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The dynamics of religious mobility: investigating the patterns and sociodemographic characteristics of religious affiliation and disaffiliation in a Brazilian sample

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Abstract

Little research has been done in Brazil regarding religious mobility, that is, the patterns of religious conversion and disaffiliation, the ways in which one moves from one religion to another or from religion to non-religion. This study aimed to investigate the patterns of religious affiliation and disaffiliation in a sample of the Brazilian population and the association of such patterns with sociodemographic characteristics. The sample consisted of 1.169 participants (mean age = 40.84, sd = 15.34). Our results showed that two-thirds of the religious believers have maintained their affiliation over time. However, more than one-third of participants reported that they have switched religions, have left their religion to become non-religious, or have switched from non-religion to religion. Females tend to switch religions more often than males. But depending on the original affiliation, participants avoided certain religions. Catholics were less likely to become Protestants or Unaffiliated. Protestants were less likely to become Catholics or members of mediumistic religions. Members of Spiritism, Umbanda, or Candomblé were less likely to become Catholics. Most Atheists and Agnostics comprised respondents who had initially been religious. These findings suggest that religious mobility depends, at least in part, on the influence of previous religious involvements.

Keywords Religious mobility · Religious conversion · Non-religiosity

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Introduction

Brazil is frequently described as a multi-religious country, one of the most diverse cultures in Latin America in terms of ethnic and religious expressions (Almeida and Monteiro 2001; Coutinho and Golgher 2014). On the other hand, the findings of national surveys on "religious affiliation" present a less diverse society in which approximately 87% of the population declares to be Christian (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics 2010). This intriguing scenario in which two very distinctive ways to describe Brazil's religious identity are possible (i.e., a multi-religious country while predominantly Christian) has been analyzed by different researchers in the last few decades (e.g., Birman and Leite 2000; Mariano 2013; Dawson 2007; Morello 2019; Usarski 2002). They argue that the understanding of such apparent contradiction requires the investigation of phenomena such as (a) "switching" of religious identity among Christians, which are largely migrating from Catholicism to different Protestant denominations; (b) the role of Catholicism "as a sort of 'universal donor' from which all religious faiths recruit a significant percentage of their followers" (Almeida and Monteiro 2001, p. 5) and with which they establish complex exchanges in terms of beliefs and practices; and (c) a significant increase in the number of those who define themselves as Unaffiliated, Atheist, or Agnostic.

A historically relevant concept in the sociological and psychological study of religion is the notion of conversion. According to Paloutzian et al. 1999 (2001, p. 1051), "to convert (conversion) is derived from the original Hebrew, Greek, and Latin terms meaning to turn, to return, and to turn again (as well as turning, returning, and turning about)". Gooren (2010) defined conversion as a "comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity" (p. 3). This definition portrays the process of religious affiliation as implying a certain level of commitment or adherence to a system of practices and beliefs which excludes (even if temporarily) other options or possibilities.

Based on a Christian prototype (the conversion of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle), this definition supposes a significant, enduring, and discontinuous transformation in behavior and experience following the conversion to a religion (Paloutzian et al. 1999). But conversion might be best seen as a complex process involving multiple facets and factors, instead of a unique, transformational event. As Gooren (2010, p. 3) himself recognizes, one must distinguish "various levels of increasing religious participation", from the initial contact with a new religion to a full commitment. According to Gooren, the investigation of "these levels provide a better yardstick to gauge what conversion means" (p. 3).

Streib and Keller (2004) also define religious identities as dynamic instead of relatively fixed. Faced with a constantly changing religious scenario in contemporary society, in which a "seeking subject" experiment with different religious options in the context of a "spiritual supermarket" characterized by individualized decisions and growing religious pluralism, Streib and Keller (2004, p. 182-182) wondered whether we could still speak of religious conversion, at least in terms of the Christian prototype.

