Cultural and Religious Identity among 18 to 45 year-olds in Canada: A Survey

Summary and Selected Findings



Peter Beyer, Alyshea Cummins, Scott Craig & Manvitha Singamsetty

RESEARCH TEAM



PETER BEYER is Professor in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. In the earlier parts of his career, Peter Beyer focused his research primarily on sociological theory of religion and on themes in Canadian religious history. Since the mid-1980s, however, his main interests have centred on the sociological understanding of the relations between religion and globalization and on religion in contemporary Canada. He has published *Religion and Globalization* (1994), *Religions in Global Society* (2006), *Religions in the context of Globalisation* (2013), co-authored *Growing up Canadian* (2013) with Rubina Ramji, and co-edited *Globalization*, *Religion and Culture* with Lori Beaman. His recent research focuses on religious diversity and multiculturalism in Canada, especially as concerns recent immigrants and the second generation of these immigrants.



ALYSHEA CUMMINS is a PhD Candidate in the Classics and Religious Studies department at the University of Ottawa. Cummins' doctoral research examines the fields of Contemporary Islam and Social Change, focusing specifically on how the Shi'i Imami Nizari Ismaili Muslim community is attempting to change the narrative of Islam in Canada. She was awarded the Religion and Diversity Project Graduate Student Research Grant for her work on the Canadian-Ismaili Muslim community. Cummins has been actively involved with the Survey since 2013, and has been a key contributor in developing and implementing the survey. In addition to co-authoring the publications that report the project's findings, Cummins has presented the project's findings both nationally and internationally between 2015 and 2017.

RESEARCH TEAM



SCOTT CRAIG is a PhD Candidate at the University of Ottawa in the Classics and Religious Studies department. Craig's research is focused on Zen Buddhism, religion online, and theories of cultural appropriation. Craig completed his BA and MA in Religious Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. His MA research focused on American Buddhism and theories of globalization. Craig has guest lectured on 'religion in modern day Japan', 'the history of Zen Buddhism in America', and 'Zen Buddhism on social media.' Craig has been a research assistant for this project since 2014. He has co-authored the publications that have thus far reported the results of the project and delivered conference papers to this effect on a number of occasions.



MANVITHA SINGAMSETTY is a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ottawa. Her work presents a critique of liberal multicultural approaches to diversity, and suggests instead alternatives based on non-western worldviews. Her wider research interests include classical Indian philosophy, social and political philosophy, specifically human-nonhuman interaction and Gandhi's non-violence. Singamsetty holds a BA and MA in Philosophy from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University, India, and a diploma in Japanese studies from Soka University, Tokyo, Japan. Singamsetty helped organize RDP's Conference -Living with Religious Diversity - in India in 2013. She was a participant at the 2015 workshop 'Journey to Elsewhere', held in Ottawa, and published 'A Ticket to Self-Discovery: Situating Yoga in Yoga Travel' as part of that workshop. Singamsetty has contributed to the Survey since 2015, and focuses on issues of non-religion.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. This report presents key findings from the Cultural and Religious Identity Among 18 to 45 yearolds in Canada Survey, a national online survey conducted between 2014 and 2016. The survey gathered data about cultural and religious identity construction from over 1,100 respondents.
- 2. The survey explored the ways that Canadians between 18 and 45, formed and expressed their cultural and religious and/or spiritual identities.
- 3. The survey asked open-ended questions rather than used a fixed idea of religion.
- 4. Respondents were asked to rate their level of religiousness and spirituality on a five-point scale. Participants were filtered to one of three silos depending on how they responded to these two scales. The three silos are: Religious, Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR) and Non-Religious.
- 5. From those participants who identified as religious, we were able to create two additional subcategories based on where they placed themselves on the religious scale; the standard religious (those who identified as being either a 4 or 5 out of 5 on the religious scale) and the moderately religious (those who identified as being a 3 out of 5).
- 6. The standard religious people identify in conformity with what we called the 'standard' idea of religion: they consider themselves to be religious and profess to belong to one and only one of the common world religions.
- 7. By contrast, those who identify as moderately religious, and those who identify as spiritual but not religious, were less likely to conform to this model: They were more likely to identify with more than one religion and to engage in a bricolage of beliefs and practices.
- 8. Those who identify as being neither spiritual nor religious generally did not identify with any particular religion (they were mostly 'nones'), they believe in none or only one or two of a list of common religious beliefs (such as life after death or souls), and are unlikely to engage in any kind of religious or spiritual practice (such as attending religious services or praying).
- 9. Although patterns of religious/spiritual identity construction differed between 18 to 30 year-olds and 31 to 45 year-olds, these differences were not dramatic (see graphs 2A and 2B), with the possibility that the most significant changes may have been introduced already within the baby-boom generation. There is a continuing decline in the proportion of people who have received religious socialization and an increase in the proportion of people who identify as non-religious.
- 10. The survey found that 'nones' (those who do not belong to or identify with a religion or religious tradition) are to be found in all the three silo groupings, but progressively more from the religious through the SBNR to the non-religious. The survey successfully identified the non-religious.
- 11. Over half of the non-religious respondents (about 1/5 of the sample) identified as atheists. The categories of agnostic, humanist, and non-religious were significantly less frequent.
- 12. Survey results point to the need for further study in order to a) find other ways of constructing religious and spiritual identity that the current version might have missed and, b) to discover more about the identity constructions of those who are non-religious.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This survey was designed to capture both standard and non-standard forms of religious identities: Surveys on religious identities have traditionally used standardized criteria for studying identity, which measure the degree of conformity to the characteristics of the dominant world religions. Seeking to go beyond this strategy, this survey was designed to capture religious identities assumptions formed on basic institutionalized religion but also designed to capture religious identities in all of their nuance and hybridities.



