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Religious Nones and Spirituality: A Comparison between Italian and Uruguayan Youth

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Abstract: Who are the religious Nones, given their representation as both a minority and a majority group within the religious landscape? This article presents findings from a comparative study of Italian and Uruguayan youth (n = 2047, with 844 Nones), focusing on sociodemographic profiles of “Nones”, their spirituality, religious belief, practice, and atheist and agnostic identities. The findings suggest that regardless of cultural context—whether in predominantly Catholic Italy or more secular Uruguay—young “Nones” tend to be males, hold beliefs, and engage in religious practices, albeit with varying degrees. Among participants in this study, those originating from Uruguay exhibit a stronger degree of belief and slightly more pronounced engagement in private prayer and attendance of religious services compared to their counterparts from Italy. Additionally, the endorsement of spiritual identity is notably stronger among religious Nones in the Uruguayan sample than in the Italian one. Instead, atheism is more prevalent among Italian Nones, whereas agnosticism constitutes a larger proportion within the Uruguayan sample.

Keywords: religious nones; spirituality; religious belief; prayer; atheism; youth; Italy; Uruguay



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1. Introduction

In the discourse surrounding the phenomenon of *religious Nones*, the sociological literature has provided diverse perspectives indicating the complexity in establishing a unanimous definition of this relatively new term (Beaman and Tomlins 2015; Burge 2021; Lee 2015; Smith and Cragun 2019). From the 2000s, multiple empirical studies on religious Nones have problematized the boundaries of nonreligiousness in its relation to key sociological concepts, such as religion or secularity, highlighting a “more general and less oppositional notion of difference” inherent to the concept of nonreligion (Lee 2012, p. 132). In more pragmatic terms, religious Nones represent “a category used by statisticians to denote those who simply profess no religion” (Tomlins and Beaman 2015, p. 2). This category encompasses a diverse array of empirical relationships that characterize the group of religiously unaffiliated, emphasizing the absence of homogeneity within it (Cragun and Hammer 2011; Madge and Hemming 2017; Voas and McAndrew 2012). Nones display a spectrum of beliefs, prayer, attendance at worship services, and engagement in spiritual practices. This prompts a relevant comparison with individuals who maintain religious affiliations (Drescher 2016), leading to questions about the distinct paths of how “each individual who walks away from religion has their own reasons and their own spiritual journey” (Burge 2021, p. 36).

Lee (2012) argues that the concept of nonreligion can refer to “any position, perspective, or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious” (Lee 2012, p. 131). This definition emphasizes “a sense of difference from religion that neither involves hostility nor indifference” (Lee 2012, p. 132) but allows us to focus on the ways religious Nones differentiate themselves from

religious individuals (Bullivant 2015). At the same time, Cragun and McCaffree (2021) cast doubt on the appropriateness of labelling this demographic group as “nonreligious”, criticizing the endeavor to categorize a group of individuals based on what they are not. Instead, they emphasize that “religiosity and nonreligiosity are not a binary distinction but rather a continuum” (Cragun and McCaffree 2021, p. 9).

Given this context, the relationship between nonreligion and spirituality may not be considered central to the theoretical debates on religious Nones, as “the concept of nonreligion is broad but still meaningfully and usefully exclusive” (Lee 2012, p. 131). In this regard, spiritual perspectives may not necessarily be linked to religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Lee 2012), as they are “usually defined by their own core principles and practices” (Lee 2012, p. 131). Nevertheless, recent empirical studies on the spirituality of religious Nones (Drescher 2016; Smith et al. 2024) highlight that, akin to religious adherents, the spiritual choices of the Nones necessitate understanding within the framework of their “hopes for self-realization and the need to express creatively the relationship with the transcendent” (Giordan 2007, p. 176). For instance, the Pew Research Report (Smith et al. 2024) presents an important point of discussion, considering the high share of Nones (49%) who identify themselves as spiritual or recognize the importance of spirituality in their lives.

Against this backdrop, this article contributes to the analysis of religious Nones and their spiritual identities along the continuum of characteristics measuring their religious belief, practice, and attitudes toward atheism and agnosticism. We explore these relationships against contrasting cultural settings—predominantly Catholic and secular societies—presenting the results from a comparative empirical study of Italian ($n = 1035$) and Uruguayan youth ($n = 1012$) conducted in 2018–2022. In doing that, we first describe the theoretical framework linked to the national contexts of religious Nones in Italy and Uruguay. Second, we explore the main sociodemographic characteristics of Nones in both samples. Third, we discuss patterns of their religious belief, private prayer, worship attendance, and atheist and agnostic identities. Fourth, we explore the spiritual profiles of Nones, considering their spiritual identity and the importance of spirituality in daily life.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Socioreligious Challenges of Defining Nones

Not being identified with a religion does not necessarily mean irreligiosity, indifference, or disbelief, although these aspects may be encompassed within it (Lee 2012, 2017; Quack and Schuh 2017; Rabbia 2017). The (non)religious identifications of individuals are often dynamic, not necessarily implying unequivocal categories, and tend to be influenced by cultural context and elements of publicly available narratives (Ammerman 2003; Rabbia 2017). Consequently, while many individuals with no religious tradition often have little or no spiritual sense of the world, some do (Ammerman 2013; Drescher 2016). These observations surrounding the complexities inherent in defining the category of religious Nones indicate two theoretical challenges for the sociology of religion: firstly, the necessity to overcome the oversimplification that Nones constitute a single and homogeneous social group (Burge 2020; Cragun and McCaffree 2021), and secondly, the complexity involved in defining the common sociocultural elements of Nones’ identities including spiritual ones in various ambits (Drescher 2016; Lee 2015; Smith and Cragun 2019).

The first challenge underscores the divergent theoretical approaches used to identify the key characteristics of Nones’ identities and experiences. These approaches reveal how numerous studies employ measures of “sets of fundamental, cross-culturally relevant, categories” (like measures of religiosity) or more “subjectively constructed” categories presenting “a varying patchwork of fuzzy fidelity” and experiences of transcendence in daily life (Cragun and McCaffree 2021, p. 9; Morello 2021; Voas 2009). The second challenge illustrates scholarly endeavors to transcend the confines of the “religion” category by portraying Nones with broader sociocultural characteristics. These efforts involve seeking explanatory categories encompassing material, emotional, relational, and existential dimensions of the experiences of Nones to address central aspects of their identities (Lee 2015).

These challenges underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of nonreligiosity within contemporary societies and initial attempts to define nonreligion as a concept primarily related to religion. As an umbrella concept, religious Nones encompass a vast spectrum of identities and can also be viewed as an undifferentiated category (Corcoran et al. 2021; Huang 2020). Some caution is warranted against treating the religiously unaffiliated as a homogeneous group (Baeza Correa and Imbarack Dagach 2023; Esquivel et al. 2020). Moreover, debates arise regarding whether some Nones engage in religious practices, akin to Christians with low attendance (Burge 2021), or resemble “distant” Catholics in terms of practices despite differences in self-identification (Pereira Arena 2018).

Against this background, the category of Nones emphasizes differentiation within this demographic group rather than indifference or hostility and highlights less-biased terminology along with the diverse nature of nonreligious identities (Cragun and Hammer 2011). The latter encompasses a wide spectrum ranging from atheism, agnosticism, secular humanism, “nothing in particular”, and “nonverts” to spiritual but not religious beliefs (Bullivant 2022; Drescher 2016). These identities can be also considered with more specific terminology describing the “belonging” dimension including terms of “exiters, switchers, religious Nones, converts, and identifiers/affiliates” (Cragun and Hammer 2011, p. 151). In this regard, despite the conventional use of “no religion” as a category in surveys (Baeza Correa and Imbarack Dagach 2023), some scholars question this labelling, arguing that it fails to capture the diversity within this group being a counterpoint to religion and not a substantive identity. Cragun and McCaffree (2021, p. 10) noted the following in that regard:

Scholars invented the category and then put people (and other phenomena) in it; we should not forget that it is a conceptual category. It was initially useful, and continues to be useful, in majority religious environments. But it is still an invention of scholars to help us theorize, identify, and measure a specific subset of populations around the world.

Therefore, the challenge in studying Nones stems from the complexity and diversity of individuals’ relationships (or lack thereof) with religion, which are often subsumed under this category. Therefore, it is essential to establish common theoretical frameworks to systematically address them and discern the various profiles that may exist under this broad umbrella term. For instance, Burge (2021, p. 96) observes this complexity in the context of Nones in the US, noting the following:

In some ways, the religiously unaffiliated are the most difficult groups to characterize in American society. At least Christians can agree that the Bible is a sacred text and that a worship service should contain some songs, Scripture reading, and prayer. The religiously unaffiliated are not a cohesive group in the same way. The reality is that the only thing that truly binds them together is the fact that they might all check the same box on the survey form.

2.2. *Being A None: Demographics, Political Orientation, and Spiritual Practices*

Similarly, Drescher (2016, p. 23) notes that “demographically speaking, what Nones have in common is that they *do not* share a specific set of beliefs with others in groups of which they are members” and they “are not part of a *group* proper, which would require that they meet at least periodically with one or more other Nones” (Drescher 2016, p. 22).

Nonetheless, she points out that “the boundaries between the affiliated and the unaffiliated are remarkably porous” (p. 10), if we consider them within a broader context of national culture. More specifically, she reports the following:

These are Nones who claim no religious affiliation but who nonetheless profess a belief in a God, a higher power, or life force; who engage in spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, or yoga; and who may, periodically at least, attend services of traditional religious groups. (Drescher 2016, p. 11)

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, Nones are predominantly young adults (Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020); they are more prevalent among males and unmar-

ried individuals and those with higher levels of education and occupational attainment (Baeza Correa and Imbarack Dagach 2023; Huang 2020). Also, a noteworthy trend indicates that an increase in self-identification as “without religion” or “without religious affiliation” does not necessarily correlate with a decrease in belief in God. Some scholars attribute this phenomenon to strong anti-Church sentiments (Furstova et al. 2021), highlighting the processes of deregulation, pluralization, and individuation that foster flexibility allowing for a spectrum of beliefs between being religious and not having religion (Baeza Correa and Imbarack Dagach 2023).

