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DIFFERENT FORMS OF RELIGIOSITY
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Faith, Ideology and the Information Age: Universal Spirituality of Generation Y

Abstract

Observing the period of recent history, it is clear that no previous generation has ever lived with such information accessibility and in such a connected word as the millennials, an age cohort of those who were, roughly determined, born between early '80s and late '90s. This is a generation that is, according to the data of *Pew Research Center*, characterized by a high degree of individual spirituality without a formal religious affiliation, best described by the motto *spiritual but not religious* (SBNR) that is often associated with them. Ideological attitudes of millennials reflect their distance to church membership since they are, at the surprise of conservative and economically right-wing baby boomers and Gen X members, predominantly leaning towards left-liberal progressivism, which was evident during 2016 US election. Exploring millennial religious beliefs opens up a series of interesting questions. First, is this exclusively an Anglo-American phenomenon and how deep are generational divisions today? How is the spirituality of a leftist generation defined by consumer logic? Do millennials really suffer more from depression and anxiety and how can that be attributed to overchoice, an almost 50-year old concept of American futurologist Alvin Toffler? Finally, is the spiritual world less important to those of age between 18 and 35 then it was to their predecessors, or do they have more in common then they think?

Keywords: Generation Y, Spirituality, Atheism, Progressivism, Overchoice, Information overload, *SBNR*, Consumerism.

Introduction

Every culture is shaped by its fundamental core beliefs, and in America today there are a few values more fiercely held than the importance of self-admiration (Twenge, Campbell, 2009). This excerpt

from a 2009 book *Living in the age of entitlement* is probably the shortest and most precise description of what could be defined as a fundamental world-view of Generation Y, an age cohort born between the early '80s and late '90s. Growing up in the dawn of the information age, young, tech-savvy *digital natives* who see themselves as the *spearhead of progressivism*, are *de facto* the first generation to seriously challenge many social norms and values that have for centuries served as the foundation of the Christian Western civilization. At the same time, however, no other generation has ever been talked about with such negative connotation and disapproval. By looking at different media, it is not uncommon to see a plentitude of derogatory terms used to describe millennials – they are portrayed as *lazy*, *seeking instant gratification, narcissistic* and above all, *entitled*. Far from being just an online expression of personal opinion, such claims are in fact, in many cases substantiated by empirical evidence (Twenge, Campbell, 2009). Also, different studies conducted by the American *Pew Research Centre* confirm that there indeed are significant differences between millennials and their predecessors when it comes to matters such as marriage, abortion, drugs, same-sex relations, migrations and others (Fry, Igielnik, Patten, 2018). To put it simply, new generations of young voters are setting the stage for a major change of the societal *weltanschauung* in the USA and other western countries. By all evidence, this change is already taking place.

Apart from politics, the other main arena of the ongoing *culture war* (a term which, in the author's opinion, is not an overstatement) is religion, for a long time an inseparable element of the western way of life. The growth of this age cohort is likely to further erode the authority of Catholic and Protestant churches, as Generation Y gave rise to an interesting new umbrella term to express new forms of millennial religiousness: *spiritual but not religious* or *spiritual but not affiliated* (SBNR/SBNA). The term itself originated in the 1960s but has gained popularity recently. We shall see how Alvin Toffler's idea of an information overload might have explained the link between SBNR and consumerist capitalism almost 40 years ago (Тоффлер, 2002).

The abovementioned specificities of Generation Y bring up a number of interesting questions. Firstly, what are the root causes

that shaped their beliefs the way they are? Secondly, how far can the Americanized, mainstream form of millennial left-liberalism expand, and more importantly, could it affect the youth of other, *non-western* civilizations? Thirdly, is there any plausibility for the claim that a neo-conservative backlash will happen at some point, or is *God really dead* as far as the digital natives are concerned? Finally, it is interesting to see how the millennial *liberation* from outdated institutions and norms did come at a certain price.