Social scientists have historically emphasized the study of conversion instead of deconversion or disaffiliation. In this sense, it was more relevant to understand what made a person adhere to a specific religion than the factors involved in disaffiliation and non-religiosity. As Enstedt, Larsson and Mantsinen (2020, p. 3) have recently observed, "while the study of conversion is a relatively well researched topic […] surprisingly few studies

have put focus on the fact that conversion implies that the individual moves from or leaves one position – say a Christian identification to another religion". This scenario has changed recently, and researchers have begun to explore the various social factors involved in religious deconversion, as well as its different presentations and stages (Enstedt et al. 2020; Streib and Keller 2004; Streib and Klein 2013).

Little research has been done in Brazil regarding religious mobility, that is, the patterns of religious conversion and disaffiliation, the ways in which one moves from one religion to another or from religion to non-religion. With a few exceptions (e.g., Almeida and Monteiro 2001), most of the studies available rely on qualitative methodologies, which do not always allow for a reliable generalization of results (e.g., Jesus 2016; Santos 2015). A series of important shortcomings also impact the results of quantitative investigations. Data from large population surveys such as the geographic census conducted each decade by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (2010) include questions about respondents' current religious affiliation, but not about their previous affiliations (such as the religion in which a participant was raised).

It is well established that religious involvement varies according to a series of demographic characteristics, ranging from gender and age to educational level and geographic region. Lehrer (2004) reviewed a range of studies demonstrating the decisive role of religion in various economic and demographic behaviors of individuals and families. As Coutinho and Golgher (2014, p. 74) have remarked, "conversion from one religion to another might represent the expression of different needs at the societal and individual levels, such as the search for spiritual comfort and/or the search for financial assistance and social capital, which religious services often provide". Little empirical research exists, however, regarding the ways through which demographic features influence the patterns of religious mobility in Brazil. In addition to these shortcomings, groups such as atheists and agnostics receive limited attention in current research, since they are usually classified in the "non-religious" group, which combines actual disbelievers with unaffiliated believers.

Although rarely discussed in Brazilian studies (e.g., Montero and Dullo 2014), atheism and agnosticism are witnessing growing research interest from international investigations (e.g., Bullivant et al. 2019; Zuckerman et al. 2016). Today, religions deal not only with the challenges arising from the diversity of options available in the religious market but also with issues brought about by secularization, including constant public debates about the relationship between science and religion (Ecklund and Park 2009). Despite the prominent levels of religious involvement of the Brazilian population, atheists are increasingly beginning to affirm their position and to organize themselves into associations such as the ATEA, the Brazilian Association of Atheists and Agnostics, which already counts more than 19,200 affiliates (according to their website). Little is known, however, about the sociodemographic profile of religious non-affiliates and disbelievers in Brazil.

Goals of this study

This study aimed to investigate the patterns of religious affiliation and disaffiliation in a sample of the Brazilian population and the association of such patterns with sociodemographic variables. To fulfill these goals, we have carried out a large survey on the religious and demographic characteristics of Brazilian respondents.

Methods

Data collection

The survey was designed for the project "Spiritual and Religious Beliefs, Practices and Experiences in the General Population" sponsored by Interfaith Coalition on Spirituality and Health (coalizaointerfe.org), a Brazilian institution composed of healthcare professionals and representative members of various religious and non-religious practices in Brazil (Peres et al. 2018).

We collected data through a self-administered, online survey using Qualtrics. Between June 22, 2016, and August 28, 2016, invitations were sent to the targeted population through Qualtrics panel partner organizations, inviting respondents to complete the online survey. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Albert Einstein Hospital (São Paulo, Brazil), and all participants provided an online informed consent.

During data collection, response patterns were monitored in relation to prior definitions regarding the sample characteristics. We employed quota sampling with the aim of approximating, as much as possible, the characteristics of the sample to that of the general adult population in Brazil (according to the 2010 census, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics 2010), particularly in terms of age, gender, and geographic region.

The questionnaire included quality check questions and attention filters in order to control for response bias. The questionnaire was also divided into five randomized blocks, so the impact of tiredness was equally distributed across questions. Force response validation was included in all questions. Respondents usually completed the questionnaire in less than 30 min.

Study variables

Demographics included age, gender, marital status, educational level, working status, average household monthly income, race/ethnicity, and geographic region (North, Northeast, Southeast, Center-East or South).

