

Digital Religion among U.S. and Canadian Millennial Adults

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With the arrival of communication technologies such as radio, television, and more recently the internet and social media, scholars of religion as well as religious leaders have debated the place of these technologies in the religious and spiritual lives of individuals. To what extent do the religious and spiritual uses of these technologies play a complementary role only to in-person activities and community for those who are already actively religious? Or do these technologies also play an alternative role in terms of religion and spirituality for some, reaching new audiences that in-person activities cannot?

These questions can more recently be raised for the role of digital religion in the lives of Americans and Canadians, and are especially important for young adult Millennials. There is no widespread agreement on exactly which birth years comprise the Millennial generation. Some will use Howe's and Strauss' seminal cut-off dates of those born between 1982 and 2004 to group together Millennials (Howe and Strauss 2000; Strauss and Howe 1991). The Pew Research Center (2019) and Twenge (2017) use instead slightly earlier birth periods of 1981-1996 and 1980-1994 respectively. Others still prefer a more even distribution of generations across 20-year periods (see for example Bibby, Thiessen and Bailey 2019), and so will break down the current living generations in the following manner: born between 1906-1925 is the Greatest Generation; born between 1926-1945 is the Silent Generation; born between 1946-1965 is the Boomer Generation; born between 1966-1985 is Generation X; born between 1986-2005 is the Millennial Generation; and born between 2006-2025 is Generation Z. Regardless of the exact birth dates used, Millennials are generally those born and raised in the late 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s.

As such, they are the first truly digital natives in North America (Prensky 2001), in that they were raised since childhood with the digital world at their fingertips. This includes all things under the umbrella concept of digital religion, defined by Campbell (2013: 1) as “[...] a new frame for articulating the evolution of religious practices online [...]” and “[...] points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice.”

With new 2019 Millennial Trends Survey data, this study explores the prevalence of some digital religion practices among 18-35 year old Millennial adults (born 1984 to 2001) in the U.S. and Canada. This generation has one of the lowest rates of participation in organized in-person religious activities within North America (Pew Research Center 2010: 85-109; Sherkat 2014; Smith and Snell 2009; Twenge 2017: 119-142; Voas and Chaves 2016; Wuthnow 2007). Our research seeks to uncover whether digital religious and spiritual practices are following a similar trend of secular transition, found only among the minority of Millennials who are religiously active in person, or if digital religion is providing new spaces for many more Millennials to explore and develop their own self-spirituality.

Millennials, Religion and the Digital Age

A Generation in Secular Transition?

The main focus in existing research on Millennials and religion has been on the religious declines we have seen so far among this generation (Pew Research Center 2010: 85-109; Sherkat 2014; Smith and Snell 2009; Twenge 2017: 119-142; Voas and Chaves 2016; Wuthnow 2007). Millennials score lower on a whole range of religiosity indicators compared with members of older generations, including religious affiliation, frequent religious service attendance, belief in God or a higher power, salience of religion in their lives, and frequent personal prayer.

Current-day secularization theories see this decline as part of a wider secular transition at play in many world regions. Like with the more classic secularization theories of Weber's (1993) disenchantment and Berger's (1967) collapse of the sacred canopy, modernization is understood in this secular transition framework as the root cause of religious decline, including its "[...] mix of industrialization, democratization, urbanization, rationalization, cultural diversity, expanded education, and increased prosperity [...]" (Voas and Chaves 2016: 1522). These modern processes, pushed to their limits and even taking on new forms among the Millennial generation, are argued to undermine identities, beliefs and behavior related to the supernatural and transcendent.

There are three main arguments put forward by the secular transition framework on how this decline unfolds (Crockett and Voas 2006; Voas 2008; 2009). Taking inspiration from Martin's (1978) seminal work, this framework first argues that religious decline can be triggered at different moments in different regions, and proceed at different speeds depending on the specific socio-historical context (Brauer 2018; Stolz et al. 2020; Voas 2008):

Every country's experience of secularization is unique when it comes to specifics like the onset of decline, the rate of decline, and contingencies that may accelerate or offset cohort-driven decline in a particular time and place. [...] although historical, political, cultural, social, and economic differences among the dozens of European countries produced substantial variation in the onset of secularization across the continent, once it begins the pattern of change looks very similar in all of them. The differences are a matter of history and culture, and explaining them always requires a combination of the general and the particular. But these differences should not obscure the reality that there is a general pattern of religious decline that characterizes the West, including the United States (Voas and Chaves 2016: 1549).

The second main argument put forward by this secular transition framework, also mentioned in the previous quote, is one of generational religious decline. Although the timing may vary between regions and countries, once underway a process begins where "[...] each successive

cohort is less religious than the preceding one. America is not an exception. [...] The common story is decline driven by cohort replacement [...]” (Voas and Chaves 2016: 1517, 1520). This process achieves fruition when many parents with weakened religiosity from their now more secular social environment have (Millennial) children of their own and raise their children without explicit religious socialization in markedly more secular surroundings. Declining levels of religious socialization during childhood are considered a key factor in understanding these inter-generational decreases in religion. Within the secular transition framework, religious and spiritual needs among individuals are understood as socially constructed; usually only present among adults who learnt them during childhood. Individuals born and raised in more religious social environments and families tend to be those who go on to be more religious and spiritual as adults. Secular transition argues that this is less and less the case for larger and larger portions of younger generations who do not receive such a socialization.

The third main argument is that the secular transition would affect all forms of religion and spirituality in society, even their digital forms. The popularity of more fuzzy forms of fidelity, as Voas (2009) names them, would only be a transitional phase in the process of decline: populations having been religiously socialized as children but no longer religiously active in the conventional sense as adults would be those especially likely to practice more individualized forms of personal spirituality, including online (Bruce 2017). As younger birth cohorts receiving less or no religious socialization as children begin to replace these older cohorts though, secular transition theory expects in-person and digital forms of less conventional religion and spirituality to also begin declining cross-generationally.

