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Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism): Residual Catholicism, Popular Piety, and Religious Disaffiliation in Chile

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Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism): Residual Catholicism, Popular Piety, and Religious Disaffiliation in Chile

Article Type

Original Paper: Conceptual and interpretive article based on secondary sources, survey evidence, and existing scholarship on Chilean religion.

Abstract

This article develops the concept of Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism) to understand the persistence of Catholic-inflected practices, symbols, and affective attachments among religiously unaffiliated Chileans. Although Chile has experienced a pronounced decline in Catholic affiliation and a corresponding rise in religious "nones," disaffiliation does not necessarily imply a complete rupture with Catholic cultural forms. Drawing on an interpretive analysis of survey evidence, existing ethnographic research, and scholarship on Chilean popular Catholicism, the article identifies practices through which Catholicism may survive beyond institutional membership and doctrinal belief. These include family rituals, funerals, Marian devotion, animitas, and practices of communal memory. Ghost Catholicism is conceptualised as a residual, selective, and emotionally charged form of Catholicity: neither full religious belonging nor complete secular detachment. By distinguishing Ghost Catholicism from conventional affiliation and from the notion of "believing without belonging," the article contributes to debates on secularisation, lived religion, popular piety, and religious change in contemporary Chile. It also proposes a research agenda for qualitative studies of disaffiliation, inherited religiosity, and the afterlives of Catholicism in Latin America.

Keywords: Catolicismo Fantasma; Ghost Catholicism; religious disaffiliation; religious "nones"; Catholic popular piety; lived religion; secularisation; Chile

Introduction

Chile has become one of the most striking cases of religious transformation in contemporary Latin America. For much of the twentieth century, Catholicism occupied a central position in Chilean national identity, education, family life, and public morality. Today, however, the country presents a very different religious configuration. Catholic identification has declined sharply, Pentecostal and Evangelical movements have expanded, and religiously unaffiliated people—often described as religious "nones"—have become a major social group. Recent survey evidence indicates that 33% of Chilean adults identified as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" in 2024, while 46% identified as Catholic and 19% as Protestant (Pew Research Center, 2026). Latinobarómetro (2024) confirms this pattern, placing Chile among the region's countries with the highest share of people declaring no religion. Chile therefore combines a still-significant Catholic plurality with one of the region's largest unaffiliated populations. Pew surveys adults aged 18 and over, while the INE census covers people aged 15 and over; the two sources are therefore not directly comparable.

This transformation has usually been interpreted through the language of secularisation, religious switching, and institutional decline. Such interpretations are necessary, but they can obscure an important complexity: leaving Catholic identification does not necessarily mean leaving every trace of Catholic culture, practice, memory, or affect. A person may reject the authority of the Church, decline to attend Mass, and identify as non-religious while still attending a family funeral shaped by Catholic ritual, visiting an animita, keeping an image of the Virgin Mary at home, or turning to Catholic symbols during illness, death, or collective crisis. These are not necessarily signs of hidden orthodoxy or future religious return. Rather, they point to a more ambiguous condition in which Catholicism survives as a cultural inheritance, an emotional resource, and a repertoire of practices even after institutional belonging has weakened or disappeared.

This article develops the concept of Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism) to interpret this condition. Ghost Catholicism refers to a residual, selective, and affectively charged form of Catholicity that persists beyond formal affiliation, doctrinal commitment, and regular parish participation. It is "ghostly" not because

Catholicism has become unreal or insignificant, but because it continues to inhabit social life in partial, intermittent, and often unacknowledged ways. It may appear in rituals of mourning, family obligations, devotional objects, sacred places, and moments of uncertainty. It is not equivalent to being a practising Catholic, nor does it imply that every religiously unaffiliated person retains Catholic attachments. Instead, it names a specific pattern of religious residue that becomes visible when disaffiliation is examined through lived religion rather than only through survey categories.

The concept responds to a limitation in much secularisation research: the tendency to treat religious identity as a binary condition—either present or absent. Survey research is indispensable for measuring large-scale change, and it has documented Chile's movement away from Catholicism with considerable precision. For example, analyses of the National Bicentennial Survey from 2006 to 2023 show that Catholic disaffiliation in Chile has been shaped by both period effects, including the impact of clerical sexual abuse scandals, and cohort effects among younger generations (Parker et al., 2024). As discussed later, Cáceres Draper and González (2024) link disaffiliation to progressive politics and institutional distrust. These findings demonstrate that Chilean secularisation is not merely a private decision but is connected to institutional crisis, generational change, and wider political and cultural transformations.

Yet quantitative measures of affiliation cannot fully capture what people do with religion after they stop identifying with it. A person may answer "no religion" in a survey while still participating in a Catholic funeral, visiting a shrine, or maintaining a family tradition connected to a saint or the Virgin. Conversely, another person may identify as Catholic while rarely practising. The category "religious none" is therefore sociologically meaningful but internally diverse. In Chile, 69% of unaffiliated adults report believing in God, even though they are far less likely than Catholics or Protestants to pray daily or attend religious services (Pew Research Center, 2026). This combination of disaffiliation, residual belief, and uneven practice suggests that Chilean secularisation cannot be reduced to a simple movement from religion to non-religion.

The argument developed here is that Ghost Catholicism helps explain this ambiguity. It draws attention to the afterlives of Catholicism: the ways in which Catholic symbols, rituals, and sensibilities continue to operate after their institutional and doctrinal foundations have been weakened. This perspective is especially relevant in Chile, where Catholicism has historically been intertwined with family life, popular devotion, local memory, and national culture. Catholicism in Chile has never been confined to Sunday Mass or official Church teaching. It has also lived in pilgrimages, popular shrines, devotional images, animitas, processions, and household practices. Scholarship on Chilean popular religiosity has long emphasised that these forms may endure even when institutional participation is weak. Ghost Catholicism builds on this insight but applies it specifically to the growing population of people who no longer identify as Catholic.