Madge and Hemming (2017) also point out that half of those identifying as “no religion” have minimal ties to religion, while the other half acknowledge some presence of religion in their lives. Regarding this matter, various authors highlight a critical stance towards institutional religions among those who view religious institutions as promoting intolerance, hypocrisy, and a significant mismatch between what they preach and how they act (Camurça 2017; Da Costa 2017). However, it is not merely a critique and distancing from these institutions; it also encompasses a fervent demand for freedom, allowing individuals to construct their personal belief systems devoid of the constraints imposed by institutional affiliation, and indications of an emerging spirituality that rejects the principle of submission to institutional coordination or doctrinal authority (Baeza Correa and Imbarack Dagach 2023; Senra et al. 2020).

Another important feature is that being a None is “directly related to political ideology” (Burge 2021). Studies suggest that Nones tend to lean more liberally, particularly in the context of the United States, “a liberal is twice as likely as a moderate and four times more likely than a political conservative to be unaffiliated” (Burge 2021, pp. 52–53). In summary, young Nones not only critique institutional religions but also advocate for individual freedom in constructing personal belief systems, rejecting the need for institutional affiliation and emphasizing the emergence of a spirituality based on personal autonomy and rejection of institutional authority. In summary, young Nones are not only critical of institutional religions but also advocate for individual freedom in constructing personal belief systems. They reject the necessity of institutional affiliation and emphasize the emergence of a spirituality grounded in personal autonomy and the rejection of institutional authority.

The study on spirituality of Nones (Drescher 2016) proposes to move beyond the juxtaposition of nonaffiliated to affiliated individuals and application of the categories of “lack and loss” to the former while describing their engagement in belief, practice, and community (Drescher 2016, p. 7). Instead, she suggests focusing on the aspects of spirituality that characterize Nones not at the moment of “becoming a None” but at the stage of “being a None” illustrating that their “spiritual life is not defined by what may have been left behind, but rather by what was found” (ibid., p. 52). The spirituality of Nones can be described as centered on relationships with families and friends and exercising formal and informal rituals and practices focused on the integration of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of life. Among central elements of such spirituality in the US context, “care for others” and “appreciation of difference” can be seen along with the boundary work marking “sacred space and time across the various domestic, commercial, natural, cultural, and other landscapes of everyday experience” (Drescher 2016, p. 14).

In the context of more secularized societies in Europe¹, the current phenomenon of spirituality among the Nones reflects both a continuity with and a departure from traditional spiritual practices (de Groot 2018). The blending of “old” and “new” spirituality indicates an ongoing evolution of spiritual expression in a post-Christian context. For instance, de Groot (2018) discusses the “spiritual revolution” thesis, which posits that spirituality, characterized by subjective, personal experiences, is supplanting institutional religion. De Groot’s analysis highlights that while spirituality is becoming more visible, it does not necessarily replace traditional religion. Instead, spirituality and secularization coexist, reflecting a complex transformation in how individuals engage with the sacred and the transcendent in contemporary society.

Against this theoretical framework, our empirical study explores a list of sociodemographic characteristics of young Nones compared to participants identified with the predominant religious tradition in the assessed countries. Therefore, we are interested in examining the proportion of males among them, the proportion of their parents with a university degree, the political views of Nones, their criticism of religious leaders, and their openness to diversity. These factors were selected as they are often highlighted in the sociological literature as significant indicators of how individuals navigate their religious and nonreligious identities (Baker and Whitehead 2016; Burge 2021; Drescher 2016; Voas and McAndrew 2012).

2.3. Nones in Cross-National Study of Italy and Uruguay

In this section, we examine two national contexts, specifically considering the role of religious and secular cultures in Italy and Uruguay to explain how young Nones engage with spiritual practices within the assessed country contexts.

2.3.1. Spirituality of Young Nones in Italy

Over the past three decades, the emergence of the “Nones” category (referred to as “senza religione” in Italian) has been observed across various age groups of Italians. Initially comprising 8.8% in 1994 and 9.1% in 2007, their representation surged to 16.0% by 2017 (Garelli 2020). Concurrently, there has been a noticeable increase in religious minorities, largely influenced by migration patterns, rising from 2.6% to 8.0%. Among these minority groups, Muslims (3.0%) and Eastern Orthodox Christians (2.6%) were the most numerous. Consequently, alongside Catholics, whose proportion decreased from 88.6% in 1994 to 76% in 2017, Nones now constitute the largest demographic group within Italy’s religious landscape.

These shifts in religious demography reflect several concurrent processes of religious modernization of the Italian peninsula. In the European context, the Italian case of socioreligious changes during the last century highlighted the overlapping processes, which evidenced the centrality of the principles of pluralism in Italian society and strong presence of Catholic cultural tradition in the public sphere and socialization processes (Garelli 2016; Giordan 2010). At the same time, more recent developments evidenced the “de-institutionalization of religious style, its passage from the institutional sphere to the subjective sphere” with gradual weakening of the former in the socialization processes of young people (Berzano 2019). These long-term and short-term developments can be interpreted through the lens of the secularization path in the Italian peninsula as well as the religious economy model stimulated by the internal changes in the Catholic Church and its broader influence with its “policies and politics, actions and institutional structures” (Diotallevi 2001, p. 20). From the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, the Italian Catholic Church effectively applied strategies to expand and diversify its religious offering, promoting high internal competition within the Church (Diotallevi 1999). This resulted in the situation that a continuous and gradual process of secularization in Italy has been accompanied by relatively high levels of religious presence at various social levels and spheres. Throughout history, Italian Catholicism has faced the problem of the country’s modernization (industrialization, political transformation, changes in lifestyles) and participated in guiding the modernization processes (Diotallevi 1999), expressing a “defensive” strategy. This allowed for the “mitigation” of tensions and sharp “breaks” in the clash between Catholicism and modernity.

Therefore, the weakening of the Catholic hegemony in religious and political spheres and the increasing religious pluralism and freedom to choose one’s relationship with the sacred created particular conditions for the individual expression of faith and worldviews (Berzano 2019; Cipriani 2017; Diotallevi 2022; Garelli 2016, 2020; Giordan 2007, 2016; Pace 2013; Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). In the context of evolving dynamics in youth identification and religious engagement, empirical studies emphasize the significance of understanding the role of the Catholic tradition for spiritual growth, alongside how young

people perceive their autonomy and exercise choice. [Giordan \(2010\)](#) underscored this point by stating the following:

When we investigate the religiousness of the Italian young people, the main question is not so much with which religion they identify themselves, considering the prevalence of Catholicism in the national territory, but rather describing the different modalities of practicing and believing, that they often live in a free and autonomous way in relation to such identification. ([Giordan 2010](#), p. 355)

Multiple ways of being spiritual and lacking some elements of religiosity for adolescents indicated to which degree young people “meet Church religion” and how “they use it according to whether this religion is capable or not of meeting their demands” ([Giordan 2010](#), p. 364). More generally, the boundaries of being religious and nonreligious highlight the centrality of an individual’s autonomy, degrees of contestation and distancing from/closeness to Church, and variety of forms of engagement in religious practices or their absence ([Garelli 2016](#)). According to Garelli, “ambivalence in the religious field also inhabits a part of the young people who make up the group of non-believers” ([Garelli 2016](#), p. 28), requiring the sociologist more detailed analysis of the profiles of those who declared to be atheists, agnostics, or indifferent. Some studies, which suggested considering youth spiritual growth with reference to Church ([Giordan 2010](#)), suggested that the most numerous group of adolescent spirituality can be described as the “indifference” type, characterized by a lack of importance placed on prayer, a lack of quest for life’s meaning, and no reference to the Church for spiritual growth. Conversely, reference to the Church for spiritual growth identified young people who fall into the profiles of “traditionalists” and “Church spirituality”, both categories highlighting the centrality of prayer and the importance of Church references for spiritual growth.²

This and other studies ([Garelli 2016, 2020](#)) show that for young people, including Nones, who are engaged in the search for life meaning, “Church religion” could serve as “a basic cultural model of reference” ([Palmisano and Pannofino 2017](#), p. 143). More specifically, [Palmisano and Pannofino \(2017\)](#) note the following:

The positions of young Italians engaged in spiritual itineraries outside organized churches, and even those of ‘Neither religious nor spiritual’ youth, are critically and reflexively built on the basis of the dominant cultural model of Church religion: they refuse the latter’s authority and doctrinal dogmatism, but it is certainly still the reference prototype as far as religion and theological conceptions are concerned. ([Palmisano and Pannofino 2017](#), p. 143)

Sociologists of religion are increasingly focusing on the shifts in identification of young people and related categories, particularly delving into the sociodemographic composition of those exhibiting belief and engaging in religious practices. According to data from 2017, within the age cohort of Italians between 18 and 34 years old, nearly 35% identified as non-believers, contrasting with nearly 13% of non-believers within the age group of 65 years and older ([Garelli 2020](#)). During the same period, only 9% of individuals in the 18–34 age range attended religious services weekly, compared to nearly 17% among those aged 35–44 and 19% among individuals aged 55–64. Additionally, around 14% of those aged 18–34 reported engaging in daily prayer.

Against the growing number of Italian Nones, more detailed research on the religious identity of youth ([Garelli 2016](#)) suggested that from 1994 to 2015, within a cohort of young individuals aged 18 to 29, the proportion of Nones surged from nearly 13% to almost 19%. Furthermore, among the group of Catholics, there was a discernible shift: the percentage of those who identified as Catholic due to “tradition and upbringing” rose substantially, from nearly 22% to almost 36%, while the number of “convinced but not always active” Catholics dwindled from nearly 37% to almost 19% and “convinced and active”—from nearly 15% to almost 11%. Moreover, “under the label of ‘non-believers’ do individuals with an atheist or agnostic condition or indifferent towards the faith of religion first and foremost fall” ([Garelli 2016](#), p. 8, our translation).