Questions about religious affiliation included current religion ("Which of the following alternatives best describes your current religious affiliation?") and religion in which the participants were raised ("Which of the following best describes the religious affiliation in which you were raised?"). In each case, respondents had to choose their response from a list comprising several options, including "Catholic," "Protestant," "Spiritist," "Jew," "Buddhist," "Umbanda," "Candomblé," "Atheist," "Agnostic," "No religion," "Spiritualist," "Christian," "Jehovah's witnesses," "Seicho-o-ie," "Wicca," and "Other." If the response was "Protestant" or "Other," then a text box for further description appeared on the screen.

Data analyses

The analyses sought to explore the dynamics and demographic characteristics of religious mobility. For that purpose, we used the following approaches:

1. First, we compared the demographic features of (1) those who were raised without religion but later became religious, (2) those who were raised in a religion but later became non-religious, (3) those who were raised without religion and remained non-religious, (4) those who have always been members of the same religion, and (5) those who have switched religions
2. Second, we explored the many patterns of relationship between the initial and current affiliations. For example, to which religion a person initially Protestant would be more likely to adhere when dropping out of Protestantism?

For statistical analyses, we used SPSS (version 17.0). Given the number of statistical analyses, we employed a more stringent criterion for statistical significance ($p < 0.01$). First, we generated descriptive statistics for each variable in the study. Categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages, while age was presented as mean (standard deviation). Second, a series of chi-square tests were run to evaluate associations between categorical variables. We analyzed the adjusted residuals (> or = 2) to determine the direction of effects when chi-square tests were statistically significant. For the sake of brevity, we reported only the residuals for statistically significant chi-square tests. We employed Cramer's V test to evaluate the association between categorical variables. Finally, age differences between groups were assessed with the one-way analysis of variance and *Sidak* post hoc tests.

Results

Sample characteristics

A total of 1252 respondents completed the online survey. However, data from 83 individuals were excluded due to incomplete or random responding, resulting in a final sample of 1.169 participants (mean age = 40.84, Sd = 15.34, minimum = 18, maximum = 88). The majority was women (52%) and white (61.2%). More than half (58.1%) were married or in a stable relationship, 55% had a college or postgraduate degree, and almost two thirds (65%) had a remunerated job and a household monthly income of at least US$610.39. Despite a significant percentage of respondents from the southeast region of Brazil (43.4%), the majority (56.7%) were from different localities, including Northeast (27.1%), South (14.3%), Central-West (7.8%), and North (7.5%).

Patterns of religious mobility for the total sample

A total of 705 (60.3%) participants have always been members of the same religion, 308 (26.3%) have switched religions, 121 (10.4%) have left their religion and became non-religious, 23 (2%) have always been non-religious, and 12 (1%) were initially non-religious but later became religious. As already suggested by the higher proportion of individuals who maintained their affiliation over time, we found a significant correlation between the initial and the current affiliation for the total sample (Cramer's V = 0.42, $p < 0.001$).

We found no significant differences ($p > 0.01$) between the many categories of religious mobility in terms of average household monthly income, educational level, geographical region, and working status. On the other hand, statistically significant

results emerged for gender, $\chi^2(4) = 17.21$, $p = 0.002$; marital status, $\chi^2 (16) = 51.13$, $p < 0.001$; and race/ethnicity, $\chi^2 (16) = 50.34$, $p < 0.001$. See Table 1 for the frequencies and percentages of each variable.

The frequency of male participants was significantly higher among those who had always been a member of the same affiliation (50%, adj. residual = 2.4), while women were significantly more frequent among those who have switched religions (60.7%, adj. residual = 3.6).

In what concerns marital status, those who left their religion and became non-religious (52.1%, adj. residual = 4.8), and those who have always been non-religious (69.6%, adj. residual = 3.8) were more likely to be single. In their turn, those who switched religions presented a high percentage of married participants (64.9%, adj. residual = 2.8).

