


Religious Diversity and its Challenges for Secularism in Mexico

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Abstract Over the past three decades, Mexico has witnessed the end to the Catholic Church's virtual monopoly of religious and moved increasingly towards religious diversity. This transformation leads us to the following questions: What challenges does the rise of religious diversity represent for the secularism model in Mexico? The first section of this article describes the current model of secularism in Mexico as the context for church-state relations. The emphasis here is on new areas of confrontation and tension between different political and religious actors who vie to redefine the state's role in the public sphere. Religious diversity is an important part of cultural pluralism in Mexico. To chart the new religious map, we analyze recent data on religious belonging from Mexico's Population and Housing Census (2010) and identify the main actors and trends within this transformation. Religious groups have different positions on the relationship between religion and the public sphere. To analyze them, we draw on the Mexican National Survey on Religious Beliefs and Practices conducted by the Religious Research Network of Mexico (RIFREM) in 2016 (Hernández et al. 2016). Based on all available information, we reflect on the issues and challenges of religious transformation and the resulting need to redefine secularism.

Keywords Religious diversity · Pluralism · Secularism · Religion and public sphere · Mexico

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Introduction

What challenges does the recent realignment of the religious field in Mexico entail for the secular state? This is the fundamental question of this article, a question we will address by identifying the contributing factors to greater diversity in a religious field that was dominated by Catholicism until just a few decades ago (Bourdieu, 1971). A series of other questions arise in this new scenario: does the presence of different religions and religious options contribute to greater cultural pluralism based on respect, equality, and religious freedom? If secularism (or more precisely, the French notion of *laïcité*) is understood as the separation between politics and religion, to what degree does the constitutional framework—and the relationship between religions and the public sphere in practice—contribute to strengthening, challenging, or weakening secularism?

To provide answers to these questions, this article is structured in five sections to provide the following: (1) an overview of secularism in Mexico, describing recent alterations to the legal framework ensuring the separation of church and state and the relationship between government officials, political parties, and religious leaders; (2) thoughts on recent confrontations and tensions between different actors who vie to redefine the relationship between churches and public spaces; (3) an analysis of the most recent data on religious belonging from the Population and Housing Census (2010) to identify the main actors and trends within this religious transformation and geographical reconfigurations; (4) an analysis of the findings of a 2016 survey on religious beliefs that shows how the conception of religion and the public space—and the relationship between the two—varies according to religious affiliation and identification; and (5) final thoughts on the issues and challenges associated with this religious diversity and the need to redefine secularism.

This analysis is particularly relevant in Mexico today because its religious field is in the midst of change: Catholicism's monopoly is crumbling in the face of brisk religious diversity, yet the Catholic clergy continues to enjoy *de facto* privileges and special treatment by the state. Another important aspect of the current-day scenario is that religious groups (including Catholics) are actively demanding freedom, equal treatment, recognition, and access to areas within the public or political sphere. In some cases, however, they also lobby to prevent other social minorities from attaining these rights or freedoms, thus inhibiting both healthy secularism and cultural pluralism, as we will see further on.

Secularism: the Areas in Dispute Between Religious and State Actors

Mexico is an overwhelmingly Catholic country whose 1857 constitution incorporated *laïcité*, the French model of secularism. At certain points in Mexican history, strict anticlerical policies kept the state from acknowledging churches' legal personality and even prohibited public worship in the first years after the Mexican Revolution. However, the ultimate aim of secularism as cited under different laws is to clearly differentiate between the functions of church and state. Historically, the Catholic Church considered that this rigid Constitution violated its religious rights and freedoms and interfered in decisions within its congregation (like the number of ministers or the use of places of worship). This tension began to wane when diplomatic relations were reestablished with Vatican City in 1991; a year

later, the state acknowledged the legal personality of religious associations and established the Office of Religious Affairs, giving these associations direct contact with the government.¹ To date, over seven thousand religious associations are registered with the office, about half of them Roman Catholic.² When enacted, the Law of Religious Associations loosened old restrictions against the expression of religion in public spaces and acknowledged priests' right to vote (González 2001).

Nowadays, these changes in Mexico's state policy on religion are viewed as a necessary part of modern democracy but they have important repercussions for secularism. First and foremost, the new policies aim to protect secularism (though without anticlericalism), affirming the autonomy of both church and state. On the other hand, the new law has acknowledged the right to religious diversity, establishing a registry of religious associations and a department entrusted with overseeing them. This created a relationship between the state and different congregations, facilitating administrative procedures for the associations and also providing legal counsel and human rights defense in cases of interreligious conflict. However, in recent years, Catholicism—high-ranking clergy in particular—has taken a more vocal and active role in society, demanding preferential treatment from government leaders and from the state as a whole. In addition, many politicians from different parties have publicly expressed their religious affiliation, often using religious symbols as propaganda during political campaigns. Although it is clear that the Catholic Church no longer holds a religious monopoly in Mexico, as the country's number one religion, it continues to enjoy certain privileges.

In spite of the loosening of the strictest anticlerical policies, the Mexican Constitution still prohibits religious involvement in various public spheres and institutions such as schools (where religious contents are forbidden), political campaigns (where the participation or intervention of priests or pastors is prohibited), and the media, specifically television and radio, which cannot be owned by religious associations. In spite of the fact that the Constitution aims to prevent any public intervention of the Catholic Church, however, this legal framework often crumbles under pressure by both Catholic and Christian agents who seek to evangelize in public spheres such as health care, education, sexual rights, family policy, the media, and politics. As Roberto Blancarte has noted, this is owed to the fact that “There has never been—nor could there be—a clear distinction between public and private. Yet modern societies insisted on this distinction and the process known as social differentiation ultimately prevented religion from structuring the other spheres of public life,” (Blancarte 2004: 91).

As religious diversity began to spread, secularism became wrought with tension. At odds with the Catholic Church, religious diversity is also frowned on by groups within civil society that support secular rights and by certain liberal sectors within government.

¹ Until the end of 1992, the office entrusted with religious affairs was the Department of Arms, Explosives and Religious Affairs, part of the Ministry of the Interior. In 1992, the constitutional amendments of Articles 3, 5, 24, 27, and 130 produced a substantial change in the relations between church and state (Hernández 2013). After the amendment, churches and other groups (including Catholic parish churches) were recognized as religious associations. Later, the name of the department was changed to the Department of Religious Associations and upgraded to a Vice-Ministry. However, the current state entity is the Department of Religious Affairs (under the Ministry of the Interior), changing the status of these topics and their degree of importance for the state.

