

## ABSTRACT

### Modding My Religion: Exploring the Effects of Digital Technology on Religion and Spirituality

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Digital technology has greatly altered daily life and social institutions. While studies on the Internet and social media are growing, few researchers have explored how using these technologies may impact religion and spirituality. This dissertation uses three different datasets and combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies to show that digital technologies of the past two decades reshape American religion and spirituality. I argue that digital technology underwrites a fluid, self-reliant, and experimental approach to religion and spirituality that can be collectively understood as “modding.” Already a popular expression in the technology community, modding here implies reconfiguring religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to suit individual, customized preferences. In the substantive chapters of this dissertation, I find evidence of individuals modding their religion in three distinct ways: (1) social media users are more likely to think it is acceptable to pick and choose their religious beliefs and endorse the practice of multiple religions, independent of what their religious tradition teaches; (2) technology writers at the popular monthly magazine *Wired* export a narrative that views technology as the

natural fulfillment of traditional religious beliefs and ideals; and (3) Internet users are buffered from religion, which I posit by finding that higher levels of Internet use correspond with lower levels of prayer, reading sacred texts, attending religious services, and considering religion personally important. Internet use also correlates positively with being an atheist and being religiously unaffiliated. Taken together, these results suggest that the proliferation of digital technology will continue to impact the religious and spiritual landscape in the postindustrial world.

Modding My Religion: Exploring the Effects of Digital Technology on Religion and Spirituality

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Department of Sociology

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that will punctuate a longstanding friendship and shared interest in the future of religion, technology, and culture.

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## DEDICATION

To my parents and grandparents

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Two research questions are central to this dissertation. First, what are the social and cultural effects of new technologies that have become increasingly adopted in everyday life? Second, what accounts for some of the recent changes witnessed across the North American religious landscape? At first blush, these questions have nothing to do with one another. Indeed, in the tradition of Western social science, technology and religion have often been viewed as diametric opposites. Secularization theorists have long posited that religion, characterized by its ancient practices and supra-empirical beliefs, would gradually recede as science and technology proceed to uncover the truths of the known universe. However, the curious persistence of religion in the late modern world forces scholars to reconsider age-old assumptions and find evidence for new theories at the intersection of religion, technology, and culture.

With these research questions in mind, this dissertation will explore the cultural values implicit in digital technology and the effects of Internet use and social media on American religious beliefs, narratives, and practices. Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, I will shed light on how the use of certain technology fosters mindsets that potentially alter the religious landscape. While many scholars recognize that digital technology has transformed social life, fewer have explored its effects on religion and spirituality. And yet, if the technologies of the last two decades have disrupted everything from world politics to our attention spans, how could religious institutions remain unfazed? They cannot, as I will argue, and the

foregoing chapters will illustrate some of the recent changes that have previously gone undetected.

Some obstacles naturally surface in studying the cultural aspects of technology and its effects on American religiosity. First, there is the problem of keeping pace with new technology. Just as bits of information fly across circuit boards at increasing speeds, the rate of adopting new technologies in homes and workplaces is equally impressive. For example, in the short span between 1950 and 1959, the diffusion of television sets in American homes went from 10 percent to 90 percent, which Robert Putnam (2000:221) writes is “probably the fastest diffusion of a technological innovation ever recorded.” Today, the Internet is on par with television in terms of its rate of diffusion (Horrigan 2000) and may be the most popular technology in American homes. Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey (2017) show that the average American spends more time on the Internet today than watching television. Academia, on the other hand, is not known for its speediness, and researchers are frequently playing catch up when trying to assess the social and cultural impact of new technologies. Thus, as Dimaggio et al. (2001:308) explained in their early analysis, “The Internet presents researchers with a moving target.”

Further, the study of American religion presents its own challenges for researchers wishing to understand its place in modernity. Low response rates, nonrandom sampling, and funding issues pose real challenges for researchers who rely exclusively on survey data (Wuthnow 2015). At the same time, undisclosed ideological commitments often creep into the research process, obscuring the reality of the religious landscape and creating a skeptical American public (Smith 2014).

Qualitative studies are no less susceptible to these tendencies and have the added difficulty of providing broadly representative results that are generalizable to other religious groups. As much as possible, I have tried to overcome these obstacles by drawing from three independent data sources, using mixed methodologies, and disclosing the theoretical commitments that guide and help explain the various results.

Despite these obstacles, then, this dissertation will proceed to explore the culture of digital technology and its impact on American religiosity in three discrete chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter two will examine the consequences of social media use for the religious beliefs of emerging adults. Using panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, I argue that social networking sites such as Facebook underwrite a process of religious customization and experimentation that challenges the way religious traditions are typically adhered to and understood. In Chapter three, I turn my focus to popular media narratives that feature technology and its complex relationship to religion. Zeroing in on Silicon Valley and the popular monthly publication *Wired* magazine, I randomly sample articles from 2001-2012 for their content and various discourses. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how elite technology journalists export various understandings of religion and narrate its relationship to science and technology in their writing. Chapter four examines the links between religiosity and Internet use with data from the fifth wave of the Baylor Religion Survey. This chapter concretizes Charles Taylor's (2007) theoretical concept of the buffered self in his magisterial work, *A Secular Age*, and aims to identify more precisely certain practices and time commitments that are associated with declines in American religiosity.

Before getting into the meat of this dissertation, let me briefly say something about its title and the overall theory that informs it. Each of the following chapters posits that the technologies which have risen to prominence in the last two decades traffic in new ways of thinking about religion. Though I have discussed some of these developments in earlier publications (McClure 2017b), this dissertation elaborates on these possibilities and argues that the Internet and social media promote a certain disposition towards the world—one marked by fluidity, self-reliance, and experimentation. In some corners of the tech community, these characteristics can be collectively described as “modding,” which is slang for reconfiguring something—usually hardware or software—so that it can perform a new function and achieve an end different from that of the original designer. Modular religion, then, is an approach to religion that prioritizes the individual’s ability to choose whatever s/he believes is true rather than letting priests, pastors, religious institutions, or traditional orthodoxies dictate what to believe. Armed with the social and information technologies of the day, modern individuals inhabit a cultural environment that displaces religious institutions as the ultimate arbiters of truth. While earlier research has identified religious individualism as a prevailing feature of the American religious landscape (Bellah et al. 1985; Madsen 2009; Roof 1993, 2001; Wuthnow 1998, 2010), few have sought to connect the rise of individualism with commonly used technologies or argue that they intensify religious individualism.

Along these theoretical lines, this dissertation maintains that digital technology and social media nurture an anthropocentric attitude toward religion. Some scholars have already posited that the conception of God as an external, transcendent deity is



gradually being replaced by an inner-directed, spiritual search (Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007), and Taylor's (2007, 2003) concept of the buffered self, which I draw from heavily in Chapter four, is a further example of how modern American religion is modular, deinstitutionalized, and subject to individual remaking. This does not mean that the Internet is a purely secularizing force or devoid of religious content,<sup>1</sup> but it does suggest that the shift toward greater religious pluralism and individualism has accelerated in part because of digital technologies that give individuals more control over their lives, allow for experimentation with multiple lifestyles and worldviews, and promote a fluid, relativistic approach to truth and morality (Bellah et al. 1985; Berger 2014; Madsen 2009; Roof 2001; Smith and Denton 2005; Wuthnow 2010).

Though no dissertation conclusively puts to bed the questions it raises, my hope is that this project galvanizes interest in the role technology plays in the constantly shifting American religious landscape. If these ideas and the findings contained therein take root, it could hopefully mark the beginning of a larger research program and career that investigates more closely the fascinating intersection between religion, technology, and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> To the contrary, Chapter three intends to shed light on how writers at *Wired* magazine appropriate religious and spiritual vocabulary in their discussions of technology and its future impact.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults

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#### *Abstract*

The rapid adoption of social networking sites (SNS) has prompted educators, parents, and researchers to consider the role SNS play in social life. Few scholars, however, have examined the effects of SNS on the religious beliefs of emerging adults. Drawing from Peter Berger's concept of "plausibility structures" and his theory of pluralism, I explore whether young adults who use SNS are more likely to condone religious pluralism and syncretism. Using panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, I find that emerging adults who use SNS are more likely to think it is acceptable to pick and choose their religious beliefs, and practice multiple religions independent of what their religious tradition teaches, but they are not more likely to believe all religions are true. These findings suggest that exposure to broader networks through social media leads to increased acceptance of syncretistic beliefs and practices.

## *Introduction*

With the meteoric rise of social networking sites, people now have unprecedented access to new ideas, beliefs, and practices. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter create a marketplace of ideas that encourage and facilitate the sharing and exchanging of information. Data from the Pew Research Center shows that 72% of adults who use the Internet also use social networking sites (Brenner and Smith 2013). Social networking sites are most popular among young adults ages 18-29, many of whom grew up using them.<sup>1</sup> In fact, 89% of young adults report using social networking sites (SNS) with some frequency (Brenner and Smith 2013).

Despite their usefulness and popularity, these new technologies can produce unintended consequences. As Schultze (2004) and Warschauer (2003) have independently observed, recent changes in technology have accelerated the growth of the pornography and gambling industries. Other studies have shown that Internet use may underwrite antisocial behaviors for adolescents (Wang et al. 2012) and that SNS are cited as contributing factors in divorce proceedings (Valenzuela, Halpern, and Katz 2014). Parents especially fret about the latent effects of modern technologies (Dill 2012). According to these concerned parents, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter not only expose adolescents to a plurality of worldviews that may be at odds with what they have learned at home, but they may also distract them from their schoolwork, inhibit outdoor recreation, and increase nefarious behaviors like “cyberbullying” and

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<sup>1</sup> Following danah m. boyd and Nicole Ellison’s (2007) definition, I understand social networking sites to be “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

“sexting.” As a result, new social technologies often pose a threat to parents who wish to impart specific moral or religious teachings to their children.

What these concerns suggest is that SNS may undermine “plausibility structures” (Berger and Luckmann 1967), which Peter L. Berger (2014:31) defines as “the social context in which any cognitive or normative definition of reality is plausible.” This paper contends that new social technologies such as social networking sites, when in the hands of emerging adults, could challenge preexisting plausibility structures and have a syncretizing effect on one’s construal of religious truth claims. Put differently, emerging religious adults who are frequent users of social media technology may see value in multiple religious perspectives.

Although previous researchers have explored the effects of social networking on our well-being (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Hampton et al. 2011; Kross et al. 2013; Nie and Erbring 2002; Wellman 2001), no one has yet examined whether SNS are associated with religious pluralism or syncretism. In this paper, I ask and answer two questions.

Research Question 1: Does using SNS affect young adults’ propensity to believe that many religions may be true simultaneously?

Research Question 2: Does using SNS make emerging adults more likely to accept religious syncretism, measured by the respondent’s approval of (1) picking and choosing religious beliefs that run contrary to what their or someone else’s religious tradition dictates and (2) practicing multiple religions?

For analytical purposes, the first question asks whether SNS users are more likely to be religious pluralists and see all religions as fundamentally equal,<sup>2</sup> while the

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<sup>2</sup> In the philosophy of religion, this position is also sometimes referred to as “perennialism” (Mercadante 2014). While religious pluralism is recognized to have many meanings (Berger 2014), I

latter questions measure different degrees of respondents' openness to religious syncretism—the idea that it is acceptable to pick and choose among a wide variety of beliefs and practice multiple religions.

### *Trends and Theories at the Intersection of Religion and Technology*

The continued decline of religiosity for American adolescents in recent years has sparked a conversation about the causes of such changes (Twenge et al. 2015). Even though religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of many emerging adults, researchers have noted significant changes in their beliefs and affiliation patterns compared to previous generations (Smith and Denton 2005; Smith and Snell 2009). Putnam and Campbell (2012), for example, have found that 35-40% of the American population switches religious traditions, suggesting that emerging adults feel quite free to abandon the religious tradition of their parents.

A substantial aspect of these changing patterns involves the tendency to support religious pluralism and syncretism. In particular, Robert Wuthnow (1998, 2007, 2009, 2010) argues that American spirituality since the 1950s has changed. Brought on by political developments such as the Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished national quotas and contributed to the influx of Eastern religions, as well as recent changes in mass communications, America is now a more religiously diverse country than ever. As a result, Wuthnow argues, young adults are not only exposed to greater religious diversity than their parents were, but today they are much more inclined to be “spiritual tinkerers,” cutting and pasting from the panoply of religions to

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make use of it in this paper because it is a more recognizable expression than perennialism. Thus, in this paper pluralism means believing that all religions are functionally the same.

customize their own tailor-made spirituality (Wuthnow 2010:13). Likewise, Pearce and Denton (2011) explore the concept of religious pluralism and find that emerging adults constantly readjust their religious and spiritual preferences. Similarly, Trinitapoli's (2007) work on the religious exclusivism of U.S. adolescents highlights the tensions between professing beliefs in a particular religious tradition and accepting multiple, diverse traditions. Fearful of being perceived as intolerant or narrow-minded, many adolescents soften their exclusivist claims by acknowledging the limitations of what they know about other religions.

In light of the changing religious and technological landscapes, the previous observations can be helpfully explained by applying the theoretical work of Peter Berger (Berger 1969, 1980, 2014; Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974; Berger and Luckmann 1967). Not only do American youth maintain different religious beliefs in comparison to previous generations, but they are also generally the quickest adopters of new technologies (Brenner and Smith 2013). In his more recent theory of pluralism, Berger (2014) argues that modernity is the seedbed for multiple ways of thinking about religion. Drawing from Eisenstadt (2000), Berger argues that pluralistic societies require strategies that defend, dismiss, or attempt to reconcile potentially opposing truth claims. Thus, for some this means religious exclusivism, or the idea that only one religion is true. For others, however, the awareness of so many different ways to perceive ultimate reality suggests that there is very little truth to any religion. For others still, pluralism means that all religions have some truth to them, and the major world religions each give partial expression to that divine truth. These responses—

exclusivism, secularism, and pluralism—make up three of the dominant religious strategies in the modern world.

A fourth religious strategy adopted by many is a syncretistic one. Here, according to Berger (2014), the crucial underlying theme of modernity is the steady increase and proliferation of human choices that, in turn, alter the way we perceive reality. In his own words, “Modernization leads to a huge transformation in the human condition *from fate to choice*” (2014:5; emphasis added). From this perspective, the existence of many religions leads neither to an inevitable secular world order, nor a stronger and more competitive religious marketplace (Stark and Finke 2000). Rather, an increasingly pluralistic environment makes for a world in which we expect and tolerate one’s freedom to choose. This modern expectation permits a religious mentality that can be rightfully called syncretistic because, while not denying the importance of one particular religious tradition, it encourages people to pick and choose which religious beliefs and practices they adopt. In other words, the idea that a singular religious tradition should dictate what its adherents believe or practice becomes anathema. Instead, the modern ethos nurtures the consumer’s right to tinker with numerous religious beliefs and practices to see which, if any, work for a given period of time.