More specifically, two types of atheists can be distinguished in that regard: “strong atheists” and “weak atheists”. While the former concept is linked to personal convictions to negate God and can be seen as “a cultural trend adopted to emancipate oneself from a religious bond that is also considered anti-modern”, the latter type of atheism among Italian young people involves being “apathetic or disinterested towards a horizon of faith although they are not without doubts”, and capturing these kinds of Nones can be a challenging task since they “do not break the bond with established or prevalent religions” (Garelli 2016, p. 9, our translation).

Recent empirical findings shed light on the spirituality of religious Nones. According to Garelli (2016, p. 185), four out of ten young Italian Nones confirmed that they have no spiritual life, while three out of ten stated that they perceive spirituality as a personal pursuit of harmony. Additionally, roughly one out of ten confirmed that they have a spiritual and religious life in a personal manner, and two out of ten Nones lacked a clear understanding of the concept of spiritual life. These data suggest that elements of traditional spirituality are intrinsically linked to a more subjective search for meaning; however, they show that just accepting “normative answers that come from outside” (Giordan 2014, p. 6) is not acceptable anymore for the young generation.

Among the categories, which can be also relevant for the study of the spirituality of youth, “multiple” or “plural spiritual identities” (Berzano 2019)—which “no longer refer to only one permanent essence but to a series of successive identifications” (Berzano 2019, p. 25)—can be central. He argued the following:

As we have seen, the dissolution of a metaphysical idea of religious subjects leads to the consideration of spiritual identity as a field of possibilities and limits contemporaneously belonging to different social worlds: working, residential, cultural, sporting and also religious. This multiple identity is significantly related to religious lifestyles which, insofar as they are real experiences of the self in various social situations, and their turn open, differentiated and reflexive. (Berzano 2019, p. 25)

These areas present further possibilities to study the cultural and socio-political influence of Catholicism on the values and traditions (Cipriani 2017) transmitted to younger generations including Nones and new tensions arising in the sphere of social ethics and public morality within the conditions of increasing diversity and religious pluralism, when religious Nones more than other groups no longer take for granted the meanings or the worldviews inculcated in them from birth.

2.3.2. Studying Religious Nones’ Spirituality in Uruguay

Recent quantitative research has shed light on the growing significance of Nones in Latin America. Various national censuses, such as those conducted in Brazil and Mexico, as well as surveys like the Latinobarómetro and the Pew Forum, indicate a noticeable rise in the representation of the nonaffiliated category across Latin America (Da Costa et al. 2021, p. 563). From virtually zero in 1970, this category surged to 17.5%³ in 2023 (Latinobarómetro Survey 2023). The growth of the category of unaffiliated in Latin America does not represent the increase in non-believers: atheists and agnostics remain around 5% of the continental population (Da Costa et al. 2021; Pereira Arena and Morello 2022). Moreover, self-identification as agnostics, atheists, and nonreligious does not necessarily imply the absence of beliefs and practices (Da Costa et al. 2019; Esquivel et al. 2020; Rabbia 2017).

Even with the widespread presence of “nonaffiliated believers” in Latin America and the increasing body of theoretical and empirical research, achieving a consensus on the classification and terminology related to “Nones” remains challenging. Past discussions of Nones by Latin American scholars have employed various terms, as stated by Da Costa et al. (2021), such as “Catholic in my own way” (Parker 1993), “non-religious” (Marzal 2000), and “religious self-accounting” (Mallimaci et al. 1999), reflecting the complexity of this demographic. More recent discussions show other categorizations. On one hand, some authors distinguish among Nones those who have abandoned Christianity but still express

their religiosity in similar terms, referred to as “Christian tradition non-affiliates” (Beltrán and Peña Rodríguez 2023), “disaffiliated believers” (Rabbia 2017), or “non-confessional believers” (Da Costa et al. 2019). On the other hand, some individuals do not identify with any religion but do hold spiritual practices and beliefs unrelated to Christianity, individuals who engage in individual or collective practices related to transcendence, termed “spiritual seekers” (Rabbia 2017), “syncretic spirituality non-affiliates” (Beltrán et al. 2022), or “believers in alternative new age spiritualities” (Sarrazín 2017). Furthermore, within this wide spectrum represented by Nones, there are atheists (classified into militant and indifferent by Da Costa et al. 2021), agnostics, and the indifferent, characterized by their lack of interest in religion (Rabbia 2017). Likewise, akin to the international theoretical debates outlined in Section 2.1, sociologists of religion in South America engage in discussions surrounding terms such as nonaffiliated, unaffiliated, disaffiliated, nonreligious, or secular, which are subject to contestation, as previously noted (Da Costa et al. 2021).

Regarding the concept of spirituality for Nones, several authors have pointed out the discursive mark they consistently present when differentiating spirituality from religion in their discourses and narratives (Da Costa et al. 2019; Rabbia 2017). According to these scholars, religion is characterized as a domain of regulation, tied to mandates, institutional practices, obligations, rituals, and traditional religious leaders and perceived as lacking authenticity. In contrast, spirituality is defined in terms of personal authority references, deeply rooted within the intimate realm of each individual, and associated with a more free, autonomous, and subjective space that pertains to quests or expressions related to the ideas of truth, mindfulness, and authenticity (Da Costa 2017). Therefore, spirituality is positively esteemed, while religion is portrayed as a depreciated notion (Rabbia 2017). For many Nones, spirituality is even considered “superior” to religion (Baeza Correa and Imbarack Dagach 2023, p. 196).

In the context of Latin American nations, Uruguay is a standout due to its distinct societal dynamics surrounding religion and its role in the public domain. This uniqueness is further accentuated by the significant presence of nonaffiliated individuals and the relatively low number of self-identified Catholics compared to its neighboring countries in the region. The roots of Catholicism in Latin America, including present-day Uruguay, can be traced back to the missionary efforts of the Spanish Church during the 15th century. This was a part of their mission to spread Christianity across the continent, which led to the establishment of significant centers such as Cartagena, Santiago de Cuba, Mexico, and Lima, thereby extending the influence of the Spanish Church throughout Latin America. However, the territory called “Banda Oriental” (which now encompasses Uruguay) did not hold the same appeal for the conquistadors as other regions (Rodé 2007). As a result, the Church’s presence in this area was delayed and lacked the institutional structure typical of other colonial outposts. It notably lacked viceregal patronage and the appointment of Spanish bishops.

This differential and delayed interest in the population of the “Banda Oriental” holds profound implications, as it carved out a distinct trajectory of Catholic presence compared to the broader Latin American context. Rodé (2007) points out that this was evidenced by a more individualistic ethos, moralistic framework, and a heightened emphasis on maintaining a basic religious life among the bourgeois populace of Montevideo and the rural gaucho community. From its inception, the Colonial Church played a pivotal role in shaping the Uruguayan Church. It exhibited specific characteristics that mitigated conflicts and laid the groundwork for disparities between the Uruguayan Church and its more traditional Latin American counterparts.

Uruguay stands as the sole South American nation to have enacted a political initiative aimed at eliminating religion from public life. This initiative drew inspiration from the French concept of laicism and aligns with José Casanova’s (2011) description of secularism. Casanova defines secularism as encompassing various state-driven projects, legal frameworks for separating state and religion, and models for distinguishing between religion, ethics, morality, and law (Da Costa et al. 2021). The separation between the Catholic Church

and the state occurred at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the latter, so influenced by the French model with its Enlightenment and Jacobin heritage, claimed control over certain aspects of life that the Catholic Church had hitherto administered. The French case heavily inspired the State, and the Catholic Church, from its highest ranks, was engaged in a firm struggle against modernity (Da Costa 2006).

The strong secularization process in Uruguay unfolded over several decades, marked by significant legislative and social changes. Beginning in 1861 with the secularization of cemeteries, the process gained momentum with events such as the exile of the Bishop of Montevideo in 1863 and continued intellectual conflicts and confrontations between liberal and Catholic factions until 1878. Legislative actions played a crucial role, with laws enacted to secularize education (1877), transfer registration to the state (1879), and declare convents legally non-existent (1885), among others. Crucifixes were removed from hospitals in 1906, followed by the introduction of divorce laws and the elimination of religious references from parliamentary oaths in 1907. The culmination came with constitutional reform in 1917, establishing legal separation between Church and state. Further secularization measures included renaming holidays and populations in 1919 from religious to secular names.

While decades have passed since this lengthy process of secularization (Greising Díaz 2023), the country has witnessed, in recent decades, a restructuring and pluralization of the religious landscape (Caetano 2006), with the growth of Afro-based religious practices, Pentecostalism, and Nones. However, the secularist stamp remains a part of the Uruguayan cultural matrix, especially concerning the presence of religion in the public sphere and the realm of politics.

With this particular history between the nascent state and religions, in a secular society, where religion is not reinforced outside the family, it is not surprising to observe a significant and differentiated growth of people without religion compared to the rest of the Latin American countries. Focusing on surveys with national samples and conducted repeatedly over time to enable statistical series, we see that the growth of the Nones in Uruguay has remained a trend in recent years.

According to the *Latinobarómetro Survey* (2023), the Nones in Uruguay, which include atheists, agnostics, believers without religion, and those who respond "none", increased from 30.9% in 1995 to 51.7% in 2023. On average, this reflects an increase of 0.74 percentage points per year. Given these statistics, studying Nones in Uruguay has become essential for understanding the dynamics and processes of religious recomposition in society. Recent qualitative research has shown various profiles of Nones in the country, especially delving into atheists and nonaffiliated believers (Da Costa 2017, 2019).

Regarding atheists, two primary experiences associated with atheism in Uruguay can be depicted: those who had some degree of involvement with a religious institution at some point in their lives and those who did not (Da Costa 2017). For the former group, the institution, they were affiliated with, ceased to hold meaning for them, along with the beliefs about God propagated by the institution. For the others, who usually come from atheist or "indifferent to religions" families, everything related to religion seems foreign because it is not part of their life experience or meaning. This distinction is crucial in understanding the complexity of atheism in Uruguay.