² The latest figures from the Department of Religious Associations in Mexico are available on the government website: <http://asociacionesreligiosas.gob.mx/work/models/AsociacionesReligiosas/pdf/NumeraliaAsociacionesReligiosas.pdf>.

Returning to Baubérot, secularism (*laïcité*) is more than just a separation of the functions of state and religions. It is an attempt to strike a balance between the sources of tension that form a “nearly equilateral triangle whose points are the division between religion and politics, freedom of conscience and its repercussions, and religious equality,” (Baubérot 2007).

Different religious associations and movements vie to recover or appropriate certain niches of power and social activism with an eye to “reversing the modern tradition of a secularized society and imposing a society governed by an inflexible, indivisible Catholic morality” (De la Torre 2005a). The main areas where conservative Catholics and even some Evangelical congregations seek to intervene are the following:

- a) *Education*. Given that this is a strategic area for secularism in Mexico, which offers public, nonreligious education, education has historically been a battleground where some fight to defend civil liberties against groups of conservative Catholics holed up in “trenches” (Rodríguez 2003). Another source of dispute is the struggle to add religious education to school curricula. Catholic groups have lobbied for a bill to include the right to religious freedom in Article 24 of the Constitution which, in their view, infringes on this right. Since 2006, Catholic lawyers and legislators have invoked the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to win support for public religious practice (Barranco 2016). One important religious institution that came out against the reform was La Luz del Mundo,³ the Evangelical association founded in Mexico that has experienced the most growth both nationwide (600,000 believers) and across the globe (5 million followers, according to the church’s tally). La Luz del Mundo, which has particularly strong lobbying power in Mexico (De la Torre 1995), joined forces with Freemason and secularist organizations to pressure local legislatures to vote against the reform and thus keep schools from teaching religion.

On the other hand, beyond the formal separation of education and religion, public schools are sites of daily conflict and exclusion for minority religious groups during traditional Catholic celebrations (especially altars on the Day of the Dead and Christmas festivities), which are frequently imposed on non-Catholic children based on the argument that these are popular Mexican traditions.⁴ Catholicism’s nationwide and historical hegemony has been ingrained as habitus, establishing a symbolic convergence between school education and this religion (particularly in its folk versions) which is why Catholics see no ethical dilemma in celebrating their traditions at public schools. Nevertheless, these practices lay the groundwork for discrimination against religious minorities (Solís 2006). Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose religious doctrine prohibits acts of adoration and warn against the idolatrous use of images, opt their children

³ La Luz del Mundo Church was founded in the city of Guadalajara in 1926. Its founder, “Aaron,” was a military officer who demanded discipline and strict obedience from the new church’s followers. Aaron’s intense nationalism led the church to a close relationship with the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the Mexican party that held power throughout the twentieth century) until the end of the twentieth century when the country finally elected a president from another party (De la Torre 1995). Unlike Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, La Luz is a Christian church that supports an apostolic church government with a single apostle (the head of the church who comes from a family of church leaders) and unlike Pentecostal churches, it does not favor congregational rule (Barranco 2016).

⁴ On conflicts and discrimination of non-Catholic children during the celebration of traditional Catholic celebrations and the Day of the Dead at public schools, see Solís (2006).

out of patriotic rituals associated with the flag and the national anthem, two core elements of civic education in Mexico since the post-revolutionary period. This has led to discrimination at schools and even student expulsion. The National Human Rights Commission has intervened to protect the rights of religious minorities and their freedom of conscience, giving the right to education priority over the constitutional mandate to participate in these school activities.⁵

- b) *The media.* Different religious associations have lobbied to change the existing legislation and give churches the right to own and manage media outlets in order for them to evangelize and promote their activities (De la Torre 2005a, b). As the law currently stands, religious associations cannot own media outlets but can buy airtime on television channels and radio stations. Additionally, the legislation on media ownership does not apply to cable TV, whose viewership continues to grow. One particularly popular religious channel on cable TV is Maria Visión. Media outlets are currently an important arena for missionary work. In Southeastern Mexico—and Guatemala as well—the radio is an important space for Christian worship.⁶
- c) *Public health care.* In this field, reproductive health is the biggest source of conflict. Catholic associations have undertaken multiple moral crusades to impose their dogmatic vision on campaigns promoting contraceptives for family planning and condom use for AIDS prevention. Recently, these associations have also come out against the morning after pill. However, the issue that causes the most tension is the push to legalize abortion. Here, Catholic associations clash with human rights organizations and feminist NGOs, organizations they approach as enemies in a battle. Other areas of public health that are sources of conflict include blood transfusions and organ transplants (Jehovah's Witnesses are against them), vaccination (opposed by those against the biomedical model who dabble in alternative spiritualities), and authorization for euthanasia, which conservative Catholic and Christian groups staunchly oppose. Some of the crusades have adopted the slogan “defending life,” which the Catholic Church hopes to use to impose its morality on society at large (see De la Torre 2006). Another area within health care where churches—especially Christian Evangelicals—have encroached is treatment for addictions, offering a slew of religion-focused therapies whose ultimate aim is not only to help addicts abandon drugs but also convert them to Christianity. These treatment centers are most frequent in cities along the Mexico-US border like Tijuana or Ciudad Juárez though they can also be found in all of Mexico's major cities (See Hernández 2013, 2015).
- d) *Family policy.* This is the area where conservative Catholic groups struggle to defend the rights of the family using a strategic ideological argument based on the pillars of individualism (the right to private education, private property, private enterprise, and free association). These groups form a broad political coalition with different branches of Mexico's right wing that frequently clashes with the

⁵ On the particular situation of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Mexico, see Garma 1994, 1999. On the intervention of the National Human Rights Commission, see National Human Rights Commission, 2003 “Recomendación general número 5/2003 sobre el caso de la discriminación en las escuelas por motivos religiosos” [General Recommendation 5/2003 on Religious Discrimination at Schools].