Methodology

This is a conceptual article. It does not present new interviews. Instead, it develops Catolicismo Fantasma through secondary analysis of the INE Censo 2024, the Encuesta Bicentenario UC 2024, and a synthesis of published ethnographies on Chilean animitas, funerals, and popular piety (Steinert & Valenzuela Carvallo, 2019; Mellado, 2020). The Encuesta Nacional Bicentenario UC (2024) shows that non-adherence is concentrated among younger cohorts, aged 18 to 34.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates Ghost Catholicism within debates on secularisation, lived religion, popular Catholicism, and religious disaffiliation. The article then reviews evidence on religious change in Chile, with particular attention to Catholic decline and the growth of the unaffiliated. It subsequently explores how Ghost Catholicism appears through ritual inheritance, devotional residues, crisis and mourning, and cultural memory. The final sections discuss the theoretical implications of the concept and outline directions for future research.

Ghost Catholicism as a Conceptual Framework

Ghost Catholicism is best understood as a heuristic concept rather than a universal theory of Latin American religion. It does not claim that all unaffiliated people remain secretly Catholic. Nor does it suggest that disaffiliation leaves Catholicism unchanged. On the contrary, the concept assumes that Catholicism is transformed

when it loses its institutional body, doctrinal authority, and regular practice. What survives is often partial, fragmented, and selective. It may be activated in particular situations, carried by families rather than churches, or attached to places and memories rather than creeds.

Research Problem: How does Catholicism persist as cultural residue among Chile's growing unaffiliated population?

Research Questions

1. How can the persistence of Catholic practices among religiously unaffiliated Chileans be conceptualised?
2. Which Catholic symbols, rituals, and devotional forms continue to appear in the lives of people who no longer identify as Catholic?
3. How does Ghost Catholicism differ from institutional Catholic affiliation, doctrinal belief, and regular church participation?
4. What does Ghost Catholicism reveal about secularisation, popular piety, and religious change in Chile?

Secularisation, Disaffiliation, and Lived Religion

a) Beyond a simple secularisation narrative

Classical secularisation theory often treats religious decline as a straightforward movement from religious belief and practice toward non-religion. In this view, modernisation, education, urbanisation, individualisation, and institutional differentiation progressively reduce the social significance of religion. Chile's contemporary religious trends appear, at first glance, to support such a narrative. Catholic affiliation has fallen sharply, while the proportion of people identifying with no religion has increased substantially.

According to Chile's 2024 census, Catholic affiliation among people aged 15 and over fell from 76.9% in 1992 to 70% in 2002 and 54% in 2024, while the share of people reporting no religion or creed rose from 8.3% in 2002 to 25.8% in 2024 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (INE), 2025). These figures indicate a major transformation in Chile's religious field.

Yet the Chilean case also complicates any simple narrative of linear secularisation. The religiously unaffiliated are not necessarily irreligious in every respect. As noted in the Introduction, most unaffiliated Chileans still report belief in God. As Casanova (1994, p. 5) argues, religion refuses to remain a purely private affair, which helps explain why Catholic symbols remain public in Chile even after disaffiliation.

This article therefore does not understand secularisation simply as the replacement of religion by non-religion. Rather, it examines secularisation as a process of religious reconfiguration, in which institutional belonging may weaken while religious symbols, practices, and cultural memories continue to operate in selective forms.

b) Disaffiliation as a process, not a rupture

Religious disaffiliation is not merely a statistical event. It is a biographical and cultural process. People leave religious institutions for many reasons: disagreement with Church teachings, disappointment with clergy, political conflict, family change, intellectual doubt, or the weakening of inherited habits. However, leaving an institution does not necessarily erase the symbolic world in which a person was raised. As Bullivant (2019, p. 21) notes, disaffiliation is rarely a single event, but a gradual process of distancing from belief, practice and belonging.

Recent Chilean research supports this interpretation. Cáceres Draper and González (2024) found that support for progressive social movements—including student, feminist, environmental, and Indigenous rights movements—was associated with a higher probability of religious disaffiliation and lower participation in religious services. Their findings suggest that religious identity in Chile is shaped not only by personal belief but also by political and moral alignments. This does not mean that progressive politics mechanically produces secularism. Rather, it indicates that religious belonging is increasingly negotiated around questions of gender, sexuality, authority, social justice, and institutional trust. For many Chileans, leaving the Catholic Church may be a way of distancing themselves from an institution perceived as morally or politically conservative. But such a departure does not necessarily involve rejecting every Catholic cultural inheritance. This distinction is central to the present argument. Institutional disaffiliation and cultural disidentification are related but not identical. A person may refuse the institutional

label “Catholic” while continuing to inhabit a Catholic-inflected symbolic environment.

