



Article

The Structure of Beliefs and Religious Practices in Spain: A Three-Part Society?

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the structure of religious beliefs and practices in Spain today. In order to approach this task, we have developed a research design that revolves around two analytical cores. The first is of a more descriptive–argumentative nature, where we present the Spanish religious reality by studying available data from relevant statistical sources, specifically, the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* and the *Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso*. The second is of a more critical–reflexive nature, where we establish whether the available data offer an effectively exhaustive view of the Spanish religious reality in a post-secular context—that is, whether it reflects the existing scenario of religious pluralism, diversity and heterogeneity or whether, on the contrary, it merely reinforces dynamics linked to the General Theory of Secularization, emphasizing narratives that focus on the crisis of the religious and on the incompatibility between the religious and the secular.

Keywords: secular; religious; post-secular; three-part society; Spain

1. Introduction

In recent decades, we have witnessed a transformation in the Spanish religious structure. This observation has already been studied by other specialists, such as Alfonso Pérez-Agote (2012) and, more recently, Rafael Ruiz Andrés (2022). Our concept offers a complementary approach in this introduction¹. Spain has moved from a religious scenario with a high degree of homogeneity and fundamentally ascribed to Catholicism to one in which two other courses of action have unfolded: the first, of a marked and manifestly religious nature, oriented towards a greater heterogeneity or diversity in terms of ways of being religious; the second, a course of action linked to the rise in the category of ‘non-religion’ (Ruiz Andrés 2024) or of ‘the nones’ (Burge 2021). Thus, in the case of Catholic ascription, the presence of religious minorities stems from migratory flows experienced in recent decades and the rise in ‘the nones’, resulting in the current triple religious reality (or parts) of Spain².

Before advancing further in our argument, and in order to understand how the transition from a religiously homogeneous society to another one that revolves around the three parts mentioned above took place, we must go back a few decades and situate ourselves in a political–religious scenario in which the Catholic Church acted as a ‘family’ of the ‘regime’—that is, as a core or as one of the main actors around which revolved what in historiography is known as Franco’s regime, a dictatorship that was totalitarian and autarchic in nature (at least until the 1960s), and which had developed in Spain by the end of the Civil War (1936–1939) until Franco’s death (1975). This political context



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allowed Catholicism, at least formally, to continue to implement a sort of moral hegemony over Spanish society, managing to slow down and/or formally disguise the secularization process which had begun previously and continued during Franco's regime. This concept was defended by authors such as Rafael Ruiz Andrés (2022). Additionally, other European societies at that time, for example, the French or British, were in more advanced stages.

From our point of view, the end of Franco's regime serves as a milestone in the transition (religious, not political) we are referring to in a dual sense: on the one hand, as the starting point of the manifest and effective emancipation process of the civil sphere of activity with respect to the ecclesiastical institution, once the latter had ceased to be an element of control and social pressure from its position of the 'family of the regime', meaning it formally lost its hegemonic–moral status over society; on the other, we understand that the existing link between the Catholic Church and Franco's regime acted as an accelerator, favouring this change—among other things, as a consequence of identifying the retrograde and undesirable nature of Franco's regime and Catholicism and the modern and desirable with democracy and the decline of religious belief and practice. Therefore, the Spanish socio-political context at the end of Franco's regime and the beginning of the Transition favoured the development of narratives that reinforced the theories defended by the General Theory of Secularization.

The comments in the previous paragraphs reveal our first significant argument: much of the rapid and profound transformation experienced by Spanish society in the last fifty years related to religious matters can be explained as a reaction to the hegemonic nature Catholicism had held since at least the end of the Middle Ages. However, we must emphasize at this point the existence of a specific socio-political scenario in which an authoritarian regime (Franco's regime) acquired much of its legitimacy from establishing alliances with the Spanish Church.

Thus, the end of Franco's regime and the beginning of the Transition to democracy (1975–1982) had a dual effect: a gradual social disaffection with respect to Catholicism and a corresponding rise in 'the nones'. This second category, made up of groups such as atheists, agnostics and/or those who identify themselves as non-believers, indifferent or nothing in particular when asked about their religious affiliation has grown in recent decades, offering an accurate measure of the process of disengagement from Catholicism that Spanish society has experienced since the 1980s. It is important to emphasize that, according to data, one of the features that define the Spanish cultural secularization programme (Gil-Gimeno 2017) is the development of a differentiation dynamic with respect to Catholicism formulated in the form of adscription to 'the nones'.