⁶ On the role of the radio in promoting religion and religious practice in Mexico, see Reyna 2015.

government. Family defense dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century and socialist education. As a movement, its current aims include defining marriage, imposing adoption criteria, and censoring school curricula, where conservative groups are particularly interested in eradicating so-called “gender ideology” to maintain the traditional family as the sole “natural” model. These groups have formed different associations that organize public campaigns and lobby in the legislature and state departments. In the crusades against gay marriage and adoption by gay couples, mass marches have been organized in different cities across Mexico. Catholics and Evangelists are currently collaborating on these campaigns because they have conceived of a new common enemy together: gender ideology, a threat to their traditional family model and marriage as they conceive it.

Data on Changing Religious Makeup and Geographical Reconfigurations

In Mexico, diversification and the tide of pluralism have occurred more slowly than in the rest of Latin America (see Pew Research Survey 2014). While Catholicism no longer holds a monopoly over religion in the country and other denominations have grown, the majority of Mexicans are still Catholic. Since 1950, when 98.21% of the country was affiliated with this religion, their numbers have dwindled, reaching 82.6% in 2010 while Protestants, Evangelists, and the unaffiliated have grown. Other religions, in fact, accounted for just 1.79% of the population in 1950 but 17.4% by 2010 (Source: XII Population and Housing Census, INEGI 2010).

Catholic dissidents form a diverse, dynamic group that varies from consolidated religions to small denominations and local churches, flooding the market with religious options. We will describe the different denominations based on the 2010 census (Fig. 1).

According to many sociologists and anthropologists of religion, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which now have 5,595,116 members across Mexico, are mainly responsible for the changes to the country’s religious map. As Garma (2007) has noted,

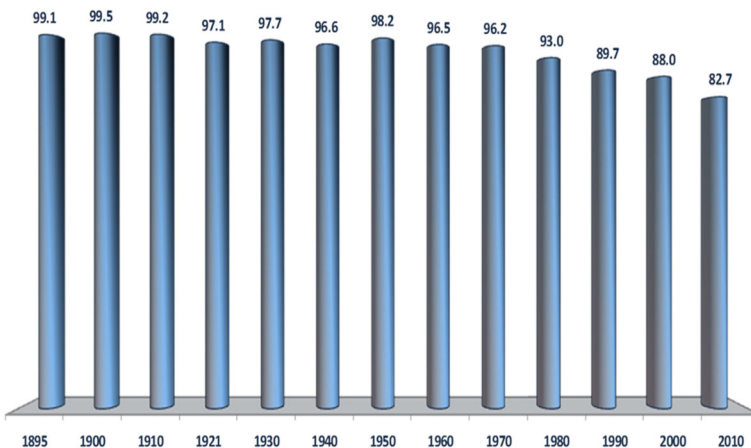


Fig. 1 Percentage of Catholic population in Mexico, INEGI 1950–2010. Source: Mexican Population and Housing Census, National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI). (Gutiérrez Zúñiga and De la Torre 2017)

Pentecostal denominations are second only to the Catholic Church in terms of their congregations (1,782,021 members). Pentecostalism is a movement within Christian Protestantism that consists of a broad range of denominations, some strongly organized and others independent churches. There are so many denominations, in fact, that it is a difficult movement to grasp. Through the Charismatic Movement, some Catholics and Protestants have embraced beliefs and practices associated with Pentecostalism; there are also Pentecostal movements that claim to be interdenominational. Not a religion per se, Pentecostalism is more of a practice that in some cases requires conversion, though it does not always require a change in a believer's formal church affiliation. Crossovers of this sort represent a methodological challenge for the sociologists of religion, because variables related to religious affiliation become less relevant and frameworks for religious identity beyond church membership necessitate new research tools and methodologies (Campiche 1991).

In order to begin to get a grasp on religious affiliation, it is necessary to go deeper into the categories of "Other Evangelicals" which includes over two million people and Pentecostals, which has just over one million. These groups have a long history in Mexico, though many denominations are rendered invisible due to these sweeping survey categories. These include the *Asambleas de Dios* (imported from an important Pentecostal denomination in Brazil), *La Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús* (the oldest Mexican Pentecostal church), the *Interdenominacional*, and the *Centros de Fe Esperanza y Amor*, among others. The same occurs with the category "Other Evangelicals," a blanket term for many important denominations like the evangelical network *Confraternice*.⁹ Although the Evangelists and Pentecostals include groups of different sizes and orientations, they represent the largest non-Catholic subgroup in the census, with 2,365,647 members, similar geographical distribution and socioeconomic status.

Among consolidated religions, we can mention the churches that fall under the "Paraprotestant" category. These are religious groups with a holy book besides the Bible and include Jehovah's Witnesses, the Paraprotestant group with the most members (1,561,086);⁷ Seventh Day Adventists (661,878);⁸ and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (314,932).⁹

With regard to the historic Protestant churches, we have seen that, contrary to what some scholars have argued, these churches do show signs of vigor and growth. In Chiapas, for example, Mónica Aguilar (2007) verifies the expansion of the Reformed Presbyterians, and in Guadalajara the same can be said of Baptist churches. Just as Christian minority groups do not always appeal to the poor and the marginalized, historical Protestants do not necessarily attract only the urban middle classes, as marginal indigenous populations also profess. Unlike liberal and "cold" versions of

⁷ Jehovah's Witnesses has gained a greater foothold in Mexico than in any other country of Latin America, with a presence in most of the country's municipalities (95% of all municipalities in 2010). Besides its geographical reach, Mexico's Jehovah's Witnesses have heterogeneous socioeconomic profiles.

⁸ The Adventist Church has many followers in Southeastern Mexico (Chiapas, Veracruz, Tabasco, Chetumal, and Quintana Roo) and is the only church that has successfully concentrated its followers in a single geographical area, making it the hegemonic religion in this specific region. Its members tend to be marginal, indigenous rural dwellers.

⁹ The followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) live in cities near the US border. Mormon congregations enjoy a better economic position and are better educated than the other Christian minorities.

Protestantism, this is a “hot” emotional version, that is to say, one that has been pentecostalized.

In Brazil, where national mega-churches like the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus are leading religious change, forming powerful companies that have made novel use of the mass media to proselytize. In Mexico, however, legislation prohibiting the ownership of media outlets by religious associations has limited the expansion of electronic churches. Some of these churches have recently arrived in Mexico and are buying transmission time on cable TV channels (which is allowed under current law), so it will be important to track their development in the future.

