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Heteronormativity Beyond Religion: Nones and Diffused Religion in Latin America

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Abstract

Religion has been widely identified as a key predictor of heteronormative views, while non-religious individuals are often described as less heteronormative than their religious counterparts. However, this contrast requires further examination, given the internal diversity of the non-religious population and the persistence of diffuse religiosity, which may sustain entangled moral frameworks imbricating religion and sexuality beyond institutional affiliation. This article examines heteronormative attitudes toward same-sex parenting among individuals in eight Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay). Using World Values Survey data, the study estimates multilevel ordinal logistic models to examine the effects of religious identification, individual religiosity, and contextual religiosity, as well as their interaction, controlling for political, social, and sociodemographic characteristics. The results show that non-religious individuals appear particularly responsive to the heteronormative moral environment of highly religious contexts; atheism and non-religiosity show distinct patterns in relation to heteronormativity; and religiosity exhibits a more consistent association with heteronormativity than the various measures of social and political conservatism. These findings suggest that non-religiosity does not necessarily imply detachment from the moral influence of religious contexts and highlight the importance of considering both individual religious identification and national religious environments in the study of heteronormative attitudes.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a growing global recognition of the rights of LGBT+ people (Flores 2019; Pew Research Center 2020). Across many societies, important legal and cultural changes have taken place, leading to the gradual normalization of sexual diversity and to a decline in the explicit criminalization, pathologization, and formal discrimination of non-heterosexual identities. Although these advances have often been accompanied by resistance, they reflect a broader shift toward the public acknowledgment of LGBT+ rights as part of contemporary human rights frameworks (Ayoub 2016; Díez 2018; Kollman 2007).

Despite this progress, significant forms of heteronormativity persist. Heteronormativity refers to a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that construct heterosexuality as natural, normal, and superior to other forms of sexuality, while organizing social life through a binary opposition between heterosexual and homosexual identities (Warner 1993). Rather than operating only through explicit exclusion, heteronormativity structures institutions, cultural representations, and everyday interactions, sustaining practices that marginalize non-heterosexual identities.

Some forms of heteronormativity persist even within the LGBT+ community. In many contexts, acceptance of LGBT+ people appears to be conditional and limited, relying on the expectation that sexual identities remain private, discreet, or invisible. This conditional acceptance constitutes an expression of homonormativity, understood as the incorporation of sexual diversity only insofar as it conforms to dominant heterosexual norms of intimacy, family life, and respectability (Duggan 2003; López Clavel 2015). This conditional tolerance suggests that inclusion is often granted only insofar as it does not challenge dominant norms surrounding family, reproduction, and gender roles (Trappolin and Tiano 2016).

At the same time, the strengthening of anti-gender movements and policies has reinforced opposition to sexual diversity (Donà 2021; Morán Faúndes 2019; Paz 2022; Ozzano and Giorgi 2015; Trappolin 2022). These actors frequently denounce what they describe as “gender ideology”, a concept that has been formulated, developed, and actively promoted by the Catholic Church and adopted by right-wing politics, and promote essentialist views of human sexuality, portraying heterosexuality as natural and immutable (Campos Machado 2018; Case 2016, 2019; Miskolci and Campana 2017). Such dynamics reveal that heteronormative assumptions continue to shape social and moral boundaries.

A substantial body of research has shown that religiosity is closely associated with heteronormative views (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Adamczyk, Liu and Scott 2022; Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Henry, Perrin and Smith 2022; Henshaw 2014; Jäckle and Wenzelburger 2015; McGuire, Cisneros and McGuire 2017; Paz González 2022; Whitley 2009), as religious traditions often provide moral frameworks that reinforce normative family models and essentialist understandings of sexuality. In contrast, research often assumes that distancing from religion is associated with more inclusive attitudes toward sexuality (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Henshaw 2014; Adamczyk, Liu and Scott 2022). However, this assumption requires further examination.

Against this background, this article examines whether heteronormative views differ between religious, religiously unaffiliated, and atheist individuals in Latin America. This question is especially relevant in a region where the non-religious population has grown rapidly and now represents the second largest group in several countries. To address this issue, the study draws on the theoretical frameworks of diffuse religiosity, which help explain why heteronormative assumptions may persist among individuals who are no longer formally affiliated with religious institutions. From this perspective, distancing from religion does not necessarily imply a rupture with inherited moral and cultural frameworks, particularly in domains such as family, marriage, and parenting. Empirically, the article analyzes data from the World Values Survey, applying multilevel ordinal logistic models to examine heteronormative attitudes toward same-sex parenting across eight Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay), taking into account the hierarchical structure of individuals nested within national contexts.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, focusing on the concepts of heteronormativity, diffuse religiosity, and the imbrication between sexuality and politics, in order to explain the persistence of heteronormative views beyond formal religious affiliation. Section 3 describes the data and methods, and Section 4 presents the descriptive and multivariate results, with particular attention to cross-national differences and to the interaction between religious identification and contextual religiosity.

Finally, Section 5 discusses these findings in light of the theoretical framework, emphasizing one central result: non-religious individuals appear particularly responsive to the heteronormative moral environment of highly religious contexts. In addition, atheism and non-religiosity show distinct patterns in relation to heteronormativity, and religiosity exhibits a more consistent association with heteronormativity than the various measures of social and political conservatism. This suggests that non-religiosity does not necessarily imply detachment from the moral influence of religious environments, particularly regarding family and parenting.

2. Heteronormativity and Diffused Religion

Heteronormativity refers to a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural, normal, and superior to other forms of sexuality (Warner 1993). Rather than operating only through explicit hostility toward sexual minorities, heteronormativity functions as a central matrix for organizing social life, shaping institutions, cultural representations, and everyday interactions through the binary opposition between heterosexual and homosexual identities (Berlant and Warner 1998; Trappolin 2024). Within this framework, heteronormativity provides the basis for heterosexism, understood as a normative system of attitudes and practices expressed through institutional arrangements, social customs, and individual behaviors that actively deny, stigmatize, and marginalize non-heterosexual identities and relationships (Blumenfeld 2013; Herek 1992; Herek 2004; Jun 2018).

