

# Gender and its implications for religious practices: Exploratory study among Brazilian universities

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### Abstract

As social practices, religions reproduce discourses that reflect society. This study aimed to analyze the gender's implications for the religious practices of a group of Brazilian university men and women. Five hundred and sixty-one university students from different undergraduate programs from all regions of Brazil participated in the study, selected through a convenience sample, who answered a virtual form with 48 questions, analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results show the importance of religiosity in the daily life of Brazilian university students and reveal the differences in the way men and women conceive and put it into practice. Women consider themselves more religious and have a greater repertoire of religious beliefs and practices than men, using them more often as a support for the challenges of university life. The data also reveal the importance of proposals that allow for spaces for the discussion of religiosity at the university level.

**Keywords:** religion, social construction of gender, universities, religion and psychology, social psychology

### GÊNERO E SUAS IMPLICAÇÕES NAS PRÁTICAS RELIGIOSAS: ESTUDO EXPLORATÓRIO ENTRE UNIVERSITÁRIOS BRASILEIROS

#### Resumo

Como práticas sociais, as religiões reproduzem discursos que refletem a sociedade. Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar as implicações de gênero nas práticas religiosas de um grupo de homens e mulheres universitários brasileiros. Participaram 561 estudantes de diferentes cursos de graduação, selecionados por meio de amostra de conveniência, os quais responderam a um formulário virtual com 48 questões, analisadas por meio de estatística descritiva. Os resultados evidenciam a importância da religiosidade no cotidiano de estudantes universitários e revelam diferenças no modo como homens e mulheres a concebem e colocam em prática. As mulheres consideram-se mais religiosas e também possuem um maior repertório de crenças e práticas religiosas do que os homens, utilizando-as de forma mais recorrente como suporte para os desafios da vida universitária. Os dados também revelam a importância de propostas que abram espaços para a discussão sobre as religiosidades no âmbito universitário.

**Palavras-chave:** religião, construção social de gênero, universidades, religião e psicologia, psicologia social

### GÉNERO Y IMPLICACIONES EN LAS PRÁCTICAS RELIGIOSAS: ESTUDIO EXPLORATORIO ENTRE UNIVERSITARIOS BRASILEÑOS

#### Resumen

Como prácticas sociales, las religiones reproducen discursos que reflejan la sociedad. Este estudio buscó analizar las implicaciones de género en las prácticas religiosas de un grupo de universitarios brasileños. Participaron 561 estudiantes universitarios de diferentes carreras de todas las regiones de Brasil, seleccionados a través de una muestra de conveniencia, quienes respondieron un formulario virtual con 48 preguntas, analizadas mediante estadística descriptiva. Los resultados muestran la importancia de la religiosidad en la vida cotidiana de los estudiantes universitarios brasileños y revelan las diferencias en la forma en que hombres y mujeres conciben y ponen en práctica su vida religiosa. Las mujeres se consideran a sí mismas más religiosas y tienen un mayor repertorio de creencias y prácticas religiosas que los hombres, utilizándolas con mayor frecuencia como apoyo para los desafíos de la vida universitaria. Los datos también revelan la importancia de mayores inversiones en acciones y propuestas que abran espacios para la discusión de la religiosidad a nivel universitario.

**Palabras clave:** religión, construcción social del género, universidades, religión y psicología, psicología social

Brazil is one of the most religious countries in the world, contributing to the construction of a social context marked by the coexistence, not always harmonious, of a diversity of beliefs, doctrines, dogmas, and religious groups (Camurça, 2019; Silva, 2017). Historically, religious discourses have been articulated with political strategies, especially of conservative groups that see religions as a space to build alliances that strengthen their agendas and interests (Rivera & Fidalgo, 2019; Silva, 2017). In recent years, the articulation between religion and politics in the Brazilian context has been intensified and became even more explicit, occupying a strategic place in the electoral scenario and the discussion of topics considered controversial, such as those related to human rights (Rivera & Fidalgo, 2019; Silva, 2017).

According to Jodelet (2013), the religious field is constituted by the religious life, characterized by the way different subjects materialize their interaction with their religions and experience their religiosity. In other words, religions refer to socially constructed and shared practices, anchored in the specific values and guidelines that direct the exercise of religiosity and the interaction with the spiritual dimension (Jodelet, 2013). Studies show that religions have important social functions, helping subjects in the ways they act and understand themselves, others, and the world (Bairrão, 2017; Cunha & Scorsolini-Comin, 2019; Jodelet, 2013; Moscovici, 2011; Paiva, 2017).