Participants claiming indigenous descent were more prevalent among those who have switched from non-religion to religion (8.3%, adj. residual = 3.2) and those who have always been non-religious (4.3%, adj. residual = 2.2). White participants were highly prevalent among those who left religion and became non-religious (71.9%, adj. residual = 2.5), but were less frequently found among those who have switched from non-religion to religion (33.3%, adj. residual = − 2.0). Participants self-identified as black (17.4%, adj. residual = 2.6) and those claiming Asian descent (13%, adj. residual = 3.1) were more likely to have always been non-religious. Participants self-identified as *pardos* (brown) were less likely to had left their religion to become non-religious (20.7%, adj. residual = − 2.3).

Patterns of mobility among affiliations

The number of religious affiliations in the survey was not evenly distributed. Some religions had only a few participating members in the survey (sometimes less than 10 respondents). In view of such findings, we had to combine some affiliations into larger categories to allow for more reliable comparisons between groups. For religions with less than 30 respondents, we created the "other religions" category. This included Jews (8), Jehovah's Witnesses (9), Buddhists plus members of the Seicho-no-ie religion (9), and respondents who chose the option other in the questionnaire (8).

Given the small number of participants from Candomblé and Umbanda, we decided to combine them with those who defined themselves as Spiritists, provided the complex interrelationships and hybridisms among these religions in popular culture (e.g., Camargo 1961; Prandi 2012). This group is hereby called simply "mediumistic religions." To allow for comparisons between religious non-affiliates and atheists/agnostics, these groups were classified separately. Based on the above classification, 44% were currently Catholics, 25.7% were Protestants, 15% were members of mediumistic religions, 6.1% were atheists or agnostics, 6.2% were non-affiliates, and 2.9% were members of other religions.

The patterns of religious mobility differed significantly depending on the initial affiliation of participants, $\chi^2(20) = 1672.54$, $p < 0.001$. As previously mentioned regarding the total sample, most participants did not change their affiliation over time (see Fig. 1, below), although the percentage for each group differed significantly. The results revealed that those most likely to remain in their affiliation were Catholics (70.2%, adj. residual = 22.2). Those who have switched from non-religion to religion were more concentrated among members of mediumistic religions (41.7%, adj. residual = 2.6). Those who have switched religions were more likely to be Protestants

Table 1 Patterns of religious affiliation and disaffiliation in relation to the sociodemographic characteristics

Variables	Had no religion but later became religious	Left religion and became non-religious	Have always been non-religious	Have always been member of the same religion	Have Switched religions
Household monthly income					
R$7.880 or more	2 (22.2)	37 (36.27)	6 (27.27)	235 (38.9)	80 (31.9)
R$3.152–7.880	5 (55.6)	44 (43.1)	8 (36.4)	220 (36.4)	98 (39)
R$1.576–3.152	0 (0)	16 (15.7)	5 (22.7)	105 (17.4)	51 (20.3)
Up to R$ 1.576	2 (22.2)	5 (5)	3 (13.6)	44 (7.3)	22 (8.8)
Missing responses	3	19	1	101	57
Race/Ethnicity					
White	4 (33.3)	87 (71.9)	11 (47.8)	440 (62.4)	176 (57.1)
Black	2 (16.7)	8 (6.6)	4 (17.4)	32 (4.5)	17 (5.5)
Yellow	1 (8.3)	1 (0.8)	3 (13)	18 (2.6)	8 (2.6)
Pardo (Brown)	4 (33.3)	25 (20.7)	4 (17.4)	211 (29.9)	105 (34.1)
Indian	1 (8.3)	0 (0)	1 (4.3)	4 (0.6)	2 (0.6)
Working status					
Part Time Job	2 (16.7)	26 (21.5)	7 (30.4)	144 (20.4)	59 (19.2)
Full Time Job	4 (33.3)	52 (43)	5 (21.7)	316 (44.8)	144 (46.8)
Unemployed	2 (16.7)	7 (5.8)	4 (17.4)	55 (7.8)	34 (11)
Homemaker	2 (16.7)	1 (0.8)	3 (13.0)	27 (3.8)	16 (5.2)
Student	2 (16.7)	19 (15.7)	2 (8.7)	69 (9.8)	14 (4.6)
Retired	0 (0)	16 (13.2)	2 (8.7)	94 (13.3)	41 (13.3)
Educational level					
Basic Education	0 (0)	2 (1.7)	2 (8.6)	15 (2.2)	9 (2.9)
High School (I)	2 (16.7)	2 (1.7)	2 (8.7)	17 (2.4)	7 (2.3)
High School (C)	1 (8.3)	12 (9.9)	5 (21.7)	153 (21.7)	56(18.2)