In contrast to generational secular transition though, Armfield and Holbert (2003), Downey (2014) and McClure (2017; 2020) provide an alternative explanation for the decline of religion

among U.S. Millennials, an explanation tied to a much more recent societal development. These researchers contend that it is more specifically the arrival of the internet and the digital age among general populations and especially among young people in the 1990s that triggered the beginning of important religious declines in the United States that they see in a variety of survey data. Millennials are the first generation to grow up with computers, the internet, cellphones and social media in their homes, to the point that these technologies are as prevalent and crucial to their everyday lives as key technologies from prior childhoods, such as paper, landlines, bicycles, cars, radios, TVs, and home appliances. The online world is now firmly weaved into the offline worlds of work, food, family, friends, our bodies, leisure, pets, sports, music, religion, education, politics, health, market consumerism, transportation, and even our experiences of nature. These digital realities are molded by and are in turn shaping almost everyone in society, but especially today's emerging young adults. Armfield and Holbert (2003), Downey (2014) and McClure (2016; 2017; 2020) see the following associations in the U.S. as causal: the macro-level association between the rise in internet use since the 1990s and the decline in population levels of religious affiliation over the same period, as well as the micro-level association between greater levels of internet use and lower levels of religiosity among individuals. According to these researchers' theory, Internet use leads to religious decline by fostering individualism and disaffiliation from larger social groups, and by acting as a buffer against normative social pressures surrounding religion. By exposing individuals to different worldviews online, people would become less certain in their own convictions and plausibility structures. Online communities can also provide safe interactional spaces for individuals to explore religious disaffiliation, and to construct and practice new nonreligious identities (Starr et al. 2019).

Finally, Internet use monopolizes an individual's time that could have been spent instead on religious practice.

However, whereas there is strong evidence from these studies for an association in the U.S. between greater internet use and lower levels of religiosity among young adults, there is minimal empirical evidence yet of a causal link of internet use occurring first and then leading to religious decline. Religious declines began much earlier in most other Western nations outside the U.S., including in Canada and many European nations as well as in Australia and New Zealand (Martin 2005; Wilkins-Laflamme 2014; Voas 2009), well before the arrival of the internet. This is a fact that Armfield and Holbert (2003), Downey (2014) and McClure (2017; 2020) seem to ignore in their U.S. focused studies. Consequently, we would need an explanation of why the U.S. is unique in this causal relationship of internet use triggering religious decline, which Armfield and Holbert (2003), Downey (2014) and McClure (2017; 2020) do not provide. The association between greater internet use and religious decline in the U.S. that these researchers show with their cross-sectional and repeated cross-sectional data could just as likely be spurious. The online world could just as likely be reflecting larger cultural shifts in the offline world which have been developing over a much longer period.

Voas and Chaves (2016) from the secular transition framework for example argue that religious decline began later and has advanced more slowly in the U.S. due notably to an Evangelical and Christian Right revival of sorts in the 1970s and 1980s that did not happen to the same extent elsewhere in Western democracies. This compared with the Canadian context for example, where religious declines that began especially with the sexual and moral revolutions of the 1960s have never really slowed since (Bibby 2017; Clarke and Macdonald 2017). This delayed start to religious decline in the 1990s in the U.S. would thus not be related to the parallel

rise in internet use. Nonreligious individuals spending more time online would simply be a product of their age (younger generations who are further along in the secular transition process) as well as the fact that they may be seeking social interaction, community and activities in digital spaces since they already do not find these within religious groups. The secular transition framework argues that wider modern societal and cultural shifts are leading to a decline in all forms of religion and spirituality across generations, including digital religion. Nonreligious pursuits online are seen as more recent alternative identities, community building and behavior that have filled this newly opened space left by the decline of religious identities, beliefs and practices, and may at most reinforce existing secularization trends rather than trigger them as such.

Individual Spiritualization, Including Online?

Seen instead in a more substantive or positive light focused not on decline but on what has been gained among members of younger generations, Millennials can be understood as the inheritors of their Boomer parents' (and grandparents' in some instances) cultural revolution that de-emphasized traditional social institutions in the 1960s, including more traditional forms of Judaeo-Christianity, and brought about a society more characterized by progressive sexual and family morals, individual choice and 'authenticity' with the ultimate goal of personal happiness, and a consumer market economy on steroids.

Additionally, just because there is some religious decline across generations, this does not mean that religion and spirituality have disappeared entirely among today's emerging adults. Smith and Snell (2009: 154-155) show with their 2007-2008 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) data that many first-wave American Millennials (born 1984-1990) are

followers of what the authors call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This MTD is characterized by five key beliefs: 1) a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth; 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught by most world religions; 3) the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; 4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem; and 5) good people go to heaven (or another similar good place) when they die.

Most emerging adults are okay with talking about religion as a topic, although they are largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them. So for the most part, they do not end up talking much about religion in their lives. To whatever extent they do talk about it, most of them think that most religions share the same core principles, which they generally believe are good. But the particularities of any given religion are peripheral trappings that can be more or less ignored. The best thing about religion is that it helps people to be good, to make good choices, to behave well (Smith and Snell 2009: 286).

For those among the Millennial generation who are more religious and/or spiritual, Gauthier and Perreault (2008; 2013) add that young adult religiosity today is for the most part de-institutionalized (takes place more and more away from organized religion); is much more transnational and global in focus (rather than centered on ethno-national religions of the past); is heavily entwined with mass media (the internet, social media, and the digital age), the market economy and consumerism; is a source of distinct and niche identities for individuals; and emphasizes above all else personal experiences (of revelation), emotion and experimentation. Wuthnow (2007; see also McClure 2016) refers to young adults today as predominantly *tinkerers*, who pick and choose their spiritual identities, beliefs and rituals from what is on offer (both offline and online) in order to create a specific new construct that addresses their own needs.

Indeed, a newer set of critics have emerged since the 1990s towards secularization theories in general and the secular transition framework more specifically. These critics argue that religion

is not declining when faced with modern societal transformations, but is instead changing (Ammerman 2014; Aupers and Houtman 2010; Davie 1994; Drescher 2016; Fuller 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Organized religion may be on the decline across birth cohorts in Western democracies, like with membership and participation in many different types of organizations for that matter (Putnam 2000), but religion conceived of more broadly, including digital religion, is thriving in new individualized and spiritualized forms. Faced with modernity's alienating dynamics, individuals turn to new forms of spirituality which sacralize the self and provide new sources of comfort and meaning in the modern age.

Rather than narrowly defining and measuring religion against conventional institutional markers, such as church attendance or communal-oriented religious activities, the individual spiritualization framework stresses ongoing self-spirituality among individuals. For example, this can include belief in a god, belief in a supernatural being or higher power, belief in an interconnected natural world and universe, belief in some form of afterlife, prayer, meditation, mindfulness activities or other spiritual identities and self-help materials and behaviors. Spiritual needs are seen within this framework as core to human existence, rather than simply socially constructed in certain times and places; fundamental spiritual needs that may be answered in new ways in contemporary societies. More and more individuals draw on a number of identity constructs, beliefs, rituals, and practices from a variety of sources, including digital sources, some of them linked to religious groups and some of them not, to build and maintain their own personalized faith systems within their social environments (Hervieu-Léger 1999).