This enduring presence of atheism in Uruguay can be traced back to at least 1962 when the first survey on religion identified its presence among the population (Da Costa et al. 2021). Atheists in Uruguay originate from diverse life paths, with some having prior connections to religious institutions while others never experienced religious socialization. The shift towards atheism is characterized by distancing and "unlearning" influenced by various factors ranging from personal experiences to critiques of institutional inflexibility. Different emphases within atheism include the rejection of religious institutions, questioning the existence of God due to personal experiences, and criticism of religious stances on social justice issues. Atheists in Uruguay can be further categorized based on their attitudes towards believers and religious institutions, distinguishing between rejection atheism and indifference atheism.

Moreover, [Da Costa et al. \(2019\)](#) draw attention to the socioeconomic disparities that influence atheistic experiences in Uruguay. Atheists from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds often articulate a more philosophical and reflective atheism characterized by critical discourse towards religious institutions and beliefs. This group's socioeconomic status gives them the resources and opportunities to engage in such philosophical elaboration. In contrast, atheists from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to express atheism as a response to disillusionment or "abandonment from God" due to their hard life conditions. This disparity in philosophical elaboration underscores the role of socioeconomic status in shaping atheistic experiences. Regardless of socioeconomic status, atheism in Uruguay is primarily framed in opposition to Catholicism, reflecting the country's cultural context. In summary, atheism in Uruguay is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, exhibiting variability depending on individuals' life conditions. However, it consistently maintains a critical stance towards religious institutions, particularly Catholicism. The relationship between individuals and religious institutions often reflects past experiences, with criticism or disengagement being prevalent themes.

Concerning nonaffiliated believers in Uruguay, they encompass a diverse collective characterized by a strong emphasis on embarking on personal spiritual journeys and prioritizing seeking answers not predetermined by religious institutions or collectives, viewing spirituality as a personal and liberated concept free from institutionalization ([Da Costa 2017](#)). Their narratives often revolve around the quest for transcendence, drawing from various spiritual traditions and rejecting externally imposed norms or beliefs.

This group is defined by eclecticism, with individuals integrating elements from diverse religious or spiritual traditions into their belief systems. They distinguish between religion and spirituality, viewing the former as restrictive and institutionalized, while the latter is perceived as personal and experiential. Many Nones in Uruguay identify as believers in God or some form of transcendence but refrain from affiliating with religious institutions ([Da Costa et al. 2021](#)). According to [Da Costa \(2017\)](#), nonaffiliated believers in Uruguay express dissatisfaction with Western religious institutions, criticizing their emphasis on promoting institutional beliefs and rules rather than fostering personal spiritual growth. Their experiences with Catholicism, often characterized by imposition and domination, lead them to seek spirituality outside traditional institutional boundaries. These believers construct their spiritual frameworks based on personal experiences and eclectic beliefs, emphasizing individual freedom and autonomy in their spiritual journeys.

A key aspect of spiritual exploration among nonaffiliated believers is individual autonomy ([Da Costa et al. 2019](#)). These individuals eschew predetermined answers offered by religious groups, opting for a more personal and experiential spiritual approach. Their narratives often echo disillusionment with institutionalized religion and a yearning for authenticity in spiritual practices.

Nonaffiliated believers in Uruguay exhibit a wide range of spiritual practices, including meditation, yoga, and holistic healing modalities. They perceive spirituality as a journey of self-discovery and transcendence, liberated from the constraints of institutionalized religion. Criticism towards religious institutions, particularly Catholicism, is a common thread among this group, stemming from negative personal experiences and perceived limitations in institutionalized religious practices. However, another profile of nonaffiliated believers still incorporates practices that could be termed as a "Christian matrix", such as attending Church or reading the Bible. They may even use elements like rosaries or be devoted to a particular saint or virgin, but they do not identify as Catholics or Christians ([Pereira Arena 2018](#)).

Therefore, nonaffiliated believers in Uruguay represent a diverse cohort of individuals who prioritize personal spiritual exploration and autonomy. Their narratives underscore a rejection of institutionalized religion in favor of experiential spirituality, drawing from eclectic beliefs and practices to shape their spiritual journeys.

After presenting two national contexts and the dynamic of socioreligious changes covering the None's demographic, their positioning on the continuum between religion and nonreligion, and the spiritual preferences of young people, we formulate the following

hypotheses to be tested on the Italian and Uruguayan samples, assuming the following in comparison with the Italian sample:

H1. *A significantly higher number of religious Nones and Catholics in the Italian sample tend to believe in and exercise religious practices compared to the young people in the Uruguayan sample.*

H2. *Spiritual identity and the role of spiritual beliefs in daily life are strongly endorsed among young people in Uruguay (both Nones and Catholics).*

H3. *Religious identity and the role of religious beliefs in daily life are less endorsed among young people in Uruguay (both Nones and Catholics).*

H4. *Relatively similar perceptions of individual autonomy among young people, operationalized as the pursuit of personal spiritual fulfillment, will be evidenced in the two samples.*

Against the presented country contexts, we are also interested in exploring whether the proportion of Nones is higher in the sample of Uruguayan youth as well as whether the share of atheists and agnostics is more numerous among the sample of Nones in Uruguay.

3. Method

3.1. Procedure

This article proposes a quantitative examination of two cases: Italy and Uruguay. It is part of an international research project aimed at surveying to assess the perception of religious freedom in various countries, specifically targeting university students, to generate data for international comparison. For these purposes, the original instrument was translated into Spanish and tested on the convenience sample of 1012 Uruguayan university students in 2022. In 2018, the instrument was tested on the convenience sample of 1035 Italian university students for the first time.

In Italy and Uruguay, the survey was administered in class with the PAPI method. It was conducted simultaneously and individually and self-administered by the participants. Initially, students were briefed on the overarching scope of this research, emphasizing that their involvement was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Subsequently, each participant received a copy of the survey questionnaire alongside a consent form for participation. Adequate time was allocated during class sessions to allow participants to complete the survey, with an estimated application duration ranging between 30 and 45 min.

3.2. Case Selection

In this study, we chose to focus on Italy and Uruguay for several reasons that go beyond mere convenience. Italy, a country with a deeply rooted Catholic tradition, presents an interesting context where the influence of the Catholic Church remains strong, yet a growing segment of the population identifies as “Nones”. This provides an opportunity to examine how young people deploy their spirituality and religious identities in a predominantly Catholic environment.

On the other hand, Uruguay offers a contrasting context as one of the most secular countries in Latin America. With a long history of secularization and a significant portion of the population identifying as nonreligious, Uruguay provides a valuable case for studying the formation of spiritual and religious identities in a largely secular society. The explicit public secularization process in Uruguay contrasts sharply with the persistent Catholic influence in Italy, allowing for a comparative analysis that can shed light on how different cultural and religious contexts influence the identities of the “Nones”.

Italy and Uruguay were selected not only for their contrasting religious contexts but also because they represent regions (Southern Europe and Latin America) that are often underrepresented in studies of nonreligiosity, which are typically focused on North America and Northern Europe. By examining young “Nones” in these countries, our

study contributes to a more global understanding of nonreligiosity and spirituality, offering valuable findings about the possible measures of nonreligiosity and perspectives that can inform future research in other regions with similar or contrasting characteristics.

3.3. Measure

To define the group of Nones, the question “What is your religion? Please tick only one answer” was formulated, and a list with 12 options⁴ for the answers was offered to the participants including, among others, the option “no religion”. The participants’ spirituality, individual autonomy, appreciation of difference, and criticism towards religion were assessed with measures from the Social Perceptions of Religious Freedom survey (Breskaya and Giordan 2019). All variables were measured using 5-point Likert-type response scales, except for age, sex, social milieu, parents’ education, and citizenship status. Recent studies have demonstrated that these measures function well when examining the effects of spirituality and religiosity on perceptions of religious freedom (Blasi et al. 2020). For the analysis of participants’ positions concerning Atheism, Agnosticism, Exclusionism, Inclusivism, Pluralism, and Interreligious perspective, we employed the multi-choice index of Astley and Francis (2016).

3.4. Participants

Completed questionnaires were returned by 1035 Italian and 1012 Uruguayan participants with a mean age of 21 and 22 years, respectively. Citizenship rates were high in both samples, with nearly 93% among Italian and almost 96% among Uruguayan participants (Table 1). However, residential distribution showed some differences, with Italian participants displaying a more balanced distribution across urban (nearly 31.9%), suburban (38.4%), and rural (29.7%) areas, while a substantial majority of Uruguayan participants (77.2%) resided in urban settings.

Table 1. Sample characteristics, Italy and Uruguay (valid cases n (Italy) = 1035; n (Uruguay) = 1012; %, except age).

	Italy	Uruguay
Age (mean)	20.8	21.7
Female	77.8	59.9
Citizen	92.9	95.5
From urban area	31.9	77.2
From suburban area	38.4	19.2
From rural area	29.7	3.6
No religion	29.9	53.7
Catholic	63.8	39.3
Mother’s citizenship	85	94.1
Father’s citizenship	86.8	94.7

Religious identification diverged as well, with a majority of Italian participants identifying as Catholic (63.8%), while a significant portion of Uruguayan participants (53.7%) were Nones. Furthermore, the educational backgrounds varied notably among the participants’ parents, with a higher percentage of parents having completed university education in the Uruguayan sample (54.1% of participants’ mothers and 40.7% of fathers) compared to the Italian sample (18.6% of mothers and 17.5% of fathers). These findings underscore the multifaceted sociodemographic landscape shaping the characteristics of Italian and Uruguayan student cohorts.

In terms of religious identification, within the Italian sample, approximately one-third (29.9%) of young people identified themselves as having no religion, while 63.8% identified as Catholics and nearly 6% as religious minorities. Among the religious minorities in the Italian sample, Muslims comprised 2.4%, Orthodox Christians 1.7%, Buddhists 0.4%, and Pentecostals 0.4%. In the Uruguayan sample, 53.7% of young people declared themselves

as having no religion, while 39.3% identified with Roman Catholicism and approximately 6% with religious minorities. Among the religious minorities in the Uruguayan sample, Protestants constituted the majority at 2.7%, followed by the individuals identified with Jewish tradition at 1.9% and other Christian traditions at 0.9%.