Previous research has consistently identified religion as a central predictor of heteronormative views and heterosexist attitudes (Whitley 2009). Its influence is shaped by several factors, including the broader cultural context in which religious norms are embedded (Adamczyk and Pitt 2009), regional sociodemographic settings marked by higher levels of religiosity or social conservatism (Adamczyk, Liu and Scott 2022; Henshaw 2014), and the specific modes through which religious beliefs are transmitted and learned (McGuire, Cisneros and McGuire 2017). The impact of religion is also mediated by the presence of fundamentalist beliefs (Henry, Perrin and Smith 2022), political activism (Paz González 2022) and the degree to which individuals self-identify as religious (Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Jäckle and Wenzelburger 2015).

In contrast to religious populations, non-religious individuals have often been described in the literature as holding more open and inclusive views toward non-heteronormative practices, a pattern observed also in Latin America (Aizenberg, Esquivel, and Vaggione 2025; Esquivel 2021). However, this characterization requires further problematization because, first, people who identify as having no religion are not a homogeneous group and extend beyond atheism (Blankholm et al 2025; Bravo Vega 2025; Mora Duro 2017). Second, non-religious individuals continue to interact with and reproduce spiritual beliefs and practices, and ontological and moral frameworks (Breskaya and Pereira 2024; Hawley Suárez 2025; Mora Duro 2024). For example, this heterogeneity also includes individuals who identify as “spiritual but not religious”, a group whose orientations combine ethical, existential, and sometimes loosely institutional elements of belief and practice, challenging the idea that non-religion implies a

clear rupture with religious or spiritual frameworks (Gilli, Lo Presti and Palmisano 2021; Sbalchiero and Giordan 2024). Third, in the United States, some studies suggest that non-theists, such as atheists and agnostics, are more likely to support same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption than individuals who are religiously unaffiliated (Frame 2021; Schwadel, Burke, and Kazyak 2025). In addition, on issues such as traditional gender roles and abortion, unaffiliated nones tend to resemble religiously affiliated believers more closely than non-theists (Schwadel 2026). Given this background, this article asks how different forms of non-religious identification are associated with heteronormative views in Latin America.

This research question is particularly relevant given the rapid proportional growth of the non-religious population in Latin America. In several countries as Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay, individuals who identify as having no religion now constitute the second largest religious group, after Catholicism (Latinobarómetro 2024). This demographic shift underscores the importance of examining internal differences within the non-religious population and their implications for heteronormative views.

Particularly, the persistence of marriage as a central institution of both the state and religion has turned debates over same-sex marriage and same-sex adoption into key sites where moral, legal, and cultural conflicts converge, ultimately challenging prevailing forms of heteronormativity (Vaggione, Montero, and Beaman 2025). Sexuality represents one of the domains in which secularization did not dismantle religious legacies but rather enabled their presence. As a result, the heteronormative sexual order expressed through the legal regulation of family, reproduction, and intimacy remains influenced by Christian worldviews. These influences, however, tend to appear natural, rational, or universal, rather than explicitly religious, due to a process of entanglement that can be understood as:

a relationship, [which] captures the ways in which secular law tends to be based on religious tradition without necessarily displacing it or overcoming its influence. It responds to a process of superimposition, of assembly, whereby secular regulations were built, more or less coherently, overlapping with religious ones (Vaggione 2018).

The process of entanglement identified by Vaggione in the relationship between legal and religious systems can be extended to social worldviews on sexuality. In this sense, heteronormative assumptions shaped by religious traditions may persist even when individuals are no longer formally affiliated with religious institutions. These assumptions can be described and reproduced through what has been described as diffused religion.

Diffused religion refers to the persistence of the values, norms, and symbolic universe of a given religious tradition beyond the formal boundaries of religious affiliation through processes of socialization (Cipriani 2017). Religion is “diffused” primarily because it extends beyond religious institutions themselves. Towler (1984) employed the concept in the context of the de-institutionalization of the Anglican Church to highlight the role of non-religious channels, such as the media, in transmitting ideas of the “supernatural” amid the decline of institutional religion. Likewise, Yang (1991) argued that the concept is particularly useful for understanding Chinese religiosity, where religious institutions have historically never exercised an exclusive or hegemonic role within the religious sphere. Instead, sociopolitical institutions, such as imperial institutions and family structures, have also contributed to the production and transmission of religious meanings, either alongside religious organizations or independently from them.

On the other hand, Cipriani (1988; 2001) emphasizes the absence of a clear rupture between religious institutions and diffused religion. The latter should not be understood as a form of individualized spirituality detached from organized religion. Rather, it occupies a continuum that overlaps with institutional religion while extending toward increasingly distant positions, including those of non-believers. Moreover, diffused religion itself may be sustained by religious institutions, particularly through rituals.

For the purposes of this study, however, a second meaning of diffused religion is especially relevant. Religion can be considered “diffused” not only because it transcends institutional boundaries, but also because it is broadly shared across a population (Cipriani 1984). Discussing the Italian case, Cipriani (2001: 298) explains that:

The essential core of diffused religion is to be found precisely in those sets of values that are the basis for the sharing of outlook and practices that bring together Catholics and non-Catholics, believers and non-believers, on the same terrain of social action.

In this sense, diffused religion constitutes the socio-cultural sedimentation of a historically dominant religious tradition. It manifests itself in the persistence and intergenerational transmission of shared values, dispositions, and moral orientations,

regardless of individuals' formal religious affiliation. As Cipriani (1984) argues, these values, while rooted in religion, are no longer necessarily perceived as religious. Instead, they come to form the moral *habitus* of a society, shaping the outlooks of believers and non-believers alike.

For its widespread and contextual nature, diffused religion has proved difficult to operationalize. In an empirical study conducted in Sicily, Cipriani (1992) associated diffused religion with the attachment to family values (63%), love for one's children (32%), honesty (74%), and faith in God (54%). At the same time, he cautioned against identifying fixed indicators of diffused religion, arguing that its contents and manifestations vary according to specific historical and social contexts.

