

## Religious imaginary, morals and politics amongst Minas Gerais youth<sup>1</sup>

Fátima Regina Gomes Tavares

*Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brasil<sup>2</sup>*

*fattavares@uol.com.br*

Léa Freitas Perez

*Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brasil*

*freitasperez@uol.com.br*

Marcelo Ayres Camurça

*Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brasil*

*mcamurca@acessa.com*

RESUMEN. El texto presenta parte de los datos y resultados de una investigación sobre religión y juventud en Minas Gerais, que intenta detectar las preferencias religiosas, las creencias y los valores de la juventud estudiantil minera. El énfasis se centrará, particularmente, en lo relacionado al imaginario religioso de esos jóvenes con sus modulaciones y articulaciones con la moral y con la participación político-partidaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE. Antropología; juventud; religión; política

ABSTRACT. This text presents some data and outcomes of a survey on religion and youth, in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. It intends to

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1. Paper presented in the Panel «Religion and public spaces: schools, universities, and prisons», at the 25th RBA, Goiânia/Goiás, June 11 to 14, 2006. This version was reviewed and modified.

2. We take this opportunity to formally acknowledge our gratitude to the Social Sciences undergraduate students of UFJF and UFMG, who have been invaluable research partners. These are: Amanda Gomes Pereira, Carlos Eduardo Procópio, Corina Valente Ferreira, Rafael Pereira, Rodrigo C. de Mello R. de Carvalho, from UFJF; Daniela Portella Sampaio, Fernanda Cimini Salles, Plablo Juan Cândido da Silva, Rogério Jerônimo Barbosa, from UFMG, and Marcos Arcaño de Assis, Social Sciences graduate from UFMG. We also wish to thank Professor Luiz Cláudio Ribeiro (UFJF Department of Statistics) for his assistance and clarification concerning demography. The translation was made by Leticia Maria Costa da Nóbrega. She is currently a PhD student at the University of California, Berkeley.

highlight religious preferences, beliefs and values held by Minas young students. Particular emphasis is placed on these youngsters' religious imaginary, as well as its modulations and articulations with morals and with politics/political party participation.

KEYWORDS. Anthropology, youth, religion, politics.

### Youth and religion: two pressing contemporary issues.

Flat-out contradicting the predictions of some secularization theses, religion is in great shape today and is even being renewed, both in private and public spheres. To the surprise of many, it stands between the civil and the celestial goal. To be young (good-looking and well-built) is a cardinal value in consumerism culture.<sup>3</sup> The role of youth in society is the object of reflection and polemics. Partitioned into 'social problem' and 'sociological issue', it receives special attention from public policies as well as from the social sciences, where youth studies are a field in sheer expansion. From an original approach to youth sectors of urban and university middle-class and its imaginary (Poerner, 1967, Ianni, 1968, Foracchi, 1972), to the acknowledgement of its empirical diversity, the focus has shifted towards the various ways of being young: behavior, beliefs, consumerism, sexuality, music, aesthetics, violence, and so forth (Abramo, 1994; Vianna, 1997 and 1998; Diógenes, 1998; Minayo, 1999; Abramovay, 2002; Dayrell, 2002; Alvim, 2004).

To the astonishment of the many who still insist that to be young is to be a rebel without a cause or an agent of utopias, youths show vivid interest in religion, which some still see as some sort of alienating bondage. Youngsters today are far more interested in religion than in party politics.

Their coming together in the social sciences is leading to the emergence of a new study field: 'youth and religion'.<sup>4</sup> On one hand, the new domain is not free from interpretive tensions and articulations stemming from the more traditional field of youth in general (emphasis in generational landmarks and in the plurality of experiences of 'being young'). On the other hand, it focuses on religious studies' vital issues, such as the complex relationships between religion and modernity, the role of religion in Brazil, and the subject of secularization and syncretism with all their corollaries.

Our work is part of this new field, pioneered by Regina Novaes' research on religion and politics amongst students of social sciences. Her study was followed by another, coordinated by Carlos Alberto Steil, undertaken in different universities from the Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Sul, Rio de

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3. For a history of the notion of youth and its role in modernity, cf. Ariès, 1986.