Berger’s assertion that the modernist enterprise facilitates human autonomy and choice is one with which few would disagree. But what role does technology play in producing the modern mindset? Since technological shifts are inherently social processes that act as catalysts and carriers of modernization (Berger et al. 1974), the values embedded in the technologies we use get internalized subjectively. Thus, as

Berger and his coauthors (1974:30) contend, humans develop “a problem-solving and deeply technological attitude [which] may carry over into the manner in which the individual looks at politics, the education of his children or the management of whatever psychological difficulties he may be afflicted with.” Of course, however, human participation is required for technology to have these hypothetical effects. In and of itself, technology is not an independent actor capable of underwriting religious or social changes. Thus, a dialectical relationship between technology and its users exists.

Although the potential for applying these theories has existed for some time, social scientists have only just begun to explore the possible connections between religion and technology. As Campbell (2005, 2010) has observed, until recently few researchers have examined the connections between religion and the Internet despite the fact that many people interact with both on a daily basis. The research that does exist, however, suggests ambiguous connections between technology and religion. For example, Bobkowski (2008) found that Facebook users were hesitant to disclose their religious affiliation, beliefs, or behaviors online and preferred instead offline contexts in which to reveal their religious identity. In a follow-up study, Bobkowski and Pearce (2011) showed that 62% of MySpace users disclosed their religious affiliation online, but only 30% spoke about religious matters elsewhere on their profile page. Jansen, Tapia, and Spink (2010) collected data on over five million Web searches from 1997-2005 and found that Internet users regularly searched for information on established religions online. Arguing that increases in Internet use negatively impact religiosity, Allen Downey (2014) has provocatively argued that increased Internet use accounts



for about 20% of the observed decrease in religious affiliation since 1990. While these studies are profitable in their own right, they do not address how SNS may affect the religious beliefs of emerging adults.

At issue here is whether SNS actually expose users to new ideas and perspectives or whether they isolate users and reinforce preexisting perspectives. Barry Wellman (2001) argues that the Internet is the ideal medium to help extend people's existing networks and strengthen social ties. From Wellman's perspective, the exponential growth of Facebook and other SNS opens up lines of communication and social capital in previously unimaginable ways. Unlike television, which may weaken civic engagement (Putnam 1995, 2000), the Internet is an interactive mass medium that catalyzes social interaction and helps otherwise isolated individuals communicate over long distances (Bargh and McKenna 2004). As evidence for the role of the Internet in expanding social networks, Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found in one study that 74 percent of people who met a romantic partner online had no prior connection to them.

Not all researchers believe the Internet is helpful in expanding social networks, however. Since screen time demands individual attention and can be highly addictive for some, some scholars argue new media technologies may have the unintended effect of isolating us rather than bringing us together (Kross et al. 2013; Roberts, Yaya, and Manolis 2014; Song 2009; Sunstein 2009; Turkle 2011a, 2011b). Nie and Erbring (2002) showed with a national random sample of over 4,000 adults that a modest 2-5 hours of Internet activity per week displaced time ordinarily spent with friends and family, thus leading to decreased contact with one's social environment. Turkle's

(2011a, 2011b) qualitative work details how technological advances have resulted in many American teenagers and emerging adults experiencing difficulty sustaining meaningful relationships in a technologically wired age that encourages expansive (but not deep) connections with friends and voracious (but not focused) consumption of information. Alternatively, Sunstein (2009:xi) worries that the Internet creates “information cocoons” and “echo chambers” that only serve to intensify prior beliefs by encouraging users to seek out likeminded people online.

What impact technology has on individual social networks and capital may also be contingent on the individual’s preexisting characteristics. DiMaggio et al. (2001) suggest that what users do online depends in part on their established patterns of behavior. Put differently, the Internet exacerbates social isolation for some and enhances social capital for others. While their research focuses neither on SNS nor religion, it has implications for scholars wishing to understand the possible connections between SNS and religion. If SNS expand social networks and increase social capital, then they can potentially pluralize or syncretize religious beliefs. On the other hand, if SNS isolate individuals or reinforce previously held beliefs, then they likely have no pluralizing effects on religious beliefs. Given the tenor and implications of the literature, however, it seems more likely that modern social technologies underwrite pluralizing or syncretizing effects. From the foregoing discussion, I formulate and test the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>: SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to believe that many religions are true rather than believe either (a) only one religion is true, or (b) there is very little truth in any religion.

H<sub>2</sub>: SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for someone of a different religion to pick and choose which religious beliefs they adopt regardless of what their religious tradition teaches.

H<sub>3</sub>: SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for a member of their own religious tradition to practice other religions.

### *Data and Methods*

This project uses panel data from Waves 1, 3, and 4 of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR is a nationally representative sample that includes both telephone surveys and in-depth interviews. Wave 1 surveyed 3,290 English and Spanish speaking teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 as well as their parents. In the third wave, respondents were between the ages of 17-24, and researchers attempted to interview every respondent from the first two waves of the study. Data from Wave 4 of the survey were obtained between February 2013 and December 2013. Respondents at Wave 4 were ages 22-29. There were 2,144 complete responses with a 66% retention rate from Wave 1 (2002) and 81% participating in the previous three waves. While the first three waves were conducted over the telephone, Wave 4 used a combination of phone (15%) and online (85%) data collection. As for attrition, some respondents were overseas actively serving in the military or on mission trips during the most recent wave, making it difficult for researchers to locate every first wave respondent. Nonetheless, the research design of the NSYR is unique insofar as the survey questions ask a wide variety of religious and spiritual questions over a number of years.

### *Dependent Variables*

As a deductive study, this analysis uses three particular variables that each ask respondents about their relative openness to other religions. The first variable investigates whether SNS respondents are more likely to be exclusivists, pluralists, or secularists whereas the second two hypotheses measure religious syncretism (i.e., that one's religious beliefs and practices do not necessarily fall under the purview of a singular religious tradition). If Berger et al. (1974) are correct that technology is a pluralizing mechanism, SNS users should be more open to other religions than non-SNS users. Further, as Wuthnow (2010:13) explains, the primary religious outlook shared by America's young adults is that of "spiritual tinkering," or the belief that it is acceptable to pick, choose, and practice disparate and potentially contradictory belief systems. By combining these insights about technology and religion, this paper therefore examines whether SNS users are more inclined to adopt the kinds of pluralistic and syncretistic approaches to religion witnessed as of late (Roof 1993, 2001; Wuthnow 2010).

The binary and multinomial logistic regressions that follow test whether involvement and time spent on SNS at Wave 3 impact Wave 4 outcomes. The first dependent variable used in this analysis asks respondents to select a statement that best approximates their position regarding religious truth. The question states, "Which of the following statements comes closest to your own views about religion?" On the survey, respondents could answer, "Only one religion is true" (=1); "Many religions may be true" (=2); or "There is very little truth in any religion" (=3). Given the three answer choices, I have used multinomial logistic regressions to compare whether SNS

users are more likely than non-SNS users to be exclusivists (“Only one religion is true”), pluralists (“Many religions may be true”), or secularists (“There is very little truth in any religion”).

The second question that serves as a dependent variable states, “Some people think that it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole. Do you agree or disagree that this is okay?” Respondents were asked either to disagree (=0) or agree (=1) with this question. Notably, this question does not ask whether the respondent actually approaches religion with a syncretistic framework, but the normative responses that follow provide an important measure of one’s openness to syncretism. In other words, those who agree with the permissibility of picking and choosing their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their faith as a whole are naturally more likely to extend this right to themselves and other would-be syncretists.

The third question measures a related yet intensified aspect to the respondents’ willingness to practice multiple religions. As another measure of syncretism, the question states, “Do you think it is okay for someone of your religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one religion?” The answer choices for this question are specified along binary lines where 0 = “Should only practice one religion” and 1 = “Okay to practice other religions.” While the second and third questions are obviously similar, the second asks about condoning syncretistic *beliefs*, whereas the third asks about syncretistic *practices* and also pertains to those who are self-identified members of the same religious tradition.

### *Independent Variables*

My primary independent variables come from questions in Wave 3 of the NSYR. Two variables in particular capture aspects of the respondent's SNS use that can then be analyzed to determine their effects on religious outcomes. The first of these variables asks, "Are you a member of any of the social networking web sites that allow you to communicate with others, such as Facebook or Myspace?" Stated in binary form, respondents could answer, "No" (=0) or "Yes" (=1). The next question on the survey asks respondents to gauge how much time they spend on SNS if they answered the previous question affirmatively. Answers ranged from "Several times a day" (=1) to "Less than every few weeks" (=6). These responses were then reverse coded in the following way: "Less than every few weeks" (=1), "Every few weeks" (=2), "One to two days a week" (=3), "Three to five days a week" (=4), "About once a day" (=5), and "Several times a day" (=6). In order to include non-SNS individuals in this recoded variable, those who answered "No" to the previous question were included and assumed to have answered "Never" (= 0). Thus, the newly constructed, continuous variable, which is labeled in this paper as "SNS Time," ranges from "Never" (=0) to "Several times a day" (=6).

Other key independent variables used in this analysis help determine what effects, if any, parental religious attendance (only asked on Wave 1) and the religious attendance of the respondent have on one's acceptance of religious pluralism and syncretism. As Bengtson, Putney, and Harris (2013) explain in their theory of intergenerational religious momentum, parental religious attendance is a consistent predictor of the religiosity of adolescents, so I have included parental religious

attendance as a control variable throughout my models. The pertinent question asks parents, “In the last 12 months, how often have you been attending religious services, not including weddings, baptisms, and funerals?” Responses were coded so that “Never” = 0, “Few times a year” = 1, “Many times a year” = 2, “Once a month” = 3, “2-3 times a month” = 4, “Once a week” = 5, and “More than once a week” = 6. For teenagers’ religious attendance at Wave 1, researchers asked them to report their attendance at the first church they named, and answers ranged similarly from “Never” (=0) to “More than once a week” (=6). In Wave 4, two variables had to be used to construct the measure needed for analysis. First, the variable asks, “Do you attend religious services more than once or twice a year, not counting weddings, baptisms, or funerals?” Answers for this question were “No” (=0) and “Yes” (=1). Those who answered negatively were then assumed to have answered “Never” (=0) on the question that asked, “About how often do you usually attend religious services there?” Answers ranged again from “More than once a week” (=1) to “A few times a year” (=6). These survey responses were then recoded as a continuous variable ranging from “Never” (=0) to “More than once a week” (=6).

Regressions analyses in this study control for essential demographic variables at Wave 4 of the NSYR. The first of these variables includes age (now years 22-29 years old) coded continuously in years. For the respondent’s sex, a binary variable labeled “female” has the response values of 0 = male and 1 = female. The race of the respondent was also made into a binary variable using Wave 1 of the NSYR, assuming the race of the respondent remains constant over time. Further, though respondents were given up to 15 different answer choices including the option to write in their

race, nearly half the sample at Wave 1 (47.3%) identified as white. As such, for these analyses, I coded race as a binary where 0 = non-white and 1 = white. Another standard control variable used in regression analyses is the region of the country in which one lives. Given the historical, religious, and political uniqueness of the American South, a binary variable is used where other parts of the United States = 0 and the South = 1. The income of the respondent at Wave 4 is also taken into consideration. The Wave 4 survey question asked respondents, “How much did you personally earn during the past twelve months, including wages from all jobs, salary, tips, bonuses, overtime, and income from self-employment, before taxes and other deductions?” Respondents could answer from “I did not earn any money” (=1) to “\$200,000 or more” (=16) with the range within each response category being \$9,999. Since 3.2% of respondents from Wave 4 refused to answer this question, I imputed the mean income (4.29) for these respondents. I have also included a second binary income variable labeled “Reported income” in order to detect whether nonresponses are statistically significant. In this variable, all respondents who reported their income = 0 and nonresponses = 1. Education is another control variable used in my analyses, and respondents were asked on the survey to report their highest level of educational attainment where “no degrees” =1, “high school diploma or GED” = 2, Associate’s degree or vocational/technical certificate” = 3, “Bachelor’s degree” = 4, “graduate school” = 5. The last control variable used in this study is marital status, which I coded as a binary so that 1 = married and 0 = all other options. With the exception of the income variables as explained above, I omitted all responses that were skipped, unknown, or refused using listwise deletion.



Finally, in keeping with the religious considerations present in this study, I control for religious affiliation. Following Steensland et al. (2000), I have used a religious tradition configuration that groups respondents into seven possible binary categories. These categories are listed as follows: Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Other Religions, and the Not Religious (or Nones). When included in my models, these variables are transformed into a system of binaries with Nones serving as the comparison group for Tables 2.2-2.4. For Table 2.5, Evangelicals are the comparison group because Nones were not asked to answer that particular question on the NSYR.

### *Analytic Approach*

This study looks at the propensity of SNS users to hold different beliefs regarding the acceptability of thinking that many religions may be true, picking and choosing their beliefs, and condoning the practice of multiple religions. The first of these, therefore, measures religious pluralism, while the latter two measure religious syncretism. The demographic and religious breakdown of SNS users and non-users follows in Table 2.1.

The first models in this paper present the outcomes of multinomial logistic regressions that test the likelihood of believing many religions to be true. Conceptually, while this outcome variable bears a similarity to those that analyze syncretism, this question aims to detect whether SNS users are more likely to be exclusivists (“Only one religious is true”), pluralists (“Many religions may be true”), or secularists (“There is very little truth to any religion”).