In the present case, the concept of diffused religion may provide a useful lens for understanding the persistence of heteronormative values and attitudes among non-religious individuals and atheists. Such attitudes may be less the product of formal religious affiliation than of socialization processes taking place within predominantly Catholic environments. Against theories of secularization, diffused religion problematizes the extent to which formally non-religious individuals and atheists have distanced themselves from religiously informed understandings of sexuality. In this sense, even in the absence of strict orthodoxy or regular religious practice, Catholicism may continue to shape everyday life as an underlying cultural and moral horizon, sustaining forms of lived religiosity that operate independently of institutional structures (Cipriani 2017).

As noted earlier, the concept of diffused religion extends Vaggione's notion of "entanglement" beyond the legal and political spheres into the realm of social worldviews, including understandings of gender and sexuality. In this respect, diffused religion may manifest itself through the reproduction of heteronormative norms and the moral frameworks that sustain them. Although these norms originate within religious traditions, they may become embedded in the wider social fabric and circulate throughout civil society independently of explicit religious commitment. This helps explain why heteronormative assumptions can persist even among individuals who identify as secular, non-religious, or atheist, reflecting the enduring influence of a historically dominant Catholic moral framework rather than adherence to formal religious doctrine.

From this perspective, distancing oneself from religious institutions does not necessarily imply a rejection of the ethical and metaphysical foundations historically associated with them. This distinction is particularly relevant when considering differences within the non-religious population, as atheism usually involves an explicit rejection of religion and its core metaphysical and moral claims, whereas identifying as having no religion does not necessarily entail such a position (Blankholm et al 2025; Bravo Vega 2025; Mora Duro 2017).

Based on the preceding discussion, we hypothesize that heteronormative views do not significantly differ between religious and non-religious individuals, whereas individuals who explicitly identify as atheists are expected to express lower levels of heteronormativity (Hypothesis 1). A second hypothesis posits that heteronormative attitudes among religious, non-religious, and atheist individuals vary according to the religiosity of the national context (Hypothesis 2).

3. Method

For this study, we draw on data from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey 7 (WVS 7, 2017–2022), a large-scale cross-national survey designed to capture social, political, and cultural attitudes across the world (Haerpfer et al., 2022). We selected eight Latin American countries: Argentina (ARG), Bolivia (BOL), Brazil (BRA), Chile (CHL), Colombia (COL), Mexico (MEX), Peru (PER), and Uruguay (URY). This comparative design allows us to examine cross-national variation within a shared regional context, with individuals treated as nested within countries. Following coding conventions, negative values indicating missing or inapplicable responses were recoded as missing. The analytic sample was then restricted to complete cases on the variables included in the multivariate models, resulting in a final sample of 7,353 respondents.

Homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples. Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.

The dependent variable was "Homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples," measured from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5), so that higher scores indicate greater heteronormativity regarding same-sex parenting. As shown in Fig. 1, responses were concentrated in the agree (32.6%) and disagree (31.5%) categories, while 19.4% selected the neutral category and fewer respondents chose either extreme response.

As shown in Table 1, “Religious identification” was treated as a three-category variable (religious, non-religious, and atheist) with religious respondents as the reference group. “Contextual religiosity” was measured as the weighted percentage of respondents identifying as religious in each country, calculated using the WVS population weight. This weight adjusts the sample according to the marginal distributions of age, sex, education, and region (Haerpfer et al., 2022). National percentages were reported in descriptive analyses and mean-centered across the eight countries for the multilevel models, so that zero represents the average religious context and the main effects in interaction models are interpretable at that reference point. For model estimation, W_WEIGHT was rescaled within each country to a mean of 1 and used as a case weight, preserving relative within-country weights while standardizing their scale across countries.

Table 1

Religious Identification and Contextual Religiosity by Country.[a] Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.

Argentina	**Religious**	**Non-religious**	**Atheists**	**Contextual religiosity**
	73.6	**19.8**	**6.5**	**74.1**
Bolivia	86.6	12.1	1.3	85.8
Brazil	72.7	25.7	1.6	74.7
Chile	47.6	46.3	6.1	49.9
Colombia	74.2	23.7	2.1	73.8
Mexico	71.3	28.1	0.6	69.7
Peru	81.2	18.0	0.9	81.9
Uruguay	51.1	35.0	13.9	50.7

[a] Religious-identification columns report unweighted percentages in the analytic sample. Contextual religiosity reports the weighted national percentage identifying as religious. The table presents the weighted percentage of respondents identifying as religious in each country for descriptive purposes. For the multilevel analyses, the same contextual measure was mean-centered across the eight countries before entering the models.

As shown in Table 2, for individual religiosity, four variables were recoded into binary indicators: importance of religion, religious faith as a desirable child quality, rejection of neighbors of another religion, and religious exclusivism. Importance of God was retained in its original 1–10 scale, with higher scores indicating greater importance. Among the political and social controls, obedience as a desirable child quality, rejection of immigrants/foreign workers as neighbors, agreement that children suffer when their mother works, preference for greater respect for authority, confidence in the armed forces, preference for security over freedom, preference for a strong leader, and national pride were recoded as binary variables, with 1 representing the more conservative response. Abortion attitudes were reversed so that higher values indicate lower acceptance of abortion. Left–right political ideology was retained in its original, with higher values indicating more right-wing positions. For sociodemographic controls, sex and education were recoded as binary variables. Sex was coded 1 for women, and education 1 for higher education (ISCED 5–8). Age (Q262) and household income (Q288) were retained in their original scales.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.