Beyond the fact that the existence of this category is in itself relevant in acquiring a real awareness of the disaffection process experienced with respect to Catholicism in Spain, we also understand that it is essential to pay attention to the heterogeneity of the groups that comprise it. For example, as undertaken in other contexts such as the United States (Burge 2021; Pew Research Center 2024) or Britain (Woodhead 2016), the degree of activism or proactivity against traditional church religion (in the case of Spain, Catholicism) shown by atheists is greater than that of agnostics, which may also be greater than that of indifferent people. In this sense, reported studies have indicated that those in Britain and the United States opting for 'nothing in particular' or 'indifferent' could be deemed the least militant with regard to this issue, followed by agnostics and atheists—the latter being the most militant. Further research by Burge (2021, p. 114) and Campbell et al. (2020) argues that a direct distinction can be established within those who opt for 'the none' between those who identify themselves as 'non-religious' (indifferent and nothing in particular) and those who can be termed 'secular' (atheists and agnostics): "Secular individuals have left behind a religious worldview and now utilize a paradigm that is based on logic and science to

guide them through life (...) a non-religious person is defined by what they are not. They don't go to church, they don't pray, they don't believe that religion is important in their life, but they don't adopt a secular outlook on life either" (Burge 2021, p. 114). Thus, in terms of proactivity vis-à-vis historical religious categories (Bellah 1969), we find nuances among the different collectives that make up 'the nones'.

Similarly, it would be interesting to analyse whether, indeed, 'the nones' are proactive or indifferent toward any form of religiosity or whether they are so in the face of those of a historical (Bellah 1969) or universal (Weber 1983) nature. What the data measure, and therefore what they tell us, is linked to these religious forms. Now, can we state categorically that atheists, agnostics or indifferent people do not develop sacralization dynamics? How would they then position themselves in the face of secular sacralization processes such as those experienced by the nation or the individual—to mention some of the most significant ones—in today's societies?

What has been described in the previous paragraphs makes us aware that in order to continue delving deeper into the religious reality of 'the nones' in Spain, it is necessary to focus on establishing this dual logic in terms of approach: on the one hand, joint or centred on the homogeneity that this category treasures and, on the other, differentiated or centred on the heterogeneity of the groups that comprise it. In this way, we will be able to approach the religious group that is growing most at the present time with firmer guarantees.

The second feature of the current Spanish religious situation is the increase in religious pluralism (Berger 2014). Evidently, the rupture of the moral hegemony enjoyed by the Catholic Church over society as a whole implies a process of openness to diversity that manifests itself in a dual sense: in terms of the rise of 'the nones' and in terms of the presence and development of a series of historical religious forms (Bellah 1969), albeit not Catholics. With regard to the latter, the immigration dynamics experienced by Spanish society since the end of the 1990s have necessarily contributed to this. These migratory processes have introduced a series of religious practices and beliefs that do not cease growing, albeit moderately, as we will observe in the following section. This vitality and relative strength of historical (Bellah 1969) or universal (Weber 1983) religious forms such as Islam, Orthodox Christianity or Evangelicalism, among others, call into question the theory that secularization necessarily implies a decline in the belief and practice of these types of religions. At the same time, it reinforces the theory defended above, in which we pointed out that the Spanish cultural secularization programme can be better explained if it is understood as a reaction toward, firstly, the cultural and religious hegemony historically enjoyed by Catholicism, and secondly, the alliance established between Church and State during Franco's regime.

Based on the above, the objective set out by this paper is twofold: on the one hand, to analyse in what terms the transformation of the Spanish religious scenario has taken place on the basis of the data provided by solid statistical sources such as the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) and the Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso (data based on some studies undertaken by the CIS); on the other, and once the previous objective has been fulfilled, to question whether in a context of religious pluralism and intramundane action orientation and its meaning—of secular age in Charles Taylor's (2007) terms—it is appropriate to approach the religious phenomenon exclusively from the standpoint of its identification with historical religion (Bellah 1969). In other words, we want to critically analyse whether the statistics on religiosity that we have at our disposal allow us to approach the phenomenon in all its complexity and heterogeneity—that is, whether they take into consideration the multiple forms that religion can acquire today, including the historical (Bellah 1969) and secular (Aron 1944). In the particular case of Spain, changes have even occurred during recent decades in terms of who is understood to be a

believer or a religious person, especially in the case of identifying as a Catholic (or how this religious affiliation is felt and/or practised). Some of these issues are addressed in the following pages.