c) Lived religion and popular Catholicism

The concept of lived religion is useful here because it shifts attention away from official doctrine and institutional membership toward the ways people actually practice, interpret, and inhabit religion in everyday life. McGuire (2008) argues that religion is not confined to formal religious institutions; it is woven into domestic practices, bodily habits, emotional relationships, and processes of meaning-making. Ammerman (2021) similarly emphasises that lived religion includes the practices, stories, and material cultures through which people connect ordinary life to transcendent meanings. From this perspective, religion cannot be measured only through church attendance, doctrinal agreement, or formal affiliation. A person may rarely attend Mass but still maintain a religious image at home, participate in a funeral ritual, visit a sacred site, or turn to prayer during a family crisis. These practices may be deeply meaningful even when they are not institutionally authorised or doctrinally consistent. Popular Catholicism is particularly important in this respect. In Latin America, Catholicism has often been practised through devotions to the Virgin Mary and saints, pilgrimages, home altars, processions, funerary rites, and local sacred sites. These practices may be more central to everyday religiosity than doctrinal instruction or weekly Mass attendance. They are also highly portable: they can survive even when a person no longer attends church or identifies with the institution. This is consistent with research on Chilean youth, who practise what Baeza-Correa and Imbarack-Dagach (2024, p. 565) call “deinstitutionalized Catholic religiosity” that persists outside parish life.

d) Popular religion as cultural inheritance

Popular Catholicism is not simply a weaker or incomplete form of institutional Catholicism. It is a distinctive religious formation with its own practices, places, objects, and emotional logics. Parker (1996, p. 29) argues that popular religion in Latin America follows “its own logic,” distinct from institutional Catholicism, which is why it can survive disaffiliation. Families, neighbourhoods, festivals, and local traditions transmit it, often without formal religious instruction.

In Chile, popular Catholicism includes Marian devotion, pilgrimage, saints' festivals, home altars, funerary practices, and animitas. These practices may remain meaningful even among people who reject Church authority or no longer identify as Catholic. Their persistence suggests that Catholicism can operate as a cultural inheritance as well as a religious institution. This is why the concept of Ghost Catholicism is grounded in lived religion. It focuses not on whether a person formally belongs to the Church, but on whether Catholic-derived practices and symbols continue to shape their everyday life, family relationships, and emotional world.

e) Ghost Catholicism as a conceptual contribution

The concept of Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism) responds to a gap in existing research. Much scholarship examines why people leave Catholicism, become Evangelical or Pentecostal, or identify as religiously unaffiliated. Less attention has been paid to what remains of Catholicism after people cease to identify as Catholic.

Ghost Catholicism addresses this gap by focusing on residual Catholic practice: the selective persistence of Catholic rituals, symbols, devotional objects, sacred places, and cultural memories among people outside institutional Catholicism.

The concept does not claim that all unaffiliated people remain Catholic in any meaningful sense. Nor does it deny the reality of secularisation. Instead, it identifies one important pattern within contemporary religious change: the survival of Catholic cultural forms beyond institutional belonging. In this sense, Ghost Catholicism is not a theory of secularisation. It is a conceptual tool for interpreting one specific dimension of secularisation: the afterlife of Catholicism among the disaffiliated.

Religious Change and Disaffiliation in Chile

i. A society leaving its Catholic majority

Chile's religious transformation is one of the most significant in contemporary Latin America. The country has moved from a religious field historically dominated by Catholicism to one characterised by religious pluralism, Pentecostal growth, and a substantial population of religiously unaffiliated people. This transformation cannot be understood only as a change in individual belief. It also reflects a broader

reconfiguration of the relationship between individuals, families, religious institutions, and national culture.

As shown above, census data confirm a sharp fall in Catholic affiliation and a rise in non-affiliation (INE, 2025). The Chilean statistical institute summarizes this trend plainly: “La religión católica se mantiene como la principal religión o credo, con una disminución a lo largo de los años” (“The Catholic religion remains the main religion or creed, with a decline over the years”) (INE, 2025).

The census also shows that religion has become less universal as a form of self-identification. In 2002, 91.7% of Chileans aged 15 and over reported having a religion or creed; by 2024, this figure had fallen to 74.2% (INE, 2025). The number of people without religion or creed increased from 931,990 in 2002 to 3,903,308 in 2024 (INE, 2025). These figures indicate that religious non-affiliation is no longer a marginal position in Chilean society. It has become a major social and cultural category. This shift has important implications for studying Catholicism. For much of Chilean history, Catholicism functioned as a broad cultural framework, shaping education, family life, public morality, and national identity. Today, Catholic identity can no longer be assumed as the default religious position of Chilean adults. Religious belonging has become more voluntary, more contested, and more fragmented.

ii. The growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity

The decline of Catholicism has not produced a purely secular society. Evangelical and Protestant Christianity has grown steadily, increasing from 13.2% of the population aged 15 and over in 1992 to 16.3% in 2024 (INE, 2025). This growth reflects the importance of Pentecostal and Evangelical communities, particularly in working-class and popular sectors of Chilean society. Bargsted & De la Cerda (2019) show that Chile’s religious field has been transformed by both the expansion of Pentecostalism and the rise of an irreligious population. Their study found that Catholic affiliation declined from 74% in 1998 to 61% in 2014, while the irreligious population tripled from 6% to 19% during the same period. This indicates that Chilean secularisation has developed alongside, rather than instead of, religious pluralisation. For this article's argument, this pluralisation is crucial. Catholicism no longer monopolises the religious field, but it has not disappeared either. It now

coexists with Pentecostal churches, Evangelical communities, spiritual practices, and growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated people. In this field, Catholic symbols and practices may survive in selective, fragmented forms rather than as expressions of unified institutional belonging. As Thorsen (2023, p. 13) notes, Pentecostalism provides "a close-knit religious community with high moral standards and mutual support, which has a strong focus on physical and emotional healing through prayer and ecstasy."

Disaffiliation, progressivism, and institutional distrust

Religious disaffiliation in Chile is not simply a private decision about belief. It is also connected to broader social and political changes. As discussed earlier, Cáceres Draper and González (2024) link disaffiliation to progressive politics and institutional distrust. Surveys also show that trust in the Catholic Church has declined sharply, particularly among younger Chileans (Centro de Estudios Públicos, 2024, p. 12).