Institutions and religious rituals help to create meanings for complex events that permeate human existence, providing answers to existential questions that are difficult to symbolize, such as, the finitude and meaning of life (Freitas & Holanda, 2014; Paiva, 2017). Furthermore, religions have the function of creating solutions to material and spiritual problems and the challenges that individuals face in their daily lives (Bairrão, 2017; Jodelet, 2013). In this context, physical, mental, and spiritual cures, rituals, and promises are sought in order to face problems, such as diseases and unemployment, and acquire material goods or an affective-sexual partnership, which transform the faithful into consumers of a series of products available in a vast religious market (Cunha & Scorsolini-Comin, 2019; Freitas & Holanda, 2014; Martins, 2019).

In the case of a country such as Brazil, with a Christian majority, religious beliefs influence not only the private life of the faithful but also affect macrosocial aspects and broad political decisions, such as the construction of legislation and the definition of the rights of socially marginalized groups (Machado, 2018; Martins, 2019; Rivera & Fidalgo, 2019; Silva, 2017). Studies have revealed the implications of religious beliefs in the formation of opinions, almost always contrary, of respondents regarding different political issues, such as the adoption of children by homosexuals, the legalization of marriage for same-sex couples, and the termination of pregnancy, among others (Machado, 2015; Vaggione & Machado, 2020). In addition, Brazilian voters also take into account the opinion and support of their religious leaders when choosing which candidates to support (Camurça, 2019; Machado, 2018).

Other studies have highlighted the influence of religiosity in the lives of university students (Chaves et al., 2015; Piergiovanni & Depaula, 2018). In this context, being part of a religious group can provide benefits for both the physical and mental health of students, preventing

the involvement of young people in violence (Doane & Elliot, 2016; Ribeiro & Minayo, 2014), reducing the use of alcohol and others drugs (Guimarães et al., 2020), reducing anxiety (Chaves et al., 2015), and increasing the feeling of happiness and purpose in life (Nascimento & Roazzi, 2017), among others.

Studies have also shown that religiosity has a positive impact on life satisfaction and seeking better strategies to face problems and challenges at university (Fleury et al., 2018; Nascimento & Roazzi, 2017). Religiosity has also been identified as an important resource for university students to deal with the stressful routine and the social pressure of the academic environment (Piergiovanni & Depaula, 2018). In turn, other studies have shown that religiosity can also compromise the well-being and quality of life of young people, especially when it imposes strict rituals and rules that require radical changes, demanding the denial of oneself (Pereira & Holanda, 2019). Furthermore, the difficulty in expressing beliefs and religious experiences in the university environment has been identified as a factor that compromises spiritual well-being and increases the presence of cognitive and religious conflicts that add to the challenges imposed when entering higher education (Pereira & Holanda, 2019).

Religions also have a third and important social function: creating identities for believers (Jodelet, 2013; Martins, 2019). In this aspect, religions contribute to the social integration of individuals, as they insert them into the processes of sociability and allow access to a new group of belonging, embracing their biographies before and after a religious conversion, requiring transformations in ways of thinking about themselves and new patterns of attitudes and behaviors in everyday life (Moscovici, 2011.) As social practices, religions, through their dogmas and rituals, also guide their believers with regard to gender issues, prescribing norms that help neophytes in the construction of a “new man” and a “new woman”, reproducing concepts and discourses that reflect the society in which these subjects are inserted (Freitas & Holanda, 2014; Jodelet, 2013; Martins, 2019).

Studies indicate that men and women experience their religious life in different ways, revealing the strong influence of the socialization process and gender norms in the way these subjects symbolize and interact with the sacred (Buchardt, 2017; Martins, 2019). Despite the low number of studies that analyze the singularities between the religious beliefs and behaviors of men and women, the literature indicates a greater frequency of religious activities among women, who, in general, seek spiritual comfort not only for themselves but also for their entire family, especially the men who are part of it (Rosas, 2015). In turn, although less frequent with religious rituals and ceremonies, it is recurrent that men assume the leadership of the main spiritual segments, with women having secondary and subordinate functions, such as the care of the religious group and maintenance of temples and places of worship (Martins, 2019).

For Moscovici (2011) society is a “machine to make gods”, which produces them in its own image and likeness. In this sense, society personifies itself in its divinities, imprinting its concepts, values, and ways of organizing daily life in its religious creations, including gender inequalities. Moscovici (2011) also stated that religions are not restricted to spiritual and

transcendental matters but occupy economic and political functions, almost always, meeting the demands of the dominant groups and classes.

In the case of an anthropocentric, patriarchal, and mostly Christian society, such as the Brazilian case, it should be noted that the gods “made” here are recognized and represented as masculine and virile figures, who also embody the ideals of masculinity and contribute to the naturalization and maintenance of the supposed supremacy of men over women (Bourdieu, 1998/2011; Martins, 2019). As highlighted by Martins (2019), religious institutions can be recognized not only as “gods factories” but also as a factory in which male and female bodies and identities are produced.