The number of Mexicans who do not identify with any one religion has grown to 5% in a single decade (5 million people). Far from indicating strictly atheism, the unaffiliated category covers multiple identities that exceed religious affiliation, revealing an important aspect of Mexico’s religious makeup. The “unaffiliated” thus includes indigenous populations who practice *el costumbre* (their ancestral traditions), groups of people who are reluctant to identify as Catholics, and those New Age believers who define themselves as “spiritual without religion.” As the number of unaffiliated is highest in municipalities where Catholicism has become a minority religion, it could cover religious conversions, conflicts between religions and children (or even grandchildren) who have abandoned their family’s religion (Bowen, 1996).

Finally, although Mexico is a predominantly Christian country, it has imported certain Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, with 5346 followers) as well as Muslims (1317) and Jews (45,260), all small minorities and generally affluent city dwellers. On the whole, as shown by Juárez and Ávila (2007), Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews are young, single, well-educated, and earn a good income. Other minorities within the minorities that are hard to classify as they contain both Christian and non-Christian components include the nativists (1487), spiritualists (60,657), and “Other Christian” (2213) categories.

In spite of Catholicism’s historic influence on the country’s territorial configurations and national unity, important shifts at the municipal level provide insight into changing religious makeup today. In 2010, for example, the census reveals that Catholicism has become a minority religion in 70 municipalities, most in Southeastern Mexico, predominantly in the states of Chiapas (43) and Oaxaca (16). These data indicate that in order to comprehend the true importance and extent of religious change, it is necessary to consider how religious diversity varies across the country, charting a map where new denominations have taken hold in certain regions. This creates differences between territories where Catholicism continues to predominate and others marked by religious heterogeneity (Fig. 2).

Religious Groups and Opinions on Religious Diversity

One of the points of Baubérot’s equilateral triangle is freedom of conscience and its consequences within a framework of secular values that guarantee cultural pluralism, essential to acknowledging the rights associated with religious diversity. Negative opinions towards religious diversity are important to understand a cultural climate that fosters the discrimination of religious minorities while positive opinions are an indicator of cultural pluralism. Below, we will present information on

Distribution of the "non-Catholic" religious preferences, Mexico 2010

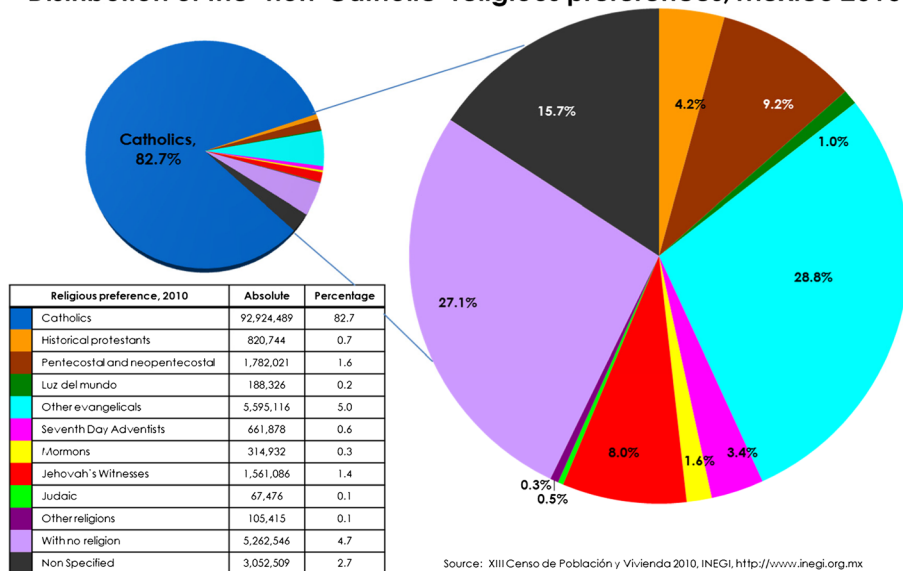


Fig. 2 Distribution of Non-Catholic Religious Preferences, Mexico 2010. Source: XIII Mexican Population and Housing Census, National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) 2010. (Gutiérrez Zúñiga and De la Torre 2017)

how different people feel about the right to change religions or continue to be affiliated with the same religion. Religious identity and commitment vary according to religious group. According to the Mexican National Survey on Religious Beliefs and Practices conducted by the Religious Research Network of Mexico (RIFREM) in 2016 (available at www.rifrem.mx),¹⁰ there are differences in the self-identifications and degrees of adherence among members within each of Mexico's main religious groups.

The majority of Catholics attribute their beliefs to tradition (47.3%) but Christians of other denominations and Evangelicals mainly attribute their beliefs to conviction (61.5% and 49.8%, respectively). These differences can be related to the longstanding nature of Catholic affiliation and the fact that Catholics are still a religious majority vs. the intensity of religiosity among the first generations of converts. However, it is noteworthy that the category of "believer in my own way" is not only present among Catholics but also among Evangelicals and Christians of other denominations, revealing a trend towards religious autonomization previously only seen among Catholics. As for the unaffiliated, many in fact believe in something, though their identity is not quite as defined as the other groups. The fact that a significant number of the unaffiliated identify as believers in their own way (17%) and as spiritual without a church (18%) confirms the *deinstitutionalized* spiritual

¹⁰ The Mexican population stands at 109,642,557. The universe of the study consisted in four population groups, divided according to their religious affiliations. Three thousand cases were used for the sample, with a reliability rate of 95% and a standard error of $\pm 2.5\%$. The sample covered 155 towns in the country's 32 federal districts. Stratified random sampling with probability proportional to size was used for the sample. The information was obtained through a face-to-face questionnaire conducted at households with anonymity assurance. The study was done from October 29–November 30, 2016.

practices outside among those not affiliated with any church. In other words, unaffiliated is not only a category for atheists (11.9%) or for those who do not practice any religion (15.5%). Within this category, there are many individualized, out-of-the-box ways of practicing different types of *deinstitutionalized* spiritualities.

There are diverse reasons for converting to a new religion but more than half of all converts gave one of the following four answers for the change: dissatisfaction with their previous religion (17%), the new religion’s faithful interpretation of the Bible (16.8%), the search for truth (13.2%), and the conviction that their new religion is the true religion (10.5%) (Fig. 3).

The scarce mention of the reasons cited in the literature as important motives for religious conversion was worth noting. These include the economic assistance and solidarity that the convert encounters in the new religious community, the crisis that gave origin to the change, and the struggle against addictions, which total just 6.4% altogether.