Contemporary research posits that we are living in an era of religious transformation, both in the forms and content of what is institutionalized and lived as religion (including the cognate 'spirituality'). The survey attempts to discover the different ways people describe their religious or non-religious lives in contemporary Canadian society.

With few exceptions, measurement of religiosity so far has been based on four suppositions about what religion is or can be.

First, religious identities are assumed to be grounded in the adherence to and practice of a particular and delimited set of religions.

Second, these religions are from a limited range of options, mostly a variety of Christianity or a form of Judaism or Islam. It is assumed that religion appears in the form of believing and practicing one of the three Abrahamic religions.

Third, people who construct their identities in terms of non-religious ways of being and seeing the world, are referred to as "nones," marginal, or unchurched.

Fourth, the strength of a person's religious identity is assumed to be measurable in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy as portrayed by the institutional religion, for instance through such categories as "service attendance," "prayer," and "belief" in orthodox propositions. Our survey was designed to move away from this standard approach and inquire into how young Canadians construct their religious and cultural identities. We aimed for a more flexible approach, but allowing for the possibility that the standard way of doing religion may (still) be the dominant one.

RESEARCH CONTEXT Continued

A. AIMS

- 1. To know more about how young Canadians imagine and construct their personal religious or spiritual identities and how they do so in a context of religious diversity;
- 2. To identify clusters of religious identity construction in the population at large;
- 3. To trace the possibly changing role of religions and religious traditions among the younger half of the sample (18-30) when compared to the older one (31-45);
- 4. To capture the multiple ways of constructing and maintaining religious/spiritual/cultural identity;
- 5. To take steps toward a) unpacking the category of "religious nones" and b) gaining a more focused understanding of both the "marginally" religious and the "spiritual but not religious" that have become the subject of a burgeoning literature in recent decades.

B. SURVEY STRUCTURE

- 1. The survey had a triple structure, meaning that respondents were asked somewhat different sets of questions depending on how they answered two central questions: "Do you consider yourself to be religious?" immediately followed in all cases by "Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?"
- 2. "Religious" and "spiritual" were therefore the core concepts around which respondents were to tell us about their religious/spiritual identities or other way of characterizing their identities.
- 3. The religious and spiritual questions asked for answers on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 5 ("very").
- 4. Based on their answers to this five-point scale, participants were channelled into one of the three silos: religious, spiritual but not religious (SBNR) or non-religious.
- 5. Each silo had many of the same questions worded differently to account for the three different orientations, and some questions that were unique to each silo.
- 6. Participants were all asked if they identified with one or more religions, but only after the survey had sorted respondents into the three groups.
- 7. As a starting point, we asked people whether they considered themselves religious or spiritual (regardless of how they defined these terms) and to what degree, in order to identify distinct clusters of religious identity.