From this perspective, this study aims to analyze the implications of gender in the religious practices of a group of male and female university students.

## Method

### Participants

The study included 561 university students from different undergraduate programs, from all regions of Brazil, selected using a convenience sample. From posts published in social media groups, aimed at university students, invitations were sent to the participants to respond to an online form. The selection criteria for the participants were: being over 18 years old, being enrolled in an undergraduate program in any area of knowledge, and accepting the invitation to participate. Accordingly, 38 responses from students at other levels of education (high school, technical school, postgraduation) were excluded, as well as four other, because they were under 18 years old and, therefore, did not fulfill the inclusion criteria described above.

### Instruments

From the scientific literature (Martins, 2019; Pereira & Holanda, 2019; Swatowski et al., 2018), a virtual form consisting of 48 questions was constructed and, using Google Forms, it was made available for the purposes of data collection between October 2018 and February 2019. In the first block, through 15 questions, information related to the sociodemographic profile of the students was requested, such as gender, age, race/color, marital status, etc.

Next, participants answered a group of 23 questions aimed at identifying religious beliefs and behaviors, including the use of these phenomena in the university environment. The questions in this block addressed themes such as religious association (current and previous), religious practices (participation in ceremonies, financial contributions, etc.), specific beliefs (God, Devil, life after death, reincarnation, etc.), and the relationship of religious life with the undergraduate studies (influence in the choice of the undergraduate program, religious support in the studies and professional life, etc.).

## Data analysis

Data were analyzed through descriptive statistical analysis, using the R-Studio software. Analyses of the absolute and relative frequencies of the responses were performed and, to analyze possible associations between the (nominal categorical) variables, Pearson's chi-square test of independence ( $\chi^2$ ) was used. In all analyses, a statistical significance of 95% was employed and a statistically significant association was considered when the  $p$ -value was  $< .05$ .

## Ethical aspects

All participants were informed about the study's objectives and expressed their consent through the Free and Informed Consent Form, available on the first page of the virtual form. The study project was evaluated by an Ethics Committee for Research with Human Subjects, receiving authorization No. 2.255.232.

## Results

### Characterization of the participants

As shown in Table 1, 561 university students participated in the study, 394 women (70.3%) and 167 (29.7%) men. Among the interviewees, most participants declared themselves to be white (43.5%) or brown (39.6%), heterosexual (81.5%), single (72.7%), and with no children (78.1%). It was a young sample, aged between 18 and 30 years (77.5%), with a mean age of 26.7 years, with low economic power, since 58.5% had incomes of up to two minimum salaries (around BRL 2,000) and 11.4% reported having no income.

**Table 1**

*Sociodemographic profile of the interviewed students*

	Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Female	394	70.3
	Male	167	29.7
Race/skin color	Asian	3	.5
	White	244	43.5
	Indigenous	3	.5
	Black	89	15.9
	Brown	222	39.6
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	457	81.5
	Homosexual	47	8.4
	Bisexual	50	8.9
	Others	7	1.2

**Table 1***Sociodemographic profile of the interviewed students (continuation)*

	Variables	n	%
Age	18 to 20 years	91	16.2
	21 to 30 years	344	61.3
	31 to 40 years	81	14.5
	41 to 50 years	35	6.3
	51 to 60 years	9	1.6
	Over 60 years	1	.1
Marital status	Married	103	18.4
	Single	408	72.7
	Divorced	25	4.4
	Stable union	24	4.3
	Widowed	1	.2
Children	Yes	123	21.9
	No	438	78.1
Income	No income	64	11.4
	Less than BRL 1,000	143	25.5
	Between BRL 1,000 and BRL 1,999	185	33
	Between BRL 2,000 and BRL 2,999	73	13
	Between BRL 3,000 and BRL 3,999	31	5.5
	Between BRL 4,000 and BRL 4,999	22	3.9
	BRL 5,000 or more	37	6.6
	Not reported	6	1.1
Programs by areas of knowledge	Humanities	249	44.4
	Health	88	15.7
	Exact and earth sciences	88	15.7
	Biological sciences	12	2.1
	Social and applied sciences	91	16.2
	Agricultural sciences	7	1.2
	Linguistics, languages, and arts	21	3.8
	Not reported	5	.9
Type of educational institution	Private and/or philanthropic	392	69.9
	Public	169	30.1
Region	Midwest	12	2,1
	North	12	2,1
	North East	36	6,4
	Southeast	467	83,3
	South	32	5,7
	Exterior	1	0,2
	Not informed	1	0,2

Most of the participants (83.3%) lived in Southeast Brazil, with a higher number of re-spondents enrolled in programs in the human sciences (44.4%), social and applied sciences (16.2%), health (15.7%), and exact and earth sciences (15.7%). There was a lower participation of students in the areas of agricultural sciences (1.2%), biological sciences (2.1%), and linguistics, languages, and arts (3.8%). Regarding the institution of origin, 69.9% of the interviewees were taking their undergraduate programs in private or philanthropic institutions and 30.1% in public universities.