Table 2.1

*Descriptive Statistics of SNS Non-Users and Users, NSYR (2003-2014).*

	<u>SNS Non-Users</u>				<u>SNS Users</u>			
	N	Mean	SD	Range	N	Mean	SD	Range
<i>Independent Variables</i>								
Age	358	25.539	1.526	23-28	1540	25.412	1.447	22-29
Female (Wave 1)	554	0.449	0.498	0-1	1974	0.531	0.499	0-1
White (Wave 1)	554	0.480	0.500	0-1	1974	0.496	0.500	0-1
Education	361	2.507	0.969	1-5	1538	3.182	1.095	1-5
Income	356	3.877	2.207	1-16	1536	4.432	2.307	1-16
Reported Income	356	0.062	0.241	0-1	1536	0.023	0.149	0-1
South	361	0.363	0.481	0-1	1545	0.406	0.491	0-1
Married	360	0.267	0.443	0-1	1542	0.248	0.432	0-1
Evangelical	361	0.188	0.392	0-1	1545	0.194	0.396	0-1
Mainline	361	0.039	0.193	0-1	1545	0.065	0.246	0-1
Black Protestant	361	0.083	0.276	0-1	1545	0.044	0.205	0-1
Catholic	361	0.102	0.304	0-1	1545	0.146	0.353	0-1
Jewish	361	0.022	0.147	0-1	1545	0.043	0.204	0-1
Other Religion	361	0.036	0.187	0-1	1545	0.019	0.136	0-1
None	361	0.366	0.482	0-1	1545	0.344	0.475	0-1
Parental Attendance (Wave 1)	553	3.376	2.242	0-6	1972	3.367	2.172	0-6
Attendance (Wave 1)	553	2.980	2.219	0-6	1973	3.306	2.165	0-6
Attendance (Wave 4)	359	1.891	2.287	0-6	1540	1.637	2.095	0-6
SNS Time (Wave 3)	554	0	0	0	1974	4.229	1.533	1-6
<i>Dependent Variables</i>								
H <sub>1</sub> : Pluralism Are you an exclusivist, pluralist, or secularist?	358	1.891	0.692	1-3	1537	1.934	0.669	1-3
H <sub>2</sub> : Syncretism: Is it okay to pick-and-choose your beliefs?	359	0.440	0.497	0-1	1529	0.568	0.495	0-1
H <sub>3</sub> : Syncretism: Is it okay to practice other religions?	198	0.348	0.478	0-1	900	0.500	0.500	0-1

Note: All variables come from Wave 4 unless noted otherwise. SNS = social networking sites; NSYR = National Study of Youth and Religion.

Table 2.2

*Multinomial Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement and SNS Time on Believing Many Religions May Be True (Pluralism) as Opposed to Believing Only One Religion Is True (Exclusivism), NSYR (2003-2014).*

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>	<u>Model 4</u>
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.989	0.993	0.988	0.990
Female (Wave 1)	1.489**	1.482**	1.505**	1.490**
White (Wave 1)	1.065	1.062	1.059	1.058
Education	0.921	0.951	0.928	0.964
Income	1.006	0.986	1.009	0.988
Reported Income	1.026	0.964	0.660	0.932
South	0.816	0.815	0.894	0.854
Married	0.424***	0.593***	0.425***	0.592***
Evangelical	0.227***	0.557**	0.226***	0.559**
Mainline	0.545*	0.973	0.548*	0.978
Black Prot.	0.287***	0.927	0.278***	0.911
Catholic	1.446	2.669***	1.465	2.685***
Jewish	1.158	1.607	1.165	1.605
Other Religion	0.945	2.758*	0.934	2.753*
Attendance (Wave 1)	0.765***	--	0.767***	--
Attendance (Wave 4)	--	0.639***	--	0.637***
Parental Attendance (Wave 1)	0.915*	0.853***	0.913*	0.853***
SNS Involvement (Wave 3)	1.408*	1.144	--	--
SNS Time (Wave 3)	--	--	1.026	0.996
N	1860	1856	1860	1856
Pseudo Max-rescaled R <sup>2</sup>	.33	.39	.33	.39

\*p ≤ .05. \*\* p ≤ .01. \*\*\* p ≤ .001. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted.

Nones are the comparison group for each of the religious traditions.

In order to test whether SNS participation at Wave 3 can be predicted to affect the respondent's disposition towards picking and choosing their religious beliefs (independent of what their religious tradition instructs), I ran a series of binary logistic regressions. In Table 2.4, SNS involvement is a binary variable where SNS users = 1 and non-SNS users = 0. Models 3 and 4 in this table use time spent on SNS as the chief independent variable. To avoid problems with multicollinearity for these independent variables, being on SNS (Models 1-2) and spending time on SNS (Models 3-4) are treated separately. Table 2.4 also includes parental attendance from Wave 1

and the religious attendance of the respondent at Waves 1 and 4. The aim of including these variables is to assess whether and when religious attendance—both of the parent and the respondent—affects the outcome of thinking it is acceptable to pick and choose whichever religious beliefs one wants without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole.

Table 2.3

*Multinomial Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement and SNS Time on Believing Many Religions May Be True (Pluralism) as Opposed to Believing That There is Very Little Truth to Religion (Secularism), NSYR (2003-2014).*

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>	<u>Model 4</u>
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	1.045	1.036	1.045	1.036
Female (Wave 1)	2.359***	2.412***	2.351***	2.404***
White (Wave 1)	0.980	1.027	0.985	1.031
Education	0.865*	0.855*	0.863*	0.853*
Income	1.006	1.008	1.006	1.008
Reported Income	1.447	1.542	1.468	1.567
South	1.503**	1.542**	1.504**	1.543**
Married	0.937	0.857	0.933	0.854
Evangelical	3.501***	1.992*	3.512***	1.991*
Mainline	7.241***	5.015***	7.209***	4.999***
Black Prot.	3.320**	1.751	3.319**	1.756
Catholic	7.372***	5.653***	7.379***	5.649***
Jewish	1.961*	1.800	1.965*	1.796
Other Religion	17.190**	12.535*	17.292**	12.540*
Attendance (Wave 1)	1.102*	--	1.101*	--
Attendance (Wave 4)	--	1.329***	--	1.330***
Parental Attendance (Wave 1)	1.071	1.120***	1.072	1.120***
SNS Involvement (Wave 3)	0.910	0.931	--	--
SNS Time (Wave 3)	--	--	0.991	0.995
N	1860	1856	1860	1856
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.33	.39	.33	.39

\*p ≤.05. \*\* p≤.01. \*\*\* p≤.001. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted. Nones are the comparison group for each of the religious traditions.

Table 2.4

*Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement and SNS Time on Picking and Choosing Religious Beliefs Independent of One's Religious Tradition, NSYR (2003-2014).*

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>	<u>Model 4</u>
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.990	0.994	0.995	0.998
Female (Wave 1)	1.054	1.055	1.055	1.054
White (Wave 1)	0.990	0.969	0.979	0.959
Education	1.206***	1.263***	1.190***	1.249***
Income	1.023	1.013	1.023	1.013
Reported Income	1.004	0.958	1.010	0.963
South	0.778*	0.784*	0.780*	0.786*
Married	0.653***	0.864	0.659***	0.872
Evangelical	0.357***	0.801	0.360***	0.809
Mainline	0.685	1.161	0.694	1.174
Black Prot.	0.302***	0.772	0.305***	0.779
Catholic	1.350	2.207***	1.351	2.209***
Jewish	1.293	1.542	1.261	1.513
Other Religion	0.678	1.355	0.670	1.348
Attendance (Wave 1)	0.880***	--	0.881***	--
Attendance (Wave 4)	--	0.698***	--	0.697***
Parental Attendance (Wave 1)	0.992	0.977	0.991	0.977
SNS Involvement (Wave 3)	1.492**	1.350*	--	--
SNS Time (Wave 3)	--	--	1.075**	1.060*
N	1853	1850	1853	1850
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.17	.24	.17	.24

\*p ≤ .05. \*\* p ≤ .01. \*\*\* p ≤ .001. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted.

Nones are the comparison group for each of the religious traditions.

Table 2.5 tests a related outcome involving religious syncretism. While previous models investigate the odds of picking and choosing among different (and possibly contradictory) religious *beliefs*, these binary logistic regressions predict the effects of SNS involvement and SNS time on believing it is acceptable to *practice* other religions. These tests are therefore an extension and intensification of earlier models measuring religious syncretism. Hypothetically, one could hold whatever beliefs they want privately, even if those beliefs run counter to their religious tradition, but think that actively practicing other religions is taboo or idolatrous. Thus, the

models presented here aim to capture whether respondents think that members of their own religious tradition should depart from their tradition's practices and assess whether and to what extent SNS play a role in that decision.

Table 2.5

*Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of SNS Involvement on Believing It Acceptable to Practice Other Religions, NSYR (2003-2014).*

	<u>Model 1</u>	<u>Model 2</u>	<u>Model 3</u>	<u>Model 4</u>
	OR	OR	OR	OR
Age	0.976	0.967	0.979	0.968
Female (Wave 1)	1.205	1.174	1.221	1.184
White (Wave 1)	0.819	0.811	0.809	0.802
Education	0.982	1.059	0.977	1.059
Income	0.996	0.975	0.998	0.977
Reported Income	0.649	0.653	0.662	0.654
South	0.694*	0.726*	0.707*	0.737*
Married	0.455***	0.660*	0.459***	0.667*
Mainline	1.981**	1.961**	2.022**	1.987**
Black Prot.	0.577	0.928	0.562	0.908
Catholic	3.090***	3.034***	3.088***	3.033***
Jewish	2.751***	1.995*	2.686**	1.958*
Other Religion	4.151***	6.401***	4.007***	6.202***
Attendance (Wave 1)	0.846***	--	0.850***	--
Attendance (Wave 4)	--	0.685***	--	0.684***
Parental Attendance (Wave 1)	0.913*	0.905**	0.910*	0.905**
SNS Involvement (Wave 3)	1.796**	1.526*	--	--
SNS Time (Wave 3)	--	--	1.082*	1.056
N	1075	1075	1075	1075
Max-rescaled R <sup>2</sup>	.25	.35	.25	.34

\*p ≤ .05. \*\* p ≤ .01. \*\*\* p ≤ .001. All variables are from Wave 4 unless otherwise noted. Religious Nones were excluded from the dependent variable in this survey question. Evangelicals are the comparison group for all other religious traditions.

## Results

In comparing those who use SNS and those who do not, some similarities and differences deserve recognition. As Table 2.1 illustrates, SNS users and non-users have nearly identical ages in this sample and closely parallel one another in terms of their race and marital status. At Wave 4 of the survey, however, SNS users are slightly

more likely to be female, more educated, and have higher average incomes than non-users.

When examining religious attendance, those who abstain from using SNS generally attend religious services with some regularity across all waves. For SNS users, however, the average religious attendance rates drop more severely over time from 3.306 and 2.019 (measured at Waves 1 and Wave 3, not shown) to 1.637 (at Wave 4). This finding, while possibly correlated with other variables (Twenge et al. 2015), dovetails with earlier research that locates a drop in religious affiliation with increases in Internet use (Downey 2014).

In turning to the regression models, a number of significant findings are evident. As the results show, neither age, race, nor income is consistently statistically significant across models. In Tables 2.2 and 2.3, women are reportedly more inclined to believe that all religions are true as opposed to believing that either only one religion is true (Table 2.2) or there is very little truth to religion (Table 2.3). Further, those who reside in the southern United States are more likely to be pluralists than secularists, but they are not more likely to be pluralists when compared to being exclusivists. Marital status also has a significant effect on one's understanding of religious truth claims as married persons are less likely to report an acceptance of pluralism when compared to exclusivism.

Among those who are religiously affiliated, Catholics stand out as having a positive predictive effect on one's stance towards pluralism across most models.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This finding, which is consistent across most models, deserves more time and attention than is allotted for this paper. Though there is Catholic precedence after Vatican II to accept other religious believers as "Anonymous Christians" (Rahner 1982), it is uncertain how extensive this theological position is among American Catholics. See also Trinitapoli (2007) for similar findings.

Conversely, Evangelicals are less likely to favor pluralism when compared to exclusivism, but they are more likely to condone pluralism as opposed to secularism. Given the options, Evangelicals are more likely to think that all religions are true rather than none at all. Further, both religious attendance and the religious attendance of one's parents are associated with lower odds of accepting pluralism versus exclusivism, though respondents who regularly attend a religious service are more likely to accept pluralism than secularism. Similarly, for respondents whose parents attended church regularly at Wave 1 of the survey, increased parental attendance translates into increased odds of accepting exclusivism over pluralism. Notably, no models in Tables 2.2 or 2.3 predict a significant relationship between SNS membership or SNS time and openness to pluralism. These models therefore provide conclusive evidence to reject my hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) that SNS users will more likely favor pluralism over either exclusivism or secularism.

The results in Tables 2.4 and 2.5 cast an entirely different picture of the effects of SNS use on religious syncretism. In Table 2.4, SNS users have higher odds of picking and choosing their religious beliefs irrespective of their tradition. In particular, SNS users are 49% more likely to find picking and choosing religious beliefs acceptable, even when controlling for essential demographic variables at Wave 4 and religious attendance at Wave 1. When controlling for religious attendance at Wave 4, SNS users are still 35% more likely to accept syncretism of religious beliefs. Likewise, in models 3 and 4, increases in time spent on SNS have a statistically significant effect on one's likelihood of endorsing syncretistic religious beliefs. Taken together, these



models suggest that SNS use is linked with the propensity to approach religion with a syncretistic mentality.

Unsurprisingly, Table 2.4 also shows that religious attendance is negatively correlated with picking and choosing religious beliefs that are independent of one's tradition. For example, at Wave 1, for every unit of increase in religious attendance, individuals can be predicted to have 12% lower odds of believing that picking and choosing beliefs is acceptable. At Wave 4, the odds are 30% lower. Thus, while religious attendance dampens the likelihood that one will condone syncretistic beliefs, those who spend time on SNS are more likely to support syncretism of beliefs.

In Table 2.5, the patterns are similar. Attending a religious service with regularity is negatively associated with thinking that practicing other religions is appropriate, and for every unit of increase in religious attendance, respondents have lower odds of thinking that a syncretistic approach is acceptable (15% lower at Wave 1 and 31% lower at Wave 4). On the other hand, SNS users are more likely to believe that it is acceptable to practice other religions. In fact, when controlling for demographic and religious variables, respondents are 80% more likely to accept syncretistic religious practices (Table 2.5, Model 1) and 53% more likely when controlling for attendance at Wave 4.

A second important finding from Table 2.5 shows that parental religiosity matters. Across all models in Table 2.5, for every unit of increase in parental religious attendance, the odds of thinking that it is legitimate to practice other religions decrease about 11%. Thus, consistent with previous research (Bengtson et al. 2013), regular parental religious attendance lessens one's acceptance of religious syncretism. The

religious attendance of the respondent works the same way. Across all models in Table 2.5, increases in religious attendance translate to decreases in legitimating syncretism. This should not be all that surprising, for increases in attendance can be properly understood to strengthen the plausibility structures that make practicing only one religion more desirable. Thus, individuals who regularly attend religious services and whose parents regularly attend are much less likely to think that practicing other religions is acceptable. The situation seems to change, however, for those who spend more time on SNS. For these individuals, each unit of increase in time spent on SNS can be shown to predict an 8% increase in believing that practicing different religions is appropriate when controlling for religious attendance at Wave 1 and all other variables at Wave 4.