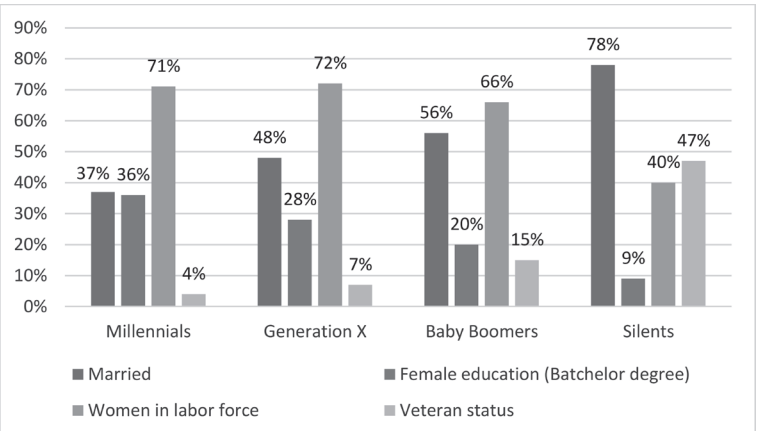
Millennialism, a (non-exclusively) American phenomenon

Generally speaking, Generation Y is an age cohort that comes after Generation X and before Generation Z[1], which puts their years of birth between the early '80s and mid to late '90s. America's leading demographic institution, *Pew Research Centre*, narrows this cohort down to years 1981-1996, (aged 22-37 in 2018), marking the year 1997 as a threshold for entering the next cohort: the post-millennials (Dimock, 2018). With more than 62 million members in 2016, they are expected to become the largest living adult generation in the USA in 2019 (Fry, 2018).

Similar to the XIX century, today's social changes seem to derive from a technological breakthrough. One of the key determiners that make millennials drastically different from all the previous generations is their dependence on modern communication technology. Having grown up in a world of cable-TV, video games, cell phones, and instant messaging services, they are the first age group that has almost no memory of an *offline world*, thus earning the name *digital natives* (Dimock, 2018). As we will see, the technological revolution of the early 21st century that has enabled the instant flow of information, combined with the narcissism driven consumerist logic of modern economies, may be the key driving forces behind this cohort's disinclination for of religious life.

[1] The term *Generation Y* was first used by a company called *Advertising Age* in 1993, as a convenient way to describe a generation that follows Generation X. The term, however, *didn't age well* (Main, 2017), and was largely replaced with the term *millennials*, coined in 1987 by social scientists Neil Strauss and William Howe.

Chart 1: Marital status, female education, female labor force participation, and veteran status of several American generations when they were ages 21-36 (%)



Source: Fry, Igielnik, Patten, 2018

Consequently, growing up in a highly consumerist capitalist society with self-centeredness as the unofficial ideology, millennial lifestyles were shaped to be quite different from that of their parents and grandparents. Empirical evidence shows us that millennials are more educated, more urban, more racially diverse, less likely to be married and less likely to experience war than all the previous generations. They also seem to be *much more detached from major institutions*[2] *such as political parties, religion, the military and marriage* (Fry, Igielnik, Patten, 2018).

In terms of Generation Y's psychological characteristics, their negative and positive aspects are the subject of an ongoing debate. A 2012 study of generational differences regarding life goals has shown that American millennials are more materialistic and less concerned about the wider community. On the other hand, the *generation of perpetual children* is more open-minded and

[2] An information that illustrates this well is that just 28% of religiously unaffiliated, (a group whose significant part are members of Generation Y) say that it is very important to them to belong to a community that shares common values and beliefs, compared to 49% of general public (Funk, Smith, 2012: 24).

less prejudiced (or simply disinterested?) about race, gender or sexual orientation (Twenge, Campbell, Freeman, 2012), which could also be ascribed to their individualist mindset.

With its narcissism and individualism in mind, it is unsurprising that in regard of faith millennials seem to be *by far the least religious generation in the previous six decades*, as San Diego State University researchers concluded by analyzing data from several national surveys from 1966 to 2014 (Downing Chee, 2015). Pew Research Centre's 2014 *Religious Landscape Study* indicates the same: 41% stated that religion is very important to them, 42% pray daily, and just 27% regularly attend religious service (Alper, 2015). By both practices and beliefs, Generation Y is less religious than its predecessors. To some degree, religion was replaced by *spiritualism* as the most personalized belief system.