Variable		WVS Item	N	R	□	*SD*
Religious variables	Importance of religion in life	Q6	7353	0–1	0.74	
	Important child qualities: Religious faith	Q15	7353	0–1	0.33	
	Not neighbor: Different religion	Q23	7353	0–1	0.09	
	Importance of God in life	Q164	7353	1–10	8.55	2.44
	The only acceptable religion is my religion	Q170	7353	0–1	0.34	
Social conservative variables	Important child qualities: obedience	Q17	7353	0–1	0.45	
	Not neighbor: Immigrants/foreign workers	Q21	7353	0–1	0.11	
	Mother working as detrimental for the child	Q28	7353	0–1	0.52	
	Greater respect for authority	Q45	7353	0–1	0.75	
	Trust armed forces	Q65	7353	0–1	0.44	
	Preference for security over freedom	Q150	7353	0–1	0.71	
	Abortion is never justifiable	Q184	7353	1–10	7.98	2.87
	Preference for strong leader	Q235	7353	0–1	0.63	
	National pride	Q254	7353	0–1	0.88	
Socio demographics variables	Political ideology (Left-Right)	Q240	7353	1–10	5.69	2.64
	(To be) women	Q260	7353	0–1	0.51	
	Age	Q262	7353	17–92	41.03	16.33
	Higher education	Q275R	7353	0–1	0.25	
	Perceived income	Q288	7353	1–10	4.74	2.21

Given the ordinal nature of the dependent variable and the hierarchical structure of individuals nested within countries, we estimated multilevel ordinal logistic regression models, specified as cumulative link mixed models (CLMMs), with a random intercept for country. Three nested models were estimated. M1 included religious identification, individual religiosity, and contextual religiosity. M2 added the interaction between religious identification and contextual religiosity, while M3 further incorporated political and social attitudes and sociodemographic controls. Results are reported as odds ratios (ORs), 95% confidence intervals, and p-values. Model fit was compared using likelihood-ratio tests for nested models and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC).

The proportional-odds assumption was not strictly satisfied. In the auxiliary ordinal model, the nominal-effect test indicated non-proportionality for the focal interaction between religious identification and contextual religiosity. We nevertheless retained the CLMM as the primary specification because it simultaneously preserves the ordinal structure of the dependent variable and the multilevel structure of individuals nested within countries. To assess the consequences of this violation, we estimated mixed binary logistic models at each cumulative threshold of Q36. The non-religious × contextual religiosity interaction was strongest at the lower and intermediate levels of heteronormativity and attenuated at the most restrictive end of the scale (OR = 1.019, p = .039; OR = 1.014, p = .017; OR = 1.012, p = .066; and OR = 1.004, p = .685, respectively). Thus, the CLMM coefficient should be interpreted as an average association across cumulative response thresholds rather than as an identical effect at every threshold.

A second concern was the small number of atheist respondents in several countries. Re-estimating M3 after excluding atheists produced an almost identical non-religious × contextual religiosity interaction (OR = 1.0134, 95% CI [1.004, 1.023], p = .005), compared with OR = 1.0131 in the full model. The central interaction is therefore not driven by the small atheist subgroup, although results specifically concerning atheists should be interpreted more cautiously. Finally, all three CLMMs, estimated using the ucminf optimization algorithm, converged satisfactorily (maximum absolute gradient < .001), and no problematic multicollinearity was detected (all VIFs < 2).

4. Results

Table 3
Multilevel Ordinal Logistic Models of Heteronormative Attitudes toward Same-Sex Parenting.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.

Variable		M1				M2				M3			
		OR	95% CI			OR	95% CI			OR	95% CI		
Religious variables	Non religious	1.05	0.94	1.17		1.03	0.93	1.15		1.07	0.96	1.19	
	Atheist	0.71	0.53	0.95	*	0.68	0.50	0.94	*	0.72	0.52	0.99	*
	Importance of religion in life	1.20	1.08	1.34	*	1.20	1.07	1.34	*	1.19	1.06	1.33	*
	Important child qualities: Religious faith	1.33	1.21	1.47	*	1.34	1.22	1.48	*	1.26	1.14	1.39	*
	Not neighbor: Different religion	1.20	1.03	1.40	*	1.20	1.02	1.40	*	0.99	0.84	1.17	
	Importance of God in life	1.03	1.01	1.06	*	1.03	1.01	1.06	*	1.01	0.98	1.03	
	The only acceptable religion is my religion	1.24	1.13	1.36	*	1.24	1.13	1.36	*	1.13	1.03	1.25	*
	Religiosity context	1.03	1.00	1.06	*	1.03	0.99	1.06		1.03	1.00	1.06	*
Interactions	Non-religious × Contextual religiosity					1.01	1.00	1.02	*	1.01	1.00	1.02	*
	Atheist × Contextual religiosity					1.00	0.98	1.02		1.01	0.98	1.03	
Social conservative variables	Important child qualities: obedience									1.15	1.06	1.26	*
	Not neighbor: Immigrants/foreign workers									1.39	1.21	1.61	*
	Mother working as detrimental for the child									1.07	0.98	1.17	
	Greater respect for authority									0.96	0.86	1.06	
	Trust armed forces									0.90	0.82	0.98	*
	Preference for security over freedom									0.99	0.90	1.09	
	Abortion is never justifiable									1.06	1.04	1.07	*
	Preference for strong leader									0.91	0.83	0.99	*
	National pride									1.00	0.87	1.14	

* $p < .05$

Variable		M1		M2		M3			
		OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI		
Sociodemographics variables	Political ideology (Left-Right)					1.05	1.04	1.07	*
	(To be) women					0.64	0.58	0.69	*
	Age					1.02	1.02	1.02	*
	Higher education					1.06	0.95	1.17	
	Perceived income					0.99	0.97	1.01	
Country random-intercept variance		0.2486		0.2498		0.2444			
AIC		20537.13		20534.87		20128.44			
	Log likelihood	-10255.56		-10252.43		-10035.22			
	LR test vs. previous model			χ^2 (2) = 6.26	*	χ^2 (14) = 434.43			*
	Observations	7353		7353		7353			
	Countries	8		8		8			
* p < .05									

Table 3 presents the results of the three multilevel ordinal logistic models. M1 includes religious identification, individual religiosity, and contextual religiosity. M2 adds the interaction between religious identification and contextual religiosity, while M3 incorporates political, social, and sociodemographic controls. All models are estimated on the same sample of 7,353 respondents across eight countries. Model fit improves across specifications. The inclusion of the interaction terms in M2 produces a modest but statistically significant improvement over M1, while the addition of the full set of controls in M3 substantially improves model fit. Consistently, the AIC decreases and the country-level random-intercept variance remains relatively stable across models.