An interesting result that should be explored in upcoming research is that among people who convert to new religions, the reason they give for the change tends to determine which religious group they choose. Finding meaning in life (19.2%) and dissatisfaction with their previous religion (19.1%) are the main reasons for religious conversions among those who become Evangelicals; among converts to other Christian denominations, the conviction that the new religion is the true religion (23.9%) prevails. For those who abandon religion, religious dissatisfaction is the main reason for converting, with 18.5% saying they were not satisfied by their previous religion and 33.3% saying no religion satisfied them (Table 1).

Independently of their experience with religious conversion, the survey respondents believe that people change religions mainly based on a personal decision (21.7%). This is the reason most frequently mentioned in all four religious groups and it seems indicative of a growing awareness of religious conversion as a decision to exercise the right to religious freedom. Among Catholics, the answers often cast doubt on the reasons for conversion: “they are brainwashed” (19.4%) or “they are drawn in by economic incentives” (13.5%).

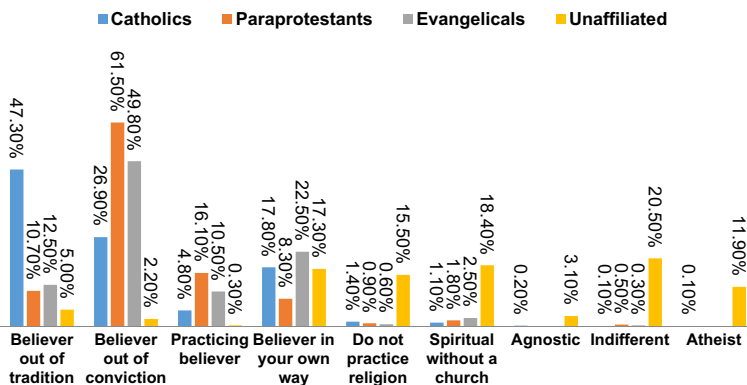


Fig. 3 How do you identify yourself in religious terms? Source: Religious Beliefs and Practices National Survey, Mexico (Rifrem 2016)

Although the main religious institutions have varying stances on secularism, believers themselves often express pluralistic attitudes and less rigid views towards organized religion than the high-ranking clergy of their respective denominations. One example of this is the recent alliance between Catholics and Christian who—in spite of their differences and mutual distrust—have joined forces against gay marriage, gay couple adoption, abortion, and women’s rights (Fig. 4).

On the other hand, there are certain locations where religious minorities are still not entirely welcomed. Oaxaca and Chiapas—states that suffered intense religious conflict at different points in their history—are two examples of Mexican states where non-Catholic religions have begun to dispute Catholicism’s hegemony.

However, certain minority religious practices continued to be stigmatized like the folk worship of saints, virgins, and other spiritual figures that have seen a surge in popularity over the past two decades. Two examples are Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte, both of whom the media associate with the world of crime and delinquency in spite of the fact that the majority of their followers are not associated with crime or drugs. Although the 2016 RIFREM survey does not provide any substantial information on such beliefs, this could be because many worship these folk saints in secret due to the stigma associated with them and their negative depiction by major religious institutions and in the media.

Table 1 What was the main reason you converted to a new religion/abandoned religion?

Religious group	Catholic	Paraprotestants	Evangelicals	Unaffiliated	Total
Not satisfied with your previous religion	15.2%	15.8%	19.1%	18.5%	17.0%
Found meaning in life in your current religion	6.1%	20.4%	19.2%		9.3%
Became convinced that this is the true religion	8.4%	23.9%	18.9%		10.5%
Experienced a crisis (emotional, economic, a divorce) and found God	5.1%	7.6%	7.0%		4.7%
Your current religion interprets the Bible more accurately	30.9%	11.0%	8.9%		16.8%
Your current religion provides economic assistance and solidarity	2.5%	2.5%			1.3%
Your new religion helped you recover from addiction		1.1%	1.3%		0.4%
Your family converted	9.4%	3.6%	10.7%		7.2%
No religion satisfies you	1.8%	1.2%	0.4%	33.3%	8.4%
You decided to seek the truth on your own	10.4%	6.9%	5.7%	29.5%	13.2%
You are put off by the church’s rules and dogmas	2.2%			6.8%	2.5%
Another reason, why?	8.2%	5.9%	8.7%	11.9%	8.9%
	Total 100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0

Source: Religious Beliefs and Practices National Survey, Mexico (Rifrem 2016)

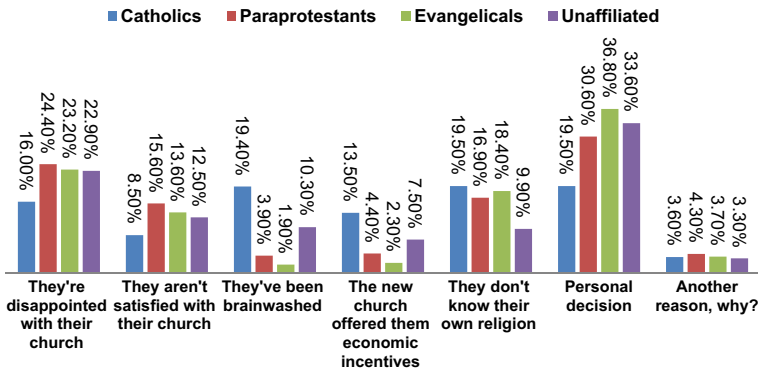


Fig. 4 Why do you think people convert to a new religion? Source: Religious Beliefs and Practices National Survey, Mexico (Riftem 2016)

Different Ways of Conceiving the Relationship Between Religion and Public Space Among Mexico’s Main Religious Groups

Another point on Baubérot’s equilateral triangle of secularism is the separation between religion and politics. Although Mexico has a high percentage of Catholics and religious diversity is only a recent phenomenon, the majority of the survey respondents—regardless of their creed—believe that the member of any religious group should have the same rights as all other citizens. This is indicative of the country’s pluralistic values (Beckford 2003).