Luckmann (1967) famously refers to this phenomenon as 'invisible religion,' and Heelas and Woodhead (2005) as the 'spiritual revolution.' Houtman and Aupers (2007:305) argue that their cross-national findings from Europe provide evidence for a surge in post-Christian types of

spirituality, and “[...] confirm the theory of detraditionalization, according to which a weakening of the grip of tradition on individual selves stimulates a spiritual turn to the deeper layers of the self.” Its eclectic nature means that scholars within this individual spiritualization framework are constantly grappling not only with what to call this phenomenon, but also how to define it and what to include within the confines of its concepts. Nevertheless, most agree there are elements common to these individualized spiritual endeavours; even a shared doctrine among these spiritualities. This would include a search for one’s ‘authentic’ self, valuing personal authenticity above conformity to external religious norms and authorities, and relocating the sacred from the external and transcendent to the internal and immanent (Aupers and Houtman 2010; Taylor 2007). All of these phenomena can be enabled as much in the online world as in the offline one.

Armfield and Holbert (2003), Downey (2014) and McClure (2017; 2020) for example are unable to distinguish in their data and analyses between nonreligious internet use and digital religion and spirituality. Internet users who are less religious on more conventional in-person religious measures (such as religious affiliation and service attendance) could just as well be finding religion and spirituality in new forms online. A whole body of literature on digital religion sees the online world as a place for new forms of religion to thrive (see notably Brasher 2001; Campbell 2013; Dawson and Cohen 2004; Forbes and Mahan 2017; Højsgaard and Warburg 2005; Wertheim 2000). Many of these studies explore the nature of digital religion, and its similarities and differences from conventional in-person religion (Campbell 2012; Campbell and Golan 2011; Farrell 2011; Frost and Youngblood 2014; Ward 2018). Others explore notably the challenge that a more individual-focused online world of religion poses for traditional forms of religious authority (Cheong 2013; Knowles 2013; Turner 2007).

Contrasting Hypotheses on the Prevalence of Digital Religion

Within the larger framework of individual spiritualization then, newer digital forms of religion, spirituality and communities are seen as contributing to the wider spiritual revolution. Consequently, this framework would expect to find digital spirituality not just among individuals who are actively religious in person or who have been religiously socialized, but instead as a more widespread phenomenon among general populations, including among Millennials.

The individual spiritualization hypothesis (H₁): Digital religion would not only be commonly practiced among in-person religiously active young adults and those young adults who have been religiously socialized as children in the conventional sense, but also among other large segments of the Millennial generation.

This contrasts the expectations of the secular transition framework regarding the prevalence of digital religion among Millennials. The secular transition framework argues instead that more ‘fuzzy’ forms of religion and spirituality, including digital religion, would only be found among in-person religiously active young adults and those young adults who have been religiously socialized as children, and not found among the rest of the more secular population in countries like Canada and the U.S. that are undergoing a secular transition.

The secular transition hypothesis (H₂): Digital religion would only be commonly practiced among in-person religiously active young adults and those young adults who have been religiously socialized as children, and not among other segments of the Millennial generation.

H_{2.1}: Rates of digital religion practice would be lower among Millennials in Canada, compared with those in the U.S., since Canada saw religious declines before the U.S. and is consequently further along in the secular transition process.

We can also add a third main hypothesis here, as a form of middle ground between the two theoretical poles of individual spiritualization and secular transition. This third hypothesis, acting as a hybrid of the first two in a way, would predict digital religion and spirituality among the religiously active in-person Millennials, among some Millennials who received a religious

socialization as children, and also among a substantial minority (but not a majority) of other Millennials. Digital religion would be especially present among those exposed to more conventional forms of religion, in part in line with the secular transition framework, but also to a minority removed from more conventional religion who nevertheless see value in what digital religion and spirituality offer, in part in line with the individualized spiritualization framework. This latter group of Millennials would not, however, form a majority of the generation, and so this hypothesis would not refer to a spiritual revolution as such.

The hybrid hypothesis (H₃): A substantial minority of Millennials would take part in digital religion practices, especially Millennials tied to conventional organized religion and also some Millennials who are not, but this would not encompass the vast majority of the generation either.

Research Objectives

The goal of the present study is to test these three contrasting sets of hypotheses (H₁, H₂, and H₃) with high-quality recent survey data from two national contexts: the U.S. and Canada. In so doing, we will explore the prevalence of different forms of digital religion among young adult populations and the extent to which digital religion only plays a complementary role among individuals who are already religious and spiritual in the offline world, or instead an alternative role in which digital religion is a phenomenon found among a much wider portion of Millennial populations.

Surprisingly, very few existing studies have actually examined the empirical prevalence of different forms of digital religion among populations, national differences in the rates of these digital religious and spiritual practices, and the extent to which digital religion plays a complementary or alternative role to in-person religious and spiritual practices among

individuals. Existing empirical research that tests the secular transition framework mostly uses conventional religiosity measures found in most surveys, such as religious affiliation and frequency of in-person religious service attendance. The individual spiritualization framework in turn often uses smaller non-probability qualitative samples to test their framework, and rarely focuses specifically on digital forms of spirituality (with the notable exception of Aupers and Houtman 2010).

One key exception to this lack of research is the Pew Research Center report published in 2001 titled *CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online* (Pew Research Center 2001). In this report, Pew found that an estimated 25% of internet users did digital religion at some point in the U.S., a group that Pew refers to as ‘religion surfers.’ These religion surfers were more likely to also be actively religious in-person, to be religious converts (practicing a different faith than the one they were raised in), and to be individuals who felt somewhat marginalized by their own religious group. However, this Pew Research Center (2001) study does have a number of limitations regarding the research objectives of the present study. The Pew data is now more than 20 years old, and a lot has changed since 2001 in the digital world and regarding the prevalence of the digital in our lives. The Pew data is also from a sample of U.S. adults of all ages in 2001, so with little data from Millennials and no specific focus on this generation. The Pew data also only comes from one national context: the U.S.