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

It is difficult to deny the fact that the adoption of social technology has greatly altered our world. Even so, few scholars have attempted to explain how SNS use disrupts, promotes, or interacts with religious beliefs or practices. For emerging adults in particular, this topic is crucial, for as Smith and Denton (2005) have argued, “Of all Americans, youth are often said to be most intensely exposed to and engaged with the digital and interactive communication technologies that are thought to be transforming American culture.” The latent effects of technology often go unnoticed despite their very real consequences, and these consequences can be detected by measuring differences among SNS users and non-users.<sup>4</sup> Thus, with the advent of new social

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<sup>4</sup> As Hubert Dreyfus (2008:1) has provocatively mused, “Henry Ford thought of the automobile as giving people cheap reliable, individualized transportation, but he did not imagine it would destroy inner cities and liberate adolescent sex.”

technologies, it is crucial for researchers to study how and why SNS may affect designated areas of our lives.

The findings presented in this paper reveal that SNS users are more inclined to condone religious syncretism but are not any more likely to be religious pluralists. The empirical evidence I have amassed can be used to support my second two hypotheses but not the first one pertaining to pluralism. Thus,

H<sub>1</sub> (Unsupported): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to believe that many religions are true rather than believe either (a) only one religion is true, or (b) there is very little truth in any religion.

H<sub>2</sub> (Supported): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for someone to pick and choose which religious beliefs they adopt regardless of what their religious tradition teaches.

H<sub>3</sub> (Supported): SNS users will be more likely than non-SNS users to report that it is acceptable for a member of their own religious tradition to practice other religions.

In light of the empirical evidence, some obvious questions persist. Why might SNS users be more likely to condone syncretism of beliefs and practices when their religion forbids it? Put more strongly, how could using Facebook or other SNS impact how people approach religion and spirituality? As I have shown, there is a consistent positive association between SNS use and the acceptance of syncretism. These findings suggest that, far from being a neutral technology, social networking sites have embedded within them certain values that urge users to think differently about reality. Consider, for example, the “*problem solving inventiveness*” and “*tinkering attitude*” that Berger and company argue are mainstays of the modernist, technological enterprise (1974:30). Carried forward to the present day, Wuthnow (2010) has found evidence of “spiritual tinkering” among America’s younger birth cohorts, particularly

Gen Xers and Millennials. Is it a coincidence, then, that these same cohorts are more likely to be heavy users of SNS (Brenner and Smith 2013)?

While my argument asserts that social technology has syncretizing effects, an important qualification to this assertion is needed. Namely, the technological platforms that support SNS are in and of themselves powerless to produce syncretism *without human users*. Digital technologies require users to “buy in” and participate before any social or religious change may occur. As Wilbert E. Moore (1972) explains in his analysis of technology and capitalism, “Without a [human] market, the machine remains useless—it is no more than a bizarre sculpture.” Thus, although changes in our collective religious thinking may occur because of the technological innovations that nurture “spiritual tinkering,” technology always exists in a dialectical relationship with those who use it.

With this important caveat in mind, this paper argues that the connections between SNS use and religious syncretism are more likely real than spurious. The basic architecture of SNS and its uses are such that they promote autonomy, control, and the fluidity of (religious) commitments (Dreyfus 2008; Turkle 1997). On Facebook, there is no expectation that one’s “likes” and preferences be logically consistent and hidebound by tradition. Religion, as a result, does not consist of timeless truths that communities submit to in faith. Instead, the Facebook effect on religion is that all spiritual options become commodities and resources for which individuals can tailor to meet their individual needs.

Turning to the empirical evidence once more, one may wonder why using SNS statistically predicts religious syncretism but not pluralism. While the two may appear

to go hand-in-hand, syncretism and pluralism are not interchangeable concepts. In general, syncretism entails the freedom to choose one's beliefs (H<sub>2</sub>) and practices (H<sub>3</sub>), whereas pluralism (H<sub>1</sub>) is a theological strategy that attempts to minimize religious differences. For the syncretist, however, minimizing differences is unnecessary. The judicious syncretist must discern *which* beliefs and practices to borrow, whereas the pluralist believes that all religions are the same anyway. Accordingly, for the variables used in this paper, H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub> tap into a general disposition that SNS users exhibit more often than non-users, which is the belief that one has the right to choose and exercise their beliefs and practices, regardless of what their religious tradition dictates. As for thinking that many religious traditions are the same, SNS use does not predict pluralism any more than it predicts exclusivism or secularism. Berger (2014:53) once again helps explain why this might be: "In the experience of most individuals, secularity and religion are not mutually contradictory. Rather, they co-exist, each pertaining to a specific form of attention to reality."

This recognition means that the assumption contained in my first hypothesis—that the adoption of social technology guides individuals towards the acceptance of religious pluralism—is based on a false trichotomy. Yes, the modern world is more pluralistic than ever thanks in part to the widespread sharing and exchanging of information made possible by social technology. Like the Silk Road on steroids, SNS give individuals today unprecedented access to new ideas, beliefs, and practices. But faced with a growing number of religious and spiritual options, individuals do not have to decide between exclusivism, pluralism, and secularism. Instead, they can be syncretists, and as Berger explains above, the structures of modern consciousness are

such that individuals can be both religious and secular, exclusivist and pluralistic in their thinking from one moment to the next so long as they have the right to pick and choose what they practice.<sup>5</sup>

Customary with any research project are certain limitations that deserve mention and point toward avenues for future research. First, the independent variables used in this analysis tracked whether individuals belonged to SNS and asked them how much time they spent on these sites. Ideally, there would have been accompanying questions about how individuals actually spend their time on SNS, which SNS they use, and what media content they consume while online. Survey questions about not only media content, but also web searches, the presentation of religious messages on SNS, and how members of different religious traditions negotiate messages of exclusivity and pluralism would further this study. Second, given the importance of religiosity in these models, it would be helpful to know why parental attendance matters greatly when it comes to considering many religions to be true (Tables 2.2-2.3) or practicing other religions (Table 2.5), but not when picking and choosing certain religious beliefs over others (Table 2.4). Third, the primary independent variables used for analysis asked about SNS participation when these individuals were already 17-24 years old. It would be worthwhile, however, to measure the long-term effects of SNS beginning in early childhood. Future researchers might also consider testing whether a distinction exists between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants” in terms of other religious measures such as biblical literalism, prayer, and the reading of sacred texts (Prensky 2001).

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<sup>5</sup> See also Nancy Ammerman’s response in Berger (2014) where she discusses sacred and secular “code switching” as a unique modern religious phenomenon.

What the previous work amounts to is an assessment of the role SNS play in the religious and spiritual lives of young Americans. Surprisingly, despite the wealth of research on religion as well as the effects of Internet use, virtually no one has examined the role that SNS play in the religious formation of emerging adults. I have shown that users of social networking sites are more likely to condone religious syncretism. At the same time, religious attendance lessens the likelihood that one will accept syncretism, and young Americans whose parents regularly attended religious services while they were growing up also have much lower odds of condoning the syncretistic practices of individuals who share their same faith. These processes are pivotal mechanisms that both reinforce existing plausibility structures and generate confidence in one's own religious tradition. For young adults on social networking sites, however, the effects of social networking sites weaken religious plausibility structures and encourage a modern mentality that condones the syncretism of beliefs and practices regardless of what their religious tradition teaches.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### The Surprising Spirituality of Silicon Valley: A Content and Discourse Analysis of *Wired* Magazine (2001-2012)

#### *Abstract*

Although traditional secularization theory holds that advances in science and technology increase at the expense of religious and spiritual belief, this paper holds that over the last two decades other narratives involving the relationship between religion, spirituality, and technology have emerged which challenge these direct assumptions. Analyzing the content and discursive frames of *Wired* magazine articles from 2001-2012, I find evidence for three motifs of religion-technology interaction: (1) *a conflict motif* which proposes that religion and technology are inherently at odds with one another; (2) *a compatible motif* which seeks to assert the ultimate harmony of religion and technology; and (3) *a fulfillment motif* which sees technology and its advances as the natural realization of traditional religious beliefs, ideals, and aspirations. Buttressed by the presence of trans- and post-humanist ideas, a pervasive “computational metaphor,” and the logic of re-enchantment, the *fulfillment motif* represents the most frequent, popular way that *Wired* writers conceive of the relationship between religion, spirituality, and technology. The paper concludes by discussing these shifting relationships as a portent for future metanarratives.

## Introduction

In 1971, still twenty years before Sir Tim Berners-Lee helped launch the World Wide Web, an eccentric writer and technologist named Stewart Brand issued these words at the outset of *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*: “We are as gods and we might as well get used to it.” Admittedly cryptic, Brand’s words may seem even more out of place when viewed from the perspective of social scientists long versed in the theory of secularization. Such theorists had predicted that with the unfolding of modernity, science and technology would eventually replace most if not all god-talk. Max Weber anticipated a disenchanted world, not one where we viewed ourselves as gods or spoke about a re-enchanted cosmos in religious terms (Lassman, Velody, and Martins 2015; Schroeder and Swedberg 2002). The secular march would continue, most academics believed, until the objective terms of science and reason had replaced our spiritual vocabularies. As Peter Berger (1969:112–13) then quipped, “A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut.” Intriguingly, the iconic cover of *Whole Earth Catalog* and its successor, *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, displays some of the first publicly available photographs ever taken of Earth from outer space. So what was Brand’s point? Why would a pioneer of the coming digital revolution invoke the gods, or equate himself to one, when writing mostly about the latest technological trends and gadgets?

This article examines the various ways in which religion and spirituality are conceived and reconfigured by technological elites through the prism of technology journalism. Brand’s reference to the gods in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* is viewed not as a coincidence, but rather as an early prototype and inspiration for the way

Silicon Valley technology journalists appropriate religious and spiritual concepts when writing about emerging technologies and related cultural trends. As a bohemian and countercultural icon, Brand's eclecticism proved to be not only a beacon for many of the innovators behind the digital revolution (Isaacson 2015), but his prolific writing and editorial prowess at *Whole Earth* served as an eventual blueprint for later publications such as *Wired* (Turner 2008).

To understand the changing cultural or religious landscape in North America, one has to reckon with the epochal importance digital technologies have had in the last twenty or so years, and Silicon Valley may be considered the supreme hub of technological activity in the United States, if not the world. The hardware and software invented in Silicon Valley fan out over the globe, radiating from the West Coast of California to homes, workplaces, pockets, and purses in every corner of the planet. The working assumption here, then, is that technology is powerful and value-laden, but determining the intrinsic values and eventual outcomes of technological spread is tricky work. As Kranzberg's (1986) oft-cited first law of technology states: "Technology is neither good, nor bad; nor is it neutral."

While there are many ways to describe and analyze the religious composition of Silicon Valley and its implications for the broader American culture, the approach used in this paper is to locate a particularly influential media outlet—*Wired*—to determine what types of narratives emerge from the technological nucleus of Silicon Valley. *Wired* is considered a cultural proxy for the various ideologies and values that emanate from elites in Silicon Valley, and recognizing its outsized cultural importance helps explain the emergence of new beliefs, or conversely, the curious persistence of

old ones. Thus, two main questions animate the following project: (1) How do the writers of *Wired* discuss and portray religion and spirituality in their featured articles? (2) How have these conceptions changed over time?

Of course, one may rightly wonder whether *Wired* contains any references to God, religion, or spirituality at all. For a seminal publication on technology and the cultural goings-on in Silicon Valley, why would it? As one colleague remarked, you do not expect to read recipes for making casseroles in an issue of *Popular Mechanics*, nor would you find instructions for assembling carburetors in the pages of *Bon Appétit*. Accordingly, the numerical presence (or the conspicuous absence) of religious terms and concepts should give us some glimpse into how technology journalists often understand the relationship between technology, religion, and spirituality. Thus, a systematic content analysis and discussion of the discursive religious frames in the pages of *Wired* should provide some insight into how potentially opposing, compatible, or unrelated cultural spheres interact with one another.

With these questions and caveats in view, this paper will first highlight a lesser known chapter of the historical backdrop that has made Silicon Valley what it is today. No attempt will be made to unpack the economic or political developments that have contributed to Silicon Valley's preeminence on the world scene. Even a brief history of significant religious or cultural events that occurred on the West Coast of California from the countercultural 1960s to the digital revolution of the 1990s is far beyond the scope of this paper. What is of interest, however, is how religion and technology intertwine and, particularly, how technology pioneers and innovators conceive of religion and spirituality in their writing. In the Bay Area, the boundaries between



innovation, promotional advertising, and journalism sometimes get quite blurry, as elites in the tech industry move fluidly between various cultural zones in hopes of achieving greatness. Fred Turner (2008) displays these lofty ambitions and overlapping networks of elites in his impressive work, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, with one chapter devoted entirely to the importance and impact of *Wired* magazine.

Since the discursive frames and narratives appearing in the pages of *Wired* are the main focus of this paper, I will then provide some necessary background regarding this publication's origins, objectives, impact, and readership. The justification for selecting *Wired* is based on a simple premise: to understand the North American religious landscape today, one must also pay attention to the various motifs popular among the technological elite. Just as "Brand assembled a network of people and publications that together brokered a series of encounters between bohemian San Francisco and the emerging technology hub of Silicon Valley" (Turner 2008:3), a new cast of characters emerged in the 1990s that have contributed meaningfully to *Wired* and the digital revolution. Luminaries such as Louis Rossetto, Kevin Kelly, Nicholas Negroponte, John Perry Barlow, Esther Dyson, and George Gilder not only forged a path for the eventual success and impact of *Wired*, but also substantially articulated a technological ethos that frequently co-opts religious and spiritual vocabulary. One instance of this appropriation can be seen in Kelly's "computational metaphor" (Turner 2008:216), which seeks to explain the origins of the universe and humanity's place in the cosmos through the language of computing. In this emerging

metanarrative, religion and spirituality are neither perfectly compatible with science and technology, nor are they entirely at loggerheads. Rather, religion and spirituality are the basis, inspiration, and precursor to a technological utopia that fulfills humanity's earliest longings and reanimates the religious myths of old.