In M1, atheists had approximately 29% lower odds of expressing more heteronormative attitudes than religious respondents, whereas non-religious respondents did not differ significantly from the religious group. Individual religiosity was consistently associated with greater heteronormativity. Contextual religiosity was also positively associated with heteronormative attitudes, each one-percentage-point increase in the national share of religious respondents was associated with about a 3.1% increase in the odds of expressing a more heteronormative attitude.

M2 shows that the association between contextual religiosity and heteronormativity varies by religious identification. For each one-percentage-point increase in national religiosity, the increase in the odds of greater heteronormativity was about 1.2% larger among non-religious respondents than among religious respondents. By contrast, the corresponding interaction for atheists was not statistically significant.

This pattern remains in the fully adjusted M3. For each one-percentage-point increase in national religiosity, the increase in the odds of greater heteronormativity was about 1.3% larger among non-religious than among religious respondents, net of political, social, and sociodemographic controls. At average levels of contextual religiosity, non-religious respondents did not differ significantly from religious respondents, whereas atheists had approximately 28% lower odds of greater heteronormativity.

Social and political conservatism showed a less consistent pattern than religiosity. Valuing obedience as an important child quality, rejecting immigrants or foreign workers as neighbors, considering abortion less justifiable, and identifying further to the political right were associated with greater heteronormativity. Men and older respondents also displayed higher levels of heteronormativity. However, some indicators commonly associated with conservative orientations showed the opposite relationship: greater confidence in the armed forces and preference for a strong leader were associated with approximately 10% and 9% lower odds of expressing greater heteronormativity, respectively. Thus, while the religiosity indicators showed a

comparatively consistent tendency toward higher heteronormativity, the social and political conservatism measures displayed a more heterogeneous pattern, with some positively associated with heteronormativity, others unrelated to it, and a few associated in the opposite direction.

To facilitate the interpretation of the interaction, we calculated simple slopes for contextual religiosity within each religious-identification group using M3. We then estimated adjusted predicted probabilities of disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples (Q36 ≥ 4) across the observed range of contextual religiosity. These probabilities were averaged over the observed characteristics of respondents in the analytic sample and weighted using the rescaled WVS weights. For presentation, contextual religiosity was transformed back from its mean-centered scale to the weighted percentage of the religious population in each country.

Probability of disagreeing that homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples by religious identification and national religiosity. Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.

Figure 2 shows that the predicted probability of expressing a heteronormative attitude increases as national religiosity increases in all three groups, but the increase is strongest among non-religious respondents. Each one-percentage-point increase in contextual religiosity is associated with approximately 2.9% higher odds of greater heteronormativity among religious respondents and 4.2% higher odds among non-religious respondents. Consequently, while non-religious respondents display somewhat lower predicted heteronormativity in less religious contexts, their predicted probability increases more rapidly and surpasses that of religious respondents in more religious contexts. Atheists show the lowest predicted probabilities throughout most of the observed range, although their slope does not differ significantly from that of religious respondents. These are model-adjusted predicted probabilities rather than the observed percentages of each group.

5. Discussions

In this paper, we started from the premise that there is a co-relation between individual religiosity and heteronormative attitudes. Building on this background, we question this assumption in two ways.

First, we include in the analysis the variable of non-religious people. Non-religious individuals – often labelled "nones" – occupy a differentiated position between religious people and atheists. They reject affiliation with any specific religious tradition and attribute less importance to religion in their everyday lives, yet they do not position themselves in explicit opposition to religion, as atheists do. As a result, their stance toward heteronormativity has not yet been sufficiently explored.

Second, we emphasize the often implicit persistence of religious values even in contexts of advanced secularization, particularly regarding sexuality, family, reproduction, and intimacy. Heteronormative views may be adopted because they are perceived as natural or universal values rather than explicitly religious ones. These values influence not only the legal domain, through what Vaggione (2018) labels entanglement, but also the broader social sphere. This persistence of values shared across the population, beyond the boundaries of institutional religious affiliation and circulating among both religious and non-religious people, is linked to the concept of diffused religion (Cipriani 2017).

To test these extensions of the literature, the article examines whether heteronormative views differ among religious, religiously unaffiliated, and atheist individuals in contemporary Latin America. By using the concept of diffused religion, which addresses the persistence of religious values in secular contexts and among non-religious individuals, often due to prior religious socialization, we explore whether such implicit influences might allow certain homonegative values to persist even among the unaffiliated.

The results allow for a more precise assessment of the two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 is largely supported: non-religious respondents do not differ significantly from religious respondents in their levels of heteronormativity at average levels of contextual religiosity, whereas atheists consistently show lower heteronormative attitudes, although this finding should be interpreted cautiously given their small numbers in several countries. Hypothesis 2 is also supported, although not uniformly across groups. Heteronormative attitudes vary according to the religiosity of the national context, and this association is significantly stronger among non-religious than among religious respondents, while the corresponding interaction for atheists is not significant.

The main finding, therefore, is that non-religious individuals appear particularly responsive to the heteronormative moral environment of highly religious contexts, suggesting that non-religious identification does not necessarily imply detachment from the broader normative influence of religion.

As national religiosity increases, heteronormative attitudes increase more strongly among non-religious than among religious individuals. In highly religious contexts, non-religious respondents even surpass religious respondents in their predicted levels of heteronormativity. The expression of these norms does not necessarily require active religious commitment; rather, it may be grounded in processes of socialization. Such values may persist not because individuals actively defend them as religious principles, but because they have become part of the taken-for-granted moral landscape. The link between these norms and religious value systems is further supported by the comparatively more consistent positive association of religiosity with heteronormativity, whereas the different indicators of social and political conservatism show a more heterogeneous pattern. As will be explained later, this contrast reinforces the idea that the persistence of heteronormative attitudes among non-religious people in certain national contexts is not simply a matter of personal preference but may reflect the broader cultural imprint left by historically dominant religious institutions. These results challenge the widespread assumption that secularization, when understood primarily as disaffiliation from religious institutions, automatically leads to more inclusive views on sexuality.