This finding helps explain why some people leave Catholicism without necessarily abandoning every Catholic cultural form. A person may reject the Catholic Church because of its position on gender, sexuality, or clerical authority, while still participating in a family funeral, visiting an animita, or preserving a religious image received from a grandparent. In such cases, disaffiliation targets institutional Catholicism, not necessarily every trace of Catholic culture.

This distinction is essential for understanding Ghost Catholicism. The concept does not deny that many Chileans have genuinely rejected Catholicism. Rather, it highlights that rejection of an institution does not always produce a complete break from the symbolic world associated with that institution.

iii. Belief among the unaffiliated

Survey evidence further complicates the idea that religious disaffiliation equals irreligion. Pew Research Center (2026) found that 69% of religiously unaffiliated Chilean adults believe in God. Although this proportion is lower than among Catholics and Protestants, it is still a majority. This finding matters because it shows that the category "religiously unaffiliated" is internally diverse. It may include atheists and agnostics, but also spiritual seekers, culturally religious people, and

individuals who reject institutional religion while maintaining selective religious practices. The unaffiliated population is not a homogeneous block of secular people.

Pew Research Center (2026) likewise emphasises that religiously unaffiliated adults constitute the second-largest religious category in the Latin American countries it surveyed. In Chile, this group represents a substantial share of the adult population. Its internal diversity means that researchers should avoid treating "no religion" as a single, uniform identity. For Ghost Catholicism, this diversity is central. If many unaffiliated Chileans retain belief in God, it is plausible that some also retain inherited religious practices, especially those linked to death, family obligation, and communal memory. The absence of religious affiliation does not necessarily mean the absence of religious sensibility.

iv. Catholic decline without cultural disappearance

The evidence reviewed in this section points to a paradox. On the one hand, Catholicism has clearly declined as an institutional and identificatory force in Chile. The census shows a substantial fall in Catholic affiliation and a major increase in religious non-affiliation (INE, 2025). On the other hand, Catholicism continues to shape family rituals, popular devotions, mourning practices, and sacred places. This paradox is the starting point for Ghost Catholicism. Catholicism may lose adherents, clergy, parishes, and institutional authority without disappearing from the cultural field. It may survive as inherited ritual, devotional memory, family obligation, or attachment to sacred places. The next section develops this idea by defining Ghost Catholicism as a residual, selective, and affectively charged form of Catholicity that may persist beyond institutional membership and doctrinal belief.

Catolicismo Fantasma: A Conceptual Framework

1. The concept

This article proposes Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism) as a conceptual framework for understanding the persistence of Catholic-inflected practices, symbols, and affective attachments among religiously unaffiliated Chileans. The concept refers to a residual, selective, and emotionally charged form of Catholicity that may survive after a person has ceased to identify as Catholic, participate regularly in parish life, or affirm Catholic doctrine. Ghost Catholicism is not a claim

that religiously unaffiliated people are secretly devout Catholics. Nor does it deny the reality of Chile's religious transformation. Many Chileans have consciously rejected Catholic belief, clerical authority, and Church membership. The concept applies only to those cases in which Catholic-derived practices, symbols, or emotional attachments remain meaningful despite the absence of Catholic identification. The usefulness of the concept lies in its ability to capture ambiguity. Religious disaffiliation is often treated as a clear boundary: a person is either Catholic or not Catholic, religious or non-religious, believer or non-believer. Yet lived religion is rarely so neat. A person may reject the Catholic Church as an institution while continuing to value a Catholic funeral, visit an animita, keep an image of the Virgin Mary at home, or participate in a family ritual because it feels morally or emotionally necessary. Ghost Catholicism names precisely this in-between condition. It describes Catholicism after institutional belonging has weakened, but before—or without—its complete cultural disappearance.

2. Residual Catholicism

The first characteristic of Ghost Catholicism is that it is residual. It appears after institutional disaffiliation. It is not the Catholicism of regular Mass attendance, parish membership, or explicit doctrinal commitment. It is what remains when formal belonging weakens or disappears. This residual quality is important because it distinguishes Ghost Catholicism from conventional Catholic affiliation. A practising Catholic may attend Mass, receive the sacraments, accept Church teaching, and identify with the Catholic community. By contrast, a person characterised by Ghost Catholicism may do none of these things and still retain a connection to Catholic symbols or practices. Residual Catholicism may be inherited from childhood, family tradition, or local culture. It may also be reactivated in particular situations, such as illness, death, family conflict, or communal crisis. In this sense, it is not simply a leftover from the past. It can become active and meaningful at specific moments of life.

3. Selective Catholicism

The second characteristic of Ghost Catholicism is its selectivity. People do not retain Catholicism in its full institutional or doctrinal form. They may accept some practices while rejecting others.

For example, a person may reject Church teaching on gender, sexuality, or clerical authority while still valuing a Catholic funeral. Another person may refuse to attend Mass but continue to visit an animita, light a candle for a deceased relative, or maintain a family image of the Virgin Mary. These practices are not necessarily expressions of orthodox belief. They may express family loyalty, cultural memory, emotional comfort, or a sense of moral obligation. Selectivity is central to contemporary religious change. In a plural religious field, individuals increasingly assemble their own religious and spiritual repertoires. They may combine Catholic inherited practices with non-religious identities, spiritual beliefs, or participation in other religious communities. Ghost Catholicism therefore should not be understood as a coherent alternative religion. It is a fragmented and selective continuation of Catholic cultural forms within lives that are no longer institutionally Catholic.