Although millennials worldwide live in a very connected world, assuming that they are a globally homogenous category by ignoring the Huntingtonian concept of civilizational differences would evidently be wrong. If we take into consideration the ideological, political and religious traits of this group, it becomes clear that the ubiquitously used world *millennial* almost exclusively refers to a specifically First World phenomenon even when it is not openly stated. Furthermore, some differences (although not very significant) can be identified even within the *Western world*, since American, Canadian and (Western) European millennials somewhat differ on a number of questions. Considering the fact that a specific political culture of a certain area also had an influence in the shaping of a European, non-western millennial, it is clear that moving eastwards, differences between millennials grow. In Poland for example, *cultural politics do not fit a neat model of young liberals versus old conservatives,* since 2/3 of polish young people describe themselves as believers and have a negative opinion about homosexuality and abortion (The Economist, 2016), even though they are *westernized* in many other ways[3]. In Europe, Christian

[3] In terms of spending time online, polish young people don't fall behind their western peers – a full 100% of Poles in the age group 18-24 and 96% of those who in the age group of 25-34 are internet users, while 54% of the former are online constantly (CBOS, 2018).

self-identification among 16-29-year-olds is also strong in countries like Lithuania, Slovenia, Ireland, Austria and Russia (Sherwood, 2018).

It is fair to say that millennials in non-western cultures, such as Islamic, Orthodox or Sinic (Confucian) largely retain the cultural characteristics of the *civilization* they were born into[4] regardless of modern consumerism and connectivity. Here, the religious moral and communitarian values still hold an important place in the collective psychology[5] while at the same time, these countries have the resources and the commitment to preserve their way of life in the digital age. Of course, except the few extreme examples, the majority of non-western countries are not hermetically sealed off from all external influences, so the presence of groups of (mostly urban) youth who try to emulate the lifestyles presented by the western model it is not uncommon. Still, the atheisation and *narcissification* of non-first world millennials are happening at a much slower rate: here, the power of the internet has a very strong adversary in the power of tradition.

Birth of a millennial and the rise of the *SBNR*

If we are to understand how millennial *spiritualism* pushed aside religiousness, we should look in the past and examine some processes that started more than 10 years before these the oldest Millennials were born. Two of those arise as the most influential:

[4] Interestingly, this is also the case with millennials from some minority groups in the USA. Jewish millennials, for example, are showing a reversed trend: about a half of them consider their Jewish identity *very important*, 44% subscribe to Judaism exclusively and 75% are at least *somewhat spiritual*. The interest for their ancestral faith is stronger in households with both Jewish parents (Barna, 2017).

[5] Another example is that of the Asian-American millennials, who *score lower on narcissism than any other ethnic group* (Twenge, Campbell, 2009: 184). This is understandable since for the past 2,500 years Asian cultures have been shaped by Confucian ethical philosophy, a *civic religion* that relies on values radically different from the modern western ideological matrix: loyalty, filial piety, humaneness, incorruptibility, dedication to the collective (Berling, 2018). As in the Jewish example, the mindset of Asian American millennials has apparently kept many of its native cultural specificities.

the secularisation of the educational system and the major ideological shift that happened in the 1970s.

As Twenge and Campbell point out, unsubstantiated self-admiration was not always the main ideological dogma of western societies. Instead of that, it was *self-reliance*, a typically American value that perfectly corresponded with basic postulates of protestant work ethic by which *hard work demonstrates one's worth in the eyes of God and others* (Twenge, Campbell, 2009: 47). Since the foundation of the USA, this was the main maxim of the *American dream* which attracted millions of migrants of many different religious and cultural backgrounds. This ideological pattern continued well into the XX century: after the Second World War, America still emphasized *...getting things done instead of admiring yourself* (Twenge, Campbell, 2009: 48).

The 1970s however, saw a major cultural shift in the American society. The emerging of the New Age movement and the anti-establishment counterculture of the Vietnam era gave rise to the popularity of everything mythical and unconventional, rebellious, spiritual, liberating and empowering. The '70s were the time of mind-altering drugs, Huxley's *Doors of perception* and the human potential movement that explored self-actualization, the highest level in the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This was the time when the service economy started to dominate over manufacturing, birth rates started to decline, and divorce rates started to rise (Twenge, Campbell, 2009: 52). This was also the period when the formulation *SBNR* first became popular as a term to describe the popular *spiritual seekers* of the time (Bahan, 2015).