4. Results

This section explores the profiles of religious Nones in the Italian and Uruguayan samples considering their belief, engagement in private prayer, attendance at worship, atheistic and agnostic perspectives, and spiritual/religious identities. For some questions, we also present the data for the group of participants who identified themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, to better understand the characteristics of Nones in assessed countries.

4.1. Nones: Sociodemographic Characteristics, Political Views, and Criticism toward Religion

For research purposes, we allocated all participants into three distinct groups based on their answers about religious identity: religious Nones (Nones), individuals identified with a predominant religious tradition (Catholics), and those identified with various religious minorities (Religious Minorities). While religious minorities constituted around six percent in both samples, the proportion of Nones was notably higher in the Uruguayan sample, surpassing the number of Nones in the Italian sample by almost twenty-four percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2. Religious identification of participants (valid cases n (Italy) = 1016, n (Uruguay) = 1006; frequency, %).

	Italy		Uruguay	
	Fr.	%	Fr.	%
No religion (Nones)	304	29.9	540	53.7
Roman Catholic	648	63.8	395	39.3
Protestant	2	0.2	27	2.7
Christian—Orthodox	17	1.7	1	0.1
Pentecostal	4	0.4	0	0.0
Other Christian tradition	4	0.4	9	0.9
Muslim	24	2.4	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0	19	1.9
Buddhist	4	0.4	0	0.0
Hindu	2	0.2	0	0.0
Sikh	1	0.1	0	0.0
Other	6	0.5	15	1.4
Total	1016	100.0	1006	100.0

Conversely, the share of Catholic Italian adherents exceeded the number of Catholic adherents among Uruguayan youth by almost 25 percentage points.

For further research, we consistently compare the groups of Nones in Italian and Uruguayan samples, while also considering the differences between Nones and adherents to the Catholic Church within the samples. This approach enables us to define patterns of belief, practice, spirituality, and religiosity among young people, both identified with religion and nonreligion. Additionally, it allows for the examination of their sociodemographic profiles and the testing of theoretical hypotheses regarding political orientation and the appreciation of the difference.

To examine the proportion of males among Nones and their parents with university degrees, we compared the ratio of males to females within this group contrasting them with Catholics, as well as examined shares of mothers and fathers with university degrees among them. In the Italian sample, approximately 42% of males identified as Nones, while nearly 27% of females did so. Similarly, among Uruguayans, there was a similar trend: almost 61% of males identified themselves as Nones compared to nearly 50% of females.

Conversely, more Catholics can be found among females compared to males: in the Italian sample, the ratio was almost 67% females compared to approximately 54% males, and among the Uruguayan sample, nearly 43% were females compared to almost 36% males (Table 3).

Table 3. Sociodemographic characteristics of Nones, Catholics, and Religious minorities (valid cases n (Italy) = 1010, n (Uruguay) = 991; column %).

	Italy		Uruguay	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Nones	42.2%	26.7%	60.6%	50.4%
Catholics	53.8%	67.1%	35.7%	42.7%
Religious minorities	4.0%	6.2%	3.8%	6.9%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

In terms of parents' education (Table 4), it is possible to conclude that in the Italian case, the proportion of mothers of Nones who had a university degree is higher compared to that of mothers of Catholics (23.4% vs. 15.6%, respectively). Among fathers of Nones, we observed a similar trend for Italian samples: more fathers of Nones had university degrees (20.7%) compared to fathers of young Italians who defined themselves as Catholics (15.4%). For the Uruguayan sample, a higher percentage of mothers of Nones (68.4%) had university degrees (complete and incomplete) compared to mothers of Catholics (65.7%), although this difference is less discernible than in the Italian case. Instead, the share of fathers with a university degree among young people who identified themselves with Catholicism in Uruguay is slightly higher than the number of fathers with a university education among Nones. Even though this study does not directly compare Nones with minorities, it is evident that Italian Nones are more closely aligned with minorities than with Catholics when considering the proportion of their parents with a university degree.

Table 4. Mothers and fathers with a university degree (valid cases n (Italy) = 998/1000, n (Uruguay) = 985/981; %).

	Mother with a University Degree		Father with A University Degree	
	Italy	Uruguay	Italy	Uruguay
Nones	23.4%	68.4%	20.7%	56.5%
Catholics	15.6%	65.7%	15.4%	58.3%
Religious minorities	24.6%	66.1%	23.2%	57.1%

In terms of political views (Table 5), Italian Nones showed a slightly stronger prevalence of democratic orientation ($M = 4.38$) compared to Catholics ($M = 4.31$) and participants from religious minorities ($M = 4.24$). Regarding the criticism of religious leaders, Nones expressed more criticism ($M = 3.79$) compared with other groups in the Italian sample. For the appreciation of diversity, Italian Nones endorsed the statement "Having many different religious points of view is good for Italian/Uruguayan society" more strongly compared to Catholics ($M = 4.18$ vs. 3.96).

In the sample from Uruguay (Table 5), representatives of religious minorities supported the centrality of democratic governance more strongly compared to other groups. Criticism of religious leaders was stronger among Nones in Uruguay ($M = 3.95$) compared to Catholics ($M = 3.60$) In terms of the appreciation of diversity, Catholics and members of religious minorities slightly more strongly endorsed this statement compared to Nones.

Table 5. Political views, criticism of religious leaders, and appreciation of difference (valid cases n (Italy) = 977/1006/977, n (Uruguay) = 959/982/956; mean).

	Italy			Uruguay		
	Nones	Catholics	Religious Minorities	Nones	Catholics	Religious Minorities
It is important to me to live in a democratically governed country	4.38	4.31	4.24	4.48	4.56	4.70
Freedom to criticize religious leaders is an important aspect of religious freedom	3.79	3.30	3.11	3.95	3.60	3.93
Having many different religious points of view is good for Italian/Uruguayan society	4.18	3.96	4.21	4.30	4.43	4.38

4.2. Religious Belief, Practices, and Truth Claims among Nones

This section delves into the aspects of belief and practice among Nones, to verify Hypothesis 1 (H1) concerning disparities in belief and engagement in religious practices across two samples. Figure 1 highlights a significant contrast: approximately 16% of Nones in the Uruguayan sample and nearly 89% of Catholics profess belief in God, whereas only 5.7% of Italian Nones and nearly 62% of self-declared Catholics do the same.

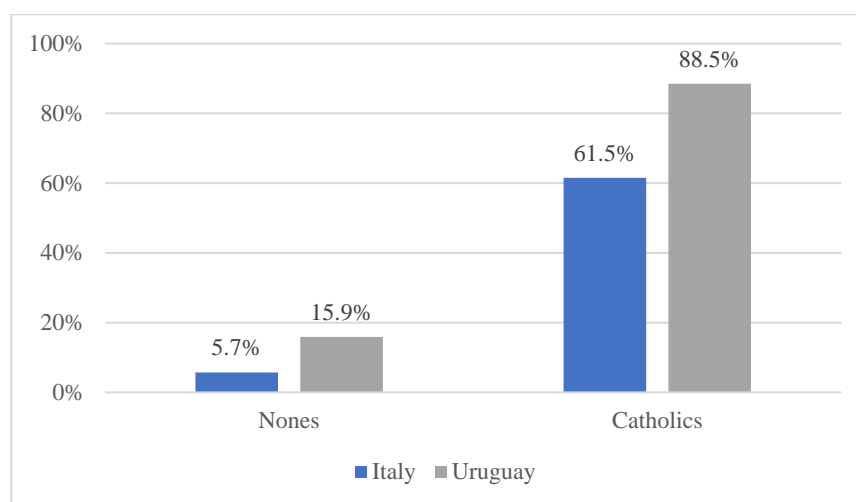


Figure 1. Agreement with the statement “I believe in God” (valid cases n (Italy, Nones/Catholics) = 301/635; n (Uruguay, Nones/Catholics) = 527/384; %).

The disparity in agreement with belief between Catholics and Nones is conspicuous in both countries. However, the level of uncertainty, as indicated in Table 6, was higher among self-identified Catholics in the Italian sample (24.3%), whereas disagreement was expressed by 14.3% of them, with 6.3% strongly disagreeing and 8% moderately disagreeing. Similarly, a comparable level of uncertainty can be observed among Nones in Uruguay, at 20.5%. These findings underscore the complexity of categorizing individuals into binary understandings of religion/nonreligion, suggesting the need to consider additional factors and aspects when analyzing the beliefs and practices of the None demographic and indicating their heterogeneity.

Table 6. Answers to the question “Do you believe in God?”.

	Nones		Catholics	
	Italy	Uruguay	Italy	Uruguay
Strongly disagree	62.1%	27.1%	6.3%	1.3%
Disagree	16.9%	14.4%	8.0%	1.0%
Not certain	15.3%	20.5%	24.3%	8.3%
Agree	4.7%	10.8%	38.0%	39.3%
Strongly agree	1.0%	5.1%	23.5%	49.2%
Not applicable		22.0%		8%

These results align with observations made by several authors (Cragun and McCaffree 2021; Baker and Smith 2015; Sherkat 2014; Bagg and Voas 2010), who have noted that individuals who claim a religious identity may also express disbelief in God or gods. Such findings reinforce the notion, as suggested by Cragun and McCaffree (2021), that we cannot necessarily predict the beliefs of contemporary youth who might not fit neatly into conventional categories. Additionally, in the Uruguayan sample, compared to the Italian one, two out of ten Nones specified that the question about belief in God does not apply to them.⁵ This finding offers insights into the common measures of belief when applied to a specific category of individuals who require more differentiated measures.

Table 7 presents the frequency of prayer and attendance at religious worship services among Nones and Catholics in Italy and Uruguay. Among Italian Nones, the majority (91.7%) never pray in their home, and in Uruguay, a similar trend is observed, with 85.1% reporting never praying. Only a small percentage of Nones pray occasionally in Italy (5.6%) and Uruguay (13.8%) or with greater frequency. For attendance at religious worship services among Nones, we observed that in Italy, the majority (82.6%) never attend religious worship services, with a small percentage attending occasionally (10.5%) or a few times a year. In Uruguay, a similar pattern was observed, with 77.1% never attending religious services and 16.7% attending occasionally. Nones in Italy and Uruguay exhibit similar characteristics of low religious engagement; however, prayer at home and attendance at religious services were more intensive in Uruguay compared to Italy.