4. Affective Catholicism

The third characteristic of Ghost Catholicism is its affective nature. It is often carried by emotion, memory, family obligation, grief, and belonging rather than by theological conviction. A person may not believe in Catholic doctrine but may still experience comfort, reverence, nostalgia, or moral seriousness in a Catholic ritual. A funeral Mass may provide a language of loss and communal support. A visit to an animita may offer a way to remember the dead. An image of the Virgin Mary may evoke childhood, family, or a sense of protection. This affective dimension distinguishes Ghost Catholicism from purely intellectual forms of religion. It suggests that religious continuity may operate through the body, memory, and emotion rather than through explicit belief. People may not be able to explain Catholic doctrine, but they may know how to behave at a funeral, light a candle, or respond to a sacred image.

5. Ghost Catholicism and “believing without belonging”

Davie (1990, p. 460) originally described “believing without belonging” as retaining belief while withdrawing from institutional participation. This idea is useful for understanding contemporary Chile, but it does not fully capture the phenomenon discussed here. Ghost Catholicism is broader and more ambiguous than “believing without belonging.” It includes people who may not hold doctrinal beliefs but who continue to use Catholic rituals, symbols, or sacred places as cultural and emotional

resources. A person may not believe in the Virgin Mary as a doctrinal figure but may still light a candle before her image, visit a shrine, or ask for protection during a family crisis.

In this sense, Ghost Catholicism is not simply belief without belonging. It may involve practice without belief, memory without affiliation, or affect without doctrine. This makes it particularly useful for analysing societies such as Chile, where Catholicism has historically been embedded in popular culture and family life.

6. Ghost Catholicism and lived religion

As discussed above, lived religion helps explain this persistence. From this perspective, a Catholic image in a home, a visit to an animita, or attendance at a funeral Mass is not merely a religious leftover. It may be an active practice through which people negotiate memory, loss, family obligation, and belonging. The fact that such practices survive among non-affiliated people suggests that Catholicism continues to operate as a cultural repertoire even where it has lost institutional authority. Lived religion also helps avoid a common mistake: assuming that people who reject the Church necessarily reject everything associated with Catholicism. Institutional rejection and cultural attachment are different phenomena. Ghost Catholicism focuses precisely on the space between them.

7. What Ghost Catholicism is not

It is important to specify the limits of the concept. *First*, Ghost Catholicism does not mean that all religiously unaffiliated Chileans remain Catholic in any meaningful sense. Many people who report no religion may have no meaningful connection to Catholicism. Others may have moved to Evangelical or Pentecostal communities. *Second*, Ghost Catholicism does not imply hidden belief. It does not assume that unaffiliated people are secretly devout Catholics who merely avoid public identification. Many unaffiliated people have genuinely rejected Catholic doctrine, authority, and practice. *Third*, Ghost Catholicism is not a new religious movement. It does not describe an organised community, doctrine, or institution. It is an analytical concept for interpreting dispersed and often private forms of residual Catholicity. *Finally*, Ghost Catholicism is not a universal theory of Latin American religion. It is a Chilean-grounded conceptual contribution, although similar

processes may exist in other Latin American societies where Catholicism has historically shaped popular culture.

8. Why the concept matters

Ghost Catholicism matters because it challenges the assumption that religious decline is a simple movement from religion to non-religion. It shows that secularisation may involve the selective preservation of religious forms after institutional detachment. The concept also highlights the limits of survey categories such as "no religion." A person may reject Catholic identity while still being culturally, emotionally, or practically shaped by Catholic traditions. Understanding this complexity requires moving beyond affiliation statistics and examining lived practice, family memory, and affective attachment.

In the Chilean case, Ghost Catholicism provides a way to understand why the decline of institutional Catholicism does not necessarily mean the complete disappearance of Catholicism from social life. Catholicism may lose its institutional body, but it may continue to inhabit everyday life, family relationships, and popular culture.

Popular Catholicism and Residual Practice

a) Popular Catholicism beyond the parish

Popular Catholicism refers to religious practices that often develop outside formal parish structures and may combine Catholic elements with local traditions, family customs, and community practices. In Chile, this includes Marian devotion, pilgrimage, saints' festivals, home altars, funerary practices, and animitas. These practices are important because they show that Catholicism is not only a set of doctrines or institutional memberships. It is also a repertoire of gestures, objects, places, and emotional practices. A person may participate in this repertoire without accepting the authority of the Church or identifying as Catholic. This is why Ghost Catholicism is closely connected to popular piety. Popular religious practices can survive independently of institutional discipline. They are transmitted through families, neighbourhoods, and local communities, often without formal religious instruction. Their persistence suggests that Catholicism may continue to shape social life even where Church affiliation and clerical authority have weakened. The distinction between institutional and popular Catholicism is therefore central to this

article. Institutional Catholicism is organised around doctrine, clergy, sacraments, parishes, and formal membership. Popular Catholicism is often organised around family obligation, sacred places, devotional objects, collective memory, and mourning practices. Ghost Catholicism emerges most clearly in the latter domain.

b) Animitas as sacred memory

Animitas are among the most visible expressions of popular religiosity in Chile. They are small shrines, crosses, grottoes, or structures placed at sites of unexpected death, often along roads, in neighbourhoods, or in rural landscapes. People bring flowers, candles, photographs, written messages, and other offerings to these sites.

Ivanova (2022) describes animitas as a widespread Chilean and Latin American phenomenon connected to unexpected death. She argues that animitas may reflect a historical synthesis of Catholic missionary influence, Indigenous traditions, and local practices of memorialization. Her analysis shows that animitas are not merely commemorative objects; they can become sacred places where the dead are remembered, invoked, and sometimes treated as intercessors or folk saints.