4. For a review of the literature on youth and religion, see Tavares and Camurça, 2004.

Janeiro and Minas Gerais. This field has played a prominent role in social sciences academic fora throughout the country, such as the Brazilian Anthropological Meeting, the Anthropological Meeting of the Mercosur, and the Journeys.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper we propose to present some of the results of a research on religion and youth in Minas Gerais, which aims at identifying, amongst other indexes, religious preferences, beliefs, and values held by teenage students from this state.<sup>6</sup> The data, collected in a survey and focus groups, reveals

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5. On these researches: Novaes, 1994 and Debates do Ner, 2001. The topic youth and religion acquires visibility in Brazilian scientific meetings from the 4th Anthropological Meeting of the Mercosur (2001) onwards, when the research coordinated by Carlos Steil (2001) was made public at the Symposium «Youth, Social Sciences and Religion». Thereafter followed the Research Forum «Religion and politics amongst university students» in the 23rd Brazilian Anthropological Meeting (2002), the Research Forum «Youths: culture and urban space, religion and politics» in the 24th Brazilian Anthropological Meeting (2004), and the Panel «Youth and religion: modulations and articulations with culture, sociality and politics» in the 8th Journey on Religious Alternatives in Latin America (2005).

6. The research «Religion, Culture and Politics in Minas Gerais Youth» is a joint enterprise between the UFFJ Graduate Program in Religion Science and the UFMG Graduate Program in Anthropology. Our purpose was to outline the landscape of beliefs and values of Minas Gerais youth by raising questions relevant to the topic, in order to understand the relationships established with the religious, social and political spheres. It began with the application of a survey to public high school junior students. The survey comprised a sample of 11,481 questionnaires applied by the end of 2001 through the MAVE (Minas Gerais System of Public Education Assessment). This system was established by the State Education Office in 2000 as a strategic mechanism for diagnosing and planning educational policies in the state of Minas Gerais. The questionnaire included 80 questions structured in five parts: socio-economical characterization; religious affiliation; moral and political values; and a socio-economical characterization of those interviewed. The questionnaires were self-administered and were applied together with the Public Education Assessment exam. The survey yielded a non-probabilistic sample. However, given the high number of questionnaires and their compatibility with data obtained by surveys such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics' (IBGE), we may suggest that their results reflect with great confidence the characteristics and diversity of this segment. When the number of students enrolled in public schools was divided by the total amount of students who were interviewed, the satisfactory outcome of 1 student interviewed for each 71 was obtained. This ratio provides us with solid grounds for making inferences about our research subject. The students who answered the questionnaire did it after a brief explanation regarding its content and purpose, delivered by a well-trained instructor. The schools which made up the survey sample are scattered throughout five geographical poles in the state: Zona da Mata in Southeastern Minas (Rio Doce Valley, Zona da Mata and Campo das Vertentes); Capital (State capital and metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte); Center-South (South of Minas, Midwestern and Central Minas); Triângulo Mineiro (Western Minas / Upper Paranaíba river valley); and Northern Minas (Jequitinhonha and Mucuri river valleys). It is thus worth pointing out that what we understand here by youth from Minas Gerais is the segment made up by the students inquired. The focus groups were performed in different schools in Juiz de Fora and Belo Horizonte.

very interesting facts and trends.<sup>7</sup> However, our particular focus here will be on the religious imaginary of these teenagers, as well as their modulations and articulations with morals and participation in political parties.<sup>8</sup>

### The group surveyed

First of all, it is worth remarking that the general outline of this research's outcomes corroborates the trends found in the last Census, as well as those provided by other studies on youth and religion.<sup>9</sup>

The group surveyed spans the age range from 17 to 19, and is mainly made up of females. They are self-declared white, single, and with no children.<sup>10</sup> They live with their parents; it is possible, however, to notice an expressive connection with the labor market.<sup>11</sup>

Almost all of them declare having a religion. In the state of Minas Gerais, these are 94% against only 5.1% of those without religion. The state capital (Belo Horizonte) presents the highest level of non-religious subjects, 8.9%.