Table 7. Frequencies of prayer and attendance at religious worship (valid cases n (Italy, Nones) = 303, (Italy, Catholics) = 648, (Uruguay, Nones) = 537, (Uruguay, Catholics) = 394; %).

	Italy (Nones)	Uruguay (Nones)	Italy (Catholics)	Uruguay (Catholics)
<i>How often do you pray in your home or by yourself?</i>				
Never	91.7	85.1	33.6	22.8
Occasionally	5.6	13.8	39.4	37.8
At least once a month	1.3	0.4	3.1	9.1
At least once a week	0.7	0.2	9.3	13.2
Nearly every day	0.7	0.6	14.7	17
<i>Apart from special occasions (like weddings), how often do you attend a religious worship service (e.g., in a church, mosque, or synagogue)?</i>				
Never	82.6	77.1	28.2	22.4
Occasionally	10.5	16.7	26.2	26
A few times a year	6.6	5.8	22.2	26
At least once a month	0.3	0.20	6.3	8.4
Nearly weekly or more	0	0.20	17	17.3

A notable contrast in religious engagement between Nones and Catholics can be observed: Catholics in Uruguay tended to pray and attend mass more often compared to Italian youth. For instance, a higher proportion of Catholics in the Uruguayan sample prayed at least weekly (13.2%) compared to 9.3% of Italian Catholic participants. Nearly weekly or more frequent attendance at religious services showed nearly the same number of Italian (17.0%) and Uruguayan Catholics (17.3%).

Following the AFTRI measures (Astley and Francis 2016), we found the following distribution of positions referring to participants' positioning towards the truth claims: among Italian Nones, atheism ("All religions are totally false") is more prevalent with 18.3% of respondents identifying as atheists, compared to 12.7% in Uruguay. Agnosticism ("I do not know what to believe about religions"), however, is more pronounced in Uruguay, with 39.7% of respondents identifying as agnostics, compared to 32.3% in Italy (Figure 2). This indicates a greater degree of uncertainty or skepticism regarding the existence of a higher power among respondents in Uruguay.

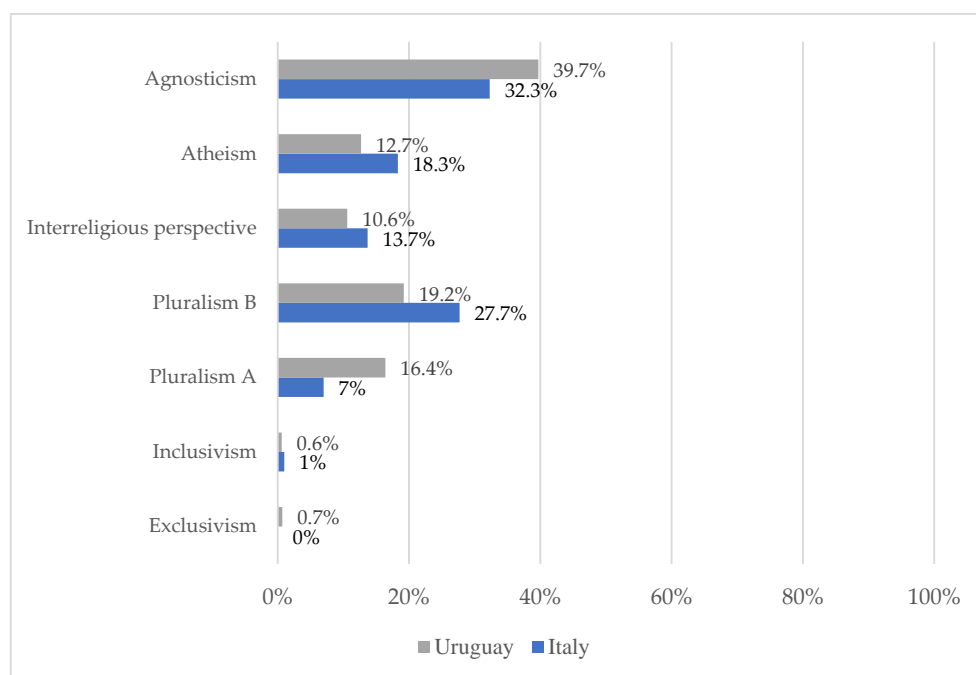


Figure 2. The Astley–Francis Theology of Religions Index (valid cases n (Italy, Nones) = 304, n (Uruguay, Nones) = 536; %).

The pluralistic perspective, when combining Pluralism A ("All religions are equally true") and Pluralism B ("All religions express the same truth in different ways"), suggests an acceptance of multiple religious beliefs as equally valid. In Italy, the combined percentage of Pluralism A and Pluralism B is 34.7%, while in Uruguay, it is slightly higher at 35.6%. This indicates a notable portion of respondents in both countries who embrace diversity and tolerance towards different religious traditions.

4.3. Spirituality–Religiosity Continuum and Individual Autonomy among Nones

Regarding spiritual identity, in both Italy and Uruguay, a notable proportion of Nones identify as spiritual individuals, with 35.8% in the Italian and 49.8% in the Uruguayan sample. Their spiritual identity was declared by 51.3% of Italian Catholic participants and 53.9% of Catholics in the sample from Uruguay (Figure 3).

These results reveal a stronger prevalence of spiritual Nones among participants from Uruguay. These findings are interesting, if we consider them together with the belief and practices of Nones, confirming that the sense of spirituality can be linked to God, but it can also go beyond Him, as Ammerman (2013) pointed out, such as extratheistic or ethical spiritualities. Similarly, when reference to the Church for spiritual growth is not relevant for young people, this may indicate the presence of "private spirituality" and "personal quest" spirituality types (Giordan 2010).

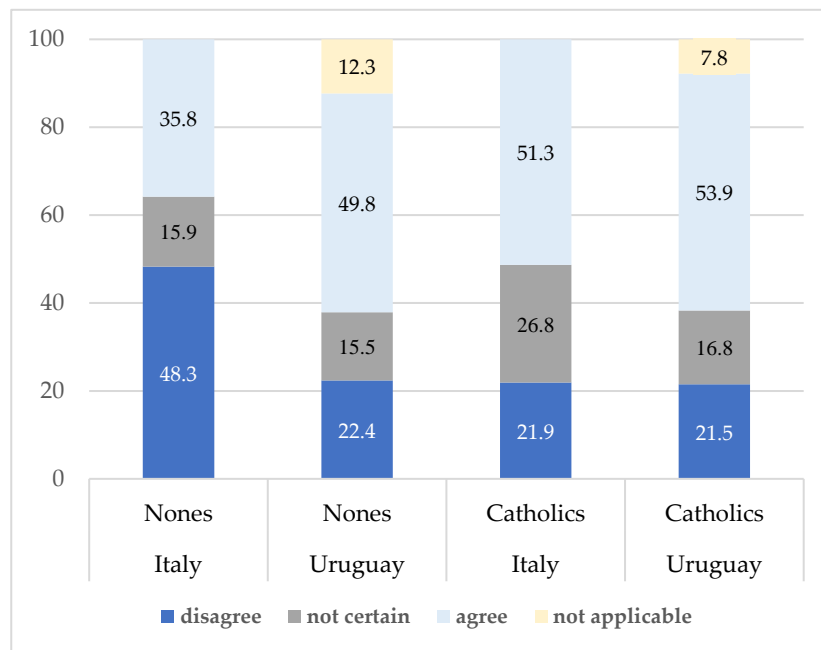


Figure 3. “I am spiritual person” (valid cases n (Italy, Nones/Catholics) = 302/635, n (Uruguay, Nones/Catholics) = 522/386; %).

The data about the share of respondents agreeing with statements about the significance of spiritual beliefs in their lives, categorized by Nones and Catholics in Italy and Uruguay (Figure 4), suggest that among Italian participants, 20.5% of Nones and 31.6% of Catholics agreed with this statement, while in Uruguay, the percentages were higher with 23.9% of Nones and 55.5% of Catholics. This finding suggests that spiritual beliefs are more influential in providing a sense of purpose among both Nones and Catholics in Uruguay compared to Italy.

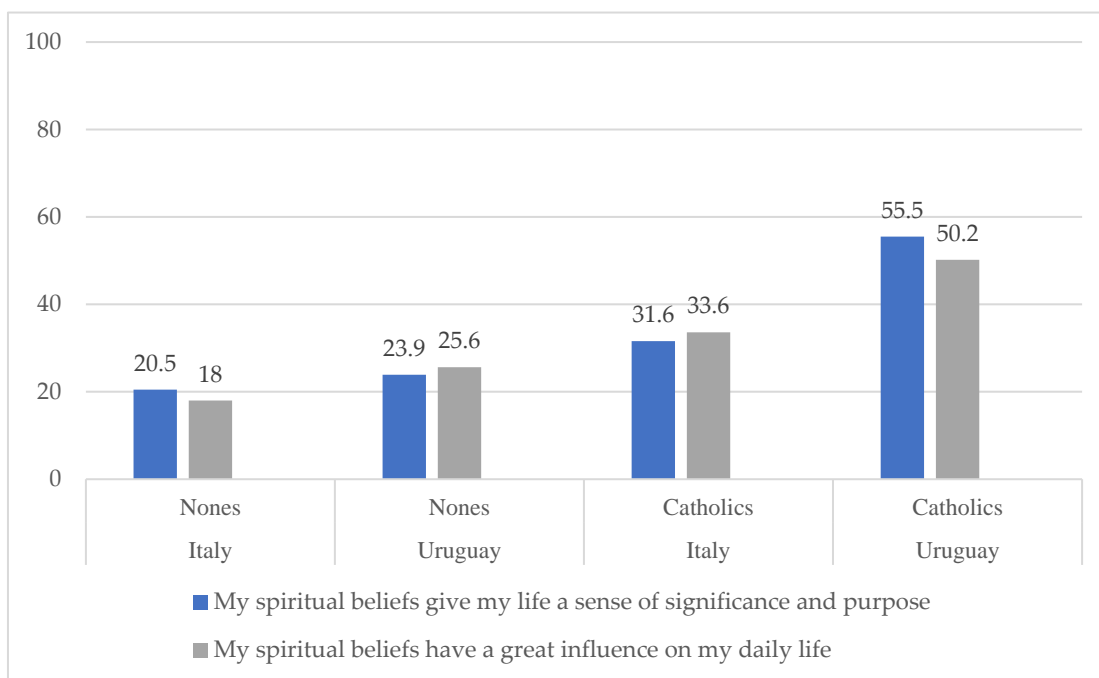


Figure 4. Agreement with the statements “My spiritual beliefs give my life a sense of significance and purpose” and “My spiritual beliefs have a great influence on my daily life” (valid cases n (Italy, Nones/Catholics) = 302/636 and 301/635, n (Uruguay, Nones/Catholics) = 531/382 and 531/385; %).