Table 1 (continued)

Variables	Had no religion but later became religious	Left religion and became non-religious	Have always been non-religious	Have always been member of the same religion	Have Switched religions
College (I)	4 (33.3)	34 (28.1)	5(21.7)	138 (19.6)	59 (19.2)
College (C)	3 (25)	53 (43.8)	9 (39.1)	256 (36.3)	115(37.3)
Post-graduation	2 (16.7)	18 (14.9)	0 (0)	126(17.9)	62 (20.1)
Marital status					
Married	5 (41.7)	63 (52.1)	16 (69.6)	222 (31.5)	77 (25)
Separated or divorced	0 (0)	10 (8.3)	1 (4.3)	54 (7.6)	23 (7.4)
Single	7 (58.3)	46 (38)	6 (26.1)	420 (59.6)	200 (64.9)
Widow/Widower	0 (0)	2 (1.7)	0 (0)	9 (1.3)	8 (2.6)
Geographical region					
Northeast	3 (25)	31 (25.8)	6 (26.1)	199 (28.3)	77 (25)
South	2 (16.7)	17 (14.2)	1 (4.3)	104 (14.8)	43 (14
Central-West	1 (8.3)	13 (10.8)	4 (17.4)	46 (6.5)	27 (8.8)
Southeast	6 (50)	52 (43.3)	10 (43.5)	301 (42.8)	137 (44.5)
North	0 (0)	7 (5.8)	2 (8.7)	54 (7.7)	24 (7.8)
Gender					
Men	3 (25)	65 (53.7)	14 (60.9)	358 (50.8)	121 (39.3)
Women	9 (75)	56 (46.3)	9 (39.1)	347 (49.2)	187 (60.7)
Age	M (sd) 29.00 (8.94)	M (sd) 37.78(16.8)	M (sd) 32.26 (13.89)	M (sd) 41.27 (15.32)	M (sd) 41.86 (14.70)

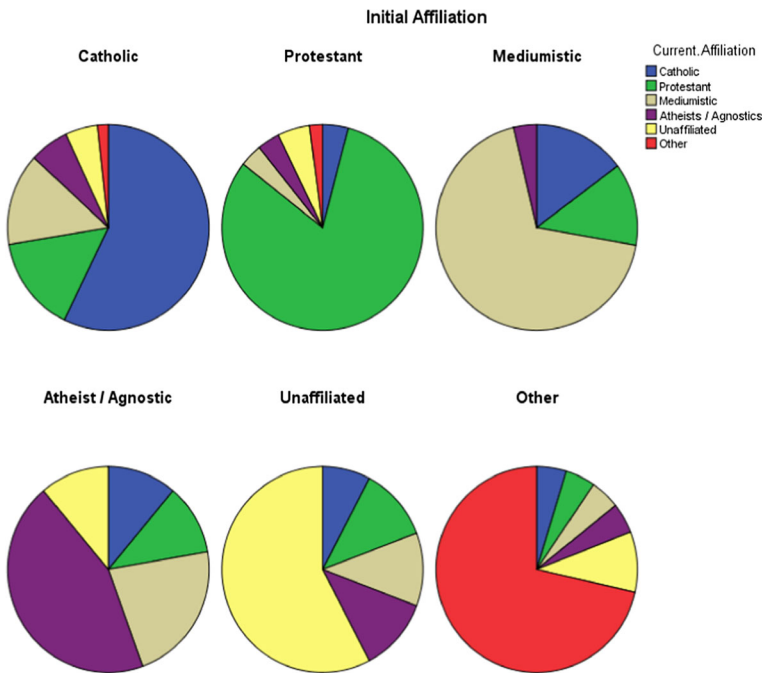*I* incomplete, *C* complete, *M* mean, *sd* standard deviation