Heteronormativity appears to extend beyond individual religious identification and to be embedded in broader national moral environments. This pattern is consistent with the conceptualization of heteronormativity as a matrix that organizes social life, extending beyond individual dispositions to encompass institutional arrangements and dominant cultural narratives (Berlant and Warner 1998; Trappolin 2024; Warner 1993). From this perspective, the results suggest that individual religiosity and the broader religious context should not be treated as competing explanations: individual religious characteristics remain relevant, while national religiosity is also associated with heteronormative attitudes and, importantly, conditions their relationship with religious identification.

Religious affiliation is not the sole factor associated with heteronormative attitudes, as the religious environment of the national context is also related to individual views on the matter. These results encourage us to move beyond explanations that reduce heteronormativity to personal beliefs or degrees of individual religiosity and to consider how broader cultural environments may structure the moral boundaries of sexuality. In this regard, a further specification of the dynamic interplay between the elements that promote or contrast heteronormativity in each national context would offer more nuanced insights. On the one hand, heteronormative values could be promoted by other social systems, in parallel to institutional religion, such as politics or the media. On the other hand, the religious system itself could host and nurture alternative, less normative views on sexuality.

The concept of diffused religion also helps explain why heteronormativity can persist in the absence of explicit religiosity. Non-religious individuals may reproduce heteronormative views without recognizing them as religious, as norms surrounding family, marriage, and parenting operate as secularized common sense despite their historical grounding in Christian worldviews. This perspective sheds light on the persistence of heteronormativity even in contexts where religious belief and institutional affiliation have declined.

A second result is that to be less heteronormative, atheism matters, non-affiliation does not. This finding lends support to the theoretical distinction between institutional disaffiliation and rupture with religious frameworks (Blankholm et al 2025; Bravo Vega 2025; Mora Duro 2017). Lower levels of heteronormativity among atheists can be interpreted as the result of an explicit rejection of the metaphysical and moral foundations of religion, rather than the mere absence of religious belonging. By contrast, religious non-affiliation does not necessarily signal the sheer abandonment of inherited worldviews, which is consistent with the notion of diffused religiosity.

Religious values continue to shape the moral fabric in societies where religious institutions have historically exercised a near-monopolistic influence over education, moral regulation, and everyday cultural life. This influence persists even in the face of declining levels of institutional religious activity, such as formal religious affiliation, or other indicators which are typically used to assess a country's degree of secularization. In other words, the erosion of visible or institutional forms of religiosity does not necessarily imply a parallel decline in the moral hegemony that a religious institution has exerted for a long time.

A third result stems from the fact that social and political conservatism does not show a uniform relationship with heteronormativity. Some indicators, such as valuing obedience, rejecting immigrants or foreign workers as neighbors, considering abortion less justifiable, and identifying further to the political right, are associated with greater heteronormativity. However, other commonly conservative attitudes are unrelated to heteronormativity or even show the opposite association, as in the case of confidence in the armed forces and preference for a strong leader. By contrast, religiosity displays a comparatively more consistent positive association with heteronormative attitudes. This finding point to the possibility that attitudes toward sexuality and same-sex parenting are connected to more specific moral schemas historically shaped by religion. Social and political conservatism is multidimensional, and its different components do not necessarily organize attitudes toward sexuality in the same way. Religiosity, however, may provide a more coherent moral framework for questions concerning family, sexuality, and reproduction.

These three findings – the influence of the religious context on non-religious people, the distinction between non-religious individuals and atheists, and the consistent positive association of religion with heteronormativity – should be considered in light of several limitations.

At the contextual level, our analysis considered only national religiosity, although heteronormative attitudes are likely shaped by a broader set of country-level conditions that could not be incorporated into the present models. More generally, the number of factors we were able to consider was inevitably limited by the constraints inherent in a secondary analysis such as ours. Several potentially relevant dimensions, especially at the national level, remained outside the scope of the data available. For instance, we did not account for the degree of political polarization in public debate, the framing of sexuality-related issues in the media, urban-rural differences, generational cohort effects, forms of cultural capital or the presence of competing moral authorities beyond religious institutions. These elements could plausibly reinforce or counteract heteronormative norms in ways that our design could not capture. At the same time, our aim was not to identify the full constellation of social determinants shaping heteronormative attitudes in Latin America. Rather, more modestly, to examine the extent to which these attitudes are associated with changing degrees of religiosity. Future research should incorporate these variables in order to better disentangle the relative weight of cultural, structural, and individual-level factors in shaping heteronormativity.

Net of the extra-religious variables not considered here – which may nonetheless shape individual's value orientations – the recorded results suggest that heteronormativity in Latin America stems primarily from the interplay of the national environment and the greater or lesser prevalence among the population of Catholic-based moral frameworks, whilst only be marginally dependent from individual religiosity.

If our interpretation is correct, both the significance of the national context and the persistence of religiously rooted values among non-religious segments of the population align well with Cipriani's (2017) theory of diffused religion. Indeed, these findings would provide evidence of its potential applicability beyond the Italian and European settings in which it was originally formulated, and they open the possibility of extending it to the analysis of more contentious or morally charged values.

However, it is important to note that our study does not explore the influence of religious socialization on heteronormative attitudes among non-religious individuals. From a theoretical perspective, diffused religion largely relies on primary socialization. Yet, the available data does not allow us to determine with certainty the degree of Christian socialization among non-religious people, nor to assess the extent to which such socialization may account for higher levels of heteronormativity. Future research could address this gap through both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The comparatively lower level of heteronormativity observed among atheists in almost all cases does not contradict the general interpretation. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical distinction between institutional disaffiliation and a more explicit distancing from religious frameworks (Blankholm et al. 2025; Bravo Vega 2025; Mora Duro 2017). However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously because atheists constitute a small proportion of respondents in several countries. Rather than establishing a definitive effect of atheism, the results suggest that non-religiosity and atheism should not automatically be treated as equivalent forms of distance from religion.