Another notable exception to the lack of existing research is a chapter in Wuthnow (2007: 201-213) on the virtual church among younger adults of Generation X. With 2000 and 2002 American General Social Survey (GSS) data, Wuthnow estimates that 20% of adults aged 21-45 visited religious websites in the 30 days prior to the survey, most to look for information about their own or other faiths. This rate is low compared with other types of website activity, with

news (just under 80% of younger adults visiting in the past 30 days), travel (just over 60%), work (60%) and education (just under 60%) websites being the most popular. Many younger adults in the GSS samples who did visit religious websites regularly were also those who attend religious services regularly in person, and tend to see the internet as a supplement to their much more meaningful in-person practices.

Again, this study does have limitations for the purposes of the present research. Wuthnow's (2007) data is also about 20 years old now, and covers members of Generation X, not Millennials. These data also only come from the U.S. context, and so there is no international comparison with other countries to determine the level of (non)exceptionalism when it comes to America in this case.

Methodology

In order to test the three contrasting sets of hypotheses of the present study, we use data from our 2019 Millennial Trends Survey (MTS). The MTS was administered online between 4-27 March 2019 in both English and French, by [first author's name and institution]. The questionnaire contains a total of 69 questions on the respondent's sociodemographic characteristics, (non)religious and (non)spiritual affiliations, beliefs and practices, friendship networks as well as inclusivity attitudes. The complete MTS questionnaire and technical documentation can be found in the online supplementary materials. This survey was reviewed and received ethics clearance through the [first author's institution]'s Research Ethics Committee.

A total of 2,514 respondents aged 18-35 completed the 15-minute web survey (1,508 from Canada and 1,006 from the U.S.). Respondents were recruited through Léger's panel of

registered members (leger360.com) to complete the survey hosted by the [first author's institution's survey research center + web link here]. Potential respondents were sent an e-mail invitation to complete the web survey, and then received reminders up to two times, if necessary. Age, gender, regional and education level quotas were applied during the initial random selection of respondents, and later monitored as responses came in to adjust further recruitment efforts and completes.¹ Post-stratification weights were then created and applied to the statistical analyses in order to achieve greater young adult population representativeness on the variables of country of birth, household income, and race/ethnicity.² The final response rate for the MTS was 6.5%: lower than the 10-15% response rates common for online surveys, mainly because of the additional recruitment efforts to fill some of the harder to reach quotas (notably young adult males with no university education). Although these additional recruitment efforts did decrease the overall response rate to the survey, they did allow the final sample to be more representative on the variables of gender and education, and so were judged worthwhile. Table 1 contains the

¹ Quota sizes were based on Statistics Canada Census and U.S. Census bureau American Community Survey data with regards to the size of young adult subpopulations, and are available in the MTS's technical documentation in the online supplementary materials.

² Post-stratification weights were based on Statistics Canada Census and U.S. Census bureau American Community Survey data with regards to the size of young adult subpopulations. Two weighting variables were generated based on young adult (18-35) population age, gender, Census region of residence, level of education, country of birth, household income and race/ethnicity parameters: one for the Canadian subsample, and one for the American subsample. These weighting variables were generated using a sequential iterative technique.

unweighted descriptive statistics for the present study's predictor, outcome and demographic variables from the MTS. Table 2 in turn compares the distribution of demographics in the MTS with those among 18-35 year-old subsamples in the 2018 U.S. and Statistics Canada General Social Surveys.

Two questions on the frequency of digital religion practice were included in the 2019 MTS and are the outcome variables for the present study: "In the past 12 months, how often on average did you do the following on the internet? Read or watched online content on religious or spiritual beliefs, values, ideas or practices" (referred to hereafter as digital content consumption); "Posted on social media (Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, etc.) about religious or spiritual beliefs, values, views or practices" (referred to hereafter as social media posting).

Key predictor variables for this research include frequency of religious and spiritual education as a child: "Growing up as a child between the ages of 5-12 years old, how often on average did you receive some form of religious or spiritual education at school, at home, or at a place of worship?"; and frequency of religious service attendance as a young adult at the time of the survey: "In the past 12 months, how often on average did you practice or take part in the following activities, either in a group or on your own? Religious services or meetings."

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, 2019 Millennial Trends Survey, unweighted

	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Catholic affiliation	2,511	.278	.448	0	1
Evangelical Protestant affiliation	2,511	.057	.231	0	1
Mainline Protestant affiliation	2,511	.045	.208	0	1
Black Protestant affiliation	2,511	.022	.145	0	1
Jewish affiliation	2,511	.009	.095	0	1
Other religious affiliation	2,511	.147	.254	0	1
No religion - agnostic	2,511	.091	.288	0	1
No religion – Atheist/Secular humanist	2,511	.109	.311	0	1
Spiritual with no religion	2,511	.081	.273	0	1
No religion – no particular preference	2,511	.162	.368	0	1
Frequency of religious education as a child	2,513	3.946	1.685	1	6
Frequency of religious service attendance at time of survey	2,496	2.677	1.729	1	6
Frequency of digital religion content consumption	2,500	2.724	1.692	1	6
Frequency of religious social media posting	2,505	2.250	1.714	1	6
Unchurched spiritual activity at least once a month	2,514	.266	.442	0	1
18-24 years old	2,514	.411	.492	0	1
25-29 years old	2,514	.271	.445	0	1
30-35 years old	2,514	.318	.466	0	1
Female	2,514	.488	.500	0	1
Male	2,514	.502	.500	0	1
Another gender	2,514	.010	.101	0	1
Have at least one child	2,505	.313	.464	0	1
Canadian resident	2,514	.600	.490	0	1
Reside in rural area with pop. < 50,000	2,510	.272	.445	0	1
University degree	2,514	.254	.435	0	1
Working full-time	2,514	.423	.494	0	1
Household income	2,511	3.425	1.837	1	8
Foreign born	2,502	.108	.310	0	1
Born in country of survey, but at least one parent foreign born	2,502	.181	.385	0	1
Born in country of survey, and both parents born in country of survey	2,502	.711	.453	0	1
Indigenous	2,514	.049	.216	0	1
Black	2,514	.100	.300	0	1
Hispanic	2,514	.076	.264	0	1
Ethnic East Asian	2,514	.057	.232	0	1
Ethnic South Asian	2,514	.054	.225	0	1
Ethnic Southeast Asian	2,514	.041	.199	0	1
Ethnic West Asian/Arab	2,514	.018	.134	0	1
White	2,514	.679	.467	0	1