Fig. 1 Pie charts—initial versus current affiliations

(45.1%, adj. residual = 9.1), members of mediumistic religions (43.2%, adj. residual = 16.2), or members of the other religions group (6.2%, adj. residual = 4.0). Those who were initially religious but later became non-religious were more likely to be atheists/agnostics (52.9%, adj. residual = 22.8) or non-affiliates (47.1%, adj. residual = 19.6). The same pattern was found for those who have always been non-religious. However, the number of atheists/agnostics for this category (30.4%, adj. residual = 4.9) was lower than the number of non-affiliates (69.6%, adj. residual = 12.7), suggesting that those who defined themselves as atheists/agnostics tended to be those who left religion to become non-religious, while non-affiliates were more likely to be those who had always been non-religious.

In terms of statistical significance, there was no systematic tendency for the members of a religion to switch to another particular religion. This means that there were all sorts of exchanges between affiliations. But more important than the affiliations to which participants were more likely to convert were the affiliations that they tended to reject, $\chi^2(20) = 1672.54$, $p < 0.001$. Those who were raised as Catholics were less likely to become Protestants (15.1%, adj. residual = −14.0), unaffiliated (5.2% adj. residual = −2.5), or members of the other religions group (1.7%, adj. residual = −4.0). Protestants were less likely to become Catholics (4.1%, adj. residual = −12.3) or members of mediumistic religions (3.6%, adj. residual = −4.9). Members of Spiritism, Umbanda, or Candomblé were less likely to become Catholics (14.8%, adj. residual = −4.4) or Protestants (13%, adj. residual = −2.2). Both atheists/agnostics and non-affiliates were less likely to become Catholics (11.1%, adj. residual = −2.0, 7.7%, adj. residual = −3.8, respectively). Interestingly, only 3 (11.5%) non-affiliates later became atheists or agnostics.

Discussion

Our results showed that two-thirds of religious believers have maintained their affiliation over time. However, more than one-third of participants reported that they have switched religions, have left their religion to become non-religious, or have switched from non-religion to religion. These patterns of mobility varied according to the affiliation of origin.

Catholics tended to remain as Catholics over time, and more often than those who were initially members of other affiliations. Catholicism is usually considered as the "default" position for many Brazilians and of fundamental importance to the constitution of Brazilian religiosity (e.g., Almeida and Monteiro 2001). Our findings may suggest that its strength is not only symbolic or cultural but depends on an enduring involvement of most Catholics with their religion. Another possible explanation is religious transmission, that is, the effectiveness with which parents (and, in its turn, cultural tradition) transmit Catholic beliefs to their children (Bargsted et al. 2019). On the other hand, our data does not allow us to differentiate between practicing and non-practicing (or nominal) Catholics, and it is unclear to what extent our respondents were significantly committed to Catholic ideas and practices. It is not uncommon for members of other religions to attend the Catholic mass and for Catholics to attend other religious services, such as Spiritist groups (Dawson 2007). Some respondents may not feel comfortable to disclose their religious affiliation, such as members of African-derived religions who are frequent victims of religious or racial discrimination (Frias and Ribeiro 2016), and may prefer instead to define themselves as Catholics. In this sense, our data might simply reflect the status of Catholicism as a socially desirable religious identity in Brazil. Nevertheless, this is less likely since our data collection was online and anonymous. More research is needed to clarify these different possibilities.

The role of Catholicism "as a sort of 'universal donor' from which all religious faiths recruit a significant percentage of their followers" (Almeida and Monteiro 2001, p. 5) was evident in the findings. The respondents raised as Catholics comprised 74% of the total sample. The percentage of those from other religions who were raised as Catholics varied from 76% in the case of atheists and agnostics to 43.5% in the case of Protestants. The members of mediumistic religions reached 71.4%, followed by the unaffiliated (61.6%) and the other religions group (44.1%). But beyond this strong Catholic influence,, all groups had evidenced some level of religious mobility among each other. This finding cannot be explained merely in terms of exchange among protestant denominations or mediumistic religions (for example, from Spiritism to Umbanda or from Umbanda to Spiritism) because there were actually all sorts of exchanges between different affiliations, which suggests that religious switching was not an uncommon, localized phenomenon in our sample. In this respect, we found that members of mediumistic religions (when they were not raised as Catholics) were more likely to have had no religion before their conversion. This finding seems to contradict an explanation of the results in terms of localized exchanges among specific groups. Atheists and agnostics evidenced a similar pattern of mobility to that of non-affiliates, but there were also some important differences. Although both groups showed a significant percentage of participants who had always been non-religious, the former had a slightly higher number of members who had had a religion before becoming religious disbelievers and a lower percentage of respondents who had had no previous