Mexico is characterized by contrasts since, in spite of the influence of Catholicism on local culture, it has been a constitutionally secular country with strict laws on the separation of church and state since the mid-nineteenth century. One of the historic topics of dispute among conservative Catholics and liberals has been public schools. Catholics regularly launch campaigns to incorporate religious values in the national education system. When asked about whether religious values or contents should be taught at schools, 64.3% of Catholics agreed, followed by 51.9% of Paraprotestants, 48% of Evangelicals, and 35.7% of the unaffiliated. On the other hand, however, although bishops and other conservative movements have expressed their opposition to sex education being included in school textbooks, the majority of Mexicans would disagree: 80.8% say they agree with sex education. Paradoxically, Catholics are the group most likely to agree with sex education (83.5%), followed by the unaffiliated (73.7%), the Paraprotestants (63.6%), and in a lower percentage—but still a majority—the Evangelicals (60.8%).

Similarly, Mexicans in general do not frown upon teaching gender perspectives at schools (73.2% say they agree with it). Once again, Catholics are the group most in favor of it (76%) even though the same year the survey was conducted, this same group launched nationwide crusades against what they referred to as “gender ideology.” In contrast, Paraprotestants (53%) and Evangelicals (51.9%) are more reactionary on this topic (Fig. 5).

Most Mexicans (75.4%) are not bothered by the tradition of keeping altars to the dead (though 41.2% of the unaffiliated, 32.1% of Evangelicals, and 23.2% of Paraprotestants do take issue with this practice). A similar quantity of Mexicans (72.2%) is not opposed to traditional Catholic celebrations (like graduation masses or Christmas pageants) that are

frequently organized at schools, although some Paraprotestants (23.2%), Evangelicals (32.1%), and the unaffiliated (41.2%) are against them. The data reveal that although secularism is established in the Mexican Constitution, it needs to be applied to values and practices at public schools, where traditional Catholic celebrations do little to contribute to a pluralistic culture. This is task that remains for Mexican secularism.

With regards to the most recent controversies over new legislative bills on the regulation of religion in the public sphere, more than half of Mexicans approve of laws demanding that churches render accounts to the tax authority. Only one-third (33.1%) said they were in favor of legalizing abortion and a similar number was in favor of legalizing same-sex marriages (30.1%). When asked about whether churches should be able to own media outlets (they currently cannot under Mexican law), 28.4% said they approve; 21.4% are not against religions openly participating in electoral policy (also prohibited). A minority (8.8%) would approve of political candidates using religious symbols in their political campaigns. In short, this analysis shows that the

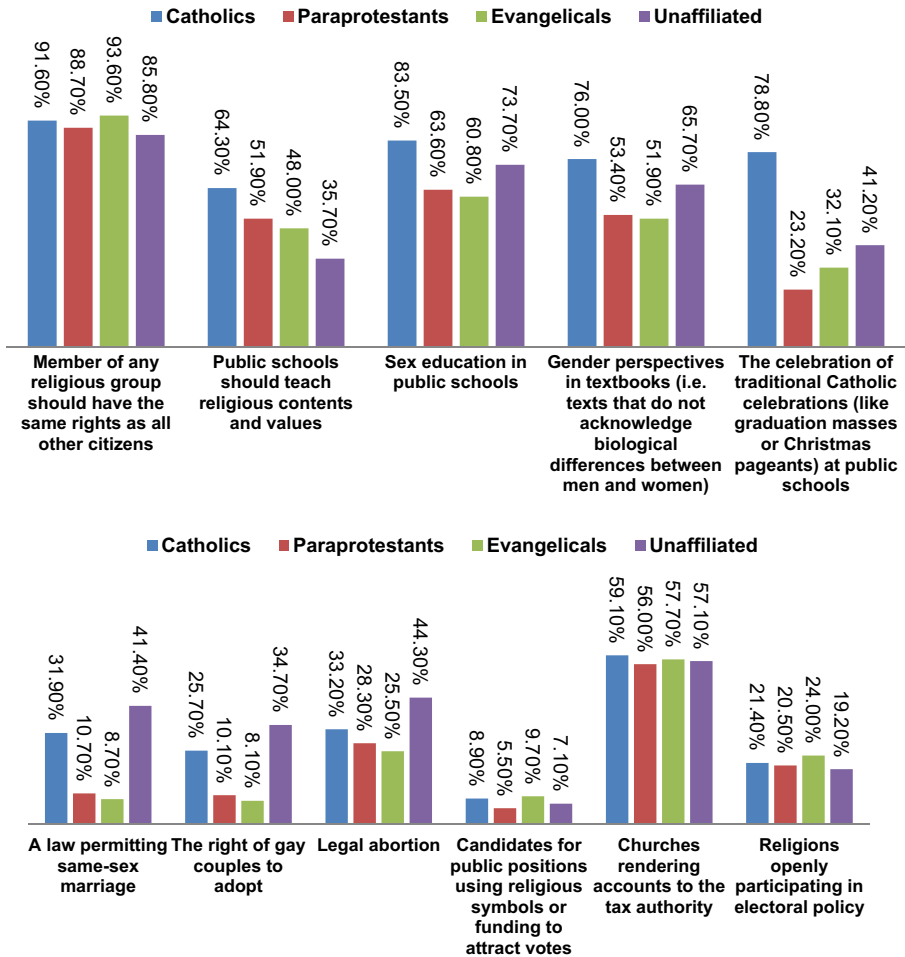


Fig. 5 Do you agree or disagree with the following statements or situations? Source: Religious Beliefs and Practices National Survey, Mexico (Rifrem 2016)

majority of Mexicans are against the new laws proposed by both politicians and conservative religious sectors, with the exception of requiring churches to render accounts to the tax authority. However, it also reveals us that a significant number approves of the new trends in sexual liberation and pluralism (around one-third) while most oppose religions getting involved in politics. However, interesting differences appear in the comparison of religious group: the unaffiliated are more liberal and favor secular culture, followed by the Catholics, while the Evangelicals and Paraprotestants are more conservative and less sympathetic to a political culture that monitors the actions of religions in the public sphere.

Controversy Surrounding the Secular State

Public space—and consequently, secularism—has become an arena of dispute where different agents put forth a series of diverging proposals.