This is highly relevant to Ghost Catholicism. Animitas demonstrate how Catholic-derived sacred forms can remain embedded in public space even when institutional religiosity declines. A person who does not attend Mass may still stop at an animita, leave flowers, or make a silent request. Such practices may not express orthodox Catholic belief, but they do express attachment to a sacred landscape shaped by Catholic popular religion. As Steinert & Valenzuela Carvallo (2019, p. 448) show, Chilean animitas are not only commemorative sites but 'privileged locations where salvific grace is dispensed.' Animitas also reveal the importance of place in residual Catholicism. Unlike doctrine, which must be learned and affirmed, sacred places can be encountered casually in everyday life. A roadside shrine, a cemetery, or a neighbourhood animita may become meaningful through repeated visibility, family memory, or local tradition. In this sense, Catholicism can persist spatially even when it has weakened institutionally.

c) Death, mourning, and ritual reactivation

Death is one of the most important contexts in which Ghost Catholicism becomes visible. Funerals, prayers for the dead, cemetery visits, and memorial practices

provide frameworks for grief, remembrance, and communal solidarity. Even people who do not regularly practice religion may participate in these rituals because they are understood as proper ways to honour the dead.

In Chile, Catholic funeral practices may retain social meaning even among people who reject Church authority. A funeral Mass can provide a shared language of loss, dignity, and communal support. Family members may participate not because they affirm Catholic doctrine, but because they wish to honour a parent, grandparent, or child within a familiar ritual framework. This suggests that Ghost Catholicism is often activated by crisis. Illness, death, accidents, and family loss can interrupt ordinary routines and make inherited religious practices newly meaningful. In such moments, people may reach for familiar symbols even if they do not otherwise practice religion.

The reactivation of Catholic practices during mourning also shows that residual religion is not merely passive inheritance. It can become a practical resource for dealing with loss. A Catholic funeral, a prayer for the dead, or a visit to a grave may help people organise grief, express love for the deceased, and reconnect with family and community.

d) Marian devotion and sacred places

Marian devotion is another important dimension of residual Catholicism. Devotion to the Virgin Mary has historically been central to Catholic popular religiosity in Latin America. In Chile, Marian images, shrines, and pilgrimage practices continue to occupy a significant place in the religious landscape. For unaffiliated individuals, Marian devotion may appear in subtle forms. A person may keep an image of the Virgin inherited from a grandparent, light a candle during a family difficulty, or visit a shrine during a moment of personal crisis. These practices may not express doctrinal belief, but they do express attachment to a sacred repertoire. Neckelmann's research on pilgrimage in Chilean shrines highlights the continuing importance of Catholic pilgrimage in contemporary Chile. Such practices demonstrate that Catholic sacred places can retain social and emotional power beyond regular parish participation.

Following Orsi (2005), Marian devotion can be understood as a way of relating to sacred figures through material practices such as images, candles, and shrine visits.

Marian devotion is particularly significant for Ghost Catholicism because it is often transmitted through material culture. Images, medals, rosaries, home altars, and shrine visits can preserve Catholic presence in domestic and public spaces. Even when people no longer attend church, these objects may continue to carry emotional and familial meaning.

e) Family rituals and lifecycle ceremonies

Family rituals are another major site of residual Catholicism. Baptism, first communion, marriage, and funeral rites are not only religious ceremonies; they are also family events that mark belonging, continuity, and social recognition.

For unaffiliated Chileans, participation in such rituals may be motivated by family expectation rather than personal faith. A parent may request baptism for a child because grandparents expect it. Hervieu-Léger (2000, p. 81) describes religion as a "chain of memory," transmitted through families and ritual practices even when doctrinal belief weakens. A family may hold a funeral Mass because it is understood as the proper way to honour the dead. These practices may persist even when the participants do not identify as Catholic. This form of residual Catholicism is important because it shows that religious practice can be transmitted intergenerationally even when belief and affiliation weaken. Families may act as carriers of Catholic cultural memory even when individual members no longer accept Catholic doctrine.

Lifecycle rituals also reveal the social dimension of Ghost Catholicism. A person may participate in a Catholic ritual not because of private belief, but because refusing to do so would create family conflict or appear disrespectful to older relatives. In this sense, residual Catholicism may be maintained through relational obligation as much as through personal conviction.

f) Material culture and domestic religion

Ghost Catholicism often survives through material objects. Images of the Virgin Mary, crucifixes, rosaries, medals, photographs of deceased relatives, and home altars can preserve Catholic presence in domestic spaces. These objects matter because they make religion visible and tangible. A religious image on a wall may not be treated as an object of doctrinal devotion, but it may still carry family history,

emotional attachment, or a sense of protection. When a person inherits such an object from a parent or grandparent, it may become difficult to discard, even if the person no longer identifies as Catholic. Material culture also helps explain why Catholicism can persist quietly. It does not always require public declaration, regular worship, or doctrinal agreement. It may survive through objects kept in drawers, images on walls, candles lit during difficult moments, or rituals performed during family crises.

g) Ghost Catholicism as selective sacralization

The practices discussed in this section—animitas, funerals, Marian devotion, family rituals, and domestic religious objects—show that Ghost Catholicism is not a complete religious system. It is a selective form of sacralization. People may sacralise certain moments, relationships, places, or objects while rejecting broader Catholic authority. They may treat death as spiritually significant without accepting Catholic doctrine. They may honour the Virgin Mary as a family symbol without attending Mass. They may visit an animita without identifying as Catholic.