RESEARCH CONTEXT Continued

- 8. Open-ended questions were used to prompt participants to describe their religious beliefs and practices in their own words. The survey therefore did not presume anything about such content.
- 9. Each question allowed for further explanation of the respondent's answer, generally in the form of "please specify" or "please elaborate/explain if you wish".
- 10. Participants were able to identify with one or more religions. For "religious" people, this question was presented as a series of tick-boxes which corresponded to the major religions present in Canadian society according to decennial Canadian censuses, followed by an "other, please specify" option. For the other two silos, this question took the form of an openended answer. All forms of the question included the explicit possibility of no answer or the answer of "none", including for the religious silo.
- 11. The survey began with demographic and cultural questions; only well into the survey were the "religious" and "spiritual" questions with their subsequent silos of questions asked. This design allowed the survey to seem to be "not just about religion" and thus encouraged the participation of non-religious or barely religious respondents. (In this regard, it may be noted that a significant number of participants stopped answering questions when they encountered the "religious" question, rendering their surveys incomplete and unusable.)

C. DEMOGRAPHICS

- The sample was not random or representative. Primary recruitment strategies that included Facebook groups and the researcher's academic networks resulted in skewing in several directions (e.g. Pagans were out of proportion relative to their presence in the larger Canadian population, significantly more female respondents, more Muslim respondents than for any other non-Christian religion, etc.)
- 2. The survey sample thus can tell something about the range of identities but does not speak to their relative distribution in the Canadian population.
- 3. There were a total of about 1,100 usable responses to the survey, 911 of which were in the target age range of 18 to 45. 50 follow-up interviews were conducted with survey participants, and 41 interviews were conducted with respondents who participated in previous research projects on the second generation of post-1970 immigration to Canada. These latter were recruited and interviewed at a time which corresponded to 5 or 10 years after their initial participation in the previous projects. Analysis of these latter is ongoing to date (October 2017).
- 4. Among the 911 respondents between 18 and 45 years old, 588 identified as female, 311 as male, and 11 as transgender/other.

RESEARCH CONTEXT Continued

- 5. 551 were between 18 and 30 years old; the remaining 360 were between 31 and 45 years old.
- 6. Among the 18 to 30 year-olds, 323 put themselves in the **religious silo** (220 female, 99 male, 4 trans/other); 100 in the **SBNR silo** (76 female, 21 male, 2 trans/other); and 128 in the **non-religious silo** (77 female, 49 male, 2 trans/other).
- 7. There were 360 responses from 31 to 45 year-olds, 230 put themselves in the **religious silo** (146 female, 83 male, 1 trans/other), 58 in the **SBNR silo** (41 female, 17 male, 1 trans/other), and 71 in the **non-religious silo** (28 female, 42 male, 1 trans/other).



- Overall, there were significant correlations between the responses to the core "religious" and "spiritual" questions and the way people constructed their religious identities more concretely.
- The categories of "religious" and "spiritual" relate to one another in positive ways. Most people
 who consider themselves religious also consider themselves spiritual; for the majority of
 people, the two concepts are closely related.
- Looked at in reverse, the proportion of respondents who were 'religious' but not spiritual was tiny: in our sample only 41 of the 553 'religious' respondents fit this description. In terms of religious identity construction religious people are almost always also spiritual, but the reverse is not always the case.
- The survey found that religions still played a consistent role in the identities of a majority of the respondents. This was measured in three ways - whether a respondent identified with one or more religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and others), whether they were raised in one or more of these religions, and whether their identification translated itself into standard beliefs and practices.
- Within the three silo categories, 94% of the 'religious' identified with one or more religious traditions, and only about 7% of them said that they identified with more than one religion. The majority of the latter as well as of those who did not identify with a religion at all indicated that they were only moderately religious, suggesting that considering oneself highly religious usually means strong identification with a single one of the standardly recognized (world) religions.
- For the **non-religious**, religions and religious traditions played a smaller role. Such identification was not wholly absent among them, but two thirds did not identify with a religion, and among those who did, that connection was mostly tenuous, a question of "family background" or "culture," and not of religious commitment. One quarter of the non-religious respondents who did identify with a religion also declared themselves atheist.
- Those who are identified in other research (including the Canadian census) as "religious nones" include a number of people who actually consider themselves to be religious or spiritual. Thus, in our sample, 4% of the highly religious did not identify with any religion, whether through their beliefs and practices or by self-identification. This percentage increased as we moved toward the less and non-religious groupings: 14% of the moderately religious were "nones", and then 51% and 64% of the SBNRs and non-religious respectively. Among young adults in Canada, it may be that standard ways of measuring religious identity misclassify a significant minority of the population either as religious or non-religious.
- There appears to be distinct clusters of religious identity construction, and three distinct
 clusters of positive religious/spiritual identity construction. There are, first, the standard
 religious; second, the moderately or eclectically standard religious; and, third, the
 spiritual but not religious. Few of the positive religious/spiritual respondents did not fit into
 one of these three categories; that includes those who identified with more than one religion.