2. Religious Reality in Spain Through Statistical Sources

The religious reality in Spain has attracted the attention of many academics, especially with the restoration of democracy in 1978 and incorporation of the recognition of religious freedom into the regulatory framework. One of the focuses of interest in the study of religion in Spanish society has been that of sociological change, which has been very significant in terms of the transformations that have taken place since the end of the 1970s, as we pointed out in the introduction. Enormous academic output is based on these areas of interest, which revolves around various focuses or themes, such as religion and society (Díaz-Salazar and Giner 1993; Pérez-Vilariño 2003); the decline of religiosity (Comas 2004; Pérez-Agote 2005; Urrutia León 2010); the role of religion in public life (Díaz-Salazar 2007, 2008; Pérez-Agote and Santiago 2008); other forms of religion and replacement of religion (Sáez de la Fuente Aldama 2002); the future of religion (Pérez-Vilariño 1995; Tornos and Aparicio 1995; Mardones 2003); and everything related to the new religious plurality (Pérez-Agote 2005)³. The following provides data illustrating some of these changes, evolutions and possible future trends.

The first question to be considered is the evolution of the socio-religious self-identification of the Spanish population. The data clearly show the transformation in the religious structure to which we referred at the beginning of this paper. As we can see in Table 1, the data provided from 1965 to the present show a clear trend in three directions: firstly, a clear decrease in the percentage of the population that identifies itself as Catholic, which is an indicator of the decline of traditional and hegemonic Catholic religiosity in the country; secondly, and in parallel with this decline, it can be observed how the presence of people linked to other religious traditions has increased over these decades, especially those of the 21st century, with a percentage being consolidated that, although small, is significant and moderately growing; lastly, the third direction we highlight is that of the group that does not identify with any traditional religious tradition, is indifferent to them or considers themselves to represent agnostic and/or atheist people. This is the segment of the population that has grown the most in recent decades, approaching percentages that are increasingly similar to those of the majority (Catholics). With regard to this group ('the nones') and with the data disaggregated by age group, it is a varied group, as we have already pointed out, albeit—and this is what we consider important to stress at this point in the discussion—with a significant and growing presence.

Table 1. Socio-religious self-identification of the Spanish population (1965–2024). Percentages are shown horizontally.

Year	Catholics	Other Religions	Non-Believers, Indifferent (and Atheists)	DK/NA
1965	98	0.0	2.0	0.0
1975	88	0.2	2.0	4.0
1985	87	1.0	11.0	2.0
1988	81	1.0	13.0	5.0
2002	80	1.5	11.5	7.0
2005	79	2.0	17.0	2.0
2009	76	2.0	20.0	2.0

Table 1. *Cont.*

Year	Catholics	Other Religions	Non-Believers, Indifferent (and Atheists)	DK/NA
2015	69.6	2.7	25.9	1.8
2019	68.7	2.4	26.5	2.4
2021	60.1	2.5	36.4	1.1
2024	59.1	5.8	40.4	1.9

Sources: Díaz-Salazar and Giner (1993, p. 133); Pérez-Agote and Santiago (2008, p. 179); CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018, 2024).

In Table 2, the breakdown of the population that identifies with some religious tradition (Catholic or one of the minority denominations) is expanded so that the evolution over the last few decades in each of these population segments can be observed. In addition to what has already been observed in the previous table (decline in the Catholic segment and increase in that of other religions), it can be seen how the Catholic population is the most numerous within the various religious traditions established on Spanish territory. Following this group, albeit with a good number of percentage points' difference, it can be observed how the Protestant, Muslim and Orthodox traditions are the most numerous among the minority confessions (accounting for slightly more than one percent), while the rest barely reach 0.5% each (of the total population).

Table 2. Evolution of socio-religious breakdown.

Confessionality	1998	2008	2018
Catholic	83.7	73.8	64.8
Muslim	0.2	1.3	1.5
Buddhist	0	0.1	0.3
Protestant	0.2	0.7	1.1
Jehovah's Witness	0.2	-	0.3
Christian	-	0.1	0.3
Orthodox	-	0.7	1.1
Other	0.1	-	0.1
None	13.8	21.1	28.6
NA	1.8	2.2	0.9
Total	100	100	99.9

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018).