For most students with religion, although there is a range of religious op-

7. The choice for using qualitative or quantitative methods does not always take into account the advantages of an articulation between these two approaches. It is based, in many cases, on an erroneous perception of the pros and cons of the different approaches available. Therefore, a fierce competition is rather common between the supporters of one or the other methodological «school», thus strengthening methodological «exclusivisms» and downplaying the contributions an articulation between the different methods could produce. Conversely, Van Maanen underscores that although qualitative and quantitative methodologies may serve different purposes, they are not mutually exclusive (1979, p. 10). In this paper we are basically limited to presenting the data from the bivariate analysis; it is thus not possible for us to test inference models. Our interpretations provide clues for further analysis.

8. The concept of imaginary is drawn on the developments by Gilbert Durand (1989) and on the work of Gaston Bachelard. Imaginary is thus related to representations and symbols which bear some autonomy vis-à-vis the empirical, perceptive, and mnemonic levels. Imaginary studies assume that the universalism of certain images called archetypes performs a vital role in the field of societies' psychological and cultural motivations. In our case, although there is some degree of kinship between beliefs and imaginary, the latter concerns certain images' symbolic power of framing the conduct and mentality of individuals.

9. For other researches on youth and religion, cf., amongst others, Novaes, 2002 and 2004; Debates do Ner, 2001.

10. The item «color» presents an interesting variation amongst the general data for the state and the capital. Belo Horizonte shows a much higher proportion of mulattoes (pardos) (33.6%) as compared to the state, where they comprise 12.6%. The situation is reversed when the black color is at stake. In Minas Gerais as a whole, 31.5% of teenagers surveyed declared themselves blacks, a percentage which fell to 20.0% in Belo Horizonte. It is worthy of note that the state is more black than its capital, which is, on its turn, more mulatto than the state.

11. This is not extraordinary if we consider that these teenagers have a lower class origin.

tions, in quantitative terms Catholicism prevails (79.4%), followed by far by Protestantism (7.7%), Pentecostalism (6%), Spiritism (2.4%), Afro-Brazilian cults (*candomble*, *umbanda*) (0.3%), and others (4.3%).<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noticing some variations in these figures when Belo Horizonte is the case in point. Besides the prevalence of Catholicism (although with a lower percentage of 67.4%), in Belo Horizonte there is an increase of Protestants (12.0%) and Pentecostals (9.0%). Even though the average rate of Catholic students is reduced, it is still superior to the sum of the average of teenagers from other religions (32.5%).

If the religions are proportionally compared according to their regional presence, the majority of Pentecostals are found in the capital (55%). Comparatively, the other religions attain their highest percentage *vis-à-vis* Catholics in the state capital; for instance, in Belo Horizonte the concentration of Pentecostals is 90% higher than the Catholics'.

These figures point toward one of the most salient trends in the Brazilian religious field, one which follows more general tendencies: its diverse composition, with the evident decline of Catholic hegemony without, however, the loss of its prevalence, plus the growth of those without religion. At the more local level, the data leads us to infer that in Minas Gerais there is a Catholic *resistance* to the general trend of changes in the hierarchy of the national religious field, where a relative fall of Catholicism is accompanied by the growth of Evangelical religions and 'non-religious' subjects. In this regard, it is worth recalling that in Minas Gerais the percentage decrease of Catholicism is smaller (14.2%) than the national average (15.4%), and that the presence of 'non-religious' people —one of the most salient phenomena in the last Census— in the state is incipient (4.2% of the population), when compared to the national average (7.3%) or to Rio de Janeiro, the state with the highest rate (15.5%) of 'non-religious' subjects in the country.

For our teenagers, parents are the most pronounced influence in terms of religious choice, and the family is the institution recognized as the most important in their lives. However, religious choice for personal reasons is very marked: 37.8% in Belo Horizonte, and 31.5% in the state taken as a whole.

On the importance of family and religion, a young Evangelical resident in the state capital, who was participative in his religion, declared: "My religion is like that, the foundation of my life, you know, besides my family."