**Gender and religiosity in the daily lives of the university students**

As it can be seen in Table 2, there was a greater number of students who considered themselves as Protestants (30.3%), followed by Catholics (24.2%), Spiritists (6.9%), and Um-banda practitioners (2.9%), with 61.7% of the participants having followed their religion for over ten years, and 51.7% never had any other religious affiliation. In addition, 12.7% claimed not to have a religion, and 13.7% recognized themselves as atheists or agnostics, which together made up 25.9% of the sample.

**Table 2**  
*Affiliation and religious practices of participating men and women*

Variables		General		Female		Male		X <sup>2</sup>	p
		n	%	n	%	n	%		
Religion	Catholics	136	24.2	109	27.7	26	4.6	14.95	< .001
	Protestants	170	30.3	124	31.5	46	27.5		
	Spiritists	39	6.9	32	8.1	7	4.2		
	Umbanda practitioners	16	2.9	11	2.8	4	2.4		
	Other religions	55	9.8	34	8.6	22	13.2		
	Agnostics	31	5.5	17	4.3	14	8.4		
	Atheists	43	7.7	15	3.8	28	16.8		
	No religion	71	12.7	52	13.2	20	12.0		
Association time	Less than one year	19	3.4	12	3.0	7	4.2	21.02	.003
	From one to two years	29	5.2	17	4.3	12	7.2		
	From three to five years	73	13	42	10.7	31	18.6		
	From six to nine years	67	11.9	38	9.6	29	17.4		
	Ten years or more	346	61.7	264	67.0	82	49.1		
	No religion	19	3.4	15	3.8	4	2.4		
	Not reported	8	1.4	6	1.5	2	1.2		



**Table 2***Affiliation and religious practices of participating men and women (continuation)*

Variáveis		Geral		Fem.		Masc.		X <sup>2</sup>	p
		n	%	n	%	n	%		
The participant had another religion	Yes	271	48.3	173	43.9	98	58.7	9.66	.001
	No	290	51.7	221	56.1	69	41.3		
The participant considers themselves a religious person	Yes	282	50.3	206	52.3	76	45.5	10.23	.006
	No	183	32.6	113	28.7	70	41.9		
	Perhaps	96	17.1	75	19.0	21	12.6		
Frequency attending church, services, and religious meetings	More than once a week	95	16.9	66	16.8	29	17.4	13.29	.102
	Once a week	123	21.9	92	23.4	31	18.6		
	Once every 15 days	53	9.4	44	11.2	9	5.4		
	Once a month	52	9.3	37	9.4	15	9.0		
	Once every six months	36	6.4	28	7.1	8	4.8		
	Once a year	37	6.6	22	5.6	15	9.0		
	They usually do not go	163	29.1	103	26.1	60	35.9		
	Not reported	2	.4	2	.5	0	.0		
Frequency saying prayers	Rarely	66	11.7	46	11.7	20	12.0	41.04	< .001
	Daily	277	49.4	216	54.8	61	36.5		
	Never	84	15.0	35	8.9	49	29.3		
	A few times a week	134	23.9	97	24.6	37	22.2		
Financial contribution to the religious group	Yes, always	106	18.9	76	19.3	30	18.0	2.7	.258
	Yes, sometimes	161	28.7	120	30.5	41	24.6		
	No	294	52.4	198	50.3	96	57.5		

Note. X<sup>2</sup>: Pearson's chi-square coefficient; p = p-value.

There was an association between gender and having a religion ( $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 14.95$ ), with a greater number of agnostics, atheists, and people with no religion among the male participants (37.2 %). Among the women, this group was represented by only 21.3% of the respondents. It was also possible to see a greater number of Protestants (31.5%), Catholics (27.7%), Spiritists (8.1%), and Umbanda practitioners (2.8%) women than men, who comprised 27.5%, 4.6%, 4.2%, and 2.4% of the sample, respectively. There was a significant association ( $p = .003$ ,  $X^2 = 21.02$ ) between gender and time of association with the religion, with a greater number of women (67.0%) that had been following the same religion for ten years or more in relation to the men (49.1%). There was also an association between gender and having had another religion ( $p = .001$ ,  $X^2 = 9.66$ ), with the change of religion being more common among the males of the sample (58.7%).