Delving a little deeper into religious practice and the degree of religiosity of the Spanish population, in this case, with information from all the segments of the population shown in the previous tables, the data collected in Tables 3–5 provides information about the evolution of the degree of religiosity, attendance at weekly services and the practice of prayer. All of these are key factors⁴ in measuring the degree of belief and practice linked to the profession of faith in contexts of historical religiosity (Bellah 1969), and they help us to scrutinize this reality with greater guarantees. We would like to emphasize at this point that the data collected in these tables refer to the group of people who have shown themselves to be believers in some of the religions established in the country. It should be noted that the Catholic group, being the majority, may be over-represented. In any case, these are data on developments of interest to the study at hand.

Table 3. Evolution of degree of religiosity.

Degree of Religiosity	1998	2008	2018
Religious (extremely/somewhat religious)	56.3	43.8	35.4
Neither religious nor non-religious	12.2	24.3	22.4
Non-religious (extremely/somewhat non-religious)	30.7	31.9	41
NA	0.3	0.8	1.1
Total	100	100	99.9

Source: CIS ([Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018](#)).

Table 4. Evolution of religious practice (attendance at religious offices).

Attendance at Religious Offices	1998	2008	2018
Never	19.5	38.8	49.7
Several times per year	37.3	17.9	26.5
Several times per month	15.8	15.2	8.3
Several times per week	26.6	19.7	14.7
NA	0.7	2.9	0.8
Total	99.9	100	100

Source: CIS ([Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018](#)).

Table 5. Evolution of religious practices (prayer).

Prayer	1998	2008	2018
Never	28.2	35.1	42.5
Several times per year	19.9	17.7	16.9
Several times per month	8.5	8.8	6.1
Several times per week	14.3	15.9	19
One or more times per day	22.2	21.3	18.7
NA	1.3	1.3	1.8
Total	100	100.1	100

Source: CIS ([Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 1998, 2008, 2018](#)).

Table 3 shows how there is a decrease in the general degree of religiosity while the increase in the non-religious sector occurs in practically the same numbers as that decrease, which in principle seems to indicate a clear transfer from one category to the other. At the same time, the percentage of the population that falls between the two represents almost a quarter of the population (22.4% in 2018), remaining stable between 2008 and 2018, after having experienced a clear boom in the previous decade (1998 to 2008), in the course of which the group represented by this category doubled.

If we look at the level of religious practice, we *do* observe a considerable decrease, fundamentally in terms of attendance at religious services (beyond celebrations linked to rites of passage or more social rites, such as baptism and marriage or funerals). The percentage of people who practise on a weekly or monthly basis barely accounts for a quarter of the population (both categories added together represent 23% of the sample), as can be seen in Table 4. The similarity between the data referring to attendance at religious offices and frequency of prayer could lead us to understand that the privatization theory—the second sub-theory of the General Theory of Secularization according to José Casanova ([Casanova 2012a](#))—is not a dominant trend in the Spanish secularizing cultural

programme. Against this argument, we would like to provide two nuances: firstly, that prayer can perfectly well take place in a congregational context or religious office—that is, it does not have to be a reliable indicator of privatization of religion (Luckmann 1973; Beck 2009; Warner 2005); secondly, that the statistics consulted do not differentiate between the frequency of prayer in a privatized context and in a congregational one, and so we cannot use this indicator as a reliable measure of the degree of privatization of religion.

If we compare the percentages referring to belief in terms of those who undertake religious practice—measured using these two indicators (prayer and attendance at services)—we can affirm that the Spanish evolutionary trend points directly to the phenomenon that Grace Davie defined as *believing without belonging* (Davie 1994) in the British case. What we have just commented does not imply the existence of two opposing trends between belief and practice, but rather indicates that the ‘decline’ that both are experiencing is more pronounced in practice, and within practice in the communitarian–ecclesiastical sphere of activity. At this point, it is important to remember the general distribution of data about religiosity, since the hegemony that Catholicism continues to enjoy over the other religions present in Spain—in a minority situation—means that the orientation of their responses is over-represented in the sample. Therefore, we must point out that the dynamic of *believing without belonging* is experienced above all by Catholicism.

Up to this point, we have been able to observe the socio-religious evolution of the Spanish population to date. In order to try to decipher or point out what direction it may take in the near future, it is interesting to analyse data about religiosity according to age segments. In Table 6, we gather the most current data about religiosity by age groups, grouping together the three trends which, in some way, reflect the structure of beliefs in Spanish society (Catholics, people who do not belong to any denomination and those identified with minority religions). If the breakdown logic observed in these tables is maintained over the coming years, the group expected to grow the most as the years go by is that of ‘the nones’.