Distinguishing non-religious individuals from atheists therefore provides a more nuanced account of the relationship between religious disaffiliation and heteronormativity than a simple religious-secular binary. Moreover, incorporating non-religious

individuals, who now constitute the second-largest religiosity group in many of the countries in our sample, into the assessment of the spread of heteronormative values challenges linear models of secularization. Distancing from religion or disaffiliation does not necessarily imply a corresponding detachment from moral expectations shaped by religious traditions. As a consequence of individual secularization, such expectations may come to be perceived as natural or universal rather than as religious in origin. This outcome lends support to cultural persistence theories, proving that religious values may outlast the decline of the religious institution.

Thus, even in contexts where secularization has increased the proportion of non-religious individuals and weakened the institutional presence of religion – particularly that of the Roman Catholic Church – the process has resulted more in the silencing than in the displacement of previously dominant religious values. These values continue to circulate and exert influence, but they are no longer explicitly recognized as stemming from their religious roots.

While we acknowledge the significant – and in some contexts growing – presence of other Christian denominations in the countries surveyed, we maintain that focusing on Catholicism remains particularly pertinent for at least two reasons. First, Catholicism continues to hold both historical and demographic primacy in these national contexts, broadly shaping national religious cultures and moral frameworks. Second, the Catholic Church has long been involved in matters of biopolitics, such as gender and sexuality, which has occupied a central place in Catholic public presence from the Second Vatican Council to the present.

Notably, since the Second Vatican Council the Church has articulated an ambitious programme of *aggiornamento*. We do not aim here to assess either the implementation of this programme or its broader ecclesial consequences. Drawing on Schloesser (2014), however, it is evident that despite the extensive modernization, the Church has struggled to keep pace with the rapid technological and cultural transformations that have reshaped contemporary biopolitics. As a result, it has largely reiterated traditional doctrinal positions on matters of gender and sexuality, even when in other domains it aligned with or even anticipated the political spirit of the time (Schloesser 2014; Faggioli 2018). Particularly under the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, ecclesiastical interventions in the public debate increasingly centred on issues about life, family, and gender (Martino and Scalon 2018). On the contrary, Pope Francis has sought to reorient the Vatican's concerns, placing greater emphasis on social, environmental, and humanitarian issues. However, recent gestures of openness, such as the LGBTQ+ jubilee (Vilchis and Giordan 2026), have not fundamentally affected the underlying moral substratum of Catholicism, which remains predominantly heteronormative in its mainstream expressions (Campos Machado 2018; Case 2016, 2019; Miskolci and Campana 2017). This results in a complex mosaic in which institutional discourse, pastoral practice and grassroots religious associations move at uneven speed, producing tensions that continue to shape Catholic engagement with contemporary debates about heteronormativity.

Beyond these considerations, the present study cannot determine whether any appreciable change over time is occurring. Since the WVS relies on cross-sectional data, it does not allow us to outline temporal dynamics, which would require comparing multiple waves that include identical items administered in the same countries.

Along this line, it would also be valuable to test whether diffused religion operates differently across generations. Large cross-national and longitudinal studies have proved that secularization is a fundamentally generational phenomenon: each successive cohort tends to be less religious than the previous one (Voas 2009). Therefore, we may expect the socialization into religious values to weaken progressively from one generation to the next. If the decline of diffused religion is not accompanied by a parallel decline in heteronormativity opinions, the explanation must then be sought in extra-religious factors.

This line of inquiry also draws attention to country-level mechanisms that may account for cross-national differences, such as legal reforms, media discourse, activist mobilization, and political polarization, which could potentially contribute to shaping heteronormative attitudes independently of shared religious ethics. Qualitative approaches, such as discourse analysis, could offer a more nuanced comprehension of how heteronormative discourses are framed and circulate within each national context.

Lastly, it would be useful to test additional variables, in order to more precisely capture and map statistically significant differences within each national context. For instance, heteronormativity scores could be compared between urban and rural areas. Alternatively, scholars could take into account the religious composition of a country and examine whether there are

appreciable differences in heteronormativity across religious groups. These developments, however, fall beyond the scope of the present article and are thus left for future research.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we examined the relationship between heteronormativity and religiosity in Latin America, paying particular attention to the position of non-religious individuals and to the theoretical perspective of “diffused religion” (Cipriani 2017). Heteronormativity refers to a hegemonic system of norms and practices that naturalizes heterosexuality and ostracizes alternative sexual identities, and it has been consistently linked to higher levels of religiosity in scientific literature. Yet the steady growth of “nones” across the region – challenging both the traditional Catholic monopoly and the active Protestant minority – has not been adequately addressed in relation to this issue.

From a theoretical standpoint, diffused religion refers to a set of religiously rooted values that have permeated the wider population through the long-standing cultural dominance of a specific religious tradition. Because heteronormativity is not merely an opinion but a discursive practice that constructs heterosexuality as the natural model of sexuality, it can be transmitted as part of this diffuse religious heritage. As a result, heteronormative orientations may persist even among individuals who do not explicitly identify as religious but have been socialized within a context shaped by diffused religion.

To investigate this issue, we used data from Wave 7 of the World Values Survey, concerning Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay. We analyzed heteronormative attitudes toward same-sex parenting using multilevel ordinal logistic regression models, specified as cumulative link mixed models (CLMMs), with individuals nested within eight Latin American countries. The models examined religious identification, individual religiosity, and contextual religiosity, as well as the interaction between religious identification and national religiosity, while controlling political, social, and sociodemographic characteristics.

The results show that 1) non-religious individuals appear particularly responsive to the heteronormative moral environment of highly religious contexts, with contextual religiosity showing a stronger positive association with heteronormativity among non-religious than among religious respondents; 2) atheism and non-religiosity display distinct patterns, as atheists generally show lower heteronormativity than religious respondents, although this finding should be interpreted cautiously given their small numbers in several countries; and 3) religiosity exhibits a comparatively more consistent positive association with heteronormativity than the different measures of social and political conservatism, which show a more heterogeneous pattern.

These findings hint at the hypothesis that religiously rooted values persist through the mechanism of diffused religion. The entanglement (Vaggione 2018) between secular law and religious tradition remains particularly influential in the family sphere, where the two normative perspectives tend to overlap and mix, contributing to the naturalization of heteronormative norms that continue to circulate even among those who no longer identify with any religious denomination. In highly religious contexts, non-religious individuals may display levels of heteronormativity comparable to, or even higher than, those of religious respondents. This reinforces critiques of linear theories of secularization as the weakening of religious institutions does not automatically entail the disappearance of the moral frameworks they once disseminated.