Although it is not possible to pinpoint an exact moment when this change took place, we can legitimately identify this decade as a beginning of what was to become nothing less than a narcissism epidemic that had a profound effect on millennials 30 years later. Nurtured by failed parenting strategies, fueled by celebrity culture and transmitted through social media (Twenge, Campbell, 2009) self-admiration became the cornerstone of millennial identity. Simultaneously, narcissism has proven to be very compatible with the consumerist logic of modern economies, where one's identity is defined by the products they consume. Christianity, having lost its monopoly as the main belief system,

now had an unfavorable position in the *open market of ideas.* Since religious moral was traditionally opposed to self-centeredness, religious organizations were not the places where millennials could fulfill their narcissistic needs (Twenge, Campbell, 2009). They became obsolete as they simply failed to fit in the new model of supply and demand.

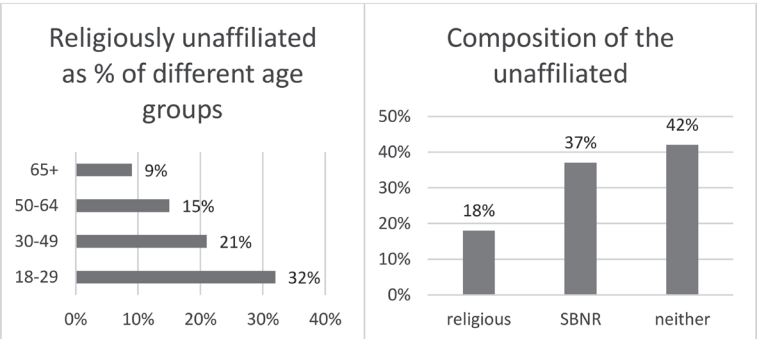
In addition to that, some millennials had less exposure to religious teachings, so their abandonment of religion is as much a result of religious illiteracy as of a rational decision based on perfect information. In Canada, a liberal country where the *social repercussions of not belonging to a religion* are not as serious as in the USA, the rise of the *nones* and the SBNR went hand-in-hand with the secularization of the public-school system[6] (Bahan, 2015). Aside from not being able to learn about religion in school, Canadian millennials were also less exposed to religion at home. This could have led to a certain *spiritual laziness,* which is why those who don't belong to any religion are also the least spiritual (Bahan, 2015).

As for those who reported being SBNR, this was the most appropriate formulation, given their generational preferences. Spiritualism *does not depend on any institutional setting,* it does not include any dogma, tradition or doctrine (Bahan, 2015). Being hyper-customizable and personal, it perfectly corresponds with Generation Y's individualist mindset. Also, the rise of the *nones* and the SBNR could also derive from perceiving religion to be synonymous with conservativism, and thus *judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political* (Funk, Smith, 2012), which is acknowledged even by scholars who are religiously affiliated and devoted[7] (Newmann, 2015).

[6] In 1982, Canada passed the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* by which all religious practices, instructions or festivities were banned from all public classrooms. From 1971 to 2011, the percent of Canadians who reported *no religion* rose from 1% to 24% with the tendency of growth (Bahan, 2015).

[7] Expectedly, ideological divisions of American politics seem to go along the lines of religious ones. The unaffiliated are *heavily Democratic in their partisanship and liberal ideology* since *six in ten describe themselves as Democrats or say they lean to the Democratic Party* (Funk, Smith, 2012: 25). On the other hand, *eight-in-ten self-identified white born-again/evangelical Christians claim to have voted for Donald Trump* in the 2016 elections (Smith, Martinez, 2016).