This hermeneutic, while novel in some respects, builds off the previous work of Stef Aupers' (2002) qualitative analysis of *Wired* from the year of its founding in 1993 to 2000. As Aupers illustrates, the secularization narrative that assumed an ongoing disenchantment of the world is sparse in *Wired* during these years and rarely draws from the social scientific legacy of Marx, Weber, or Durkheim. Instead, Aupers finds traces of a "technoanimism" that seeks to re-enchant a secular world through technology. Initially surprised by the presence of this spiritual language in the world's most technological magazine, Aupers (2002) challenges the assumption that science and technology are inversely proportional to religion and spirituality in the mindsets of the writers and thinkers at *Wired*. In what follows, I aim to update and revise Aupers' findings, focusing specifically on the years 2001-2012, and provide a systematic content and discourse analysis that will reveal a metanarrative understudied among theorists in the sociology of religion, technology, or culture. In the process, I will challenge two popular and competing narratives that seek to explain the presence of religion in the modern world: (1) traditional and neo-secularization theory (Bruce 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2011) and (2) the new paradigm (Warner 1993) that accounts for North America's persistent religiosity (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008).

### *Silicon Valley Religion and Spirituality*

To understand the complex relationship and narratives concerning religion and technology for the writers of *Wired*, it first helps to grasp some of the surrounding cultural contours that punctuate Silicon Valley's techno-spiritual ethos. Like any print media, technology journalism is a product of a specific social and historical milieu, and the writers at *Wired* are the successors of a stream of thinking that stretches back at least to the California counterculture of the 1960s, if not earlier. Indeed, scholars have long recognized the presence of fervent spirituality and New Religious Movements on the West Coast that preceded the rise of the California computer industry. Though science and technology were often seen as disenchanting forces in the eyes of many, Zandbergen (2010:163) contends that "since the 1960s various processes of 'brokerage' can be traced between New Age spirituality and Silicon Valley 'high tech culture.'" Similarly, Turner (2005) and Binkley (2003) each highlight the counterculture's role in challenging the presumed sterility of science or the moral vapidness of modern capitalism, seeing instead a logic of re-enchantment at work. Turner (2005:485), for example, points to the rise of virtual communities, which "formed an emotional bulwark against the loneliness of a highly technologized world." For Binkley (2003:3), overlapping networks of writers and journalists in the Bay Area "injected an alternate discourse" that brought new meaning and moral purpose to a consumer culture "yearning for a new cast of lifestyle intellectuals."

One of these "lifestyle intellectuals" was, of course, Stewart Brand. Prior to Brand and his associates at *Whole Earth*, the computer was primarily a symbol of disenchantment and workplace bureaucracy. As Turner (2005:2) recounts, the

computer used to be a symbol of “dehumanization, of centralized bureaucracy and the rationalization of social life,” not a portal of expressive individualism or a means to self-improvement. Through his role as editor at *Whole Earth*, Brand gave a new coterie of bohemian individuals the tools they needed to express themselves, while at the same time providing a moral language and vision that helped programmers and computer scientists articulate a new way of life. The Merry Pranksters that Tom Wolfe (2008) documents in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which included Brand as a key member, furthered the notion that one could gain spiritual enlightenment through technology (Cobb 1999; Zandbergen 2010). Though these experiences were first thought possible thanks to the light shows at Grateful Dead concerts or the ingestion of synthetic drugs like LSD (Roszak 1986), the personal computer and digital technology increasingly came to be seen as tools that could re-enchant an impersonal and overly rational world. Commenting further on the religious implications of the digital revolution, Aupers and Houtman (2005) write, “What we are witnessing today is a remarkable convergence of digital technology and spirituality... that constitutes a relocation of the sacred to the digital realm, inspired by the desire to overcome the experiences of alienation, suffering, and impotence.” The implication here is that the social capital and moral purpose typically provided by organized religion are increasingly found through social media and other online networks (Brasher 2004; Detweiler 2013).

Beyond these observations, other demographic and cultural trends in Silicon Valley play a major role in the way writers at *Wired* or other media outlets think about and discuss religious and spiritual issues. For example, compared to the rest of the

United States, Silicon Valley has a tremendous degree of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. High rates of immigration and intermarriage contribute to a plurality of religious perspectives, undermining the possibility of a single, dominant religious perspective in the area (Perreira 2004). As a result, Silicon Valley is a hotbed for religious pluralism—or the notion that all religious perspectives are valid and true in their own way. While total religious inclusivity remains difficult, if not impossible, to achieve (McClure 2017a; Prothero 2011), the sheer variety of religious perspectives available on the West Coast creates a “spiritual marketplace” that requires individuals to choose among many religious narratives and potentially customize their own belief system (Roof 1993, 2001).

To see how these cultural trends play out on one organizational level, consider the company Apple as a case study for how religion, spirituality, and technology often intertwine. Jaron Lanier (2014), one of the pioneers of virtual reality and a Silicon Valley insider, has observed that Steve Jobs purposefully appropriated the marketing tactics of popular Hindu gurus to make his product line at Apple more appealing. As Lanier (2014:213) explains, “Apple exemplifies one strain of influence that is particularly underappreciated: the crossover between countercultural spirituality and tech culture.” Walter Isaacson (2011), often considered Jobs’ definitive biographer, also highlights Jobs’ affinity with Eastern religions and especially Zen Buddhism. As for the hundreds of Apple stores around the globe, the white, clean interiors evoke notions of purity and holiness just as the translucent glass exteriors are meant to evoke feelings of awe and inspiration on par with Europe’s great cathedrals (Robinson 2013). Media reports often show hordes of followers and Apple consumers who line up for

days before the release of a new iPhone. Even the company symbol, an apple, though once associated with the Judeo-Christian account of human origins, is made into an icon for a new generation of believers (Crouch 2011). In *Appletopia: Media Technology and the Religious Imagination of Steve Jobs*, Brett Robinson (2013:68) further contends that these marketing tactics and religiously inspired advertisements are far from coincidental: “In the promotional rhetoric of the Apple computer company, the convergence of the technological and the religious reveals a persistent dialectic at work in the American imagination between rationalism and mysticism.”

The tendency for technologists and Silicon Valley innovators to step outside the secular realm is not confined simply to Steve Jobs and the Apple computer company either. Turner (2005, 2008) shows that early tech trailblazers were neither conventionally monotheistic nor atheistic, but consisted rather of a hodgepodge of spiritually-minded hackers, hippies, and New Communalists who wanted to gain spiritual enlightenment through the material devices they built. Today, their religious and moral legacy can perhaps best be witnessed in the annual ritual known as Burning Man (Turner 2009), an event where tens of thousands of Bay Area “pilgrims” known as “Burners” gather for a weeklong community festival where participants adhere to 10 Principles such radical inclusion, self-reliance, and self-expression. Culminating with the symbolic burning of a 70-foot tall wooden effigy (“The Man”), Burning Man has all the makings of an emerging belief system and is highly popular among members of the technology industry who see no antithesis between technology and quasi-religious or spiritual practices.

Since few scholars have explored recent ways in which technological advancements run parallel to changes in the religious landscape, this paper therefore aims to bridge an important gap between the sociology of religion and the literature on technology. While there are important exceptions (Borgmann 1987; Ellul 1967; Guardini 1994; McClure 2016), this paper contends that, in the minds of many technology journalists, religion and technology do not operate in mutually exclusive spheres. Though some scholars have supposed modern science and technology are intrinsically secularizing forces (Bruce 2002), there may be alternative narratives that complicate age-old assumptions regarding the relationship between religion and technology.

#### *Wired: Its Origins, Objectives, Impact, and Readership*

Based in the Bay Area, *Wired* may be considered a cultural proxy and media hub of Silicon Valley as the nation's most popular monthly magazine to feature current news on technology culture. Founded in 1993 by editor and journalist Louis Rossetto with his partner Jane Metcalfe, *Wired* bills itself as the premier technology magazine in the United States, and in its earliest issues, frequently solicited the opinions of elite thought leaders in the technology industry including Nicholas Negroponte (1996), Howard Rheingold (2000), and Kevin Kelly (1995, 2010, 2017).<sup>6</sup> These tech visionaries helped give *Wired* a clear identity and voice, thus separating it from other technology publications that focused more on reviews of the latest computers or newest gadgets.

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin Kelly also served as executive editor of *Wired* from 1992-1999 and continues to write and contribute occasionally.

While recognizing the many different streams that converge to make *Wired* the distinguished North American magazine on technology and culture, the one most responsible for providing a definitive, if not puzzling, techno-philosophical voice is the late media theorist Marshall McLuhan. A 1993 *Wired* article featuring an interview between Stewart Brand and Camille Paglia in fact declares McLuhan the “patron saint of *Wired* magazine” (Brand 1993). Though much has been said about McLuhan’s esotericism and puzzling juxtaposition of ideas (Jacobs 2011), he is perhaps best remembered for arguing that the emergence of new technologies alter the way information is presented and received. With his enormously popular and clichéd aphorism, “the medium is the message,” McLuhan (1964) argued that textual interpretation requires not simply paying attention to content, but also understanding the medium through which text is delivered. For the editors at *Wired*, McLuhan’s understanding of technology provides a theoretical basis and vision for how to think about technology. That is, emerging technologies would revolutionize not only how we spend our time and money, they would change how we see and interpret the world. Summarizing these objectives and the theoretical foundations provided by McLuhan and others, Turner (2008:207) writes that “*Wired* aimed to herald the arrival not only of a new era in computing machinery, but a new era in social life.”

Since its founding, *Wired* has amassed a wide readership and achieved much journalistic success. Winning two National Magazine Awards in its first five years, *Wired* quickly grew its readership to over three hundred thousand individuals per month (Turner 2005). Despite having extensive readership, however, consumers typically fit a narrow demographic profile. As Turner (2005:218) observes, by the



mid-1990s “its readers were 87.9 percent male, 37 years old on average, with an average household income of more than \$122,000 per year.” *Wired* has also experienced some changes in ownership since the mid-90s, but has kept its distinctive mission to report on technology and culture. Further, in an age when many magazines have seen drastic reductions in paid readership or have been forced to close, *Wired* has maintained its position as a major media outlet compared to similar publications featuring technology news and related cultural trends. According to the Alliance for Audited Media, *Wired* had a total paid circulation of 870,101 households in 2016, making it one of the country’s top 100 consumer magazines and more popular than *Fortune*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, and *Architectural Digest* (AAM 2016). Currently owned by Condé Nast Publishing, *Wired* features both online and print versions of its articles and conveniently archives nearly all its published content free of charge.<sup>7</sup> With an active online readership that reaches more than 30 million people each month,<sup>8</sup> *Wired* is therefore properly considered an authoritative, influential media source that not only reflects the thinking of many elites in the technology industry, but also helps frame current debates and shape narratives involving important world issues.

In discussing and analyzing the religious narratives present in the pages of *Wired*, I hope to specify how certain ways of thinking about religion and its relationship to technology get entrenched in popular culture. The legacy of Western social science has long assumed an inverse relationship: As technology advances, religion vanishes. But the historical backdrop of the 1960s counterculture, which

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<sup>7</sup> A majority of the content and discourse analysis was conducted using *Wired*’s online platform, [wired.com](http://wired.com). Hard copies of issues were consulted in 2008 when acquiring the articles through online archives became less accessible. Print articles also appear online.

<sup>8</sup> Wired Staff, Press Center. 2010. <https://www.wired.com/about/press/>

fueled the rise of Silicon Valley's technological dominance, complicates traditional assumptions regarding the theory of secularization. Ultimately, three motifs of this religion-technology relationship will be presented: (1) *a conflict motif* which proposes that religion and technology are inherently at odds with one another; (2) *a compatible motif* which seeks to assert the compatibility of religion and technology; and (3) *a fulfillment motif* which sees technology and its advances as the natural fulfillment of traditional religious beliefs, ideals, and aspirations. Thus, while theory building is a definite aim of this paper, the motifs proposed were arrived at inductively and without predetermination.

#### *Data and Methods*

To reveal the presence of heterogeneous narratives regarding the relationship between religion and technology, I examined issues of *Wired* both for their content and discursive frames from 2001-2012. The range of years selected pick up where Aupers' (2002) analysis of *Wired* concluded, where Aupers found a "technoanimistic discourse" from 1993-2000.<sup>9</sup> Since articles of *Wired* have been extensively archived and placed on their website (wired.com), data collection could proceed easily through the use of their website search engine. Customary with content analyses of this nature, practical strategies were used to limit the sample size. Since *Wired* is a monthly publication, I used a random number generator to determine which issues to analyze (1-12, with January = 1 and December = 12). Three issues were then selected to analyze for each year in the study for a total of 36 issues and with the conviction that random sampling (vs. systematic) would have the advantage of not repeating the same

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<sup>9</sup> Future stages of data collection will bring the analysis up to the present year.

months each year. Recognizing that *Wired* publishes many different types of articles in print and online—including letters to the editor (“Rants and Raves”), teasers or short reviews (“Start” and “Play”), info graphics, and so forth—I further limited the sample by excluding non-feature articles. Each issue contains between five to ten feature articles, making for an approximate total of 270 feature articles between 2001-2012.

Using this sample, I then used the website’s search engine and scanned articles for general religious or spiritual vocabulary. These included searches for the following: *God, deity, divine, religious/religion, spiritual/spirituality, heaven, hell, church, temple, prayer, faith, holy, Christian/Christianity, Muslim/Islam, Jewish, Judeo-Christian, Jesus, evangelical, supernatural, and sacred*. While searching for these words, other secondary terms and expressions were often discovered and documented such as *the Catholic Church, Virgin Mary, Protestant, Old Testament, theological, blasphemy, idolatry, apocalyptic, jihadists, angels, demons, Mennonite, crosses, monks, creationists, fundamentalism, messianic, Nirvana, New Age, cultlike*, and so forth. In most cases, feature articles could be quickly scanned to determine whether they contained references to the numinous, and while some colloquialisms such as *goddammit, holy shit*, and *for God’s sake* appeared every so often, these were excluded from final analysis. With conservative estimates, a total of 75 feature articles were found to contain significant religious or spiritual expressions (27%). These articles were not necessarily about religion or spirituality per se, but they contained at least one and usually multiple religious expressions that were more than incidental rhetorical expressions or colloquialisms.

Of the 75 feature articles between 2001-2012 that contain religious or spiritual vocabulary, 33 articles were then selected and analyzed according to their discursive frames. In determining whether an article contains a substantial presence of religious and spiritual terms, some degree of subjectivity is inevitable. However, the selected articles were revisited multiple times during analysis to verify that religion and spirituality were not incidental to the article. Readers can therefore be assured that the articles included in the discourse analysis represent discernible frames and still support *Wired*'s distinctive objectives to deliver news about technology and articulate visions of the future.