The first position is backed by certain government officials, intellectuals, and journalists who want to maintain a rigid separation between religion and politics, forbidding clergy from intervening in politics or education. These liberal sectors who defend the secular state (politicians, attorneys, NGOs and intellectuals) argue that the concept of the secular state should be reformulated. Legislators, they say, should pass laws and amend the Constitution to promote religious pluralism, ensuring equal opportunity for different religions and congregations and thus revoking the privileges the Catholic Church has traditionally enjoyed. They also support limits on the intervention in the political sphere of different religious associations. A similar stance that is gaining ground in the debate is “post-secularity” (Romerales and Zazo 2016) which proposes to include value pluralism within the discourse, ethical framework, and secular language of human values. In this regard, the proposal is for religions to be integrated to civil discourse under the same guidelines that ensure a pluralist society. This means that the Catholic Church is no longer the sole protagonist, just one more actor in a field of religious diversity. According to this perspective, all religious positions are recognized as valid and legitimate, with the right to act within civil society but also with certain obligations, part of a discourse of a Mexican civil religion (Romerales and Zazo 2016). Churches of all denominations, then, would abandon their pretension as the keepers of the truth and their mission to save those who have yet to see that truth. A new model of communicative action would be thus created on a “neutral” terrain, that of civic engagement to address social problems.¹¹

The second stance is led by high-ranking clergy from the Catholic Church and civic secular groups that defend conservative values. These actors continuously organize information campaigns, product boycotts, and mass marches to oppose liberal policies like campaigns to promote condom use, the morning after pill, initiatives to legalize abortion, and more recently, the gay marriage law. They have cultivated a public profile, attained social visibility, and intend to re-Christianize different spheres of the secular world. The aim is to recover the symbolic kinship between Catholic and Mexican, that is, the convergence of Catholicism and national culture (Solís 2006),

¹¹ Different religious communities in Los Angeles, California began to work with this model after the L.A. riots and others after September 11, 2001. The Center for Religion and Civic Culture at Southern California State University was formed to document and foster this social initiative.

overlooking and even discrediting religious diversity by emphasizing the historic importance of this one religion in configuring the nation. This discourse has been important historically not only in Mexico and Latin America but also in other countries where Catholicism has deep roots, like Poland and Italy. The defense of Catholicism has been updated to incorporate concepts associated with human rights discourse like conscientious objection and the demand for religious freedom and then used them to try to win back historic privileges for the Catholic Church, as seen in a recent bill sent to Congress by Argentina's executive branch.¹²

There is, however, a group of Catholics that is opposed to secular regulations and lobby to guarantee the freedom of worship and religious expression in public spaces and the public sphere. These Catholics base their arguments on certain models of secularism outside the French tradition that have been successful in countries with a historically multi-faith or Protestant tradition where the conditions for pluralism are quite different than in countries with a Catholic majority. Under these alternative models, churches receive subsidies for their social activities and can be involved in educational institutions and media outlets like any other social actor.

The third position corresponds to political actors who use religious symbols associated with Mexico's national identity in the public sphere for party campaigns and to increase the appeal of their politicians (often linked to the PAN but also to the PRI). At the turn of the new century, the "perfect dictatorship" came to an end when the PRI government (which had favored the French approach to secularism until a few decades earlier) lost its first election in seven decades. The PAN began running the country, giving militant Catholics a voice in public policy and thus jeopardizing the state's autonomy. As Blancarte has shown, on different occasions, politicians have exploited Catholicism's powerful symbolic capital during election campaigns, like when candidate Vicente Fox used the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe and a crucifix during both his presidential campaign launch and later, to celebrate his electoral victory. In any case, regardless of party affiliation, politicians are constantly invoking "the people's faith" (and not the principle of sovereignty) to defend their public actions. Religious activities that used to be relegated to the private sphere have become part of elected officials' public agenda (some examples include then President Vicente Fox kissing the Pope's ring or President Enrique Peña Nieto taking communion during the last visit of Pope Francis to Mexico, both sparking controversy because they broke with national protocol in a state that is still constitutionally secular). A final example of this is the use of Catholic symbols of national unity (like the iconic Virgen de Guadalupe) as patriotic symbols.

The fourth position is the Evangelist's recent incursion in formal politics. A group of Evangelists decided to form a political party, Encuentro Social, whose "activism is mainly limited to Evangelical Christian groups though they defend the secular state." The principal reason for the new party was to counter the Catholic lobby but also defend Evangelist rights as a religious minority and its vision of the world. Defending conservative values and opposed to same-sex marriage, the legalization of abortion, and the circulation and sale of pornography, Encuentro Social describes itself as the "family party."⁸ Mexico could be close to experiencing the level of political engagement of Evangelists that countries like Brazil and Colombia have seen in recent years. A decade

¹² See Fortunato Mallimaci's analysis of the bill proposing a constitutional amendment in Argentina: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/49909-con-la-conciencia-a-otra-parte>

ago, Ari Pedro Oro warned of what was to come in Brazil: “the most visible sign that religion and politics are coming together is the significant presence of Evangelist churches, especially Pentecostal churches, in politics, and the formation of the so-called ‘Evangelist caucus,’” (Oro 2006:75) that has infiltrated the different levels of legislative power. While Catholics and Evangelists vie for political power in certain cases, they have also formed political alliances in defense of “public order,” launching moral crusades and coming out against laws that defend secular liberties like the legalization of abortion, divorce, legal recognition of same-sex marriage, and the decriminalization of drugs. In the recent municipal elections in Baja California, Encuentro Social took second place in the municipality of Tijuana, unseating the PRI candidate and losing to the PAN candidate by a tiny margin. While the victory can partially be attributed to the popularity of the party’s candidate among Tijuana locals, the religious background of this political party is a clear sign of how secularity is being reworked in the political context. The founding of the party and Evangelists’ recent incursion in formal politics create new challenges for secularity.

The risk of this party model is that it will use the slogan “brothers vote for brothers” to encourage Evangelists of vote for “their” candidate, a tactic that has already been seen in other countries of Latin America, particularly Brazil, to exercise political pressure and increase their power. Another strategy involves presenting candidates as the best option simply because they are Evangelists. As analyst Roberto Blancarte has said,

The problem is that through these actions, the Evangelists are undermining their own tradition of distinguishing between religion and political affairs (the lack of distinction between pastors and political leaders, or between Christian-Evangelical factions and the party, are evidence of this) and they push other religious factions (Catholics, Evangelists or any other religion) to bring religion back into Mexico’s public sphere. By opening up this Pandora’s box, they are unleashing woes that we believed we had overcome like religion interfering in public life. (Blancarte 2014).

Christian denominations (Evangelical, Paraprotestant, and Pentecostal) are not strong enough to counter Catholicism. Therefore, they are not able to impose religious pluralism though the political action of some congregations does broaden their influence through caucuses in Congress. This tactic has replaced civil religion, a dynamic that inspired many citizen action movements in Latin America (Parker 2008). Many of these churches respond to ultraconservative mentalities that constantly oppose any attempt to defend secular freedoms, sexual rights, and movements of historically discriminated social groups (ethnic, racial, sexual, and gender minorities including feminists, sexually diverse individuals, and the differently abled). Some Christian Evangelical congregations struggle for equal rights among the Catholic majority but they are often among the staunchest opponents of secular freedoms and the demands for equal treatment and human rights of other social minorities. One example of these conservative Pentecostal and Catholic groups is Frente Nacional por la Familia (2016),¹³ founded to promote and defend marriage as the union between a man and a woman, and the “natural” family.¹⁴

¹³ Frente Nacional por la Familia comprises a range of Catholic organizations like Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia, Comité Nacional PROVIDA, Adoración Nocturna, Asociación Nacional Cívica Femenina (ANCIFEM), and others. Legislators from the PAN and PES parties have also joined the coalition.

¹⁴ Taken from the “About Us” page on the Frente Nacional por la Familia website, available at: www.frentenacional.mx/quienessomos/. Accessed December 15, 2016.

This alliance has organized marches in different cities across Mexico to oppose the rights of homosexual couples to marry and adopt;¹⁵ they have also lobbied to block legislation protecting secular freedoms and sexual rights. Additionally, for the first time in history, right-wing Evangelists and Catholics have abandoned their competition for souls and their theological and liturgical differences and joined forces against “gender ideology,” a concept that invalidates gender as a social and historic construction. These Evangelists and Catholics affirm that men and women’s anatomical differences are an expression of nature and a creation of God. The Christian right thus scoffs at gender as a cultural construction (which explains their use of the term gender ideology), the argument made by social movements fighting for secular rights like legalizing abortion, same-sex marriage, and inclusion for diverse families.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, the progressive left—especially the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD)—has been fighting for secular rights and freedoms, working for laws that guarantee new individual rights like legal abortion and marriage/adoption for gay couples. The movements in favor of these rights have led to interventions by Catholic clergy, particularly Norberto Rivera, presiding bishop of the Mexico City dioceses, and Juan Sandoval, cardinal of the archdioceses of Guadalajara.¹⁶ The political involvement of these and other clergy members has gone beyond expressing their opinion to encouraging boycotts and getting involved in national campaigns and crusades to “guide” the Catholic vote towards right-wing candidates and let their congregations know not to vote for parties that “offend Catholic faith and morality.” The Catholic clergy has also clashed with feminist organizations and associations working for the rights of homosexuals and sexual freedoms.

Final Reflections: Moving Towards a New Secular Pluralism

While the growing presence of Evangelists in government who work continually to limit the separation of church and state is important, the impact of religious diversity is critical to any study of secularism today. It is also important to consider religious minorities who are immersed in “a debate on whether religious organizations are respecting people’s human rights and civil liberties,” (Gaytán 2014).

The question then is whether the current legal framework, state institutions, and the culture of both religious groups and society in general can ensure the

¹⁵ The first march was held on September 10, 2016, in 130 cities across the country. The largest march was in Guadalajara, where 275,000 people attended. The second largest march attracted 20,000 participants in Mexico City. Available at: <http://www.animalpolitico.com/el-pulso/miles-protestan-contra-matrimonios-gay-en-mexico/>, accessed July 7, 2017.

¹⁶ One example of this was the confrontation between Norberto Rivera and PRD activists. The first occurred in 2009 when activists barged into the Cathedral during mass. The party members had been attending a rally in the Zócalo, the main square of Mexico City, when the event was interrupted by the ringing of the Cathedral bells, which the activists interpreted as an insult to the speaker. Angry, they barged into the city Cathedral, shouting that the cardinal was a party opponent and shouting out “Pedophile!” due to accusations that Rivera covered for priests accused of sexual abuse. In response, the archbishop ordered that the Cathedral’s doors be closed, an act that echoed the beginning of the Cristero Rebellion against the federal government in 1926. (see De la Torre 2009).

conditions for secularity in a context of religious diversity where one religion continues to predominate.

There is no doubt that the secular state had to abandon the anticlerical French model that prevented the Catholic clergy in Mexico from intervening in public life, thus laying the groundwork for the post-revolutionary secular state of the twentieth century. Given the new multi-faith context, state models that deny religion a role in public life should give way to others that guarantee rights to freedom of conscience and religious belief through policies that foster religious pluralism (Beckford 2003). These policies should be based on respect, tolerance, and a guarantee of religious pluralism that consider minority religions and their demands to be acknowledged while ensuring equal treatment for religions and respect for other beliefs and expressions of faith. Though Mexico is moving quickly towards diversity, it still lacks an institutional culture based on religious pluralism. In spite of the fact that Mexico formally recognizes all religions as equal since the constitutional amendments of 1992, Catholicism continues to receive preferential treatment from the highest levels of government (Blancarte 2004).

Given the country's move towards religious diversity, neither liberal models (without state regulation) nor the French model of secularism (where churches are severely restricted in the public sphere) is entirely able to forge the desirable separation between religion and politics. Although it is essential to guarantee religious freedom, there is not yet a self-regulating religious market that allows for free competition. Therefore, instead of working to amend the Constitution, it is necessary to find new ways of guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities for all religions and create a framework that prevents the state from imposing certain faiths as public policy and thus limiting the freedoms of other social minorities (as recently seen with the triumph of Evangelist candidates in Brazil, Guatemala, and Colombia).

Religious diversity is a growing trend, but it has not been accompanied by a greater tendency towards pluralism or the values (mainly secularism, equality, and freedom) associated with modernity. Similarly, religious diversity is not generating a new kind of secularism but is instead provoking constant revisions of the social relations and policies on religion(s) in Mexican society.

In conclusion, we believe it is essential to acknowledge and integrate the three points of the triangle proposed by Baubérot (2004) in order to move towards a contemporary secularism that recognizes religious diversity but also protects the freedom and secular rights of other social minorities. The new secular state must play a leading role in implementing pluralism in order to acknowledge religious freedom and the values that contribute to cultural pluralism while governing the public sphere and ensuring that churches and religious movements do not influence policies in key areas like health care and education.

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