This selectivity is what makes Ghost Catholicism distinctive. It is not simply Catholicism in a weaker form. It is Catholicism fragmented, reinterpreted, and refunctioned within lives that are no longer institutionally Catholic.

h) Implications for understanding residual religion

The evidence and examples discussed here suggest that residual Catholicism should be taken seriously as a form of religious continuity. It is not merely a transitional stage between Catholicism and secularism. For some people, especially where Catholic practices remain embedded in family life and local tradition, it may be a stable cultural condition. At the same time, Ghost Catholicism should not be romanticised. It may involve contradiction, ambivalence, and selective memory. People may retain Catholic practices while criticising the Church, rejecting its teachings, or avoiding its institutions. This ambivalence is not a failure of disaffiliation; it is part of how contemporary religious change works.

Discussion: Ghost Catholicism and Chilean secularisation

1. Secularisation as reconfiguration

The Chilean case suggests that secularisation should not be understood as the simple replacement of religion by non-religion. It may instead involve a reconfiguration of religion: institutional authority weakens, affiliation becomes optional, and religious practices become more selective, privatised, and fragmented. Ghost Catholicism captures one form of this reconfiguration. Taylor (2007, p. 3) describes secularity not as the disappearance of religion, but as a new condition in which belief becomes "one option among others." A person may leave the Church as an institution while remaining connected to Catholic symbols, sacred places, or inherited practices.

As discussed above, many unaffiliated Chileans retain belief in God. In this sense, Ghost Catholicism does not contradict secularisation. It refines it. It shows that secularisation may involve the weakening of institutional religion without the complete disappearance of religious culture.

2. The limits of affiliation categories

Survey research is essential for tracking religious change, but it has limits. A question asking whether a person is Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, or unaffiliated measures self-identification. It does not measure the full complexity of religious practice, family tradition, emotional attachment, or selective belief.

The 2024 census stated above shows that 25.8% of Chileans aged 15 and over report no religion or creed (INE, 2025). This is an important finding, but it does not tell us how these people relate to Catholic rituals, sacred places, family traditions, or moments of grief. Some may have no connection to Catholicism at all. Others may retain selective practices that would not appear in a standard affiliation question.

Ghost Catholicism therefore points to the need for more nuanced research instruments. Future surveys could distinguish between institutional affiliation, personal belief, ritual participation, and cultural attachment. For example, researchers could ask not only whether a person identifies as Catholic, but also whether they attend funerals or baptisms, visit animitas or shrines, keep religious images at home, or consider Catholic rituals important for family life.

Qualitative research would be especially valuable for understanding how people interpret the tension between saying "I have no religion" and continuing to engage

with Catholic practices. Such research could reveal whether these practices are understood as religious, cultural, familial, aesthetic, or simply habitual.

3. Ghost Catholicism and religious individualisation

Ghost Catholicism is also connected to broader processes of religious individualisation. In contemporary Chile, religious identity is increasingly chosen, negotiated, and revised rather than simply inherited. People may move between Catholicism, Evangelicalism, spiritual practices, and non-religion over the course of their lives. This individualisation does not necessarily produce a complete break from religious tradition. Instead, it may produce selective continuity. A person may reject institutional authority while retaining practices that provide emotional comfort, family connection, or a sense of moral order.

In this context, Ghost Catholicism can be understood as a form of individualised religiosity. No church, clergy, or shared doctrine organises it. It is assembled from inherited symbols, family memories, sacred places, and emotionally significant rituals. This does not mean that individualisation always weakens religion. It may also make religion more flexible and adaptable. Catholic practices may survive precisely because they can be detached from institutional demands and reinterpreted in personal or familial terms.

4. Ambivalence and contradiction

Ghost Catholicism is marked by ambivalence. People may retain Catholic practices while criticising the Church, rejecting its teachings, or avoiding its institutions. This ambivalence is not a contradiction to be explained away. It is a central feature of contemporary religious change. A person may oppose Church authority on gender and sexuality while still wanting a Catholic funeral for a parent. Another may identify as atheist but continue to visit an animita because it is connected to a deceased family member. Another may reject Catholic doctrine but feel emotionally moved by a Marian procession or a family pilgrimage. These contradictions show that religious identity is not always coherent or consistent. People may hold multiple, sometimes conflicting orientations at the same time. Ghost Catholicism captures this complexity by focusing on practice and affect rather than requiring doctrinal consistency.

5. Implications for the Catholic Church

Ghost Catholicism also has implications for the Catholic Church in Chile. The Church may retain cultural influence even where it has lost institutional loyalty. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge.

The opportunity is that Catholic rituals and symbols may still be meaningful to people outside the Church. Funerals, baptisms, Marian devotion, and sacred places may continue to provide frameworks for family life, mourning, and communal memory. *The challenge* is that such residual attachment does not necessarily translate into renewed affiliation, doctrinal agreement, or regular participation. People may value a Catholic funeral while rejecting Church authority on social and moral questions. They may visit a shrine without accepting clerical authority. They may keep a religious image at home without identifying as Catholic.

This means that the Church cannot assume that cultural familiarity will automatically produce institutional belonging. Ghost Catholicism may be a form of continuity, but it is also a form of distance.

6. Ghost Catholicism and Pentecostal expansion

The growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical Christianity adds another layer to this discussion. Chile's religious field is not simply moving from Catholicism to secularism. It is also becoming more plural, with Pentecostal communities gaining visibility and influence. In this context, Ghost Catholicism may coexist with other religious identities. A person may have family members who are Catholic, Evangelical, and non-religious. They may attend a Catholic funeral, participate in an Evangelical family gathering, and personally identify as non-religious. Such situations are increasingly common in plural religious societies. Ghost Catholicism therefore should not be understood as a stage that necessarily leads to secularism or to another religion. It may be one position within a broader religious field characterised by mobility, mixing, and selective belonging.