### *Results*

In analyzing the religious narratives contained in *Wired*, one of the simplest ways to gain some understanding of its relationship to technology is to assess whether the terms are used positively or negatively. Distinguishing between positive and negative religious content requires some subjective interpretation, but on the whole, fewer articles (36.0%) explicitly framed religious or spiritual terms in strictly negative terms, whereas more articles (61.3%) contained positive references (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

<i>Content Analysis in Sample of Wired Magazine Articles (2001-2012) N=75</i>		
Articles and their positive/negative references	N	% in sample
Article has a positive reference to religion and/or spirituality	46	61.3
Article has negative reference to religion and/or spirituality	27	36.0
Unclear/Mixed	2	2.7

As an example of one of the negative mentions, a *Wired* article entitled, “How Europe Can Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Future,” refers to “the straitjacket of the Catholic church” and conservative Christians in Germany who promote a “crude racist campaign” to prevent Indian immigrants in the tech industry from working in Germany (Glenny 2001). These religious forces obstruct the technological, globalizing forces that are contributing positively to the world and are therefore characterized in negative ways.

Most examples, however, are more positive and show no antipathy toward religion. For instance, Mark Zuckerberg is positively referred to as a “dotcom deity” (Vogelstein 2007). A software engineer named Dan Morrill is described as “a roving evangelist to the coder world” (Roth 2008). Filmmaker James Cameron seeks to build “the holy grail of cameras” (Davis 2009). While these expressions may seem idiomatic or unworthy of further analysis, one will be hard-pressed to find similar content in the pages of *Forbes*, *National Geographic*, or *Food & Wine*. Further, though the references to religion and spirituality are unconventional in their appropriation of religious vocabulary for a secular context, they are generally used in positive ways.

Only in a couple instances are the connotations of terms ambivalent or unclear for the purposes of assigning a solely positive or negative frame to the article. In “Cairo Activists Use Facebook to Rattle Regime,” several references are made to Islam, for instance, but the Arab Spring was a multilayered phenomenon with Muslims on both sides of the struggle who used social media to accomplish their political purposes (Wolman 2008). Though religion and technology intermingle in interesting

ways in this article and did so in the actual landscape of the Arab Spring, the relationship between the two is complex.

Further assessment of how the technology writers at *Wired* have used religion in their articles can be tracked longitudinally. Figure 3.1 displays how these positive or negative expressions transpired over the years from 2001-2012. As the results show, with some exceptions, the number of positive religious frames in *Wired* articles parallels the number of negative frames. Even though most articles that mention religion or spirituality do so with benign or complimentary connotations (Table 3.1), there appears to be a balanced assessment of religion's role in the tech world when viewed from a yearly perspective.

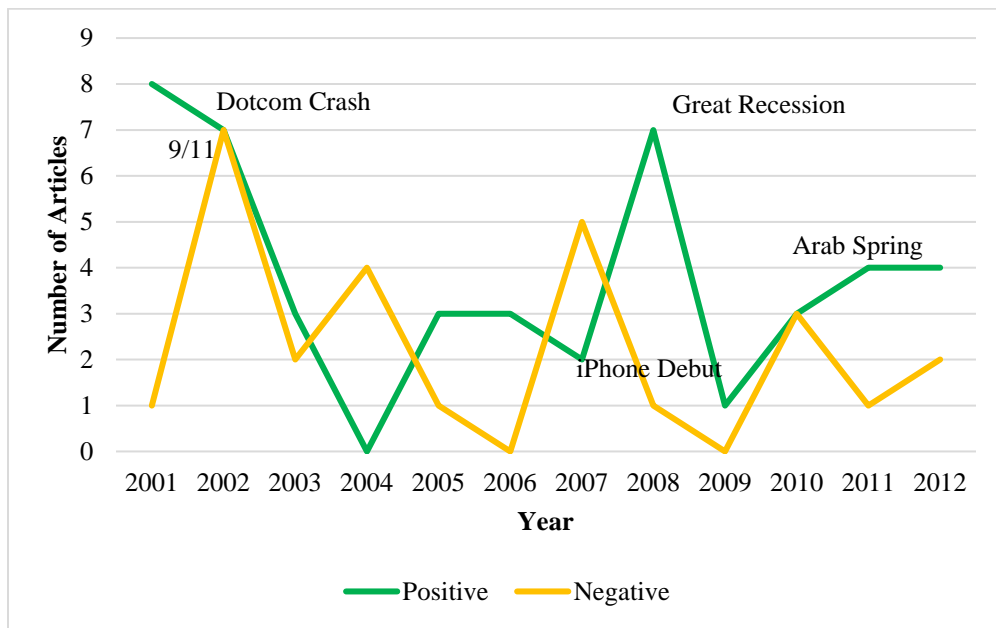


Figure 3.1. Articles containing positive/negative religious vocabulary, *Wired* (2001-2012)

Moreover, as Figure 3.1 illustrates, no constancy in the number articles that mention religion or spirituality is evident, making it difficult to predict under what conditions *Wired* writers turn to religious or spiritual vocabulary or choose to cover events that

have religious implications. In the sample from 2002, seven feature articles mention religion positively, and seven mention religion negatively. At that historical moment, readers were grappling with the fallout of 9/11 and the Islamic fundamentalism that fueled it, while the technological optimism that characterized *Wired*'s early years met a stark reality in the Dotcom Crash of the early 2000s. Reflecting on the importance of the Dotcom downturn, *Wired* contributor Po Bronson (2003) explains:

It's hard to find the shine today on what just yesterday was the shining new metropolis, the New Jerusalem.... Silicon Valley will continue to export computer technology, much of which will continue to reshape the world. But the Valley itself won't be a role model for anything. While the rest of the world will want to use our technology, they won't want to live like us; they won't care what we talk about; they won't worship our CEOs as leaders, or get excited about the newest startup. Silicon Valley 3.0 will be an industrial force, minus the magic that spawns imitation—a success again, but not the One True Way.

The religious language in this passage is obvious and points in a clear direction: before the Dotcom Crash, many considered Silicon Valley's technologically inspired lifestyle to be "the One True Way." Technological monotheism was the norm, and the positive use of religious terms was highest in 2002 (before the Dotcom Crash) and again in 2008 (after the debut of the iPhone but before the Great Recession). Absent its success in the global market economy, however, and this language became less useful. Thus, while fluctuations in positive and negative frames could map onto external world events that affect how many perceive or appropriate religion and spirituality in Silicon Valley (or, minimally, within the headquarters at *Wired*), speculation as to why certain spikes appear when they do must be interpreted cautiously.

Having concluded the content analysis, I will now look more closely at the discursive frames pertaining to those specific articles that delve deeper into religious

issues. After introducing three conceptual motifs, substantial evidence in support of these motifs will be provided.

### *The Conflict Motif*

For social scientists well versed in history of secularization theory, the frequency with which religious and spiritual terms are used in *Wired* might seem surprising. For a popular publication dedicated to promoting and discussing the latest applications of modern science, why would there be any need to invoke the supernatural? One possible answer, supported by secularization theory, could be that advances in technology are not possible without the concurrent dwindling of religion. If the proponents of a liberating technological future face consistent threats from the guardians of an older religious order, the inclusion of religious and spiritual vocabulary may occur simply because there exists an antagonistic relationship. In the same way that Batman finds himself talking disproportionately about the Joker's evil machinations, technologists could, in theory, find themselves discussing the intentions of those who wish to halt the march of progress, scientific advancements, or liberal democracy.

In *Wired*, some evidence exists to support this widely accepted conflict motif whereby science and technology confront religion and theology as opposing forces. For example, in "The Crusade Against Evolution," Ratliff (2004) monitors the resurgence of anti-evolutionary arguments, particularly the Intelligent Design (ID) movement, and covers its implications for school textbooks and science curricula for the Ohio State Board of Education. While the article generally avoids polemical overtones and even-handedly summarizes the viewpoints on each side of the debate,



there is little recognition that alternatives besides these two warring camps exist. No mention is made, for example, of widely accepted positions such as theistic evolution, and scientists who support evolutionary theory but also hold religious convictions are given little attention. The reader is thus left with a choice: one can choose between the ultimately misguided position of ID or the secular, data-driven theory of evolution. Ratliff reveals his own hand toward the end of the article: “In an era when the government is pouring billions into biology, and when stem cells and genetically modified food are front-page news, spending even a small part of the curriculum on bogus criticisms of evolution is arguably more detrimental now than in any time in history.”

Although anti-evolutionists draw the ire among some *Wired* writers, the conflict model is not confined solely to North American debates between evangelical Christians and their secular counterparts. Issues with the religion of Islam also surface occasionally and serve as further instances where religion and technology collide. In an article entitled “Robots of Arabia,” Lewis (2005) covers a fascinating conflict between the religious ideals of Islam, the Qatari culture of camel racing, and the developing field of robotics. Attempting to secure ever-lighter (and thus faster) jockeys for the camels, owners had begun using small Sudanese boys instead of voluntary adult competitors. Eventually, recognizing the danger and servitude foisted upon the Sudanese boys, the Emir of Qatar, Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, decided to replace all child jockeys with robots. This decision accelerated the oddness of an already strange series of events where Swiss engineers and zoologists were contracted by the government to build camel-riding robot jockeys. Making matters more

complicated, the whip-swinging robot jockeys needed to appear human-like to assuage the camels' nerves, but Islam "forbids representations of the human form" since they could be "considered graven images, inducements to idolatry." Reflecting on the peculiar conflict, Lewis (2005) writes, "It's a moment created by rampantly colliding contexts: Western R&D, international NGO pressures, Arabian traditions, petroleum wealth, and benevolent despotism." In the end, the Swiss engineers were able to produce robot jockeys that satisfied the demands of the prickly camels and law-abiding Muslims, but the story itself exemplifies the occasional conflicts that arise between the conservative forces of religion and the liberating potential of technology.

### *The Compatible Motif*

Despite secularization theory's legacy in the social sciences and its entrenchment in popular culture, other articles in *Wired* support a motif of compatibility, one where religious faith and its real-world expression exist peacefully in a modern, technologically savvy world. Obviously, this view is not unique to *Wired* journalists. Prominent scholars have argued for the reconciliation of science and religion such as Francis Collins (2007), who as former head of the Human Genome Project and current director of the National Institutes of Health, has been featured frequently in *Wired*. Since advances in modern technology often prompt ethical or religious considerations, *Wired* writers often cover this interaction and feature prominent thinkers who contend that advances in modern technology can move in concert with religious convictions. In "The Remastered Race," for example, Brian Alexander (2002) interviews Ted Peters, a theologian at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, who believes that genetic engineering for humans is a natural extension of

God's will. According to Peters, "We are responsible for making the world a better place, and technology is one means whereby we can do it."

Similarly, in a December issue of that same year, Gregg Easterbrook (2002) overtly challenges the popularity of the secularization thesis. As he explains, "the pure materialistic view that reigned through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, holding that everything has a natural explanation, couldn't keep other viewpoints at bay forever. The age-old notion that there is more to existence than meets the eye suddenly looks fresh again."

Running the gamut from quantum physics and the Higgs boson "God particle" to new findings in evolutionary biology, Easterbrook's article is remarkable in its extensive coverage of the ideas and people who see an ultimate compatibility between religion, science, and technology. From his perspective, the secularization thesis has failed to account for some of reality's lingering questions, and readers would be wise to consult other repositories of truth—including religion and theology—to seek out answers.

Facing unprecedented moral predicaments with advances in biotechnology,

Easterbrook (2004) concludes:

The need to grope our collective way through such quandaries may force theologians, church leaders, biologists, and philosophers to engage one another. Perhaps this debate will get hopelessly hung up on doctrine, for instance on the question of whether life begins when sperm meets the egg. But there is at least an equal chance that the pressure of solving biotech questions will force science and theology to find the reasonable points of either field. Unlike cosmology, which poses fascinating questions whose answers have no effect on daily life, biotech will affect almost everyone in an immediate way. A science-and-religion reconciliation on this subject may be needed to write research rules, physician ethics, and, ultimately law.

These sentiments are not isolated, anomalous suggestions coming from one *Wired* contributor, either. In "The Pope's Astrophysicist," Margaret Wertheim (2002) pushes back on a materialistic view of the universe while favorably covering the life and

thoughts of Father George Coyne, director and senior scientist at the Vatican Observatory. Though some tensions exist,<sup>10</sup> Coyne’s theologically informed cosmological research makes room for a universe where angels and astronauts can co-exist.

### *The Fulfillment Motif*

Departing from both the traditional secularization thesis and the post-secular pushback, a third motif articulates a narrative where technology and its ultimate potential are the perfect fulfillment of religion’s ancient ideals. Surprisingly, in fact, most of the articles in *Wired* that bring religion prominently into the story avoid both the conflict and compatible models just discussed. By contrast, as Table 3.2 indicates, over 50 percent of the articles sampled from *Wired* from 2001-2012 follow what I call the fulfillment motif.

Table 3.2

<i>Discursive Frames in Sample of Wired Magazine Articles (2001-2012) N=33</i>		
<i>Religious-Technology Frames</i>	N	% in sample
Conflict Motif	9	27.3
Compatible Motif	7	21.2
Fulfillment Motif	17	51.5

While borrowing some essential elements from the previous motifs, the fulfillment motif distinguishes itself in a few important ways. First, there is usually a temporal ordering to the fulfillment motif. By depicting technology as making possible that which religion could never achieve itself, the fulfillment motif suggests that some

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Wertheim (2002) points out that Coyne kneels to kiss the ring of the Pope before a meeting and asks, “How can Coyne live both in the hierarchical world of the Catholic Church and the egalitarian world of science, where there is no higher authority?”

of the typical themes of religion (immortality of the soul or body, knowledge of the origins of the universe, restoration of the cosmos, etc.) can only occur through technological means. Whereas the conflict motif views religion and technology as continual enemies in the past and present, and while the compatible motif dissolves the tension between the two, this third frame resituates technology as the eventual fulfillment of humanity's earliest religious ideas.

*Wired* contributor Brian Alexander (2001) follows the fulfillment frame in his article on advances in human cloning technology. When Alexander interviews an underground scientist referred to as "The Creator," he discovers that the unnamed scientist's motive to clone humans is surprisingly spiritual. As "The Creator" tells him, "This will be the biggest leap for mankind.... It is the central core of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus, the promise of eternal life!" Despite these spiritual impulses, however, the fulfillment motif is generally inconsistent with traditional religious ideals. Alexander (2001) recognizes as much when he contextualizes the controversy and later states, "The Catholic Church was (and remains) an especially vociferous opponent of in vitro fertilization." However, "The Creator" refutes these Catholic objections to in vitro and human cloning, while Alexander spends a good portion of his article interviewing pro-cloning advocates and downplaying unwarranted ethical fears.

