investigation into the insertion of religious and nonreligious minority beliefs in public schools is opened, given the historical Catholic predominance of teaching in Brazil. Some issues arising from this are connected with the "law" axis, especially regarding the religious freedom of minorities (religious or not) and the "imposition" in practice of non-inclusive religious education. For example: according to the judgment of the Brazilian Supreme Court in 2017, confessional religious teaching in public schools does not affect the principle of State laicity.

On the other side, evangelicals in the National Congress invested in debates about public education. In the 2010 presidential elections, pastors used Census data to underscore the importance of evangelicals in politics. Since 2014, they have proposed the "Escola sem Partido" program and bills to change the educational law. The purpose of religious deputies is to ban the "indoctrination" and the teaching "gender ideology" and sexuality, especially in public schools. Since 2016, deputies have accused the history and sociology professors to making "Marxist" and "atheist" "indoctrination" in public schools to destroy

the traditional family. In the 2018 elections, they were part of candidate Jair Bolsonaro's rhetoric. The current Bolsonaro's education minister uses this ideology to justify the implementation of public education policies (anti-gender and school militarization).

6. Annotated bibliography on religion/nonreligion

Social Science

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