Half of the students (50.3%) considered themselves religious, with this number being higher among the women (52.3%) than among the men (45.5%), revealing an association with the gender variable ( $p = .006$ ,  $X^2 = 10.23$ ). It was also found that the group of participants was assiduous in attending religious ceremonies, with 21.9% attending these spaces once a week and 16.9%, more than once a week. Although it was not possible to identify a statistically significant association, there was a greater number of men who did not usually go to religious cults and services (35.9%) when compared to women (26.1%).

Almost half of the students (49.4%) said prayers daily. It was also possible to verify an association of this variable with gender ( $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 41.04$ ), with the number of women who say prayers daily being higher (54.8%) than men (36.5%). Furthermore, while 29.3% of the men reported they did not say prayers, only 8.9% of the women did not carry out these practices in their daily lives. It was found that 47.6% of the participants contributed frequently or sporadically to their religious group, with no significant differences between the two groups.

Regarding religious beliefs, as shown in Table 3, 79.6% of the students said they believed in the existence of God ( $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 38.15$ ) and 56.6%, in the Devil ( $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 18.05$ ), with a significant difference between the genders. There was a greater number of women who claimed to believe in these entities (86.0% and 61.9%) than men (64.7% and 47.3%). Also considering this aspect, 57.4% of the respondents said they believed in the existence of life after death, with no significant differences observed between the two groups. However, there was an association between gender and belief in the possibility of reincarnation ( $p = .002$ ,  $X^2 = 12.13$ ), with this being more recurrent among the women (35.0%) than among the men (22.2%). Considering the general group, the percentage of people who believed in reincarnation was 31.2%. Furthermore, 33.2% of the respondents stated they had already had contact with some supernatural being (angels, demons, spirits, etc.), with no significant differences observed between the men and women.

**Table 3***Religious beliefs and values of the participants*

Variables		General		Female		Male		X <sup>2</sup>	p
		n	%	n	%	n	%		
Do you believe in the existence of God?	Yes	447	79.6	339	86.0	108	64.7	38.15	< .001
	No	57	10.2	22	5.6	35	21.0		
	Perhaps	57	10.2	33	8.4	24	14.4		
Do you believe in the existence of the Devil?	Yes	323	57.6	244	61.9	79	47.3	18.05	< .001
	No	153	27.3	87	22.1	66	39.5		
	Perhaps	85	15.1	63	16.0	22	13.2		
Do you believe in the existence of life after death?	Yes	322	57.4	234	59.4	88	52.7	3.74	.15
	No	147	26.2	94	23.9	53	31.7		
	Perhaps	92	16.4	66	16.8	26	15.6		
Do you believe in the possibility of reincarnation?	Yes	175	31.2	138	35.0	37	22.2	12.13	.002
	No	291	51.9	186	47.2	105	62.9		
	Perhaps	95	16.9	70	17.8	25	15.0		
Have you ever had contact with any supernatural being?	Yes	186	33.2	133	33.8	53	31.7	.28	.869
	No	293	52.2	203	51.5	90	53.9		
	Perhaps	82	14.6	58	14.7	24	14.4		
Would you date a person who follows a different religion or group or has a different religious view?	Yes	341	60.8	239	60.7	102	61.1	.01	.990
	No	70	12.5	49	12.4	21	12.6		
	Perhaps	150	26.7	106	26.9	44	26.3		
At election time, would you consider the opinion of your church or religion's leaders?	Yes	63	11.2	49	12.4	14	8.4	1.94	.378
	No	422	75.2	292	74.1	130	77.8		
	Perhaps	76	13.6	53	13.5	23	13.8		
Would you vote for a candidate who follows a different religion from yours?	Yes	455	81.1	320	81.2	135	80.8	.30	.857
	No	23	4.1	15	3.8	8	4.8		
	Perhaps	83	14.8	59	15.0	24	14.4		
Have you ever stopped doing something or an activity due to a religious reason or belief?	Yes	212	37.8	149	37.8	63	37.7	4.47	.106
	No	314	56.0	215	54.6	99	59.3		
	Perhaps	35	6.2	30	7.6	5	3.0		

Note. X<sup>2</sup>: Pearson's chi-square coefficient; p = p-value.

Among the participants, 37.8% had stopped doing something or an activity due to some religious reason or belief. It was also observed that only 12.5% said they would not date a person who adhered to a religion other than their own, and only 4.1% of the students reported that they would not vote for a candidate for a political office with a religious affiliation different to theirs. A total of 11.2% said they took into account the opinion of their religious leaders during elections. For these variables, no statistically significant associations were found between the genders.