STANDARD RELIGIOUS

The **Standard religious** exhibited these characteristics:

- They rated themselves on average not only highly religious, but also as highly spiritual.
- The vast majority of them identified with one and only one religion or religious tradition. The largest groups in the sample were Roman Catholics (96), Protestants (92), Muslims (95), and Neo-Pagans (90). (See Graph 1)
- Over 90% of them held this identification to be very important to them. The vast majority exhibited features standardly identified with those religions as the way that they expressed this identity. For example, Catholics gave mass attendance, prayer, and partaking of the sacraments; they believed in God, Jesus, heaven, and hell, often with reference to the magisterium. Protestants attended church services, engaged in regular prayer, and studied the Bible; they believed in God and in Jesus, the sinfulness of humans, heaven, resurrection, and other similarly familiar beliefs from the standard Christian repertoire. Muslims observed the five pillars, above all regular prayer and fasting during Ramadan; they believed in God (Allah) and the Qur'an, the prophets, (especially Muhammad as messenger), in angels, afterlife, and the last judgment.
- This cluster claimed to believe all or most of the major beliefs that they felt belonged to their tradition. The beliefs they explicitly indicated were almost always those standardly associated with the religion in question.
- The standardly religious were not just orthodox, they were also orthoprax: they engaged in exceedingly few practices not usually associated with their religion. (See Graph 1)

MODERATELY RELIGIOUS

The **Moderately or Eclectically Religious** exhibited these characteristics:

- They were far more likely than their more religious counterparts to identify with more than one religion or with none at all: 19% of them identified explicitly with more than one religion, and 14% identified with none.
- They were less likely to practice and believe all or most of the standard items of the standard religions with which the majority of them identify. (See Graph 1)
- They were more likely to include 'unorthodox' beliefs (e.g. reincarnation) or practices (e.g. meditation) not associated with the standard religion with which they identify (mostly Christian, some Muslims, and others).
- They were more likely to say that their religious identity was a matter of upbringing, culture, or that it was just something that they have always done.

MODERATELY RELIGIOUS Continued

- They were much more likely to exhibit low levels of what they identify as religious practice of any kind. This is why they are often referred to as "marginals".
- Overall, this group believes and practices differently. Although a good number of them
 listed the same sort of standard beliefs as the standard religious, a substantial number
 deviated from such lists, giving answers like "do good and stop others from doing bad, be
 patient and pray and don't lose hope" or "any beliefs that promotes a general acceptance
 and love for mankind is important, no matter what the religion."
- In terms of actual practice, about two-thirds said that they did practice, listing mostly praying, fasting, and attending religious services. A substantial number, however, also said that they did so only selectively and occasionally.
- The significant minority among the Moderately or Eclectically Religious who claimed multiple religious identification gave, as one might expect, an even greater variety of beliefs and practices associated with their religious identities. These ranged from "ahimsa" to the Wiccan rude to "belief in a Creator," "ideals of social justice," or "environmental stewardship." Most said that they engaged in religious practices, such as meditation. Others included a varied range: "work with spirits," "Charity, sexual and dietary restrictions, trying to live honourably using any teacher as a model (Mohammed, Jesus, or Buddha)," or "speaking to God on a sporadic basis." For the most part this group was eclectic; choosing from various religious sources, in almost every respect.
- The 'none' subgroup among Moderately or Eclectically Religious, who did not identify with a tradition or religion, tended to list an even greater variety of beliefs and practices. Many did not list any. Overall, our strongest conclusion about this group is that they feel somewhat religious, but this feeling does not translate into specific and identifiable practicing or believing.

SBNR: SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

The **Spiritual But Not Religious** exhibited the following characteristics:

- A smaller proportion identified with one or more religion, usually with the same standard religions as the other groups. A few had idiosyncratic ways of describing their tradition, such as "love, yoga" or "Magyar spirituality."
- They were far less likely to be orthodox or orthoprax with regard to their affiliation to a religious tradition, to claim to have essential beliefs and practices, or to follow all of more of those prescribed beliefs and practices when they do.
- Correspondingly, they were much more likely to have non-standard beliefs and practices, especially when compared to the Moderately or Eclectically Religious. (See Graph 1)
- A good portion were not regular in any sort of practice.