Chart 2: Percentage of religiously unaffiliated in different age groups in the USA and the composition of the unaffiliated



Source: Funk, Smith, 2012

It is clear that young people today *are more likely to be unaffiliated than previous generations at a similar age*: in the USA, one third of people under the age of 30 have no religious affiliation[8], compared to just 9% in the 65+ group. Moreover, just 17% of religious Americans are millennials[9], which is less than their share among SBNR's (23%) or among those who fall into the *neither* category (35%) (Funk, Smith, 2012: 10-45). With all this in mind, it is fair to say that the abandonment of religion mostly refers to the abandonment of Christian churches (Newmann, 2015).

The meaning of spirituality and the consequences of *information overload*

One of most easily overlooked facts regarding religiously unaffiliated people is that they are not necessarily completely uninterested in spiritual matters, since more than a third of America's

[8] The religiously unaffiliated (or *nones* as they are referred to) comprise of 3 subgroups: agnostic, atheist and *nothing, with* the last more often identifying as SBNR then the first two.

[9] The extent to which technology has penetrated everyday life can be observed from the fact that even religious millennials have *shifted their focus to…online presence* (religi-online) or alternative megachurches that are more like entertainment centers than classical churches (Welch, 2017).

46 million religiously unaffiliated identify as *spiritual, but not religious*[10] (Funk, Smith, 2012:10). With all the (political and institutional) differences between millennials and their religiously affiliated grandparents, a number of very interesting similarities about spiritual beliefs still remain. For instance, 46% of millennials feel a *deep sense of wonder about the universe at least once a week,* 55% *think about the meaning and purpose of life*, 76% *have a strong sense of gratitude and thankfulness* and 51% feel *a sense of spiritual well-being* (Alper, 2015). All these figures are roughly the same as those regarding the previous generations, indicating that millennials (or at least a significant number of them) are no less spiritual despite being less religious. Finally, a staggering 92% of SBNR people believe in the existence of God (Funk, Smith, 2012).

Of course, the most important question is how to precisely define millennial spirituality? What would be a common spiritual denominator in a generation where everything is about diversity and uniqueness? According to Samantha Bahan from the University of Victoria, the New Age conception of SBNR as *mixing of metaphysical beliefs and practices from different religious traditions* simply does not apply to modern conditions: by all evidence, millennials are not the *spiritual seekers* of the 1960s and '70s[11] (Bahan, 2015). Spiritual eclecticism which would include borrowed concepts and practices would still be a *system*, meaning that it would still require dedication and adherence to rules, which is something atypical for Generation Y. Instead, contemporary spiritualism is even more personalized: it is a completely individual *pursuit of something transcendent of the self*, which is why Bahan suggests that SBNR should be replaced with *postmodern secular spiritualism*[12] as a more adequate term (Bahan, 2015: 73).

[10] An interesting fact is that 15% of those who are affiliated also identify as SBNR (Funk, Smith, 2012: 44).

[11] The disinterest among the unaffiliated for any kind of standardized religious pattern is backed by empirical evidence, because 88% of those whose religion is *nothing in particular* are not actively seeking for a suitable religion (Funk, Smith, 2012: 10).

[12] As Samantha Bahan writes, earlier researchers have identified 4 discourses related to the SBNR: *the theistic package*, *the extra-theistic package*, *ethical spirituality,* and *belonging spirituality*. Those who best explain millennials are, in her opinion, the extra-theistic package (spiritual experienc-

Finally, one possible explanation for the aforementioned lack of commitment to the otherworldly could be the *information overload*, a phenomenon described almost 50 years ago by an American futurologist Alvin Toffler. When his book *Future Shock* was first published in 1971, hyper-consumerism was in the early stages and the internet was still 4 decades into the future. Still, his description of what later became a typically millennial problem seems almost prophetic and accurate today more than ever.