Departures from the conflict and compatible motifs are perhaps most evident when *Wired* articles move into trans- or post-humanist territory. Ray Kurzweil, a prolific inventor and author of *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (2000) and *The Singularity Is Near* (2006), is a frequent subject of fascination for *Wired* writers for his

bold predictions and belief that humans will one day merge their bodies with technological interfaces, thus escaping their mortal bodies (Boutin 2001). In a 2012 *Wired* article, posthumanism is taken up in an article on Japanese pop culture where James Verini (2012) reports on the massive crowds flocking to see a virtual pop star named Hatsune Miku in concert. Verini explains the odd circumstances surrounding Miku's fans:

Miku is not human. She is a virtual idol, a holographic star. Miku is crowdsourced, ever-evolving, famous software. Not even her fans know, or care, how to taxonomize her. ("She's rather more like a goddess: She has human parts, but she transcends human limitations. She's the great posthuman pop star," one fansite reads.)

Consequently, the technological innovations that make it possible to believe that humans can live forever or transcend bodily limitations not only receive the interest of tech journalists and writers at *Wired*, they also reveal a new way to conceive of the religion-technology relationship.

A second theme that supports the fulfillment motif employs what Kevin Kelly calls a "computational metaphor." Describing the universe in mystical terms, Kelly rejects the notion that religion and technology conflict with one another, but at the same time he subverts traditional religious conceptions that portray God as standing apart from creation. From Kelly's perspective, the universe is one gigantic computer and "God is the Machine" (2002). The metaphor of computation accordingly helps humans understand their place in reality as a new, more explanatory belief than either secularism or what traditional religious dogma can offer. Quoted in Turner (2008:15), Kelly explains this metaphor's narrative potential:

It is a new universal metaphor. It has more juice in it than previous metaphors: Freud's dream state, Darwin's variety, Marx's progress, or the Age of

Aquarius. And it has more power than anything else in science at the moment. In fact the computational metaphor may eclipse mathematics as a form of universal notation.

Given Kelly's role as former executive editor at *Wired*, his thinking has left a visible imprint on the types of stories emerging from Silicon Valley's popular media outlet. For those immersed in the world of software development and coding—or for those seeking to embrace a metanarrative that avoids traditional religious dogmas on the one hand and secularism's hostility to transcendence on the other—the computation metaphor provides a popular, third alternative.

Kelly (2002) explains:

From this perspective, computation seems almost a theological process. It takes as its fodder the primeval choice between yes or no, the fundamental state of 1 or 0. After stripping away all externalities, all material embellishments, what remains is the purest state of existence: here/not here. Am/ not am. In the Old Testament, when Moses asks the Creator, "Who are you?" the being says, in effect, "Am." One bit. One almighty bit. Yes. One. Exist. It is the simplest statement possible.

As this passage illustrates, Kelly reinterprets an Old Testament passage and recasts its meaning so that technology is the ultimate fulfillment of religious underpinnings. The God in the Old Testament may exist, according to Kelly, but this deity is best understood through the metaphor of computation.

Finally, a third motif that appears in connection with the fulfillment motif deals with the logic of re-enchantment. Contra Weber's theory of disenchantment, the writers at *Wired* often infuse their articles with a re-enchanting logic to suggest that technology produces a more positive, life-giving outcome than once thought. Viewing the Romantic tradition as a useful counterweight to the Enlightenment's secularizing tendencies, a *Wired* article follows this re-enchanting logic when covering the

neurologist Oliver Sacks and praising his ability to have “profound mystical feelings which do not have to call on fictitious agencies like angels and demons and deities” (Silberman 2007). In the same October issue, writer Gary Wolf (2007) waxes romantically about “Guru David Allen and His Cult of Hyperefficiency.” A leader in the life-hacking movement, Allen’s advice for how to organize your personal life contains nothing less than “a spiritual promise” and a litany of self-help, New Age concepts.

Taken together, these motifs articulate a narrative that sees technology—or, more broadly, technique (Ellul 1967)—as the means and fulfillment of spiritual promises. While many *Wired* writers and tech journalists appropriate religious and spiritual vocabulary for these purposes, the most serious spokesperson for this way of thinking is, of course, Kevin Kelly, whose presence at *Wired* is fundamental and stretches back to the founding of the magazine and his days with Stewart Brand at *Whole Earth Catalog*. As a result, in contrast to the notions of pure conflict or compatibility, a new fulfillment motif emerges which sees technology as the natural fulfillment of earlier religious ideas and concepts. From this perspective, technology is not a cold, lifeless tool, as some thought before the origins of Silicon Valley cyberculture (Turner 2008), but an entire way of living and thinking that ultimately explains reality. Kelly summarizes his position and the fulfillment motif generally in a 2010 interview with Steven Johnson: “I’ve actually gone a bit further and come to see technology as an alternative great story, as a different source for understanding where we are in the cosmos. I think technology is something that can give meaning to our



lives, particularly in a secular world.” With this motif now in view, all three motifs—conflict, compatible, and fulfillment—are summarized and explained in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

<i>Conceptual Motifs of Religion-Technology Interaction, Wired (2001-2012)</i>		
1. Conflict Motif Religion vs. Technology	2. Compatible Motif Religion & Technology	3. Fulfillment Motif Religion → Technology
Religion is an obstacle to:	Religion and technology are compatible because:	Technology is the natural fulfillment of religious themes and ideals because:
a. globalization	a. major scientific leaders also hold religious convictions (Collins 2007)	a. humans will eventually achieve immortality by merging with technology (Kurzweil 2006)
b. public school teaching of evolutionary theory	b. scientific theories, such as the Higgs boson, invoke the supernatural—e.g. “the God particle”	b. the universe can best be understood through the metaphorical lens of computation and information (Kelly 1999)
c. biotech and genetic engineering	c. religious professionals believe God requires them to use technology responsibly	c. as a metanarrative, technology can re-enchant a disenchanted world and give life meaning and purpose
d. liberal democracy and civil rights	d. religion and science are “non-overlapping magisteria” (Gould 2002)	
e. scientific progress in general	e. scholars have recognized the failure of the secularization thesis and presence of multiple modernities (Berger 2014; Eisenstadt 2000)	

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Most of the technology that resides in our homes and workplaces or fills our pockets and purses today can trace its origins to Silicon Valley, but what goes less noticed among those interested in technology and social change is how various narratives pertaining to religion and spirituality occasionally creep into discussions about science and technology. Hoping to shed light on this understudied corner of the Bay Area, this chapter seeks to identify the surprising spirituality of Silicon Valley

through the prism of tech journalists and their work at *Wired* magazine. In doing so, this project echoes Binkley's textual ethnography of *Wired*'s predecessor, *Whole Earth Catalog*, which explains emerging consumption patterns and the popularity and fascination with *Whole Earth*. In that article, Binkley (2003:288) strives "to bring our understanding of the origins of the postmodern consumer down from the ether of metatheory to the level of actors, innovations, and print media." Likewise, the foregoing content and discourse analyses intend to explain more precisely how religion and technology are understood and articulated by some of the leading actors and writers in Silicon Valley. Reaching an estimated 30 million readers each month, *Wired*'s success not only reflects its cultural appeal to technology enthusiasts, but also communicates important metanarratives that explain complex social realities. Some of these narratives, I argue, pertain to the evolving relationships between religion, spirituality, and technology. Indeed, evidence suggests that *Wired* contributors articulate the complex relationships of religion and spirituality to science and technology in multiple ways.

The first narrative—labeled *the conflict motif*—has a venerable history in the social sciences. From Marx and Weber onward, secularization theorists have long posited that advances in technology would lead to the gradual regression of theology. Given this legacy, it is unsurprising to find occasional articles in *Wired* that portray religion or its followers in a negative light. In a sample of 75 feature articles that mention religion or spirituality in purposive, non-colloquial ways, 27 of them (36%) do so negatively. In these examples, religion may be seen as the enemy of globalization, evolutionary theory, biotech or genetic engineering, liberal democracy

and civil rights, or scientific progress in general. Accordingly, such instances corroborate the accounts of contemporary theorists who find evidence for secularization (Bruce 2002; Chaves 1994; Norris and Inglehart 2011) or who otherwise understand cultural change as a product of concerted struggle between opposing groups of elites (Hunter 1992; Smith 2003).

The second narrative—or *the compatible motif*—presents an entirely different picture. Rather than viewing religion and technology as bitter enemies, some writers at *Wired* feature a more benign or positive account of the religion-technology relationship. As Table 3.1 indicates, 61 percent of the articles that use significant religious or spiritual vocabulary from 2001-2012 contain positive references. To be sure, this percentage may be partially explained by the words themselves, since references to the supernatural already slant in the direction of power, omniscience, reverence, and the like. Still, while the possibility of selection effects should caution readers from interpreting these percentages too confidently, the compatible motif clearly operates on a discursive level and presents a narrative where astrophysics and metaphysics coexist (Wertheim 2002). As Table 3.3 shows, *Wired* authors occasionally feature stories of major scientific figures who hold religious convictions, or they discuss the religious implications of emerging scientific theories in a post-secular context. Such appearances, in fact, parallel current research that challenges or otherwise reckons with the once widely revered theory of secularization (Berger 2014; Eisenstadt 2000; Froese 2008; Gorski 2012; Stark 1999; Warner 1993).

Though both the conflict and compatible motifs are present in the broader Silicon Valley ethos, the most popular narrative involving the religion-technology

relationship is best expressed through *the fulfillment motif*. In the pages of *Wired*, this motif steers a middle course, synthesizing elements of the previous two but also subverting their arguments in the process. Aupers' (2002) early analysis of *Wired* initially recognized the curious presence of spirituality in what most would expect to be an overtly secular publication. For those familiar with the work of Kevin Kelly or his predecessor Stewart Brand, however, the appearance of spiritual or religious vocabulary may not seem out of place. As Turner (2005, 2008, 2009) has shown, Silicon Valley has long fostered a "digital utopianism" that co-opts religious or spiritual metaphors and subverts traditional religious dogmas. In the fulfillment narrative articulated by the writers at *Wired*, technology is understood to be the natural fulfillment of religious or spiritual ideals. The post-humanist movement expressed by Ray Kurzweil (2000, 2006) exemplifies an attempt to gain immortal life and a Gnostic liberation from the body through technological means. Kevin Kelly's "computational metaphor," which affirms God's existence, reduces the origins of the universe and all material reality to quasi-spiritual, informational processes (Gleick 2012; Kelly 2011). Further, the frenetic pace of innovation and activity in Silicon Valley derive not solely from a profit motive, but out of a deeper desire to overcome the effects of alienation and disenchantment—in short, a longing to re-enchant the world (Aupers and Houtman 2005; Froese 2016).

The longitudinal findings in this paper also point to the conditions under which religious and spirituality vocabulary is most prominent. Though the random sampling of articles does not provide an exhaustive analysis and cannot fully rule out statistical outliers, Figure 3.1 suggests that the conflation of religious, spiritual, and

technological language may occur when Silicon Valley's global success is most prominent. In the three issues of *Wired* sampled in 2002, 14 feature articles significantly mention or discuss religion and spirituality in the context of some broader technological issue. While some of these articles contain negative perceptions of religion and reflect a post 9/11 mood, other mentions are positive and may pattern after the financial success of Silicon Valley prior to the Dotcom Crash. In fact, the precipitous decline in both positive and negative religious references in 2003-2004 and again in 2008-2009 suggests that overtly religious language becomes less useful for *Wired* writers during economic downturns.

As with other content and discourse analyses, some limitations to this project exist and deserve further discussion. The first is that coding positive and negative references as well as distinguishing between the proposed motifs of conflict, compatibility, and fulfillment require subjective interpretations and would benefit greatly from inter-rater reliability provided from the addition of a second researcher. Moving forward, a second author with qualitative research experience will verify these findings and sharpen the final product. Second, the data collected for this project range from 2001-2012, but this paper needs to bring the study up to the present day and display data from *Wired* articles from 2012-2017. At the close of 2017, there will be five additional years of data to collect and analyze, thus enabling further accuracy and testing of the present conclusions. As it stands, however, other discursive frames and motifs could exist which have not yet been detected. Third, questions might arise as to whether *Wired* writers purposefully follow the motifs of conflict, compatibility, and fulfillment that I argue are at the heart of the evolving religion-technology discourse.

Perhaps they do so unintentionally, but while questions of authorial intention are relevant when interpreting any text, the possibility that writers unknowingly follow certain structures and patterns of thought does not invalidate the existence of the proposed motifs. In any case, broader hermeneutical debates that wade into structuralist and poststructuralist waters are beyond the scope of this paper.

In the end, finding the levers that produce cultural change requires understanding how the norms, values, and beliefs traditionally associated with religion interact with the floodwaters released from technological innovation. Over the last few decades, Silicon Valley has arguably become the most important cultural reservoir in the world, impacting not only the residents and writers living in the Bay Area, but all those who download new apps on their phones or gather information about the world using Google or Facebook. Understanding the complex data humans acquire in life also requires adopting and adhering to structured metanarratives that explain reality. In this paper, three motifs emerge which hint at the possibility of future metanarratives: (1) *a conflict motif* which asserts an irreconcilable difference between religion and technology; (2) *a compatible motif* which seeks to assuage the presumed tensions between religion and technology; and (3) *a fulfillment motif* which sees technology and its advances as the natural realization of traditional religious beliefs and ideals. By locating these narratives and grasping their social implications, scholars can more fully anticipate what role technology plays in producing cultural change, how religion is central to cultural and technological production, and under what conditions religious and spiritual terms are appropriated for purposes inconsistent with their founding. Such anticipations should provoke new dialogue at the intersection of culture,

technology, and religion and challenge assumptions that have placed religion and technology as either eternal enemies or consonant dance partners. At the very least, a different game with a different narrative, one that marches to its own beat altogether, may be afoot.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Buffered, Technological Self: Finding Associations between Religiosity and Internet Use

#### *Abstract*

Explanations for the rise of the religiously unaffiliated have regained attention from sociologists and scholars of religion in light of recent trends and declines in religiosity. While the secularization thesis has seen several revisions among scholars across disciplines, few studies link lower levels of religiosity with greater Internet use. This paper draws from Charles Taylor's widely regarded account of secularity and his concept of "the buffered self" to argue that individuals who use the Internet more frequently are less religious. Using data from the Values and Beliefs of the American Public survey (2017), I find that with higher levels of Internet use, individuals are less likely to pray, read sacred texts, attend religious services, consider religion personally important, or affiliate with a religious tradition. Greater Internet use is further associated with being an atheist, while other media activity such as watching television is not similarly linked. These findings ground Taylor's theoretical work by specifying empirically measurable, contextual conditions that help explain recent declines in religiosity.