SBNR: SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS Continued

- Very few claimed to belong to any defined spiritual group or community.
- Belief and practice items included "the sacredness of all life, and thus responsibility/compassion toward all," "smudging, gardening (reaping and replenishing the earth)," or "respect of intangible parts of nature, life, cosmos." A few subscribed to standard religious beliefs like the Buddhist four noble truths or Jesus as savior.
- Only about half of the SBNRs engaged in what they consider spiritual or religious practices.
- Overall, the SBNRs' spirituality distinguishes itself in being far more diverse, with no consistent convergence or even dominant aspects.

NON-RELIGIOUS/NON-SPIRITUAL

The Non-Religious and Non-Spiritual exhibited these characteristics:

- The majority, 53%, identified themselves explicitly as atheists.
- They had a low level of identification with religions, and the majority of those that did so identify, have a tenuous, cultural, or otherwise vague connection to them.
- They have a low level of adherence to a set of common religious beliefs that the survey asked of all respondents, whether they considered themselves religious/ spiritual or not. Thus, few believed in god or spirits (and none of the declared atheists, as one might expect), in life after death, in any form of salvation or in reincarnation. The only belief item to receive more than a 20% positive response among them was that in souls. (See Graph 2)
- They are less likely to have been raised in a religion than participants in any of the other clusters.
- They have a far lower level of reporting extraordinary experiences, even if this level is not zero. In other words, they lack the identification, belief and practice, and also religious/spiritual experience. Nonetheless, in all clusters, the older sub-cohort is significantly more likely to report such experiences than the younger one, perhaps a function of age. (See Graph 3)
- Only a minority belongs to groups of any kind; less than 1/5 of the atheists belong to atheist groups.
- Of the 198 respondents who fell in this cluster, half declared expressly that they were atheists, with the rest declaring a variety of non-religious identities such as agnostic, humanist, or simply non-religious.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

- The data lend some support for the idea that the SBNRs and non-religious are an increasing portion of the young adult population, especially if they were not raised in a religion, but often even if they were. Among the young adult SBNRs, only 71% were raised in a religion. Among the non-religious, 66% were raised in a religion. Thus, according to this sample, the large majority of Canadian young adults were still raised in a religion, overall about 80% of them; but one is far more likely to become a non-religious adult if one is not raised in religion. Of the about 20% of the sample not so raised, about three-fourths end up as SBNR or non-religious.
- Significantly more of the older adults were raised in a religion than among the younger adults, and somewhat lower percentages of the older adults are not religious people now. Thus, religion seems to be playing a lesser role among the young adults when compared to the next older cohorts.
- With respect to cultural identity and its relation to religious/spiritual identity, **cultural identity** among Canada's young adults is on average more important than religious or spiritual identity, just as the average young adult is slightly more spiritual than they are religious. Second, the importance of cultural identity varies directly with the level and importance of religious and spiritual identity: the religious on average claim their cultural identity important to them more than the spiritual but not religious, and these in turn consider cultural identity more important than the non-religious. Culture, in other words, is not a substitute for religion or spirituality; it may be more accurate to say that culture is closer to being a component of religious and spiritual identity.
- Even though the survey was designed to avoid presupposing a traditional understanding of being religious, the standard model of being religious did in fact apply to a vast majority of respondents who claimed to be quite religious. Yet, the survey also found that a significant group of young Canadian adults - those who consider themselves not - or only moderately religious but may consider themselves to be quite spiritual - do not follow this standard model.
- There is a sizeable group in the Canadian population that does not identify as having a
 religious or spiritual identity. These individuals do not fit neatly into the category of 'religious
 nones,' as identified and described in other studies. Rather, they are people who do without
 religion, without the religious, and even without what they consider to be the spiritual.
- Because the response sample was not representative, little can be said with confidence about
 relative proportions. We can conclude that the set of clusters we have identified tell us
 something meaningful about the range of possibilities for putting one's religious
 identity (or lack of it) together. But we cannot confirm what other research has found, which
 is that the majority of the population is located in the moderate/eclectic to non-religious range,
 with a good minority of SBNRs and an increasing growth of the non-religious and non-spiritual.
- This survey has identified detailed clusters of identity formation: the framework of standard religious, moderately or eclectically religious, spiritual but not religious, and non-religious and non-spiritual gives space for expressing the breadth of responses and attempts to draw a nuanced portrait of each group.