On religious choice, two statements are expressive:

My parents are also christians, they also go to the Methodist Church. But it was my own choice to start going to church, because my parents already went there, and they never forced me to go. It was my own choice, you know?

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12. The religious options available in the survey were limited to these greater 'families'.

I am catholic. I always go to church, I help a lot at the church. I've already met other religions, I've been to the Evangelical church [...] I liked it a lot because they celebrate, and stuff... they don't have that boredom which I don't like. But I really like my religion [Catholic] and I feel good. [...] My father does not practice it, he is not like that, but he believes in God. My mother is catholic and she does not accept that I change my religion. I've already told her that this is my choice and that she has nothing to do with it.

We signal here the possibility of this being another modulation of religious transmission, even in a state —it is never enough to point this out— as religious and catholic as Minas Gerais. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that here we find the action of the 'traditional Minas Gerais family', in its articulation with Catholicism in its facade of 'religion of the Brazilian family' (Novaes, 2004: 277). On the other hand, however, for our teenagers religion is no longer a family legacy; individual choice has a weight which is not negligible, since this is about a religious individual, as Pierre Sanchis would have it, definitely affirmed. Still, it is undeniable that, even with the greater religious openness (the fact that these teenagers choose their religion from a plural and competitive religious field has to be highlighted) they are mostly Catholics, following their parents' religion. Therefore, it can be said that family and religious tradition inflect with individual autonomy, thus manifesting one of the variables making up the sociological frame in which religion is experienced by contemporary youth.

Family power is restated when we inquired about the importance of certain institutions, habits and routines in their lives. In Minas Gerais, the importance of family is followed, in decreasing order, by: *religion*, *work*, *study*, and, in the lower ranks, *friends*, *dating*, and *sports*. In the state capital there is a significant reversion: work is ranked higher than religion.<sup>13</sup> The importance of family, school and work is also found amongst both those 'with' and 'without' religion. Therefore, it can be said that religion is not a strong allure for the strengthening of institutions.

In the field of 'fundamental' values, Minas Gerais youths provide grounds for relativizing theses of 'social memory' and 'vital memory' (postponing responsibilities and social obligations as a tradeoff for freedom to enjoy life) as categories for characterizing youth.<sup>14</sup> Our students diverge from it when they state the importance of habits based on more defined and enduring *social bonds* related to the idea of *enjoying life*, for instance, through dating or practicing sports.

13. On a scale from 0 to 6, students scored the importance of each of these items. A score table in decreasing order was built in order to analyze the data.

14. These theses were set forth by M. Margulis and M. Urresti (1996) as guiding principles of the category «youth», understood as a common generational experience – regardless, for instance, of class distinctions.

This is thus the profile of a youth who constitutes and recognizes him or herself in traditional spaces of reproduction of values and customs (such as family, school, and work), even when current changes in family are taken into account. However, it can be suggested that this youth assimilates the strength of family tradition while modulating it with new values and customs acquired from his or her experience in other social spaces. This was evident in their opinion concerning issues related to bodily morals and ethics (virginity, homosexuality, abortion, etcetera.)

Our data indicates that when these issues are at stake, religion is indeed an important variable. Take ‘virginity’, for instance. Female virginity in the state as a whole is valued by 37.6% of teenagers; in Belo Horizonte, this percentage is, as would be expected, a bit lower, at 34.5%. When these overall data are compared with those obtained through crossing with having or not having religion, religious influence becomes obvious, since amongst those who declared to have a religion the rates are very close to the overall picture. Thus, in Minas Gerais, amongst those with religion, female virginity is acceded by 38.5%, and in the capital by 35.5%. Conversely, amongst those without religion, the reduction is sharp, to 20.4% and 17.9%, respectively. Taking every particular religion, both statewide as well as in the city, the Pentecostals are those more willing to agree with the safeguard of female virginity (78.5% and 76.4%, respectively), followed by Protestants (72.4% and 75.8%, respectively). Adherents to Spiritism are the most open: 16.4% in the state, and 14.6% in Belo Horizonte. It is interesting to note the more sensitive difference between Minas Gerais and its capital as far as young Catholics are concerned. While in the state they comprise 31.1% of those valuing female virginity, in the capital they are 40.1%.