Table 6. Religiosity by age (distribution by age group).

Years (Age)	Catholics	Believers of Other Religions	Non-Believers, Agnostic, Indifferent (and Atheists)	DK/NA	Total
From 18 to 24 years old	31.6	14	540	0.4	100
From 25 to 34 years old	34.5	10.5	54	1	100
From 35 to 44 years old	43.9	5.5	48.6	2	100
From 45 to 54 years old	50.8	5.5	42.2	1.5	100
From 55 to 64 years old	60.7	3.4	33.5	2.4	100
From 65 to 74 years old	63.7	3.6	30.1	2.6	100
75 and over	76.5	1.4	19.5	2.6	100

Source: CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas 2024).

Table 6 offers us several cases of interesting data. In the first place, Catholicism experiences a clear increase in ascription as age increases (an impact that increases from 31.6% among young people between 18 and 24 years of age to 76.5% among those over 75 years of age). This scenario seems to show—without ever losing sight of the fact that social reality cannot escape contingency dynamics that could reverse, qualify or emphasize this type of trend—that Catholicism will continue to lose weight in Spanish society in the coming decades. The situation regarding religious minorities points to a different scenario: their greatest impact is to be found in the age cohorts to which the youngest people belong (14% among those aged 18 to 24 and 1.4% among those aged 75 and over). Although

less than 1/6 of young people belonging to these religious groups identify themselves as such, the fact is that growth by age group is gradual, which points to a trend towards a greater presence of this type of religiosity in the future scenario in Spain; thirdly, we are approaching the situation in which 'the nones' find themselves: their logic is similar to that of religious minorities, but their impact on the social group is greater. In numerical terms, the results range from 54% among people aged 18 to 24 and 25 to 34 to 19.5% of those over 75. This points to a clear trend towards growth in this group in the future, again provided that the factors and the trend remain stable.

In short, three trends that have been consolidated over the last few decades can be highlighted from the data in the tables above. In the first place, there has been a boom in the 'the nones' group. Parallel to the increase in this segment, and in the opposite direction, there has been a decline in the belief and practice of Catholicism in terms of believing without belonging. Lastly, there has been an increase in belief in other confessions, although the volume of the population found in this category is at a considerable distance from the two majority groups. However, analysis of the data distribution by age reveals that the impact of these religious minorities is greater among the younger age cohorts, which points to a growth in this group in the medium term.

3. Analysis of Certain *pars pro toto* Dynamics in Statistical Approaches to the Reality of the Religious Phenomena

This paper has so far focused on analysing the current religious situation in Spain based on the data offered by the different statistical institutions consulted (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas and Observatorio del Pluralismo Religioso), but in this section, we would like to dwell briefly on an important issue which, from our point of view, clearly conditions the approach to the religious phenomenon in all its breadth and complexity. This therefore gives rise to difficulties in assessing the impact of religion on current societies—and specifically on the religious phenomenon in Spain—with the precision required, since the data collected do not take into account part of what Robert N. Bellah, in his "Religious Evolution" (Bellah 1969), defines as the 'modern phase'. This is characterised by two elements: on the one hand, "the fundamental symbolization of modern man and his situation is that of a dynamic multidimensional who is self-capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and capable, again within limits, of remaking the world including the very symbolic forms with which he deals with it—even those forms that state the unalterable conditions of his own existence" (Bellah 1969, p. 81); on the other, "religious action in the world becomes more demanding than ever. The search for suitable standards of action, which is at the same time a search for personal maturity and social relevance, is in itself the heart of the modern quest of salvation" (Bellah 1969, p. 81). From this point of view, statistics that approach the religious phenomenon are establishing an identification between religiosity and religion (Simmel 2012)—specifically, between religiosity and historical religions (Bellah 1969) or universal religions (Weber 1983).

In doing so, and in the same way, the data we have at our disposal at both national and European levels do not show the plurality (Berger 2014) of ways of being religious that develop in the secular era (Taylor 2007)—that is, we understand that they do not offer an accurate measure of the effective impact of the religious in a context dominated by what Charles Taylor defines as the immanent frame (Taylor 2007). Nor do they therefore do so in terms of the diverse formulas of secular religiosity (Aron 1944) that prominent authors such as Thomas Luckmann (Luckmann 1973), José Casanova (Casanova 1994) and Hans Joas (Joas 2014, 2021)—to mention just some of the most prominent references—have identified and analysed over the last fifty years⁵.