affiliation. In fact, atheists and agnostics showed the lowest percentage of participants who maintained their initial affiliation over time, 5.6%, adj. residual = 4,8, which might indicate that the endorsement of atheism or agnosticism is a response to previous religious engagements. Another evidence in favor of this hypothesis is that only 3 (11,5%) non-affiliates later became atheists or agnostics. One possible explanation for these findings is that self-identification as atheist or agnostic may reflect a critical stance towards religion, perhaps due to frustrating experiences as a religious believer or because of the imposition of religious ideas by family during upbringing (Maraldi 2014a; Zuckerman et al. 2016).

We have also identified important demographic differences between atheists/agnostics and non-affiliates. While those who had always been non-religious showed significant percentages of Asian, black, and Indian respondents, those who had left religion to become atheists/agnostics were often white participants. Subsequent post hoc analyses also showed that there was a higher, significant proportion of males in comparison with female respondents among atheists/agnostics (63.4%, adj. residual = 2.7), but not among those without affiliation (46.6%, adj. residual = − 0.2), χ^2 (5) = 28.11, $p < 0.001$. These different demographic profiles suggest different social pathways to atheism/agnosticism and religious non-affiliation that require further investigation. Clearly, we are dealing with two distinct groups in terms of demographic characteristics. These findings are supported by previous research in Latin America showing that religious "nones" differ from atheists/agnostics in important ways, not only in terms of demographic variables, but also regarding the endorsement of supernatural beliefs (Bargsted et al. 2019). Although more research is needed to elucidate what people mean by "non-religious," it is evident from the available studies that religious non-affiliation is not the same as indifference or disbelief (Novaes 2004; Santos 2012; Montero and Quintanilha 2019).

In what concerns gender differences, female respondents showed to switch religions more often than males. In contrast, male participants were more likely to remain members of their religion of origin. Almost half of the males were Catholics (48.7%, adj. residual = 3), suggesting that the enduring pattern of involvement mentioned above for Catholics was due, in part, to the large proportion of males in this group. There are many possible explanations for these findings. One hypothesis is that females tend to adhere to the religion of their spouses. In our sample, those who dropped out of their initial religion to become members of another affiliation were more likely to be married and female. Although our data and study design do not permit causal inferences, other studies provided evidence of the importance of marriage as a factor in religious switching (e.g., Coutinho and Golgher 2014; Garcia and Maciel 2008; Loveland 2003; Musik and Wilson 1995). Individuals who marry outside their religion of origin are believed to be more likely to switch in order to make their marriages homogamous (Loveland 2003). This might be particularly pressing for females because of idealized expectations about marriage and the internalization of patriarchal values and conservatism (Carvalho and Paiva 2010).

Another hypothesis concerns the role of social status. Based on his investigation of members of the Assembly of God, Costa (2013) suggested that since females of that group do not usually hold positions of power (which imply the need to maintain an "exemplary" behavior), they have a greater chance of switching denominations when there is an unmet demand. Therefore, they relativize the institution's capacity to influence their choices. Males,

on the other hand, might see religious identity as part of a broader, social identity that should be protected and reinforced. However, this might vary according to the religious context and the roles ascribed to males and females. Future studies should investigate more deeply such factors as religious status or leadership and marital status in the elucidation of gender differences in religious mobility.