Table 2: Descriptive statistics, 2019 Millennial Trends Survey, 2018 U.S. General Social Survey and 2018 Statistics Canada General Social Survey, respondents 18-35 years old, weighted

	2019 MTS Canada N = 1,508	2018 Stats Can GSS N = 3,114	2019 MTS U.S. N = 1,006	2018 U.S. GSS N = 672
18-24 years old	42%	36%	40%	36%
25-29 years old	29%	29%	28%	28%
30-35 years old	30%	35%	32%	36%
Female	49%	50%	48%	55%
Male	50%	50%	51%	45%
Another gender	1%	---	1%	---
Have at least one child	25%	26%	41%	40%
Reside in rural area (pop. < 50,000)	18%	14%	33%	---
University degree	28%	30%	27%	24%
In full-time paid work	47%	59%	41%	53%
Household income less than \$20,000	6%	9%	9%	21%
Non-white ethno-racial background	36%	33%	51%	36%

We also want to see to what extent digital religion overlaps with less conventional forms of religion and spirituality, and so we include a predictor for what we call unchurched spirituality. In the 2019 MTS, respondents were asked in a short-answer open-ended question to list up to three of their group or individual activities, practiced at least once in the past 12 months, that they consider spiritual experiences according to the following definition: “a profound and usually positive experience that helps individuals find their authentic self, as well as connects them to a mysterious, universal, and overarching reality.” We coded into a dummy variable all those who identified practicing a non-conventional spiritual activity at least once a month (other than organized religious activities such as religious service attendance).

Socio-demographic predictors of age, gender, level of education, household income, employment activity, number of children, rural residence, Canadian residence, country of birth and race/ethnicity (multiple ethnicities could be selected by one respondent) were included in this study’s logit regression models as controls, along with a respondent’s religious

(non)affiliation as a young adult: “What, if any, is your religion?” Respondents were given 18 categories to select from for this religious (non)affiliation question, including Aboriginal/Indigenous spirituality, Buddhism, Chinese religion, Christianity – Catholic, Christianity – Orthodox, Christianity – Protestant (prompted to specify denomination or church), Christianity – other (prompted to specify tradition, group or church), Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, other religion (prompted to specify), multiple religions (prompted to specify), no religion – agnostic, no religion – atheist, no religion – secular humanist, no religion – spiritual with no religion, and no religion – no particular preference. These categories were then grouped into the RELTRAD categorization in this study (evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, and other religion; see Steensland et al. 2000) while keeping the four no religion categories separate due to their large prevalence among the sample of Millennials.

Results

Figure 1 contains the distribution of young adult respondents according to their self-declared frequency of religious or spiritual digital content consumption and social media posting for both Canada and the U.S. Frequent digital religion practices are found among a substantial minority of the Millennial population: 29% of Canadian Millennial respondents consume religious or spiritual digital content at least once a month, and 41% do so in the U.S. For a more active form of digital religion, 17% of Canadian young adult respondents post on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month, and 32% do so in the U.S. A majority in both countries consume religious or spiritual digital content at least once a year, although our survey data do not

provide further information into the various reasons why respondents consume this content and what they end up doing with it.

To compare more directly with the 2001 Pew Research Center data, 67% of American MTS respondents who used the internet at least once in the year prior to the 2019 survey also consumed digital content on religion or spirituality at least once in that same year. The Pew Research Center had found that 25% of their internet users of all adult ages were similar religion surfers back in 2001. The much higher rate found with the MTS data is striking, although it is at least in part most likely a product of greater internet use in the general population in 2019 compared with 2001, the focus on young adult respondents who have much higher rates of internet use in general, and more digital content on religion and spirituality available online in 2019 than in 2001.

Wuthnow (2007: 201-213) in turn found that 20% of American adults aged 21-45 visited religious websites in the 30 days prior to the 2000 and 2002 General Social Surveys. In the 2019 MTS among American adults aged 18-35, the rate who consumed digital content on religion or spirituality at least once a month in the year prior to the survey stood at 41%. As rates of more conventional religious practices, such as in-person religious service attendance, have fallen in more recent years among younger generations, the expansion of the internet in our lives has meant that a larger proportion of Millennials are coming into somewhat regular contact with religion and spirituality online.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

Another trend to note in these MTS data is the wider prevalence of digital religion practices among U.S. Millennials, compared with those in Canada. Fifty-nine percent of Canadian

Millennial respondents consumed religious or spiritual digital content at least once in the year prior to the survey, compared with 64% in the U.S. In turn, 33% of Canadian young adult respondents posted on social media about religion or spirituality at least once in the year prior to the survey, compared with 47% among U.S. young adults. These lower rates of digital religion practices among Canadian Millennials thus continue the trend present in the country since the 1970s of lower religiosity indicators in general when compared with the U.S., such as lower rates of frequent religious service attendance in Canada, lower prayer rates, and lower rates of belief in God or a higher power (Bibby 2017; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2020).

If we focus now on those who consume religious or spiritual digital content at least once a month, for whom this religious or spiritual digital content consumption most likely plays a more important role in their lives, Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which this frequent religious and spiritual digital activity overlaps with two others among young adult respondents: monthly or more frequent religious service attendance, and monthly or more frequent unchurched spiritual activities.³ The results illustrated in this graph show that most U.S. and Canadian Millennials who do digital religion at least once a month also do at least one in-person religious or spiritual activity monthly or more frequently. There are only 5% of young adult respondents (16% of monthly or more frequent digital content consumers) who only do monthly or more frequent religious or spiritual digital content consumption without also attending religious services at least once a month or practicing an unchurched spirituality at least once a month. Another 11% do both monthly or more frequent digital content consumption and religious service attendance; six

³ See Figure A.1 in the online supplementary materials for a similar graph for monthly or more frequent social media posting about religion and spirituality.

percent do both monthly or more frequent digital content consumption and unchurched spiritual activities; and another 10% do all three types of activities at least once a month.

In other words, 25% of Millennial respondents across both countries take part in less conventional spiritual or religious activities at least once a month, and 11% include a digital component to these activities. Another 25% pair these frequent less conventional religious and spiritual activities with monthly or more frequent religious service attendance, among whom almost all include a digital component. A further 7% only take part in more conventional religious service attendance at least once a month without other digital or unchurched religious and spiritual activities. So as the Pew Research Center (2001) and Wuthnow (2007: 201-213) also found, we see a lot of overlap between digital religious and spiritual content consumption and religious service attendance among respondents. This said, it is also important to note that there is a significant minority of Millennials who seem to do digital religion away from organized religion.