This dual observation obliges us to dwell briefly on some of the main consequences of this ‘narrow’ or not very exhaustive way of approaching and interpreting the religious phenomenon. As a starting point, it seems appropriate to turn to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, a work in which Émile Durkheim provides an approach to the reality of the ‘sacred’, an element on which both religiosity and religion are pivoted and formulated: “But sacred things should not be understood as simply those personal beings called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred (. . .) It is not possible to determine once and for all the circle of sacred” (Durkheim 1982, p. 33). From the above words, it is clear that if we identify the religious with some of its hegemonic (theistic) or more systematized forms (religion), we generate dynamics of the *pars pro toto* type that can cause validity problems when considering the phenomenon of religion and evaluating its impact, especially in a scenario of post-secularity (Habermas 2008, 2010), characterised not so much by an absence of religious experience, but by its great diversity and pluralism. Perhaps here we find the basis for the error, which is twofold: on the one hand, to consider that we live in a context of absence of religious experience; on the other, to consider that religious experience is either linked to historical religions (Bellah 1969) or universal religions (Weber 1983)—in the Spanish case, to Catholicism—or it is not a religious experience.

Based on what we have just commented, we understand that there are three main consequences of this ‘narrow’ approach to religious reality when it comes to generating solid knowledge about this phenomenon, and we will devote this brief reflection to them:

1. Underestimation of the impact of other religious phenomena or secular religiosities. This, perhaps, is the most evident consequence of the analysis we are carrying out. If data collection focuses on analysing aspects of religiosity specific to historical religions (Bellah 1969), there is a large part of the current religious experience that is left out of the equation. Although we could dwell on other dynamics of a more spiritual nature, here, by way of example, we study how this way of approaching the phenomenon underestimates—and even hides—religious experiences of a clearly secular origin and type. Among them are those derived from the sacralization of the person (Durkheim 1973; Joas 2014), the sacralization of the civil (Bellah 2007), the nation (Beriaín 2016) and revolutionary cults (Mathiez 2012). Here, we point out some of the phenomena of secular religiosity that have been more exhaustively analysed from the field of sociology of religion and cultural sociology. In the case of Spain, we can highlight the phenomenon of Basque nationalism as a substitute religion, as analysed by Izaskun Sáez de la Fuente Aldama (2002). Some of these religious experiences have led to religions—as may be the case with what has come to be known as American civil religion⁶—undergoing a process of systematization of “a set of beliefs and practices related to the sacred” (Durkheim 1982, p. 33). However, that the fact that most of these experiences are not of a systematized or institutionalized nature does not mean that, for that reason, they cease to be experiences that can be called religious. As Durkheim rightly points out when referring to the national spirit, “What essential difference is there between a gathering of Christians celebrating the principal ephemeris of the life of Christ, or of Jews celebrating the flight from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a gathering of citizens commemorating the establishment of a new moral constitution or some great event of national life?” (Durkheim 1982, p. 397). As we have previously pointed out, broadening the spectrum of the religious to this type of secular experience could call into question the anti-religious nature of a collective, such as that of atheists, as proactive in the face of the historical religion.

We understand that to ignore the religious nature of the experiences involved in transcendent ‘overcoming’ (Simmel 2000)—linked, for example, to the protection of children’s rights, to the inviolability of the human subject or to the sacred nature of the cultural

community, whether understood as the core from which the rights of citizenship are formulated, as a bastion from which the nation emerges or from which a totemic religion is formulated in the way analysed by Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle (Marvin and Ingle 2008)—entails not noticing the real impact that the religious has on current societies and the diversity and plurality (Berger 2014) of the ways in which it manifests itself. It entails, therefore, not noticing that religious experience has more to do with what is sacralized and/or what generates social and individual dynamics involving transcendence and sacralization than with the forms of sacralization or generation of transcendence linked to specific, systematized and, above all, hegemonic ways of pursuing such processes of sacralization or generation of transcendence.