As mentioned above, our findings indicated that religious switching was not an uncommon phenomenon in our sample, and it was possible to identify exchanges between all main affiliations. On the other hand, there was some evidence showing that, depending on the denomination of origin, participants tended to avoid certain religions. Respondents who were initially Catholic were less likely to become Protestants, non-affiliates, or members of the other religions group. Protestants were less likely to become Catholics or members of mediumistic religions. Members of Spiritism, Umbanda, or Candomblé were less likely to become Catholics. These results suggest that religious mobility depends, at least in part, on the influence of previous religious involvement. That is, one's identification with a new belief system will vary according to the extent to which the new involvement is incompatible with previous beliefs or expectations.

In tandem with this was the fact that the patterns of avoidance seemed to reproduce some of the same rivalries or disagreements found between members of these religions. In the same way that some Protestants reject or even demonize Catholic and mediumistic practices (Mariano 2014), individuals who were initially Protestants were less likely to become members of Catholicism and mediumistic religions when they dropped out of Protestantism (despite a few of them have done so; more specifically, 4.1% later became Catholics, while 3.6% later became members of mediumistic religions). Individuals raised as Catholics seemed to react similarly by not becoming Protestants (even though 15.1% later became Protestants, which confirms, in a way, the migration of members from Catholicism to other Christian denominations). Interestingly, 15% is also the net gain of new followers by Protestant denominations in Brazil in recent years according to a survey on religion in Latin America carried out by the Pew Research Center 2014).

These patterns of religious mobility seem to reproduce historical conflicts between affiliations. The same can be said of the relationship between mediumistic religions and Catholicism. It is well-known that mediumistic religions suffered from discrimination by psychiatrists and religious agents during the first decades of the twentieth century, sometimes in the name of Catholic ideas (Hess 1991; Giumbelli 2003). Still today, mediumistic religions establish a complex relationship with popular Catholicism in which hybridisms and differentiations are equally observed (Dawson 2007). Both Protestantism and Catholicism may demonize or reject mediumistic experiences or beliefs, thereby discouraging individuals who report such experiences (and who were raised in mediumistic religions) to become Catholics or Protestants (Maraldi 2014b). This study has some limitations. First, we used a cross-sectional design, which limits our possibilities to raise causal inferences. Also, retrospective data can only provide a static description of religious mobility processes and is vulnerable to memory biases for previous religious engagements. Future investigations would benefit from a longitudinal design with the assessment of religious affiliation at different time points. In addition, data collection was carried out only in people who had access to e-mail, social media, or websites, and more than half of participants were white and had a college or postgraduate degree which are all factors that weaken the generalization of

the results to the Brazilian population. Another important limitation was the low number of respondents for some religions, which forced us to combine affiliations in order to allow for more reliable inferences based on statistical analysis. Such combinations may not do justice to the specificities of each religion. Thus, it is recommended that future studies use larger samples, including more members of religions with only a few respondents in our study—for example, Candomblé (5)—as well as other ethnic groups not sufficiently represented in our sample (such as Black participants). Due to these characteristics, our findings should be considered preliminary.

The Protestants group included both Pentecostals and members of traditional churches, but the dynamics of mobility between these different Protestant denominations would merit more detailed discussion in future research. Finally, our questionnaire did not differentiate between single and multiple previous affiliations. It could be that some individuals attended more than one religion in the past. Multiple religious belonging is a common but understudied phenomenon in Brazil (Peres et al. 2020), and more research is needed exploring the religious trajectory of respondents through different religious contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that most religious believers of this Brazilian sample did not change their affiliation over time. Still, more than one-third reported that they have switched religions, have left their religion and became non-religious, or have switched from non-religion to religion. Females showed to switch religions more often than males. It was possible to identify exchanges between all main affiliations. On the other hand, there was some evidence showing that depending on the affiliation of origin, participants tended to avoid certain religions. These results suggest that religious mobility depends, at least in part, on the influence of previous religious engagements.

These findings illustrate the importance of reconsidering current criteria used in Brazilian population surveys, including the need for reframing questions employed to investigate religious affiliation. More attention should be given in future research to religious switching and non-religiosity in their different expressions.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Albert Einstein Hospital (São Paulo, Brazil), and all participants provided an online informed consent.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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