The results in Table 3 and Figure 3 come from a more detailed logit regression analysis controlling for socio-demographics to tease out specific associations between adult religious service attendance, adult unchurched spiritual activity, religious socialization during childhood and the two outcome variables of monthly or more frequent religious or spiritual digital content consumption as well as social media posting. We focus here on the statistically significant and relatively large associations from these two models ($\pm 5\%$ or more marginal effects).

[insert Figure 2 about here]

For all the socio-demographic variables, the effects are quite small in Model 1 on monthly or more frequent religious or spiritual digital content consumption. For example, the association between this outcome and residing in Canada is not statistically significant when religious affiliation, adult religiosity and spirituality as well as childhood socialization variables are controlled for. However, there are some larger and statistically significant socio-demographic associations found for monthly or more frequent social media posting about religion or spirituality (Model 2). Millennials with at least one child are 5 percentage points more likely to post on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month. Indigenous Millennials are also 7 percentage points more likely to post on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month. Respondents in the highest household income group in the survey (\$200,000 or more/year) are in turn 11 percentage points less likely on average to post on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month, compared with respondents in the lowest household income group (less than \$20,000/year). Those living in Canada are also an estimated 8 percentages points less likely to post on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month, along with second generation immigrant respondents (-6 percentage points).

Table 3: Marginal effects on monthly or more frequent digital religious or spiritual content consumption, and on religious or spiritual social media posting, respondents 18-35 years old, U.S. and Canada, 2019

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>dydx</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>dydx</i>	<i>SE</i>
Model 1: Digital content consumption at least once a month; N = 2,455; McFadden's $R^2 = .294$				
Model 2: Social media posting at least once a month; N = 2,448; McFadden's $R^2 = .226$				
25-29 years old (ref. 18-24)	-.025	.021	.025	.020
30-35 years old (ref. 18-24)	-.042*	.021	-.012	.020
Male (ref. female)	.045**	.016	.037*	.016
Another gender (ref. female)	.109	.075	-.060	.098
University degree	.022	.019	.027	.018
Household income (8 categories)	-.007	.005	-.016***	.005
Working fulltime	.013	.018	.004	.017
At least one child	.036*	.018	.050**	.017
Reside in town/rural area with pop. < 50,000	-.038*	.019	-.018	.018
Reside in Canada	-.019	.018	-.078***	.017
Foreign born	.051	.029	-.042	.029
Born in country, but at least one parent foreign born	.011	.024	-.061*	.024
Indigenous (ref. White)	-.003	.035	.071*	.032
Black (ref. White)	.054	.029	.050	.027
Hispanic (ref. White)	.011	.030	.012	.029
Ethnic East Asian (ref. White)	.053	.038	.027	.038
Ethnic South Asian (ref. White)	.005	.038	.022	.038
Ethnic Southeast Asian (ref. White)	-.065	.040	.019	.039
Ethnic West Asian/Arab (ref. White)	.070	.055	.050	.052
Evangelical Protestant (ref. Catholic)	.089**	.032	-.035	.030
Mainline Protestant (ref. Catholic)	.010	.035	-.139***	.038
Black Protestant (ref. Catholic)	.039	.056	-.092	.050
Jewish (ref. Catholic)	-.011	.075	-.107	.086
Other religion (ref. Catholic)	.061*	.025	.012	.024
No religion – agnostic (ref. Catholic)	-.051	.033	-.063	.034
No religion – Atheist/Secular humanist (ref. Catholic)	-.064	.034	-.083*	.035
Spiritual with no religion (ref. Catholic)	.025	.032	-.036	.034
No religion – no particular preference (ref. Catholic)	-.100***	.029	-.053	.028
Growing up as a child between the ages of 5-12 years old, average frequency of receiving some form of religious or spiritual education at school, at home, or at a place of worship (6 categories)	.021***	.006	.009	.006
Frequency of religious service attendance (6 categories)	.084***	.005	.071***	.005
Unchurched spiritual activity at least once a month	.121***	.016	.071***	.016

[insert Figure 3 about here]

In addition to these socio-demographic effects on social media posting, we also see some important distinctions between religious traditions for both digital outcome variables once level of religiosity and childhood religious socialization are controlled for in the two models. evangelical Protestants are 9 percentage points more likely than Catholics to consume digital content on religion or spirituality at least once a month, but no more likely than Catholics to post on social media about religion or spirituality monthly or more frequently. By contrast, mainline Protestants are 14 percentage points less likely than Catholics to post on social media about religion or spirituality, but no less likely than Catholics to consume digital content on religion or spirituality monthly or more frequently. Respondents in the ‘other religion’ category are 6 percentage points more likely than Catholics to consume digital content on religion or spirituality at least once a month, but no more likely than Catholics to post on social media about religion or spirituality monthly or more frequently.

Somewhat surprisingly, there are not many significant differences between the various ‘no religion’ respondents and Catholics once level of religiosity and childhood religious socialization are controlled for in the models. Only two significant differences are present in this regard. First, atheists and secular humanists are 8 percentage points less likely to post on social media about religion or spirituality than Catholics. Second, those who self-selected into the ‘no religion: no particular preference’ category are 10 percentage points less likely than Catholics to consume digital content on religion or spirituality at least once a month. Notably, the predicted probabilities of consuming digital religious or spiritual content as well as posting on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month are especially similar between Millennial

respondents who self-selected as ‘spiritual with no religion’ and Catholics once level of adult religiosity and childhood religious socialization are controlled for in the models.

Some of the largest associations in these statistical models though can be found for the variables of frequency of religious and spiritual socialization during childhood, frequency of religious services attendance as an adult, and practicing an unchurched spirituality at least once a month as an adult. Millennial respondents who practiced an unchurched spirituality at least once a month in the year prior to the survey were 12 percentage points more likely to consume digital content, and 7 percentage points more likely to post on social media at least once a month in that same year.