With regard to academic life, as presented in Table 4, only 7.9% of the participants believed that their religion influenced the choice of their undergraduate program, and 24.8% reported they had already felt fear or embarrassment in expressing their religious views at the institution where they studied. Only 32.2% of the respondents had participated in a class or academic event that discussed the theme of religiosity in the academic context. Also, it was not possible to identify significant differences between the responses of the men and women for these variables.

**Table 4**

*Religiosity in the daily academic life of the participating men and women*

Variables		General		Female		Male		X <sup>2</sup>	p
		n	%	n	%	n	%		
Did your religion and/or religious views influence your choice of undergraduate program?	Yes	44	7.9	28	7.1	16	9.6	1.30	.519
	No	481	85.7	342	86.8	139	83.2		
	Perhaps	36	6.4	24	6.1	12	7.2		
Have you ever felt fear or embarrassment in expressing your religious views at the university?	Yes	139	24.8	89	22.6	50	29.9	3.67	.159
	No	377	67.2	274	69.5	103	61.7		
	Perhaps	45	8.0	31	7.9	14	8.4		
Do you believe that God or some supernatural being can help you with your studies?	Yes	320	57.1	247	62.7	73	43.7	27.65	< .001
	No	165	29.4	90	22.8	75	44.9		
	Perhaps	76	13.5	57	14.5	19	11.4		
Do you believe that God or some supernatural being can help you with test results and assignments?	Yes	223	39.7	181	45.9	42	25.1	30.96	< .001
	No	250	44.6	146	37.1	104	62.3		
	Perhaps	88	15.7	67	17.0	21	12.6		
Do you believe that God or some supernatural being can help you in your profession?	Yes	355	63.3	271	68.8	84	50.3	29.85	< .001
	No	142	25.3	74	18.8	68	40.7		
	Perhaps	64	11.4	49	12.4	15	9.0		
Have you ever participated in a class or academic event that discussed the theme of religiosity in your undergraduate program?	Yes	181	32.2	130	33.0	51	30.5	.86	.647
	No	370	66.0	256	65.0	114	68.3		
	Perhaps	10	1.8	8	2.0	2	1.2		

Note. X<sup>2</sup>: Pearson's chi-square coefficient; p = p-value.

A total of 57.1% claimed to believe that God or some supernatural being could help them in their studies ( $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 27.65$ ), tests' results and assignments (39.7%,  $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 30.96$ ), and the practice of their profession (63.3%,  $p < .001$ ,  $X^2 = 29.85$ ). Again, it was found that the belief in the help of supernatural beings was more recurrent among women than among men.

## Discussion

The profile of the students participating in this study reflects the recent and constant changes in the Brazilian religious scenario, especially with regard to the rapid and continuous growth of Protestants and people with no religion (Camurça, 2019). It should be highlighted that, in Brazil, Protestants constitute a diverse and heterogeneous group, being marked by dogmatic disputes and divergences between the different segments (Rivera & Fidalgo, 2019). Accordingly, the fact that most of the students declared themselves to be Protestants seems to reflect this diversity, especially in recent decades, when this religious segment has been gaining new expressions and more followers in the country (Camurça, 2019). Studies such as those by Lages (2019) and Nogueira (2020) have indicated that the religious prejudice that the religions of African origin suffer in Brazilian society is also experienced in the university context, contributing to the followers of these groups denying their religious affiliation, identifying themselves as non-religious or as believers from other less stigmatized groups.

Different factors have been highlighted as being responsible for the expansion of Protestants groups in Brazil – among them, the reduction of the institutional power of the Catholic Church, previously responsible for different aspects of the Brazilian citizen's life, such as, for example, birth registration, definition of laws, management of cemeteries, among others (Camurça, 2019; Silva, 2017); the large investment of protestant groups in proselytizing actions aimed at mass evangelization and conversion of the population (Silva, 2017; Rivera & Fidalgo, 2019); and, mainly, the engagement of new Protestants churches in cult proposals aimed at the immediate and magical solution of different ills, especially those related to health and financial life, providing the faithful with an expectation of social ascension and improvement in living conditions, previously unimagined by the poorest population of the country (Camurça, 2019; Rivera & Fidalgo, 2019).

The data also reveal that religious beliefs and practices were included in the daily lives of the university students. Furthermore, many of the students participating in this investigation maintained their religious beliefs and practices and, therefore, believe in God, the Devil, and the existence of supernatural phenomena, such as life after death and reincarnation. Similar results can be observed in the scientific literature, indicating that, during the academic trajectory, students maintain their religious beliefs and practices, however, they experience this privately, fearing the effects of prejudice, if they share their beliefs with their colleagues and professors at universities (Lages, 2019; Nogueira, 2020; Swatowski et al., 2018).