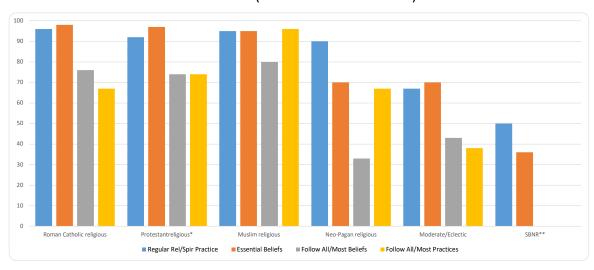
NEXT STEPS



The survey revealed the many different ways of constructing religious identities in the Canadian population, especially ones that the results hinted at but were not able to identify or isolate. In particular, the lack of substantive questions of the non-religious leaves open the possibility that this seemingly growing group may be constructing positive identities that replace religion and spirituality with something else. Thus, next versions of the survey will test for precisely this sort of positive non-religious identity with questions specifically designed to discern it. In addition, there may be other kinds of identities that are neither non-religious nor so clearly religious or spiritual. To test for this possibility, the next version of the survey will seek to isolate those respondents that indicate in one fashion or another that their identity 'doesn't fit' anywhere on the religious or spiritual spectrums. The next iteration of the survey will also use a representative or random selection of the population, and this will require different recruiting techniques.

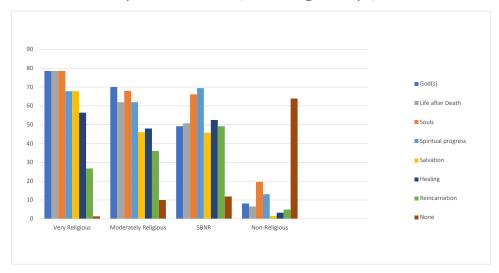
The project has only just been completed. Future reports and publications will incorporate follow-up interview data and data from the longitudinal interviews which will permit partial insight into changes in religious identity constructions over time, especially from emerging adults (ages 18-24) to young adulthood (ages 28-34).

Graph 1: Beliefs and Practices (% within clusters)



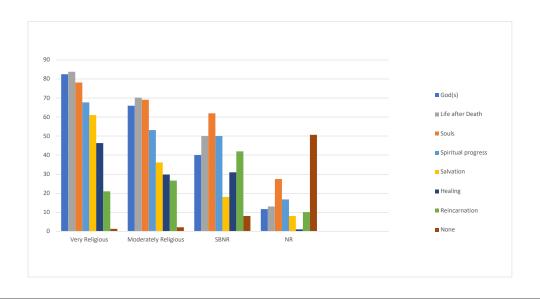
^{*&}quot;Protestant" includes those who indicated only "Christian".

Graph 2A: Religious and Spiritual Beliefs, 31-45 year-olds (% of group)

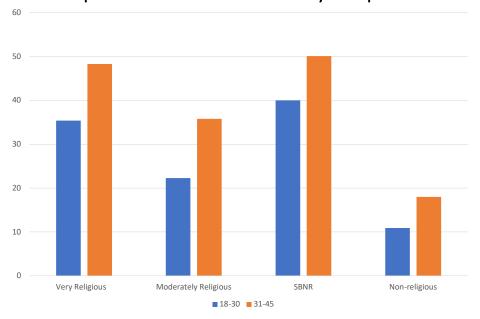


^{**} SBNRs did not belong to groups, therefore there are no data for following beliefs and practices of group.

Graph 2B: Religious and Spiritual Beliefs, 18-30 year-olds (% of group)



Graph 3: Extraordinary experiences



PUBLICATIONS

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY SURVEY PROJECT:

- Peter Beyer, Alyshea Cummins and Scott Craig, "Measuring Religious Identity Differently: A Canadian Survey Study," Bulletin for the Study of Religion 45, 1 (2016): 10-15.
- Peter Beyer, Alyshea Cummins and Scott Craig, "Religious/Spiritual Identity among Younger Adults in Canada: A Complex Portrait," in Elisabeth Arweck and Heather Shipley, eds., Young People and the Diversity of (Non)Religious Identities in International Perspective. Berlin: Springer, 2018.
- Peter Beyer, Alyshea Cummins and Scott Craig, "Religious Identity Construction among Young Adults in Canada: The Religious, the Spiritual, and the Non-Religious," In Paul Gareau and Spencer Bullivant, eds., Youth at the Intersections of Religion and Identity: Canadian and International Contexts. Leiden: Brill. Forthcoming.



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