Figure 3 in turn illustrates the predicted probabilities of the different levels of frequency of religious and spiritual childhood socialization and frequency of religious services attendance on the two outcome variables.⁴ Although religious and spiritual socialization during childhood is not statistically significant for monthly or more frequent social media posting, it is for monthly or more frequent digital content consumption: respondents who say they received a religious or

⁴ Separate models with interaction terms between Canadian residence and frequency of religious service attendance, unchurched spiritual activity at least once a month as well as frequency of religious or spiritual education as a child were generated (results not shown here). None of these interaction effects on monthly or more frequent religious or spiritual digital content consumption or social media posting were statistically significant. In other words, the effects of frequency of religious service attendance, unchurched spiritual activity at least once a month and frequency of religious or spiritual education as a child on the two digital religion outcomes do not vary significantly between the U.S. and Canada.

spiritual education at least once a day at school, at home, or at a place of worship between the ages of 5-12 years old have a predicted probability of 33% to consume digital content at least once a month when level of adult religiosity and the other variables in the model are controlled for at their mean. This compares with a predicted probability of 20% for those who had no religious or spiritual socialization as children. Yet, the strongest effect by far is for adult religious service attendance. Millennial respondents who attend religious services at least once a day have a 72% probability of consuming religious or spiritual digital content at least once a month, and a 55% probability of posting on social media about religion or spirituality at least once a month. This compares to predicted probabilities of 12% and 9% respectively for those who do not attend religious services at all.

Discussion

Some readers may be surprised then that not all of the most religious Millennials, those who attend religious services or meetings at least once a day, also do digital religion. Other readers may instead be surprised that a minority of Millennials who do not attend religious services at all still do digital religion. With our data we do observe many complexities when it comes to the patterns of digital religious and spiritual practices. Yet, the following key trends also emerge. First, digital religion as measured here is definitely a phenomenon present among many Millennials, although it is also not present among all or a vast majority of this demographic. Second, social environment does seem to play an important role: in our data, digital religion practices are much more prevalent as a phenomenon in the generally more religious U.S. context,

compared with the generally more secular Canadian context. Third, digital religion practices are often, but not always, tied to other in-person religious and spiritual activities among Millennials.

Fourth, there appears to be a distinction in nature to be made between the more passive form of digital religion that is digital content consumption, and the more active form of digital religion that is social media posting. The more passive form of digital content consumption of religion or spirituality requires less effort and engagement on the part of the individual, and is more common in both countries. It is found a bit more among individuals from certain religious traditions, notably among evangelical Protestants and the 'other religion' category, and a lot less among religiously unaffiliated individuals who do not identify as atheists, secular humanists, agnostics or spiritual but not religious. Additionally, religious and spiritual childhood socialization has a greater impact during young adulthood for the practice of this more passive form of digital religion.

By contrast, the more active form of social media posting about religion and spirituality is tied more to specific demographics among Millennials: those with children, those with lower household incomes, Indigenous young adults, those of first and third generation immigration, and those living in the United States. Mainline Protestants as well as atheists and secular humanists are in turn less likely to partake in this more active form of digital religion. Adult religious service attendance and unchurched spiritual activities also have a greater impact on this more active form of digital religion. Living and experiencing religious and spiritual activities in person makes a young adult much more likely to post about them on social media.

To what extent do these results support or not our contrasting hypotheses regarding the prevalence of digital religion among Millennials, i.e. the individual spiritualization hypothesis vs. the secular transition hypothesis vs. the hybrid hypothesis? Regarding the individual

spiritualization hypothesis (H₁), as defined and self-declared by the survey respondents it is not all or a vast majority of them who take part in digital religious and spiritual activities.

Consequently, we would not refer to this as a spiritual revolution as such, especially when it comes to more active forms of digital religion practice, and so we reject H₁ here.

This said, there is a substantial proportion of Millennials who do digital religion on an infrequent or frequent basis, which also means that this is not a small niche phenomenon either. This includes a smaller number of Millennials who only do digital religion, especially in its more passive forms, and unchurched spiritual activities away from organized religion. We find more support then for our hybrid hypothesis (H₃) where the digital component of individual spiritualization is found among important segments of (but not all) Millennials.

Regarding the secular transition hypothesis (H₂), we found that it was not only those who are actively religious in-person or who received a religious socialization as children who take part in digital religion, and so we also reject H₂. Digital religion practices are strongly (but not exclusively) tied to adult religiosity, spirituality and childhood religious socialization, phenomena which are less prevalent among Millennials than among older adult generations. These findings thus support a softer version of secular transition theory and are once again more in line with our third hybrid hypothesis (H₃). This said, digital religion practices are less prevalent among Canadian Millennials residing in a national context where the secular transition process is considered as more advanced than in the U.S., and so we do find support for H_{2.1}.

Conclusion

Consequently, the empirical reality on this matter does not seem to be cut and dry between either predominant individual spiritualization or a complete process of secular transition. Proponents of each framework would probably see in this study's results some data to support their own arguments on the state of the current religious and spiritual landscape among young adults in North America. There is in fact some support for each framework in our findings here, which is best reflected in support for our hybrid H₃ hypothesis. Therefore, it may be worthwhile considering the two theoretical frameworks as complementary, rather than completely in opposition, to develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of the processes actually at play.

Millennials who do in-person conventional religion or who were at least socialized religiously as children now form a smaller proportion of their generation than the religiously active do among older birth cohorts. They are still present though, and for many of them digital religion plays an important complementary role to the in-person practicing of their faith.

For a smaller proportion of Millennials, digital religion along with other unchurched forms of spirituality are practiced alternatives to more conventional in-person forms of religiosity. These are minority phenomena among Millennials, and so we would not use the term 'spiritual revolution' to describe them. Nevertheless, they are substantial phenomena that deserve researchers' attention, rather than being brushed aside as inconsequential as is often done by proponents of the secular transition framework. Digital religion does have its followers, and is one set of available options competing in a sense with many other more secular ones for the time and attention of young adults today.