The Latin American case is particularly significant given the long-standing cultural hegemony of Catholicism and the centrality that biopolitical issues – such as heteronormativity – have acquired in recent decades. Biopolitics has been one of the main arenas of tension between Catholic teaching and modernity, as well as one of the domains in which the Church has been most vocal in public debate. At the same time, important grassroots transformations within Catholicism may be reshaping these dynamics, potentially fostering internal shifts in how such issues are interpreted and addressed.

Our study has several limitations. First, the proportional-odds assumption was not strictly satisfied, so the CLMM coefficients should be interpreted as average effects across thresholds. Sensitivity analyses showed that the focal interaction was stronger at lower and intermediate levels of heteronormativity and weaker at the most restrictive threshold. Second, the relationship between heteronormativity and diffused religion remains untested. Our aim was not to prove the persistence of diffused religion. Rather, diffused religion is proposed as a possible explanation for the relatively high levels of heteronormativity observed within non-religious individuals. Third, atheists represented a small proportion of respondents in several countries, which limits the precision

of estimates for this group and requires caution when interpreting differences involving atheists, although the main interaction remained virtually unchanged when they were excluded. Fourth, national religiosity was the only contextual variable included in the models, so the analysis cannot capture the broader set of country-level conditions that may shape heteronormative attitudes. We were also unable to address diachronic change or cohort differences. Future research should therefore incorporate additional contextual factors – such as media discourse, political polarization, activism, urban–rural differences, and more specific religious configurations – to better identify the mechanisms that reinforce or challenge heteronormativity.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and gender. They show how implicit and often silent dynamics – such as the transmission of heteronormativity – continue to shape the social fabric beyond the boundaries of formal religious affiliation, encouraging us to move past essentialist and overly simplified interpretations of contemporary religious change.

Declarations

Author Contribution

DEVC and AG contributed to the conceptualization of the study. DEVC developed the methodology and prepared the visualizations. DEVC and AG conducted the formal analysis, and AG performed the validation of the results. DEVC and AG wrote of the original draft, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are publicly available from the World Values Survey, Wave 7 (2017–2022), Country-Pooled Datafile Version 6.0. The dataset can be accessed through the World Values Survey Association at https://doi.org/10.14281/18241.24. The data are available for non-commercial research and publication purposes in multiple formats, including SPSS, Stata, SAS, R, and CSV. No new data were generated for this study.

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Figures

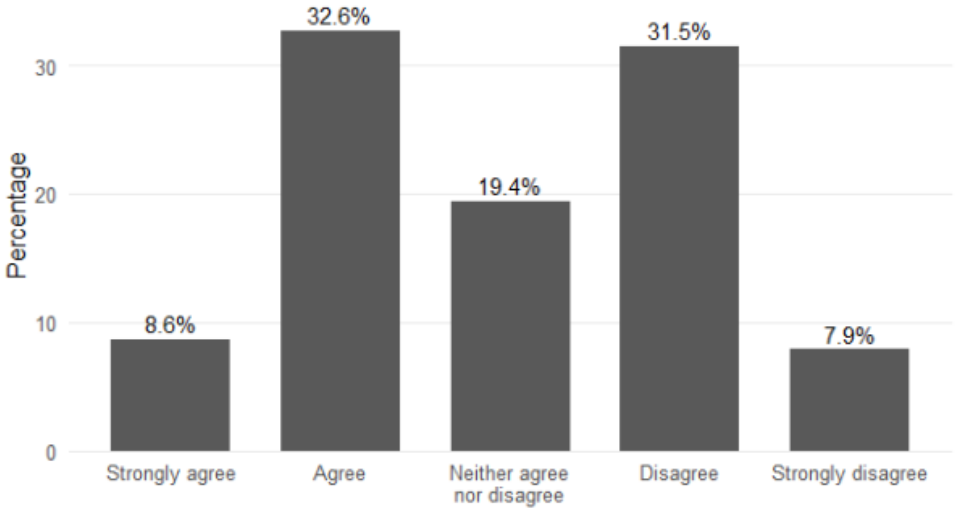


Figure 1

Homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples. Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.

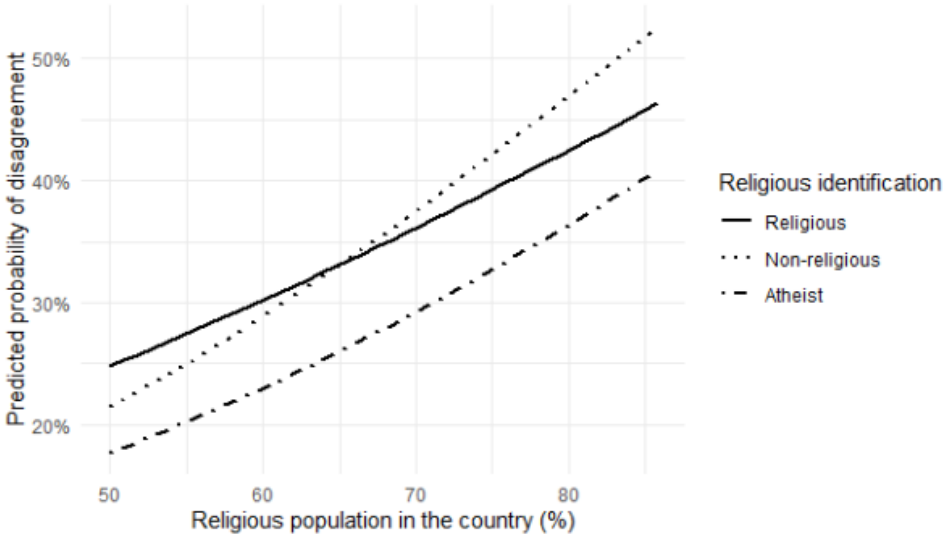


Figure 2

Probability of disagreeing that homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples by religious identification and national religiosity. Source: Authors' elaboration based on WVS 7.