Agreement with the statement “My spiritual beliefs have a great influence on my daily life” showed similar results: among Italians, 18% of Nones and 33.6% of Catholics agreed with this statement (Figure 4), while in Uruguay, 25.6% of Nones and 50.2% of Catholics did so. Again, this indicates a greater impact of spiritual beliefs on daily life among both Nones and Catholics in Uruguay compared to the Italian sample.

In terms of religious identity (Figure 5), in Italy, a significant majority of Nones disagreed with the statement “I am a religious person” (92.6%). Among Catholics in Italy, a substantial proportion (44.3%) confirmed their religious identity, while 34.2% disagreed with this statement. In Uruguay, the trend is notably different. While the majority of Nones still disagreed with the statement (70%), with almost 9% expressing uncertainty, among Catholics, only 10.3% disagreed with the statement, with a large majority (68%) agreeing.

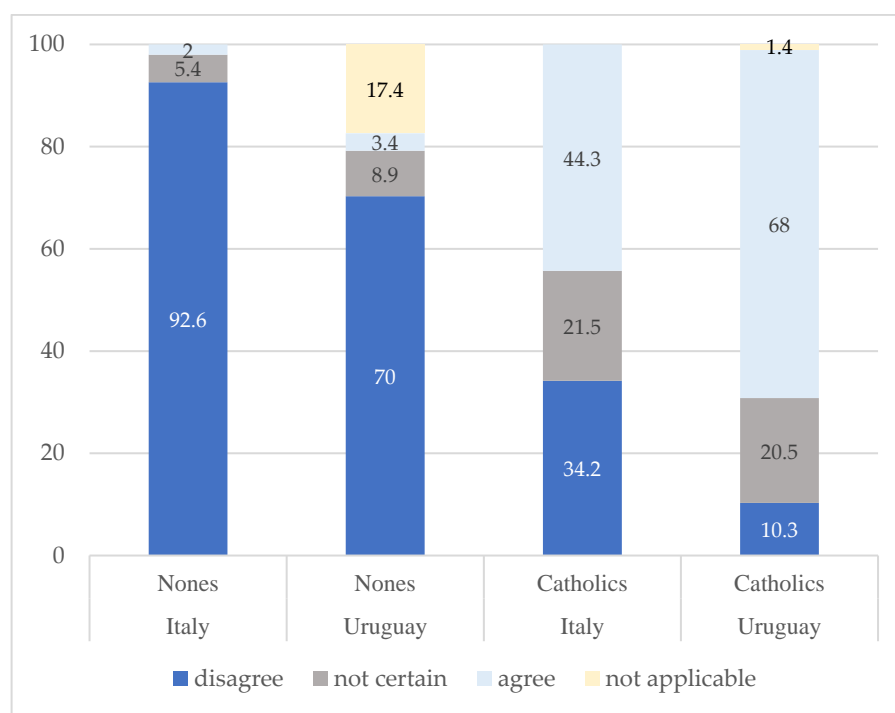


Figure 5. Agreement with the statement “I am a religious person” (valid cases n (Italy, Nones/Catholics) = 301/636, n (Uruguay, Nones/Catholics) = 529/386; %).

Among Italian Nones, only 2% reported that their religious beliefs give their life a sense of significance and purpose, while in Uruguay, this figure was at 5.1%. Compared to 53% of Catholics in Uruguay who indicated that their religious beliefs give their life a sense of significance and purpose, among Catholics in Italy, a substantially lower proportion (31.3%) did so. Similarly, in Italy, only 2% of Nones mentioned that their religious beliefs have a great influence on their daily life, slightly increasing to 4.7% among Nones in Uruguay. Among Catholics, the influence of religious beliefs on daily life was notably higher, with 25.5% in Italy and 48.6% in Uruguay reporting that their religious beliefs have a great influence on their daily lives (Figure 6).

In terms of perceptions of personal spiritual fulfillment as an element of participants’ religious freedom (Figure 7), a substantial majority of Nones and Catholics in both samples indicated the centrality of this idea.

In the Italian sample, 74.6% of Nones and 83.3% of Catholics agreed with this statement, while in Uruguay, 74.7% of Nones and 90.5% of Catholics expressed agreement. A minority of respondents disagreed with the statement, with Nones showing higher disagreement rates compared to Catholics in both countries. Specifically, in Italy, 9.6% of Nones and 4.2% of Catholics disagreed, whereas in Uruguay, 6.9% of Nones and 1.5% of Catholics expressed disagreement.

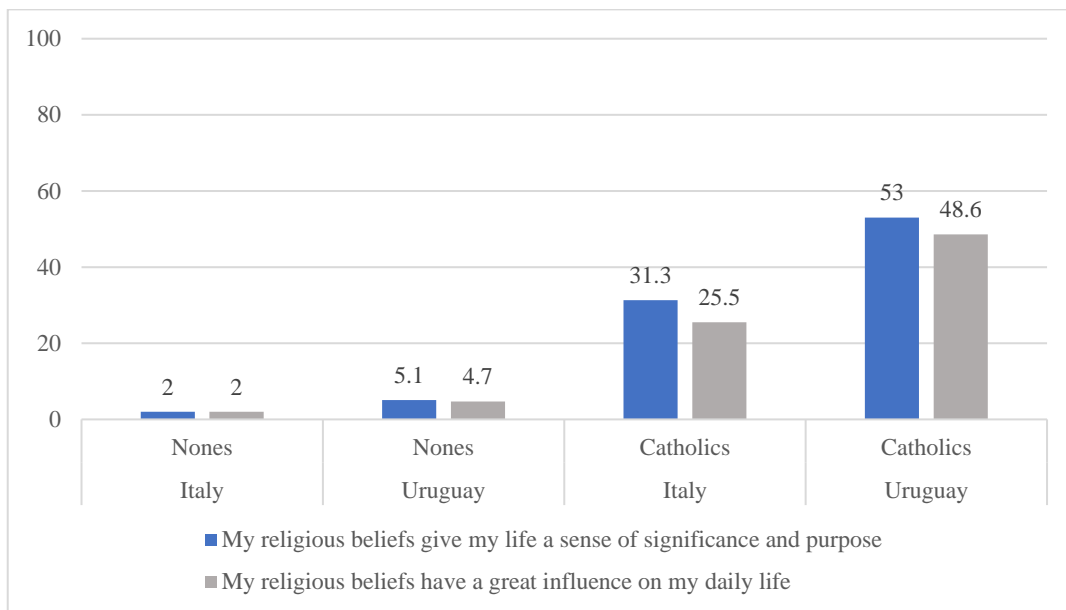


Figure 6. Agreement with the statements “My religious beliefs give my life a sense of significance and purpose” and “My religious beliefs have a great influence on my daily life” (valid cases n (Italy, Nones/Catholics) = 301/635 and 301/636, n (Uruguay, Nones/Catholics) = 530/383 and 532/387; %).

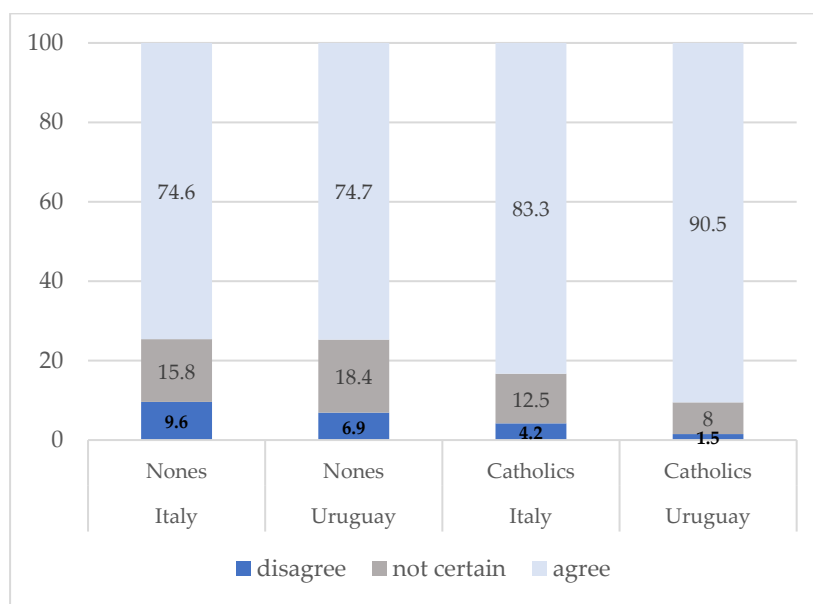


Figure 7. Religious freedom allows everyone to pursue their personal spiritual fulfillment (valid cases n (Italy, Nones/Catholics) = 304/647 and 301/636, n (Uruguay, Nones/Catholics) = 535/389; %).

5. Discussion

The rise of the category of religious Nones is notable in both Italy and Uruguay, despite the differing sociocultural and secularist contexts of the societies. This article introduces the first exploratory findings from a comparative study on religious Nones among young people in Italy and Uruguay, examining their primary sociodemographic characteristics, aspects of religiosity, and spiritual identities.