These data also reflect religious beliefs of the Brazilian population that, even nowadays, are important elements for organizing the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in relation to various themes (Bairrão, 2017; Camurça, 2019). Studies carried out among the Brazilian university population have also observed the influence of religiosity on students' behavior, for example, in leisure practices and the consumption of psychoactive substances (alcohol and other drugs), among others (Lages, 2019; Nascimento & Roazzi, 2017; Pereira & Holanda, 2019; Swatowski et al., 2018).

For the group of students investigated in the present study, religiosity also played a role as a coping strategy for the stressful situations that permeate academic life. The participants believed that God or some supernatural being could help them in their studies, tests' results and assignments, and the practice of their profession. Similar results can be identified in the scientific literature, which shows that religiosity positively influences life satisfaction, improves mental health and assists in seeking healthier and more positive strategies for the challenges of university life (Fleury et al., 2018; Piergiovanni & Depaula, 2018).

However, while the results highlight the importance of religiosity in the lives of students, the data also reveal that the discussion of these themes, in the university context, is still incipient. Only a third of the students claimed to have participated in a class or academic event that discussed themes related to religiosity. Furthermore, almost a third of the university students said they felt fear or embarrassment when expressing their religious views at their educational institution. These data become even more intriguing, considering the greater participation, in this study, of university students from programs in human, social, and applied sciences, who, in general, carry out discussions on various social phenomena in their pedagogical projects, including those on the life of the university community itself. The data, therefore, lead us to question whether religiosity occupies a place that is still limited and silenced in Brazilian higher education, even in areas in which the debate on the subject would be fundamental.

Contrary to the popularly held maxim that "religion should not be discussed", studies have demonstrated the need to include themes related to religious life in the academic sphere (Chaves et al., 2015; Fleury et al., 2018). Obviously, it is not about reproducing religious beliefs and practices at the university but rather allow for spaces for discussions about an important phenomenon in our society and, as the data affirm, very present in the daily lives of students, who spend part of their lives at universities (Pereira & Holanda, 2019).

The results are also in line with the scientific literature, showing differences in the way men and women conceive and put into practice their religious life on a daily basis, revealing important implications for the way men and women are socialized and construct their male and female experiences (Martins, 2019; Rosas, 2015; Swatowski et al., 2018). From this perspective, it was observed that women consider themselves more religious and also have a greater repertoire of religious beliefs and practices.

These data corroborate the findings of other studies that highlight the influences of gender issues and the sexist socialization process in the ways men and women are linked to religious life (Camurça, 2019; Martins, 2019; Rosas, 2015; Swatowski et al., 2018). In a study conducted by Orellana et al. (2020), with a group of Spanish university students, a strong association was found between the religious beliefs of students, especially men, and sexist stereotypes and attitudes. As highlighted by Rosado-Nunes (2017), most of the religions are configured as social institutions that, historically, contribute to the process of the domination of women and maintenance of patriarchy, justifying, from religious discourses, gender inequalities and male violence against women.

Despite the constant struggles with transformation in gender relations, in contexts marked by the influence of Christianity, such as Brazil, the social representation of God as a man still predominates. Particularly in the context of Christianity, God is characterized by attributes socially recognized as masculine, which emphasize his virility and manhood, physical strength, courage, and his role as a father, protector, and provider for humanity (Martins, 2019; Schultz, 2017). These adjectives are then incorporated and reproduced by the faithful, so that religious beliefs also contribute to the design of guidance about the behavior of men and women (Martins, 2019; Rosado-Nunes, 2017; Rosas, 2015). Similar results have been observed in the context of religions from other matrices, such as the African ones, which are also expressive in the Brazilian religious scenario (Barros & Bairrão, 2015; Nascimento et al., 2001).

In a study that investigated the representations of God among a group of master's and doctoral students in Clinical Psychology, Ancona-Lopes (2004) observed that God is sometimes represented as an elderly, bearded, good, and fair man and, sometimes, characterized by exceptional qualities, including power, unconditional love, and omnipotence. The author emphasizes that, in the Christian context, "God is seen through man", who starts to perceive himself as the "locus of the manifestation of divinity" (Ancona-Lopes, 2004, p. 80). In the same vein, Viero (2005) highlighted the influence of the patriarchal and androcentric culture in the construction of the image of Jesus Christ, within the scope of Christianity. According to the author, "if Jesus was a man, then masculinity is perceived as an essential characteristic of the divine being itself, or at least as closer to the Divine than femininity" (p. 172). Also, according to the author, these concepts strengthen "an androcentric anthropology, which elevates the male human being to the norm and model of the human, distorting the good news of the Christian salvation". From this same perspective, Schultz (2017) highlighted that, like many biblical characters, Jesus is also presented as an ideal model of masculinity and recalls that the body of Christ is, above all, "a man's body".