2. Reinforcement of the identification between religion and religiosity. What was mentioned in the previous paragraph leads us to a second dynamic in which there is a logic in terms of *pars pro toto* analysis. From the way in which statistics on religiosity are gathered, it might seem that only actions developed in contexts of religion (let us recall the institutionalization of a set of beliefs and practices related to the sacred from Durkheim's perspective) can be catalogued as religious experiences. Against this logic in terms of action and information gathering, it would be interesting to re-read Simmel (2012), specifically the differentiation he establishes between religiosity and religion. For the German sociologist, religiosity refers to 'substance' of the human while religion is one of the 'forms' that the former can acquire. In fact, he points out that "religiosity is already secretly presupposed in all the alleged derivations of it. It is therefore better if from the outset it is recognized as a primary, non-derivable quality" (Simmel 2012, p. 107). From Simmel's words, as was already the case with those of Durkheim (1982), it follows that, indeed, we could perfectly well find ourselves in a scenario involving an absence of religion or crisis of religion—something that has been clearly detected with regard to Christianity in most European societies in which it was the majority faith, and, specifically, in Spain with respect to Catholicism—but not due to an absence of religiosity. In this sense, it is interesting to consider phenomena such as unaffiliated spirituality, which arises in contexts such as Spain, and which has recently been studied by Cornejo Valle et al. (2024). While we understand nuances can be formulated with respect to the Simmelian argument of religiosity, which can be deemed to be a substance of the human, especially with respect to the permanence of any social fact *ad futurum*, his argument is supported both by socio-historical analysis and also by—as we saw in the previous paragraph—of secular and current forms of religiosity in a post-secular scenario.

3. Overestimation of the decline of the religious in secular societies. Finally, the way in which statistics on religiosity are collected reinforces a narrative—that of the General Theory of Secularization (Acquaviva 1961; Wilson 2016)—which, as defended by prominent authors such as Casanova (2012a), Joas (2021) and Berger (2014), has proven incapable of explaining the current religious reality in all its complexity, and which is based on three sub-theses: 1. That of the general decline in religious belief and practice, 2. That of the privatization of religious experience and 3. That of the differentiation between secular and religious spheres. Although we cannot deny that there are dynamics in this sense (especially with regard to Christianity in Europe and Catholicism in Spain, as we have previously pointed out), it is also true to say that, at the same time, a religious vitality can be perceived in the terms analysed in the previous paragraphs. This leads us to affirm that the current phase of social life is not one that is definitively situated with its 'back to God', to paraphrase Max Weber (2004), but one in which the religious continues to manifest itself (not exclusively in divine form) in a plural manner (Berger 2014).

In this sense, we understand that the post-secular approach to religious reality adapts more suitably to reality as it is the one currently being put forward. From its assumptions,

what we have witnessed in recent decades is a transformation of the religious, towards a ‘metamorphosis’ (Lenoir 2005) of the sacred and of what is sacralized, rather than towards a general disappearance of or decline in sacralization dynamics. From this perspective, the reality of post-secular societies will shatter the ‘mantra’ that is repeated time and time again by the General Theory of Secularization, which reads as follows: ‘the more modern a society is, the more secular, and the more secular, the less religious’ (Casanova 2012b). This is because, as Gordon Lynch (2012) points out, we live in secular societies, but not for that reason non-religious ones. In the case we are analysing, the statistics—as they are gathered—reinforce the sub-theory of the general decline in belief and religious practice of historical religions (Bellah 1969), in the specific Spanish case of Catholicism, reproducing the narrative of the General Theory of Secularization and overestimating the impact that historical religions have on the post-secular religious reality as a whole. But not only that, since, as we have seen in the previous section, historical religions are not only experiencing a decline, but there are also historical forms such as Islam or Evangelicalism that are growing moderately in this country. In the case of Spain, we can see how the decline of Catholicism is linked to a dual factor: historical religion and the hegemonic religious position.

But the question does not end here, since the statistics also highlight difficulties in approaching the diversity of formulas of religious identity that have proliferated within the historical religions. In the Spanish context, can we call a person a Catholic who defines their ascription by the logic of believing without belonging (Davie 1994)? Would the dimension of belief—together with the individualization of practice (Luckmann 1973; Beck 2009)—be enough to qualify a person as a Catholic? Or is an active community practice required to effectively define a person as Catholic? If so, then could the dynamics of patrimonial belonging referred to by Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2002, 2005) serve as a basis for defining a person’s Catholic religious affiliation? And how do we assess supermarket religiosity (Hervieu-Léger and Champion 1986), in which each person shapes their religious identity as they please, selecting elements from each of the religious formulas (whether historical or secular) at their disposal? After all, the metamorphosis towards diversity and plurality of ways of being religious has not only affected secular religious experiences but also traditional faiths.