On virginity, an Evangelical girl stated:

I think it is important to me. But if people don't think so... I reckon it is one's own choice, it does not depend on religion, on family, on nothing; it is something of your own. It is something that you decide for yourself.

Associating fidelity with virginity, a young Catholic declared:

I think fidelity nowadays is very important, not only with girlfriends or boyfriends, but with friends too; it has to be [...] One has to be an honest person, has to keep his/her word, right? This thing of having one boyfriend over there, one girlfriend [...] it is cheating [...] I think it is [...] not ok. This thing of virginity, I think it is put today in kind of unequal terms. Because for men, if you are a virgin they say: ‘Really? I’m sorry for that! 18 years and nothing so far [...]’ The guy is a bit discriminated. But with women, no. If the girl loses her virginity earlier she is soon discriminated, like ‘She’s so promiscuous’.

**Table: beliefs of Minas Gerais youths**

Beliefs	%
Entities / <i>orixás</i>	16,9
Divination / oracles	17,6
Reincarnation / past lives	31,1
Energies / auras	36,3
Spirits	51,1
Afterlife	57,8
Angels / demons	68,7
Saints	69,1
Virgin Mary	75,7
Miracles	84,1

The overall picture of beliefs (without considering religious affiliation) relating to the segment of Minas Gerais youth considered here is highly suggestive.<sup>15</sup> For the state, the first three ranks are occupied by beliefs typical of Catholicism, in line with its greater prevalence. These are, in order: miracles, the Virgin Mary, and saints.

In Belo Horizonte, miracles come first, the Virgin Mary falls to the third position and the second is occupied by angels/demons (which, in the state, rank fourth). This hierarchy is perfectly predictable given the state of religious affiliation in the capital, where the Pentecostal presence is more marked. Beliefs in energies/aura rank seventh in both regions, being a likely index of the modest presence of New Era, characterized by the valuing of unsubstantial references (Amaral, 2000). Similarly discreet in both the state and its capital is the belief in entities/*orixás*, in the tenth and ninth positions, respectively.

When belief is crossed with having or not having religion, it becomes evident that when Belo Horizonte teenagers declare they have no religion it does not necessarily entails an absence of religious beliefs. On the contrary, it can even outline, following Regina Novaes' clue, a noticeable segment of «religious without religion» (2004: 272). When these are compared to those with religion, what is found is not the rejection of beliefs, but a change in the hierarchy as far as catholic symbols are concerned. It points toward a less Catholic, more varied, religious imaginary even when the state of Minas

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15. One set of questions aimed at ascertaining beliefs in relation to some religious symbols. Each of the items was approached separately by means of the options «yes», «no» and «I don't know».

Gerais is taken as a whole. The Virgin Mary and the saints rank lower in both the state and its capital, occupying the seventh and eighth positions in Belo Horizonte, and ranking sixth and seventh in the state, respectively. It is worth noticing the highest rank of belief in angels/demons in Belo Horizonte and in the state, amongst those without religion. Given the centrality these symbols acquire in the Pentecostal universe, it should be asked what its meaning for those without religion would be.<sup>16</sup> Is this another sign of the rise of Pentecostalism in the country as a whole?

The table of beliefs of those who declared having a religion both in Belo Horizonte and in the state, although more markedly catholic, is not exclusively so. In both the state and its capital, miracles come first, but there is an interesting shift between the second and third positions. In Minas Gerais the Virgin Mary comes in second, and saints third. In Belo Horizonte, angels/demons come in second, the Virgin Mary third, and saints drop to fourth. It may be suggested that there is some prevalence, amongst those with religion, of a more Pentecostal and/or New Era mark.

It was thus found that the religious imaginary of our students, although typically catholic, is not exclusively so. It reaches beyond the institutional and dogmatic boundaries of this and of other religions which are also present. In this regard, it is important to underscore two aspects. In the field of beliefs there is not only institutional and dogmatic permeability, making these teenagers more open and tolerant. There is also a wider movement of 'mutual borrowings' amongst the different religions, making up a more fluid, porous, and *mixed* religious imaginary. Thus, for instance, the fact that amongst those who declared having no religion, almost all affirmed to believe in God.