7. A research agenda

Future research should test the concept of Ghost Catholicism empirically. Because this article is based on secondary sources, it does not claim to demonstrate how

widespread the phenomenon is. Instead, it identifies a plausible pattern and proposes directions for future study.

- Qualitative interviews could explore how unaffiliated Chileans interpret their continued participation in Catholic rituals. Researchers could ask whether these practices are understood as religious, cultural, familial, or emotional. They could also examine whether people experience contradiction, nostalgia, comfort, obligation, or indifference.
- Ethnographic research could examine animitas, shrines, cemeteries, pilgrimages, and family rituals. Such research could show how Catholic symbols operate in public and domestic spaces, and how people interact with them in everyday life.
- Comparative research could also be valuable. Scholars could compare Ghost Catholicism across regions, generations, social classes, and religious backgrounds. For example, residual Catholicism may take different forms in Santiago, rural areas, northern mining communities, and southern regions of Chile.

Finally, survey researchers could develop new measures of residual religiosity. These measures could distinguish between affiliation, belief, practice, and cultural attachment. Such instruments would allow researchers to assess how common Ghost Catholicism is and how it varies across social groups.

8. Ghost Catholicism as a lens for religious change

Ghost Catholicism offers a useful lens for understanding religious change in Chile because it focuses on continuity as well as decline. It does not deny that Catholicism is losing institutional power. Rather, it asks what happens to Catholic cultural forms after that power weakens. The concept suggests that religious change may be less linear than it appears. People may leave institutions while retaining inherited practices. They may reject doctrine while preserving ritual. They may identify as non-religious while remaining emotionally attached to sacred symbols. In this sense, Ghost Catholicism helps explain why the decline of Catholic affiliation does not automatically mean Catholicism disappears from Chilean social life.

Conclusion and Future Research

i. Main argument

This article has proposed Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism) as a conceptual framework for understanding the persistence of Catholic-inflected practices, symbols, and affective attachments among religiously unaffiliated Chileans. As defined above, Ghost Catholicism refers to a residual, selective, and emotionally charged form of Catholicity that may survive beyond institutional membership.

The central argument is that religious disaffiliation in Chile does not necessarily produce a complete rupture with Catholic cultural forms. A person may reject the Catholic Church as an institution while continuing to value Catholic funerals, visit animitas, maintain Marian images, participate in family rituals, or draw on Catholic symbols during moments of crisis. In such cases, Catholicism persists not as full institutional belonging, but as inherited practice, cultural memory, and affective attachment. Ghost Catholicism therefore does not deny Chile's religious transformation. It refines our understanding of it. Catholic affiliation has declined sharply, and religious non-affiliation has grown substantially. Yet the decline of institutional Catholicism does not automatically mean Catholicism's disappearance from everyday life, family relationships, and popular culture.

ii. What Ghost Catholicism explains

Ghost Catholicism helps explain a paradox that is difficult to capture through affiliation statistics alone. On the one hand, Chile has experienced a major decline in Catholic identification. As shown above, census data confirm a sharp fall in Catholic affiliation and a rise in non-affiliation (INE, 2025). On the other hand, many unaffiliated Chileans continue to believe in God, and Catholic symbols remain visible in family rituals, funerary practices, devotional objects, and sacred places (Pew Research Center, 2026). The concept explains this paradox by distinguishing between institutional Catholicism and residual Catholicism. Institutional Catholicism is organised around Church membership, clergy, sacraments, doctrine, and regular participation. Residual Catholicism operates through inherited rituals, family obligations, devotional objects, sacred places, and practices of mourning. Ghost Catholicism is therefore not simply a weaker form of Catholicism. It is a selective and fragmented continuation of Catholic cultural forms within lives that are no longer institutionally Catholic.

iii. Contributions to the study of religion

This article makes three main contributions. *First,* it introduces Catolicismo Fantasma (Ghost Catholicism) as a conceptual tool for analysing religious continuity after disaffiliation. The concept is especially useful for societies where Catholicism has historically been embedded in family life, popular devotion, and local culture. *Second,* the article shows that secularisation should not be understood only as a movement from religion to non-religion. It may also involve the selective preservation of religious forms after institutional detachment. People may leave the Church while retaining practices that remain emotionally and culturally meaningful. *Third,* the article highlights the limits of survey categories such as "no religion." Religious non-affiliation is internally diverse. It may include atheists and agnostics, but also spiritual seekers, culturally religious people, and individuals who reject institutional religion while maintaining selective religious practices.

Implications for future research

Future research should test this framework empirically through interviews, ethnography, and improved survey measures, as outlined in the Discussion.

Final reflection

Ghost Catholicism suggests that the decline of institutional Catholicism in Chile does not necessarily mean the end of Catholicism as a cultural force. Catholicism may lose parishes, clergy, believers, and institutional authority, while continuing to inhabit homes, cemeteries, roadsides, family rituals, and moments of grief. Catholicism may become less visible as an institution but remain present as a ghost: partial, selective, ambivalent, and emotionally persistent. It may no longer command belief or belonging, but it may continue to shape memory, mourning, family obligation, and the sacred geography of everyday life. The concept of Ghost Catholicism therefore invites scholars to look beyond affiliation and ask a more difficult question: not only whether people leave the Church, but what remains after they leave.

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