Undoubtedly, these and other questions are challenges to which both statistics and, above all, analysts in the field of the sociology of religion must respond. To this end, a dual effort must be made: conceptual, on the one hand, trying to banish the blind spots (Gil-Gimeno 2020b) linked to the General Theory of Secularization, concentrating on conceptual proposals that address the diversity and pluralism of sacralization options; on the other, linked to the development of a series of analytical categories from which religious experience, whether historical and/or secular, can be gathered.

4. Conclusions

Our aim at the beginning of this paper was twofold: on the one hand, to establish the Spanish religious reality through the data gathered and, on the other, to undertake a critical exercise on the capacity of the statistical data as they are collected with a view to approaching the religious phenomenon in all its complexity.

With regard to the first question, the analysis shows a religious reality that is based on a structure of beliefs revolving around three parts, as stated in this paper: (i) firstly, that of those individuals and groups who continue to identify with the Catholic tradition (almost 60%), and although they continue to represent the majority group, are experiencing a steady decline, especially in terms of practice; (ii) secondly, those individuals and groups who identify with other religious traditions (around 6% of the population), which have experienced a gradual, albeit moderate, growth in recent decades and which have a greater

impact on the younger generations of believers in this type of religiosity; (iii) lastly, those individuals and groups who are organised around the category of ‘the nones’, which brings together atheists, agnostics and indifferent people or those who self-identify as nothing in particular. This is the fastest-growing religious category in our country (currently representing 40%).

The above data could be interpreted under the umbrella of the General Theory of Secularization as a demonstration of the steady decline of religious belief and practice in today’s societies. And although in the Spanish case, it is clear that the impact of Catholic belief and practice has witnessed a notable decline in recent decades, if we approach the religious phenomenon from the post-secular or pluralist paradigm, this general decline in religious belief and practice is applicable to a specific religious identity—the Catholic—and not to other historical religions that have proliferated in recent decades. Not only do those fail to lose followers, but, in fact, they actually gain them. In the same way, the statistics—making some of the assumptions of the General Theory of Secularization—ignore another outstanding phenomenon, namely, the proliferation of secular religious forms. In this sense, a person who self-identifies as an atheist will automatically acquire the religious category of ‘non-religious’. Now, could such a person who rejects the existence of a God develop secular sacralization dynamics, and do our statistical approaches consider this possibility? And most importantly, how does this fact affect our understanding of the religious phenomenon?

From the point of view of the critical perspective we have put forward in the second epigraph, it is necessary to approach religious reality—both conceptually and methodologically—by abandoning the ‘narrow’ view that associates the religious experience with historical forms of religion, and that concentrates on the nuclear element around which this social phenomenon revolves: sacralization dynamics.

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Notes

- ¹ For further information on these issues, see [Itçaina \(2019\)](#).
- ² Despite the fact that we study Spanish religious reality from the perspective of homogeneity, we feel it is important to point out that the focus could also be placed on the diversity linked to the different socio-cultural and socio-demographic realities that coexist in this country.
- ³ The series of publications edited by the Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation since 2007 on minority religions in the different Autonomous Communities has led to a significant qualitative leap in the study of this socio-religious reality with the publication of 15 volumes on each of the Autonomous Communities. The Observatory of Religious Pluralism (which is part of the Foundation) has also developed an instrument with data on places of worship in Spain, which helps to illustrate religious pluralism in the country and its evolution (<https://www.observatorioreligion.es/> accessed on 12 November 2024). The publications referred to can be found on the Foundation's website: <https://www.pluralismoyconvivencia.es/publicaciones/coleccion/coleccion-pluralismo-y-convivencia/> (accessed on 12 November 2024).
- ⁴ However, it should be asked whether these items alone are capable of evaluating religious behaviour in general or whether they are only suitable for historical religiosities.
- ⁵ Some current publications that delve into the plural and also secular nature of religious manifestations are ([Bellah et al. 2024](#); [Dreher 2024](#); [Taylor 2024](#); [Joas 2020](#); [Gorski et al. 2012](#)).
- ⁶ With the intention of being thorough and exhaustive, it should be noted that social debate has been generated around whether the sacralization of the civil American has crystallized into religion. Even [Bellah \(1992\)](#) himself was a participant in this debate, questioning the assertions that he himself had previously developed. However, regardless of whether or not it has crystallized into a systematized corpus of beliefs and practices related to the sacred—for more information, see [Gil-Gimeno \(2020a\)](#)—we can confirm the existence of sacralization dynamics around the American civic identity (for example, and without wishing to be exhaustive, see [Marvin and Ingle \(2008\)](#)).

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