In tune with their times, our students show a weak interest in party politics: 83.4% of Minas Gerais and 84.2% of Belo Horizonte teenagers proclaimed to have no connection and/or affinity with political parties. Those who are affiliated to a political party comprise only 4.6% in the state, and a percentage even lower in the capital: 2.6%. When considering religious confession there is no significant variation in political participation, that is, the major clustering of answers, regardless of the religion, is in «I have no relation to parties». Thus, low political participation, at least when limited to traditional sites such as political parties, is in sharp contrast with high religious participation.

Another finding concerns the non-interference of religion in the choice of a candidate: 94.7% of teenagers from Minas Gerais and 92.1% of those in Belo Horizonte would vote for a candidate belonging to a religion different from their own. This indicates a perception which clearly distinguishes between the laicized space of politics and that of religion. However, when these data are crossed with those of the religion professed, variations are found:

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16. On representations of the devil in Pentecostalism, cf. Mariz, 1997.

thus, Pentecostals (11.0% in the state and 17.9% in the capital) are those who have mostly voted for candidates belonging to their own religion.

### Argument and conclusion

The segment of Minas Gerais youth surveyed by us is not indifferent to religion and knows what it says when it speaks of religion. They have a clear-cut religious conscience which is made manifest in a positive identification with religiosity, even though to be religious, to have a religious confession, and to believe in religious symbols are not necessarily situated on the same plane and in the same hierarchical level. Our students suggest that religious belief, religious sentiment/sensitivity, and religious confession are experiences of the ineffable [or the absolute, the sacred or the radically other —name it as you wish—] which broadly and forcefully escape the rigid verbal cages into which we would wish to restrain them.

The tendency towards individual autonomy in religious choice amongst Minas Gerais youth considered here suggests that we are in the presence of a religious individual definitely affirmed, as Pierre Sanchis would say. This, however, does not imply a necessary rupture with traditional affiliations, since in general they follow their parents' religions, albeit relating to it in somehow different terms. It is worth noticing that even where there is continuity, there is also (*et pour le cause*) change. In other words: parents' religion is kept because they can relate to it as autonomous individuals, as willful subjects. The linking of tradition and modernity carried out by these teenagers in their religious choice is a frontal challenge to classical theses of secularization, according to which individual choice would pave the way to privatization of religion, its confinement to intimacy, thus leading to a break with communitarian belongings and to disenchantment with the world. Conversely, it is thanks to and by means of secularization that they are able to relate with religion in alternative ways. Going to church and/or cult and engaging in religious associations and activities are for many of the teenagers interviewed a fundamental element of sociality, one which is part of their busy routine. That is, these are things they enjoy doing. At this level, religion is leisure; it is inserted into other cultural references, as attested for instance by the religious content of lyrics in some popular rap and hip-hop songs.

We wish to stress that the 'generational experience' of our teenagers strongly suggests that religion still plays an active role in their lives, remaining as a source of meaning and experience, but not necessarily nor exclusively under the formal guise of institutional and traditional religion or of a product for consumerism. Religion is part of the more immediate cultural references of these teenagers. Perhaps it would be even reasonable to say that it is no longer religion, but religiosities, or still, religiously grounded sensibilities which prompt the sacred, especially in its property of putting

things and/or ideas hitherto separated in continuity, creating a broad field of possibilities for modulations and articulations.

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RECIBIDO 25/3/08 • ACEPTADO 18/4/08

FÁTIMA REGINA GOMES TAVARES. Is professor of Sociology in the Post-Graduate program in Religion Science and in the Post-Graduate program in Social Science at Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil.

LÉA FREITAS PEREZ. Is professor of Anthropology in the Graduate and Post-Graduate program in Anthropology at Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil.

MARCELO AYRES CAMURÇA LIMA. Is professor of Anthropology in the Post-Graduate program in Religion Science and in the Post-Graduate program in Social Science at Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil.