

## Social Studies of Religion: Toward an Academic and Research Commitment

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*Abstract*

This article results from the research and training processes developed by the Research Program on the Social Facts of Religion and Subjectivity at La Salle University. The article proposes to address how the social studies of religion have been consolidating, especially in Latin America, to propose later how to study and project them in the academic field. At the same time, this article is part of the foundation of the postgraduate programs of Master and Doctorate in Social Studies of Religion at the Universidad de La Salle (Bogotá - Colombia).

Keywords: Field, Epistemology, Religion, Social studies, Social studies of religion.

**Introduction**

Four main positions can characterize the epistemological field of social studies of religion in Latin America: historiography, secularization and post-secularization processes, inter-religious dynamics and non-institutionalized cultural expressions. For some authors (Bidegain, 1996; Figueroa, 2010; Plata, 2010), the trajectory of the historiographic perspective has established various trends: ecclesiastical history, church history, history of religions, etc., where the focus of analysis has concentrated on studying the role played by religious sector organizations within the social space, specifically those linked to Christianity in its various expressions: Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal. Another line of work has been the research around the processes of secularization, desecularization, and post-secularization present in the normative systems, social practices and institutional order of societies, tracing the relations of tension and pressure between leaders and organizations of the religious sector concerning the State and the other fields that integrate the social space, determining the role that organizations play in the dynamics of the formal and informal public sphere (Gamper, 2009; De la Torre, 2016; Frigueiro, 2018). Religious diversity has been studied from the perspectives of identity recomposition, flow and migration to other denominations and membership in various entities - religious denominations. However, a line of reading is established in front of the interaction within the social space of the various confessional institutions based on their interests and properly religious capitals, and it is thus that positionings arise such as multireligiosity - multi-religious, interreligiosity - interreligious, transreligiosity - transreligious (Bastian, 2006; Panotto, 2017; Frigueiro, 2018). Finally, the study of cultural expressions of religiosity, called by some “popular religion,” develops its conceptual and methodological frameworks around the processes of syncretism, hybridization, and crossbreeding of religious expressions that distance themselves from institutionalized religions, a scenario in full research development.

### From Social Sciences to Social Studies

For some decades now, three (3) denominations have prospered that have tried to redefine the limits of the fields of knowledge that make up the human and social sciences, namely: analytical, empirical, hermeneutic historical, and socio-critic. These tendencies have behind them a set of historical struggles that have taken place in the scientific field and in the different fields - disciplinary subfields, which imply relations of tension within these fields and disciplines.

These designations arise from the following considerations:

- The consolidation of specializations within disciplines or as the product of the institutionalization of exchange spaces between different disciplines has given rise to sub-disciplines.
- The simultaneous impact of certain discourses on the historical objects of one or more disciplines, including gender studies, for example.
- The manifestation of concrete phenomena that had remained invisible because they were in the shadows of the different disciplines or because they were unheard of in the social world, among which are, for example, childhood and youth.

Social Studies [SE] have become the denomination that has acquired particular relevance in recent decades, which is understood as a space that can host a multiplicity of phenomena that have been brought to light with the new phase of globalization represented by globalization; from this perspective, SE is consolidated as a place to vindicate those historically unknown identities that acquired massive visibility since the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, SEs are recognized as a reinvention of social thought similar to that promoted by Cultural Studies in the 1960s, which, as they did with the cultural dimension, identify the importance of the social dimension in the study of phenomena that historically have been analyzed as derived from sociological competence. In this way, SEs are positioned as those that transcend disciplinary developments by promoting interdisciplinary articulations in the Social and Human Sciences. From this perspective, SEs are defended by the specificity of their facts and phenomena, by the particularity of their subjects, by the innovation of their epistemological - theoretical - methodological references and by their capacity to integrate disjointed disciplinary developments.

In this order of ideas, to study and research in the Social Studies of Religion is to enter a versatile path, with the capacity to respond to different challenges contemplated in the historical development of social thought, in which from its denomination it constitutes a propitious space to create, reproduce and/or deepen the theoretical and methodological tensions that have arisen between the disciplines that studied and continue to study the religious field, trying to establish

alternatives to the problems of the reification of the social, to reproduce and/or deepen the theoretical and methodological tensions that have arisen between the disciplines that studied and continue to study the religious field, trying to establish alternatives to the problems of the reification of the social to the detriment of dimensions such as politics or economics, among others, the ignorance of the lasting effects of the automatism of science in the definition of the social world as an objective reality; the restitution of the figure of the scholar to the detriment of the figure of the researcher as an objectifying subject; the unsuspecting incorporation of all sorts of discourses as legitimate representations of the social world, among others.

This paper intends to make evident the need for Social Studies to deal with the role of religion, religion and religiosity in the social space, in the public sphere, in the configuration of subjectivities, recovering in their analysis the symbolic function, undertaking a reflective and critical look at scientific or disciplinary practices, questioning the scientific perspectives that ended up mechanizing the social world and instrumentalizing its knowledge.

#### The Social Studies of Religion

The study of the religious field in Latin America can be characterized from four main positions: the hegemony of Catholic thought in studies on religion, highlighting the relations between the Apostolic See of Rome and the Spanish monarchy or the tensions that arose between the Vatican and the Latin American States during the 19th and 20th centuries; the processes of secularization and post-secularization present in the legal systems of the nations and objectified in the social and cultural history of the nations; the processes of multi-religiosity and inter-religiosity that arose in the social space with the presence of diverse religious confessions; the multi-religious and inter-religious processes that developed in the social space with the presence of various religious confessions in direct relation to the political processes of each territory; the study of the cultural expressions of popular religion and the debate that developed on syncretism, hybridization, and the crossbreeding of non-institutional religious expressions; among others.

The hegemony of Catholic thought in religious studies stems from the tension and pressure between the political and religious fields during the times of the Discovery, Conquest, Colony and Independence. Following the characterization proposed by Bidegaín (1996), religious studies in America had a historiographic approach during the first half of the 20th century. Denominations such as ecclesiastical history, church history, and history of religions represented the historiography of Christianity in its Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal aspects. Plata (2010) states that ecclesiastical history or official history focused its analysis on Catholicism as the institutional religion of the territory, presenting an apologetic vision of the religious organization

and an exclusion-invisibilization of other denominations (Christian, Jewish, Islamic, etc.). The same author states that in the second half of the 20th century, the studies framed in the current Church history broadened the horizons of meaning, giving the laity a predominant place within the historical processes of Catholicism, proposing permanent interrelations of the institution with the political, economic, educational and cultural sectors of the continent, thus evidencing the antagonisms of Catholicism with other Christian denominations. Figueroa (2010) affirms that the history of religions - a current established at the end of the last century - presents a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective that covers several aspects in its analyses: daily life, belief systems, religious practices, gender relations, politics and religion, among others, investigating the existing interactions between the different religious denominations and the impact of these in the social space. Frigueiro (2018) warns that these analyses started from institutionalized visions of religion, accepting the criterion of the Catholic monopoly as a natural condition of the religious field and providing a stereotyped and simplified vision of religion.

The studies of religion that concentrated on the processes of secularization and post-secularization in Latin America focused their analysis on the interactions between the State and the organizations of the religious sector. Gamper (2009) defines secularization as the process of gradual exclusion of ecclesiastical authorities from the formal public sphere, over which the Modern State poses a monopoly claim; in the same line, he describes desecularization or postsecularization as a current determined by the crisis of modernity, which mobilizes the subjects of secular life towards a constitutive re-encounter with religions, not by simple nostalgia or inner comfort. Panotto (2017) speaks of the diverse positionings that agents and institutions of the fields (political and religious) have determined throughout history in Latin American countries, characterizing the ways of understanding secularization, identifying three forms: differentiation between secular spheres concerning religious institutions and norms, secularization as the decline of beliefs and secularization as the marginalization of the religious to the sphere of the private. De la Torre and Martín (2016) resort to the categorization of the different modes of secularization based on the analysis of the types of secularity evidenced in Latin American Nation-States, starting from the following variables: a. the legal framework that governs the relations of separation or collaboration between the State and Religious Organizations, b. the composition of the religious field (monopolistic, majority or diverse), from the relations of force between the State and the Institutionalized Religions, c. the tensions (internal) and pressures (external) that are gestated and developed between the agents and institutions that integrate the religious field, d. the degrees of religious hegemony in the culture and daily life of each society, translated into the capacity of

religious organizations to intervene in the space and public life. Frigueiro (2018) points out that in Latin America, secularization cannot be understood as the loss of religion in society but as a reorganization of the forms of religiosity where religious plurality, the experience of beliefs in individual-personal terms and the breakdown of collective memories, would be the main features of this reorganization. Reyes (2022) investigates the regimes of truth that have configured the ways of understanding religions, specifically on the paradigm of secularization, giving an account of the regimes of truth that have configured the ways of understanding religions, making visible the strategic game that takes place in the knowledge-power relationship in the field of intellectuality and that has proposed, in turn, some regimes of truth about the role of religion and its public relevance. Therefore, it assumes the task of investigating what happens with religions in the Latin American present, especially in the organizations that come from them, those that have been called Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs).

Religious diversity in Latin America has been studied from the perspectives of identity recomposition, flow and migration to other denominations and membership in various organizations of the religious sector (Bastian, 2006). Concepts such as plurality, pluralism and diversity are used by researchers in different ways, causing tensions in the use of the terms. Drawing on conceptual developments in the field of culture, we have coined the concepts multireligiosity - multi-religious, interreligiosity - interreligious to present the research trends concerning religious diversity. Kimlicka (1996) describes multiculturalism as the challenge faced by societies with minority groups that demand the recognition of their identity and the accommodation of their cultural differences within the social space. In this order of ideas, multi-religiousness consists of diverse religious denominations in a territory, limiting their interaction to coexistence under the criteria of distinction and distance between them. On the other hand, the multi-religious represents the normative order that guarantees religious diversity within a nation-state, recognizing the legal personality of the organizations of the religious sector and the ownership of rights in their personal aspect. In summary, while multireligiosity represents the descriptive dimension of the social fact, multireligiosity refers to the prescriptive dimension of the same. For Olivé (2004), interculturalism is based on multiculturalism and can be understood in two ways: as a theoretical thematization of interculturality, that is, as a field of studies, or as the possibility of a political project of relations between diverse cultures. From these notions, interreligiosity is characterized as the presence and interaction within the social space of the various confessional institutions, which establish multiple relationships (tension and pressure) based on their interests and religious capital, such as the ethics and aesthetics of places of worship, sacred texts, theologies, ideologies, among others. In the same line, the interreligious refers to

the collective political project, which the organizations of the religious sector raise before the State in recognition of religious freedom, freedom of worship, and freedom of conscience, among others, as individual and collective rights that must be guaranteed from the principle of social justice respecting the autonomy of religious identities, promoting processes of political participation and favoring the use of the knowledge of the various confessions to consolidate a social state of law. Panotto (2017) warns that in Latin America, multi-religiosity and inter-religiosity, as well as multi-religious and interreligious imply the presence and interaction of the various organizations of the religious sector, guaranteeing the recognition of identities, enabling communication and encounter amid the differences presented by the belief systems and ritual practices that each confession professes.

Popular religion has been characterized as the emergence of new spiritualities, new religious agents and movements, and new expressions of religiosity at the margin of institutionalized religions, where different traditions are combined with established beliefs and practices, which enable experiences around the sacred in permanent dialogue with the “profane” or secular (Cruz, 2016). Belief in miracles, the reciprocity between the sacred and human beings, devotions to different virgins, the cult of Catholic saints, bandit-criminal saints and a variety of secular devotional practices constitute a large part of popular religious diversity (Lehman, 2004). The social studies of religion have characterized these manifestations as forms of syncretism, hybridization or crossbreeding among diverse religious traditions. As an analytical category, Syncretism has a perspective of stigmatizing religious expressions as inferior to the so-called “pure” or “authentic” religions. On the other hand, hybridization is characterized as the dialogue process of combining and producing new religious meanings that arise amid the coexistence between cultural traditions (Figueiro, 2018). Mestizaje poses the search for spiritualities linked to nature, native culture, spirits, and energies, which do not have institutional structures, but rather the presence of local mediators who promote processes of creation and recreation of bricolage phenomena (De la Torre and Martín, 2016).

These perspectives make it possible to problematize the organizational structures positioned in the religious sector for the development of its missionary functions; likewise, they make it possible to investigate the normative systems, beliefs and ritual practices developed within the different religious denominations. Likewise, the analyses on the relationship between religions and subjectivities show other lines of work that open the discussion on belief systems, religious practices, where spiritualities, cultural expressions of religion, gender, feminisms, geopolitics and biopolitics, and the configuration of subjectivities, among others, are problematized. In the same line, they encourage research on the role of social agents within religious organizations, open the doors to raise questions about the place occupied by parishioners -

lay people within the structures of institutionalized religions, establish questions regarding their positions before the belief systems produced and reproduced by religious leaders, propose discussions about the practices they manage from the dispositions they embody by being linked to and from confessional identities and raise questions about how religious identity is constructed: How are subjectivities configured in the religious field? How do believers act in the social space? How do subjects position themselves within the religious field and the political field?

#### Problematic nuclei and spaces of formation in the Social Studies of Religion

Within the proposal for approaching the Social Studies of Religion, especially for the research field, there is a proposal around problem nuclei. These nuclei reflect facts, situations and questions that are highly pertinent and susceptible to being approached and of solution alternatives. Their logic helps to design and organize the study around holistic problems that generate significant and integrated learning; it gives rise to contradiction as a possibility to think, reflect and discuss. Likewise, these cores favor dialogue within and among disciplines, and among different sectors and actors, as well as among the knowledge that allows the understanding of the field phenomena from different perspectives.

The first problematic nucleus contemplates the study of diversity, plurality and religion. This core proposes the analysis of the process of diversification that the religious field has undergone. Within the framework of this nucleus, the study of the following situations is proposed: the emergence of fundamentalisms in the different religions, the configuration of citizenships, the emergence of conflicts where the religious component is relevant, the problem of the denomination: Diversity / Plurality / Multiplicity, the formation and processes of School Religious Education. Theoretically, the nucleus retakes the concepts of field, habitus and capital in its operativity in the social studies of religion but is open to new interpretations and complementations that allow for broadening the study horizon.

The study proposes to address the relationship between the public and religion in the second problematic nucleus. Therefore, the nucleus reflects the historical and current discussion on religion's role in the public's context and definition. Hence, the situations under study will be the electoral political participation of religious communities, the social mobilization that has been promoted by religions, the discussion on the relationship of States with religion (secularism), the humanitarian and social action developed by religions, the influence of religion in the design and implementation of public policies. Theoretically, the nucleus updates the debate on secularization and secularity, analyzing the most



recent developments that researchers, mainly Latin American, have generated on the subject.

Subjectivity, practices and religion constitute the third core. From there, it is possible to analyze how belief systems, religious practices, spiritualities, cultural expressions of religion, syncretisms/hybridizations/mestizations, gender, feminisms, geopolitics and biopolitics configure subjectivities. Theoretically, the nucleus incorporates into its reflection the developments that have taken place in the research framework with decolonial, feminist, post-structuralist, and post-humanist approaches from the difference and the ecology of knowledge.

The organization of the Social Studies of Religion field is based on the empowerment of knowledge. In this sense, we consider that this objective can be achieved if spaces for work, training and discussion are provided, as follows:

A space for the epistemological approach to the social studies of religion in which the conceptual foundations that allow addressing the epistemological debates in the field are developed. These theoretical tools allow critical analysis and research on the diversification of the religious field from a local, regional and global perspective.

Likewise, generating discussion and promoting debates on religious and social is appropriate. From there, it is possible to reconstruct the religious field within the social space, the social agents and the institutions that integrate it to identify the relational dynamics established with other fields (ad extra): political, economic, cultural, and scientific, among others. In the same perspective, it allows the identification of the processes of rationalization and systematization of beliefs and religious practices and their circulation within the field (ad intra); establishing interests, capitals, trajectories, positions, and dispositions, it will delineate the multiple and possible relations of tension and pressure that are generated at the macro level of religion, meso of religion and micro of religiosity.

In order to approach the question of religions, history and the historical from dynamic, critical, deconstructive and de-Westernized understandings, necessary is a space to study the historical evolution of religions, which will allow an approach based on comparing religious facts, not centralized in particular religions, ecclesial institutions or cultures, emerging historical issues (history of bodies and sexuality), and transdisciplinary (sociology, art, anthropology, theology, literature, aesthetics, etc.).

One of the most debated topics in contemporary times is the relationship between religion and the public sphere. Hence the need to promote spaces for discussion and analysis of the relationship between religion and the State, law, politics and public policies, opening the field

of research on how governmental discourses on religion have shaped subjectivities.

Finally, all the above reflection is the path towards a research praxis, for which it is important to allocate a space oriented to explore phenomena and needs feasible to study; to recognize gaps in one or more fields of interest within the Social Studies of Religion; to delimit fields of study; to trace antecedents; to specify diverse methodologies according to the nature of the phenomena; and to concretize the design of diverse routes or preliminary projects.

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