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Figure 1: “In the past 12 months, how often on average did you do the following on the internet? Read or watched online content on religious or spiritual beliefs, values, ideas or practices; Posted on social media (Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, etc.) about religious or spiritual beliefs, values, views or practices, respondents 18-35 years old, U.S. and Canada, 2019, with CI 95%

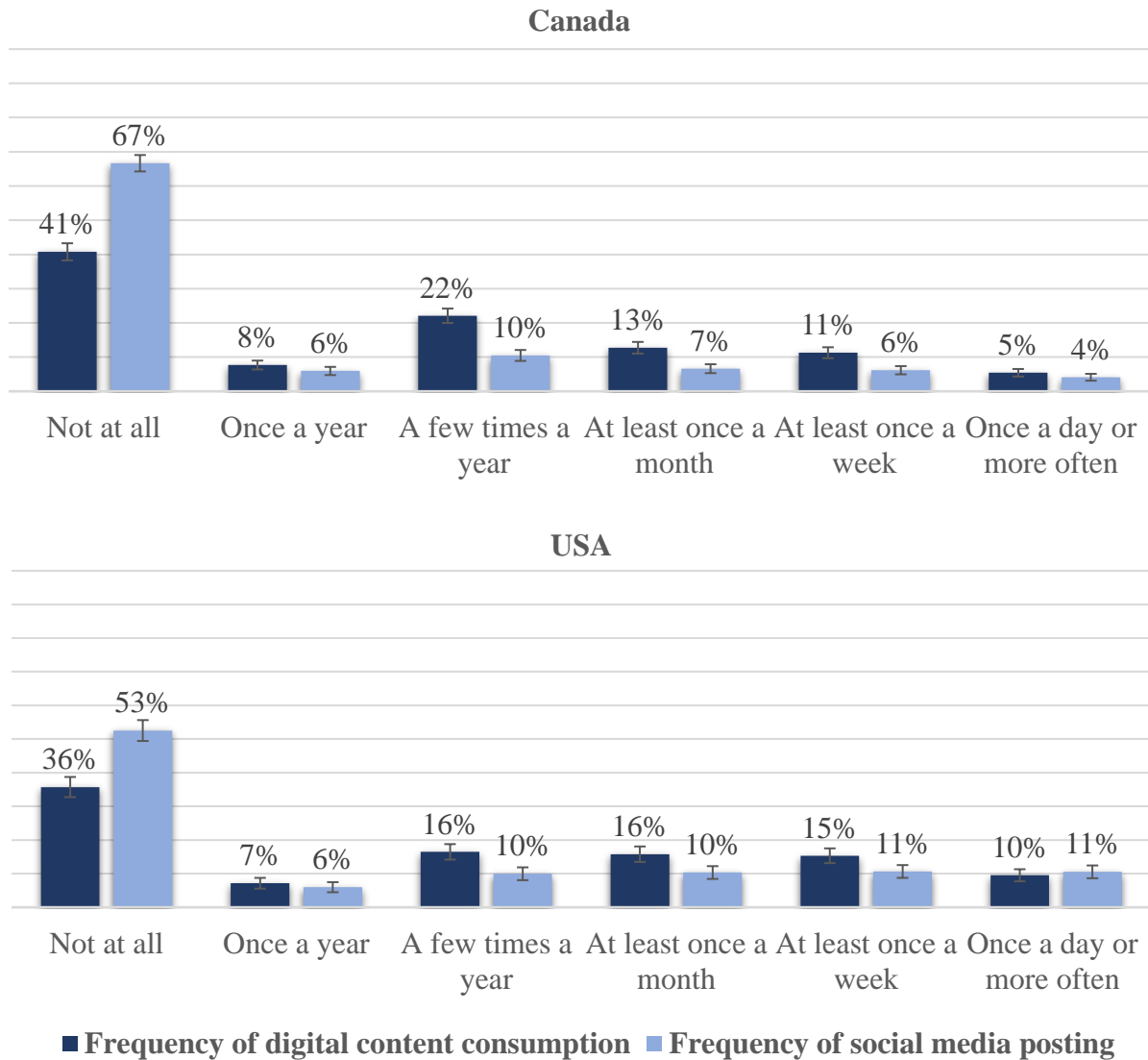


Figure 2: Rates and overlap of monthly or more frequent religious or spiritual activities, respondents 18-35 years old, U.S. and Canada, 2019

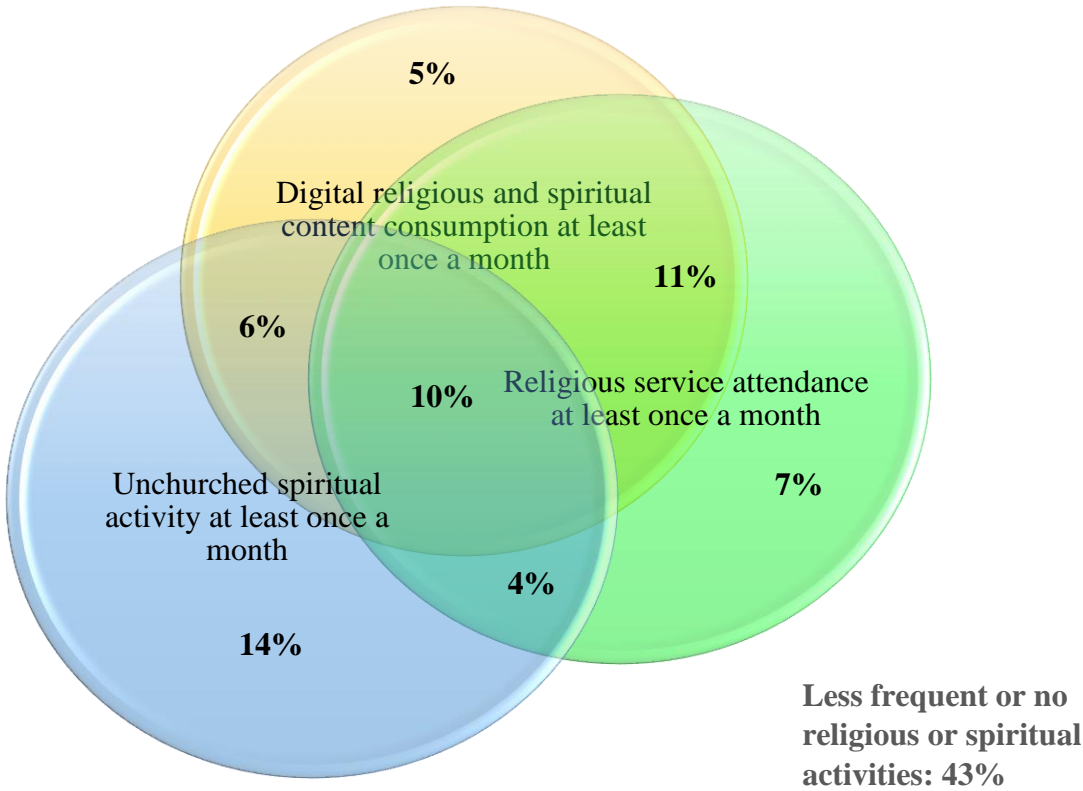


Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of monthly or more frequent religious or spiritual digital content consumption and social media posting, by frequency of childhood religious education and adult religious service attendance, respondents 18-35 years old, U.S. and Canada, 2019