The results suggest that in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, in both samples, the ratio of males to females was higher among Nones, although this difference was less pronounced in the Uruguayan sample. According to our data, the sociodemographic characteristics of “Nones” in Uruguay show some convergence with those of the general

population. This finding about a more balanced gender distribution of “Nones” among the participants from Uruguay compared to the Italian sample complies with recent sociological discussions, where some authors suggest that as the number of individuals identifying as “Nones” increases, their distinctive sociodemographic characteristics resemble those of the general population (Kosmin et al. 2009). This phenomenon, often understood as a form of regression to the mean, posits that the larger the population of “Nones”, the more they reflect the broader society’s demographics and attitudes. This theory is particularly relevant in Uruguay, where “Nones” constitute a significant portion of the population. In a broad qualitative study of lived religion in Latin America, and unlike what happened with countries like Peru (Morello 2021), the researchers had no difficulties in finding Nones among people from the lower or lower middle classes, nor did they have difficulty finding them among people with more or less education. Although there are still trends (it is still more prevalent in men), the population without religion in the country is more diverse.

For Italian Nones, the proportion of their mothers and fathers who had a university degree is higher compared to mothers of Catholic participants. In the Uruguayan sample, although the trend is less clear, a higher proportion of mothers among Nones had university degrees (both complete and incomplete) compared to the mothers of Catholics. Consistent with arguments by Burge (2021), the majority of Nones agreed with the importance of living in a democratically governed country, even though Italian Nones showed a slightly stronger prevalence of democratic orientation compared to Catholics, while we did not find the same trend in the Uruguayan sample. Both Italian and Uruguayan Nones are more critical towards religious leaders. They also demonstrate a stronger opinion compared to other groups regarding the importance of being able to criticize religious leaders as part of what they understand as freedom from religion, aligning with observations made by some authors about an anti-religious sentiment, especially concerning institutional terms or figures of authority (Da Costa et al. 2021).

Moreover, the data showed that Italian Nones tended to have a stronger appreciation of religious diversity than Catholic participants. Similarly, previous studies (Breskaya and Giordan 2021) indicated that Nones are sensitive to selected aspects of religious freedom compared to participants identified with the majority and minority religions. As for the Uruguayan sample, novel findings for which there was no previous information are related to the lesser importance Nones give to the existence of different religious viewpoints, in comparison to the importance given by Catholics or religious minorities (Table 5).

Our explorative analysis evidenced a higher proportion of Nones in the Uruguayan youth sample: nearly 54% of the sample comprised Nones, whereas in the Italian sample, their representation was almost 30% (Table 2). Regarding the higher presence of atheists and agnostics among the assessed countries, the findings suggest that slightly more atheists were present among Italian Nones (18% vs. 13% among Nones in Uruguay), while a higher proportion of Nones in Uruguay expressed an agnostic perspective (40% vs. 32% among Italian Nones).

Our first theoretical hypothesis (H1) about a higher number of religious Nones and Catholics in the Italian sample who believe in and exercise religious practices, referring to the cultural model of a “Church religion” (Palmisano and Pannofino 2017), was not supported. In Uruguay, Nones appeared to engage more intensively in prayer at home and attendance at religious services compared to their counterparts in Italy. Moreover, a higher proportion of Italian Nones never pray or attend religious services. The same trend was observed for participants who identified themselves as Catholics.

The second (H2) hypothesis concerning the stronger endorsement of spirituality among Uruguayan Nones and Catholics compared to Italian ones was confirmed regarding three separate statements: “I am a spiritual person”, “My spiritual beliefs give my life a sense of significance and purpose”, and “My spiritual beliefs have a great influence on my daily life”. For these three statements, Nones and Catholics in the Uruguayan sample strongly endorsed these statements compared to Italian participants in these groups. The empirical data from the Uruguayan sample supported theoretical arguments and findings

indicated by local investigations (Da Costa et al. 2019; Da Costa et al. 2021; Pereira Arena and Brusoni 2017): Nones in Uruguay show a strong prevalence of a sense of spirituality, engage in various types of practices, and believe in God.

Interpreting the results under the existing theory about the Nones in Uruguay (Da Costa 2017, 2019), we can infer that their tendency to consider themselves spiritual people stems from a pronounced distinction they make between the categories of spirituality and religion. While they identify religion with institutions and mandates, which allow little autonomy, spirituality is about a personal search for meaning, found within oneself, in nature, and encounters with others. Following the classification of Ammerman (2013), Nones in Uruguay often speak of spirituality in an extratheistic sense. At the same time, observing the available statistics on nonaffiliation in the country, we see that most Nones are not atheists but “believers without religion”, so the data from this survey make sense. Moreover, Catholics, as noted in the relevant theory (Pereira Arena and Brusoni 2017), understand spirituality as something connected to God and how they are called to act in the world (in their home, at work, in their free time) based on their religious values.

The third hypothesis (H3) regarding the weaker support of religious identity and the role of religious beliefs in daily life being less endorsed among young people in Uruguay (both Nones and Catholics) was mostly confirmed for Catholics. This is because the agreement with the statement “I am religious” was very low among Nones in both samples. A similar trend was observed for the centrality of religious beliefs in daily life; the hypothesis was confirmed for Catholics, with small differences observed for Nones. The importance of differentiating between types of “Church spirituality” from its more “private” and “personal” forms (Giordan 2010) is evidenced by our data when comparing the results of this study on the religiosity–spirituality continuum.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis (H4), which predicted a relatively similar perception of individual autonomy to fulfill one’s spiritual realization among young people in the two assessed countries, was confirmed. Consistently, participants from both samples provided mostly similar responses regarding their perception of freedom to pursue personal spiritual fulfillment: eight out of ten Nones in both samples agreed with this perspective. The data illustrate the centrality of the idea of freedom grounded in one’s spiritual journey (Berzano 2023; Blasi et al. 2020; Giordan 2016), both for Nones and even more for Catholics (Figure 7).

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that the ways in which religious Nones relate to spirituality and religious practices vary considerably depending on whether they are part of a majority or a minority group in their respective countries. In Uruguay, where Nones are more prevalent, they exhibit a stronger identification with spirituality and agnosticism. This contrasts with the Italian context, where Catholicism remains strong and Nones are a minority; they reveal their spiritual identity to a lesser degree, also showing that they are more likely to adopt an atheistic perspective, thus illustrating a more antagonistic attitude to the tradition. These data could also indicate that the strong cultural presence of Catholicism in Italian society, with its diversification of religious and spiritual offerings (Diotallevi 2001), makes the boundaries between religious and spiritual realms more porous, leaving them less differentiated for young Italians. This makes it more challenging for individuals to discern the conceptual differences between the two categories.

Our study contributes to the discourse on religious Nones by highlighting the complexity and diversity within this group. Despite the challenges of categorizing them, we identified common features when examining them within the distinct cultural contexts of Italy and Uruguay. An interesting finding about the spirituality of Nones suggests that, despite the varying degrees of their spiritual identification (agreement with the statement “I am a spiritual person”) and its prevalence in the Uruguayan sample, the ratio between spiritual identification and the centrality of spirituality in daily life (agreement with the statement “My spiritual beliefs have a great influence on my daily life”) remains consistent

across both samples. Nones are twice as likely to identify with spirituality as they are to consider it central to their everyday routine.

Nones in the same way associate the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment with religious freedom. This finding suggests that despite differences in secularism models and degrees of sociocultural influence of institutional religion, young people appreciate the possibilities of personal spiritual exploration. Our findings underscore the importance of context in shaping the identities and practices of religious Nones and, at the same time, some common characteristics they share.

Nones' spirituality is not monolithic; it varies significantly based on cultural and societal factors. However, Nones combine elements of spiritual identity with belief and uncertainty of their belief in God, occasional private prayer, and public worship in both samples. This study illustrates the different ways spirituality is being formed and understood in contemporary societies, providing a nuanced perspective on the interplay between identity, practice, and perceptions among Nones. By situating our analysis within the specific cultural landscapes of Italy and Uruguay, we have shown that the discourse surrounding religious Nones is deeply influenced by their environment.

This first exploratory study of religious Nones in Italian and Uruguayan contexts was focused on religious and spiritual characteristics; meanwhile, in the survey of university students, it would have been very interesting to look at the attitudes toward marriage, homosexual relationships, and other values in relation to whether young people identified themselves with nonreligion. This future research will provide some quite specific hypotheses about those who are turning away from religion and what sorts of spirituality they may be forming in the light of the recent secularization debate (Inglehart 2021).

Furthermore, one of the primary limitations of this study is the use of an opportunity sample. While this approach facilitated data collection from a sizeable group of university students, it may not capture the full variety of sociodemographic profiles, beliefs, and practices of all young people in Italy and Uruguay. University students might exhibit distinct characteristics and attitudes compared to their non-student peers, potentially introducing bias into the results. Consequently, the conclusions drawn from this study may not fully apply to the wider population. Future research should employ more representative sampling methods to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, further studies could investigate the religious and spiritual identities of Nones among non-student youth to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the religious landscape among young people in Italy and Uruguay.

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Notes

- 1 Given the nature and the size of this article, we do not focus on a broader sociological debate about spirituality revolution. See the following for details: (Flanagan and Jupp 2007; Heelas 2008; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Giordan 2016; McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2013).
- 2 These profiles diverge in their perspectives on the quest for life’s meaning: deemed unimportant for “traditionalists” while significant for “Church spirituality” (Giordan 2010). Interestingly, those who considered the quest for life’s meaning important were divided into mostly similar groups: for those to whom reference to the Church for spiritual growth was not important (with types of “private spirituality” and “personal quest”) and for whom it was important (with types of “Church spirituality” and “critical people”).
- 3 This percentage contains the sum of people who responded “Believer, does not belong to the Church”; “Agnostic”; “Atheist”; and “None”.
- 4 The full list included the following options: No religion, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Christian, Pentecostal, Other Christian tradition, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Other (specify).
- 5 The introduction of the “non-applicable” option in the questionnaire on the Social Perception of Religious Freedom, especially concerning the statement about belief in God, came from its testing on the Italian sample in 2018. The original version of the instrument did not contain this option. The aim was to explore whether individuals identifying as Nones would choose this category instead of selecting the “disagree” option. In the questionnaire administered in Uruguay, this option was extended to questions concerning belief and spiritual and religious identities.

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