Besides, with regard to the differences in the religious associations practices of men and women found in this study, it is necessary to consider that, even nowadays, the virility of boys and young men is put to the test, and it is up to them to demonstrate and prove it to other members of the group through behaviors that guarantee their authenticity and social recognition (Bourdieu, 1998/2011; Martins, 2019). Therefore, thoughts, bodily gestures, and ways of speaking and dressing, among other behaviors, are carefully watched and, if necessary, punished, aiming to extinguish any doubts about the virility of these subjects (Bourdieu, 1998/2011). This process also marks male religious beliefs and behaviors (Martins, 2019). Studies show that men seek religious comfort in situations of serious personal and family crises, in which they are no longer able to correspond to the ideals of masculinity, such as in situations of unemployment, chemical dependency, and illness, which threaten their supposed natural and spiritual role as the protector and provider of their families (Buchardt, 2017; Lemos, 2011; Martins, 2019).

Therefore, seeking services and religious leaders can be seen, for many men, as a synonym of weakness and vulnerability, being associated with the feminine sphere (Rosado-Nunes,

2017; Martins, 2019). This phenomenon could indicate why the men participating in this study resorted less frequently to religious resources to face everyday situations, including those in the university environment. In turn, as shown by some studies, women find a reproduction of gender inequalities in religions, as well as social expectations that reinforce the stereotypes widespread in other social institutions, favoring the greater religious adherence of this group (Barros & Bairrão, 2015; Rosado-Nunes, 2017).

### Final considerations

This study highlights the importance of religiosity in the daily life of a group of Brazilian university students, indicating the presence of religious beliefs and behaviors that comprise the everyday life of these subjects. The results also reveal that, during their academic trajectory, these students maintained their religious beliefs and even used them as resources to face the challenges that present themselves in academic life, such as assignments and tests, as well as in everyday situations, such as in their affective relationships and their political and professional choices, among others.

The data also highlight the incipient discussion on themes related to religiosity, in the academic context investigated, so that many of the interviewees reported fear or embarrassment in expressing their religious views at the institution where they studied. Accordingly, the data reveal the importance of greater investments in actions and proposals that allow for spaces for discussion about religiosities in the university environment, recognizing them as powerful phenomena to broaden the understanding of gender relations.

It was also possible to verify, among the participants, differences associated with gender, revealing that, as in other social contexts, religious institutions, in general, are also crossed by expectations about male and female roles, which guide their ways of conceiving themselves, others, and the world. In this sense, in the investigated group, while many of the men declared themselves with no religion, it was observed that most of the women considered themselves religious and had been involved with the same religious group for a longer time. When compared to the male participants, the women more often claimed to believe in God, the Devil, the possibility of reincarnation, and the help of supernatural beings, in addition to saying more prayers than the men, reflecting the social constructions of masculinity and femininity.

The main limitations of the study are related to the fact that it used a convenience sample so that caution should be taken in generalizing the results presented and discussed here, considering the limits of this type of investigation. It is also necessary to consider that the study was constructed from the students' self-reports, which also implies a limitation since the participants' discourse does not always corresponds to their practices and behaviors.

Other limitations, such as the diversity of religion and areas of knowledge of the group of participants, the geographic distribution of the students, and the different characteristics of the higher education institutions to which the participating university students were affiliated must be considered when interpreting the results. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the



complexity involved in the study of religious beliefs and behaviors, especially when considering that other variables, not controlled in the study, such as family support, study conditions, quality of classes, motivation, self-efficacy, among others, should also be considered when interpreting the results.

Although the study did not propose to carry out comparisons between religions or areas of academic study, other investigations may emphasize certain areas of knowledge and religious segments that compose the Brazilian scenario. New studies could also focus on groups such as Spiritists, religions of African and Oriental origins, mestizo shamanism, and even people with no religion, who, despite representing a smaller number among the participants in this study, also contribute to the Brazilian religious scenario. These studies will be able to broaden the understanding regarding the singularities of the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting of these groups, showing how these groups help in the construction of male and female identities, as well as in social practices, such as those of university life.

Other investigations may also focus on the systematic study of religious practices and behaviors, including research that considers methods such as observation in different contexts, both of academic and religious institutions. These studies may consider the practices of believers, as well as leaders, including the behavior of people who define themselves as non-religious. Finally, further research is recommended to analyze other variables that were not considered in this study and that could allow for the discussion of the influence of factors related to family and school characteristics and individual and personality differences, among others.

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