Unlike agricultural and industrial capitalism where identities were defined by production, in modern consumer capitalism where everything is about choice, identity is defined through consumption. This definition could also be valid when it comes to religion: consuming *religious products,* rather than belonging, is what defines one's religious identity. Through the decades, the development of information technologies increasingly diversified the *supply side* in all fields of life, including religion. But this opened a new problem, the one described by Toffler. With almost endless diversification and customization options, an individual consumer is put under tremendous stress, one that would have been completely unknown to a French farmer from the XIV century that had no dilemma *whether he should be a Catholic or not* (Newmann, 2015). Being bombarded with information from all sides while constantly worrying about the opportunity cost[13] leads to information overload and analysis-paralysis. Ironically, in an abundance of choices, a consumer, utterly overwhelmed with too much information to process, is reluctant to make a choice at all. Psychologically, such decision stress certainly takes its toll in form of regret, indecision, and unhappiness (Hererra, 2018). Toffler even ascribed the increase of LSD and heroin use to young people who were *frantically looking for ways to simplify their existence* (Тоффлер, 2002: 182).

es related to *something transcendental and extraordinary*, experienced *through seeking an individual life meaning*, but *unrelated to divinity, explanation or life after death*) and ethical spirituality, experienced through helping others and random acts of kindness (Bahan, 2015: 70).

[13] It was in 2003 that Patrick McGuiness coined the term FOBO (*fear of a better option*) that later became the widely accepted pop-culture slang for the psychological stress that a person faces when presented with an abundance of options (Herrera, 2018).

Spirituality, therefore, could be a modern coping mechanism against the crippling effects of overchoice in this field. When the information about virtually all religious teachings is just a *few clicks away*, a curious millennial, by opting to be spiritual, does not have to make a firm and irreversible life decision. SBNR is an umbrella-term, imprecise, vaguely defined, open to modifications and change along the way and a sort of a *Swedish buffet* of religious practices or values from which one can freely pick whichever part one sees suitable (or none at all). It could be nothing more than *another simple way of dealing with the growing complexity and general overstimulation* (Тоффлер, 2002: 182).

Conclusion

A suitable conclusion for any debate that discusses the questions of millennial religiousness and ideology could be a notion that the author holds to be impossible to overlook. It is an obvious fact that Generation Y's world is a world of an atomized individual; the world of the one who *bowls alone* and who enjoys more liberty from imposed collectivist norms than any previous one. It is a world where it is hard for a self-centered individual to conceptualize the idea that private life was once guided by institutions that are today seen as repressive, outdated, or even tyrannical.

What is also a fact is that the millennial credo of *do whatever you like* and *believe in whatever you want* seems to have come at a high price. Their disengagement from communal activities and social organizations has lessened their social capital (Funk, Smith, 2012: 30) and the natural process of real-life socialization that was normally occurring within religious (and other) institutions are now replaced with increased screentime, which, according to many psychologists, has a very detrimental effect on one's mental health. Seeking instant gratification by continual online presence made this cohort especially vulnerable to depression, anxiety and loneliness, whose adverse effects are comparable to those of smoking and obesity and the scale of which is such that it is sometimes labeled as the *silent plague* of Generation Y (Gil, 2014). On the *UCLA Loneliness scale* of 20 to 80, with 45.3 points millennials are second

only to post-millennials, who score 48.3 (Chatterjee, 2018). As the renowned Canadian psychologist Jordan B. Peterson put it simply, *loneliness is pain* (Peterson, 2018).

However, as Peterson also noticed, structure is something that people need and naturally seek (Peterson, 2018). Structure and rules are the default state of human existence. That leads to a logical question: when the millennial consumerism, narcissism, and social detachment reach their zenith, could we at some point expect a neotraditional backlash or a revival of conservative interest for the church life? It was not historically uncommon to see a pattern of liberal parents followed by conservative children who were shaped and disciplined by hardship. Such a change could be incited by globally significant political events, as it happened several times in modern history. After all, members of the *Greatest Generation* who fought the Second world war were the progeny of those who lived in the narcissistic *roaring twenties* (Twenge, Campbell, 2009: 195).

With the further development of information technologies as the main *infection point* for the spread of narcissism (Twenge, Campbell, 2009: 55), Generation Z is already overtaking millennials as the most affected by the aforementioned problems. Having this in mind, one could ask the following question: with millennials becoming the largest cohort in the electorate and the workforce, could they, having experienced precariousness and the effects of social detachment, look at the post-millennials in the same disapproving manner that they themselves were subjected to? This could lead to an even bolder assumption – that potentially, the First World millennials themselves (or a part of them, at least) could make a full circle, come to realize that it is the high time for a *reset* and set the stage for a major neotraditional comeback.

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