## *Introduction*

The secularization thesis has enjoyed renewed attention in recent decades, prompting scholars across disciplines to reconsider its place in the social sciences as they seek to explain declines in religiosity. As researchers have shown, one of the most well documented trends in the sociology of religion has been the increase in the religiously unaffiliated, or “nones” as they are more popularly known (Baker and Smith 2009; Kosmin and Keysar 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2012; Woodhead 2017). The Pew Research Center has conducted numerous studies on nones and their recent growth, finding that 23 percent of the American population (approximately 74 million adults) report no religious affiliation (Smith and Cooperman 2016). While proposing various explanations such as generational replacement (Lipka 2015a, 2015b; Liu, Funk, and Smith 2012) as well as a general disbelief or disapproval of organized religion (Lipka 2016), Pew’s reports on the growth of nones suggests that important changes in North America’s religious landscape are on the horizon and deserve further reflection.

Though the list of possible explanations has not been exhausted, some scholars have proposed mechanisms that may account for recent declines in religiosity. For example, Hout and Fischer (2002) argue that recent upticks in nones can be explained by an aversion to conservative politics. The conflation of religion and politics, especially prominent within the Moral Majority and Christian Right movements, has led some liberals to disaffiliate from organized religion. Putnam and Campbell (2012) support this account and find that social and political movements often produce reactionary (anti-) religious sentiments in an oscillating fashion. Summarizing their

position, Putnam and Campbell (2012:566) point to a “broader slackening of institutional commitment” and a definite “creeping secularism” among American youth who have “a genuine antipathy toward organized religion.”

The growth of religious nones is certainly not isolated to the American context either. While Europe has long been considered more secular than America, scholars have noted religious variations across the world and have wondered who sets the trends for other nations to emulate (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008). From a global perspective, Norris and Inglehart (2011) attempt to explain religious decline in postindustrial nations with their existential security hypothesis. As they maintain, affluent Western nations with relatively high amounts of existential security see declines in religious adherence, whereas underdeveloped nations retain traditional religious views that provide security and comfort in the face of life’s perils. As a result, religious participation declines in the West while remaining active elsewhere. In Britain, the rise of nones has occurred rather drastically (Bullivant 2017; Woodhead 2017), thus forcing scholars to reconsider different connections that may account for their growth and the collective social implications that may result.

Since much of the scholarship on religion has focused on formal religious organizations and their members, nones have until recently received scant attention. Further, by concentrating on formal religious organizations, especially those in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, scholars have neglected important developments in Eastern, non-monotheistic, or spiritual belief systems. Indeed, Heelas et al. (2005) attribute religious decline in part to an increased fascination with spirituality, and Houtman and Aupers (2007) argue that “post-Christian spirituality” has expanded in

numerous countries while traditional religious observance has decreased. Scholars have also sought to understand the “spiritual but not religious” (commonly, SBNR) population (Ammerman 2013; Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014), with some evidence suggesting that SBNRs actually double in size the population of nones in the United States (McClure 2017a). Researchers have further revealed the presence of beliefs that borrow from more traditional theologies but ultimately run counter to them. For example, in their extensive analysis of the religious beliefs of American adolescents, Smith and Denton (2005) find evidence of widespread “moralistic therapeutic deism.” Coupled with the projected growth of nones in the United States and elsewhere, these trends should force researchers to recognize the importance of analyzing changes on the religious landscape, particularly as they apply to younger birth cohorts.

Fortunately, research into the religious variation among birth cohorts has made significant strides in recent years. In their 35-year survey of over 3,000 California families, Bengtson, Putney, and Harris (2013:193) advance a theory of “intergenerational religious momentum” to explain how religious beliefs are passed down from one generation to the next. Their findings, as the title of their theory suggests, show that religious families still bear a remarkable influence on the beliefs and practices of their children. Still, their study also finds that individualism, relativism, and the interiorization of God are more common among younger cohorts. Similarly, Merino (2012) points out that just as religious groups seek to retain members of their own, nonreligious parents socialize their children into more secular mindsets. Thus, religious variations among birth cohorts—with younger generations

typically being less religious than older ones—may partially explain recent declines in religiosity.

While this recognition is profitable, the question remains: why are young generations less religious than older ones? Wuthnow (2010) assumes this responsibility in *After the Baby Boomers*, finding that young adults are more likely to experiment with a wide variety of religious and spiritual beliefs as they pragmatically navigate the complexities of their social environments. Expanding this line of thought, I show that young adults who spend more time on social networking sites are more likely to customize their beliefs in syncretistic fashion and endorse practicing multiple religions simultaneously, independent of what their religious tradition teaches (McClure 2016). In thinking about the effects of technology, Downey (2014) and I have separately discovered that increases in Internet use correlate with decreases in religious affiliation (McClure 2017b). Twenge (2017; Twenge et al. 2015) has perhaps best furthered these connections in her recent book *iGen*, though her research focuses more on the post-Millennial birth cohort than it does on specific technology measures or the effects of Internet use.

In their broader context, studies on the decline of religiosity transpire against a larger theoretical backdrop where scholars have sought to assess the place of the secularization thesis in the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the traditional secularization thesis, which posited a weakening of religious authority in the modernizing world, has been resurrected with the ascension of nones and simultaneous decline of religious institutions worldwide (Bruce 2002; Chaves 1994, 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2011; Yamane 1997). But these arguments still confront both the “new

paradigm” (Warner 1993), “multiple modernities,” (Eisenstadt 2000), and the desecularization thesis, which together maintain that religion is alive and well in the modern world (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Stark 1999). Given these tensions, it is not surprising that some scholars have pushed for the adoption of the phrase “post-secular” to describe the current religious landscape (Gorski 2012; Gorski and Altinordu 2008). With these debates in mind, this paper contends that Charles Taylor’s (2007) *A Secular Age* provides the most useful vocabulary and best theoretical explanation of the present situation, despite the curious absence of any discussion of technology and its effects. Thus, in what follows, I aim to: (1) explicate Charles Taylor’s concept of “the buffered self,” (2) relate this concept to technology by discussing the Internet’s purportedly secularizing effects, (3) state relevant hypotheses, (4) introduce the data and methods used for this study, (5) highlight main results, and (6) conclude with a discussion that connects Internet use to lower levels of individual religiosity. Ultimately, the shifting contours of religion in the United States and elsewhere cannot be properly understood without paying attention to the technological gears which have so massively altered modern social life.

### *The Buffered Self in Charles Taylor’s Theoretical Lexicon*

Arguably the most impressive work in the history of the secularization debate, Charles Taylor’s (2007) *A Secular Age* examines the place of the secularization thesis in the twenty-first century. Over 800 pages long and spawning numerous commentaries and books of its own (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011; Smith 2014; Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun 2010), Taylor’s tome begins with a simple question (2007:25): “why was it virtually impossible not to believe in

God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?” Given its length and complexity, not even a brief summary of the book is possible here,<sup>1</sup> but in order to answer his own question, Taylor deposits a rich theoretical vocabulary and introduces the concept of the “buffered self.” For Taylor, this concept helps clarify the place of the secularization thesis in the social sciences and explain recent declines in religiosity.

Though framed in abstract terms, Taylor’s buffered self accounts for many social realities of our day, including disengagement from larger institutions and social organizations. Properly defined, Taylor (2007:42) writes, “The buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement. And disengagement is frequently carried out in relation to one’s whole surroundings, natural and social.” As a result, Taylor contends that buffered individuals determine their lives without ever sensing a need to consult higher authorities or adhere to institutionally imposed doctrines. As for the fate of religion, this means that modern individuals, according to Taylor, are increasingly less likely to affiliate with religious organizations because such institutions provide little explanatory value or social capital outside of what self-sufficient individuals can obtain on their own steam.

Commenting on this phenomenon, Bilgrami (2010:152) writes, “What Taylor calls the ‘buffered self’ is a self that is not open to normative demands from any site external to

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor distinguishes between three forms of secularity that he labels secularity 1, secularity 2, and secularity 3. Secularity 1 refers to worldly things and occupations, as in the classically medieval division between priests and the occupations of laypeople. Secularity 2 conjures up notions of a neutral, non-parochial sphere intended to be conducive to the social order. The Enlightenment project, with its emphasis on universal reason and neutrality, helped pave the way for secularity 2. Finally, secularity 3 refers to the articulation of the secular that Taylor himself advocates. Here, secularity 3 refers to a pluralistic situation whereby religious and secular understandings of reality are both live options, but the plausibility structures are such that non-religious interpretations seem more favorable. For a brief review of these definitions and distinctions, see Taylor’s introduction (2017:2-4).

itself, an inevitable consequence of the fact that a world conceived as brute does not, in any case, contain anything that *could* make those demands.” This conception of self stands in direct contrast to the “porous self,” which Taylor (2017:38) argues was characteristic of pre-modern selves who felt “vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces.” Thus, modern individuals, who feel no obligation to obey the dictates of larger religious or social institutions, are buffered selves.

In explaining the rise of this modern cultural consciousness, Taylor carefully points out that the buffered self did not emerge in a vacuum. Historically, certain conditions had to change to make the buffered self possible. Taylor (2007:239) describes these changes as an “anthropocentric shift” that contributed to a new “social and civilizational framework which inhibits or blocks out certain of the ways in which transcendence has historically impinged on humans, and has been present in their lives.” Though the rising tides of individualism have been well documented (Bellah et al. 1985; Madsen 2009), Taylor argues that declining religiosity is more a product of a collective social imaginary, or “an immanent frame,” than an aggregate supply of individual decision-makers who have rationally decided to disaffiliate from their church or religious organization. While these outcomes are historically contingent and not inevitable byproducts of modernity, Taylor illustrates that the immanent frame in which all Westernized individuals today are situated—regardless of whether they are religious or secular themselves—produces an unreflective background that accounts for declining religiosity. Commenting on Taylor’s sweeping account of these historical events, Warner et al. (2010) write, “We cannot make sense of the decline of religious

practice (where this has occurred), the compartmentalization of religion as private, or even declarations of doctrinaire atheism without reference to these changes.”

But what, exactly, are these changes? Taylor’s account of secularization begins as far back as 1500 and marches onward to the present, stopping to reflect on cultural developments as varied as the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, Matthew Tindal’s Providential Deism, Nietzschean philosophy, and the expressive individualism characteristic of the late twentieth century. Still, *A Secular Age* is neither a chronological history of ideas, nor a straightforward account of secularization. Diverging from the traditional secularization thesis, Taylor in fact contends that people today find themselves living in “cross-pressured” spaces where feelings of transcendence occasionally interrupt the disenchanted, secular realm. As Taylor (2007:300) explains, “We are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.” Thus, Taylor’s argument here and elsewhere is sufficiently nuanced to account for the varieties of modern religious experiences that still occur despite the seeming secularity of the world (Taylor 2003b). At the same time, despite the rich theoretical vocabulary, attention to historical detail, and comprehensive nature of Taylor’s work, little is said about the technological forces that have shaped modern life.

### *Internet Use and Its (Secularizing) Effects*

Despite Taylor’s sweeping comprehension, the potentially secularizing forces of modern technology receive scant attention in his work, particularly Internet technology and the widespread ramifications of the ongoing digital revolution. Outside Taylor’s corpus, some studies attempt to specify more precisely the possible



connections between technology and religion, but these are narrow in scope and make broader extrapolations of the religion-technology relationship more difficult. Campbell (2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2010, 2012) covers this terrain extensively in her research, revealing whole tracts of undeveloped territory ripe for investigation. In general, however, scholars point to the Internet as either a force that strengthens religion or one that erodes its institutional and moral hold over adherents (Armfield and Holbert 2003; Bunt 2011; Goh 2005).

One of the ways the Internet is understood as a tool that can strengthen religion is through its ability to provide solidarity with fellow adherents. Religious minorities, in particular, can benefit from Internet technology as it offers communicative means for otherwise isolated believers to connect with members of their religious group. For example, within ultra-Orthodox Judaism, a religion not normally viewed as technologically progressive, some groups such as Chabad have dedicated webmasters striving to build sacred online communities (Golan and Stadler 2016). In an earlier study, Campbell and Golan (2011) show that the Israeli Orthodox community carefully constructs bounded “digital enclaves” that foster solidarity with existing members while also maintaining appropriate levels of social control and authority over the online group. Further, Singh (2014) finds evidence of young British Sikhs using the Internet to deepen their faith, discuss religious issues with each other online, examine different Sikh practices, and stay networked with others who share their faith.

Second, many religious believers turn to the Internet for information about their religion or their congregation’s daily activities. The young British Sikhs studied by Singh (2014) used the Internet this way, as do Singaporean religious leaders from a

variety of faiths including Taoism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Protestantism (Kluver and Cheong 2007). While Singapore has embraced the Internet far more than other non-Western countries, Kluver and Cheong provide good qualitative evidence that many religious leaders view the Internet more as a helpful tool than as an obstacle to reaching their congregations.

Third, some religious believers and professionals recognize the Internet's potential as a proselytizing aid. For example, Bergen (2017) observes that some American converts to radical Islam first came into contact with ISIS through virtual recruiters, and Năstută (2012) finds that New Religious Movements (NRMs) similarly use the Internet as they seek to grow their memberships. Since NRMs typically have small followings in their infancy, any technological boost which helps advertise their message and reach new converts is beneficial. By providing an accessible platform from which NRMs can launch their brand, the Internet levels the playing field and allows NRMs to compete with more traditional, mainstream religions for new converts. As Năstută (2012:70) concludes, the Internet has produced "a religious market that favours individuals and small religious communities to compete against established religions." At the same time, religious groups cannot establish an online presence without the required national and corporate infrastructure, and this further depends largely on cultural and economic conditions that make Internet adoption possible in the first place. As Goh (2005) forcefully argues, the Internet is not a neutral tool that will be equally valued in all places, and the variation of Internet diffusion in Asian countries is a testament to that fact. Instead, as a cultural product that emerged out a primarily American context, the Internet prioritizes autonomy, open markets, and

the free exchange of ideas at the expense of local relationships, familial piety, and traditional rituals. Thus, while some Asian countries have fully embraced the Internet and have had religious professionals adopt it for proselytizing purposes, other cultures and individuals may view it as corrosive to a traditional way of life and thus resist its continued encroachment into the home or workplace.

Given the pervasiveness of the Internet in modern American life, it is hard to imagine that some individuals find its very presence objectionable. Some scholars argue, however, that the Internet erodes religion by transmitting immoral norms and values. In the Confucian context, Mary Bockover (2003:159, 163) contends that the Internet subverts Confucian values and could be “a potentially harmful foreign product” with its deeply entrenched “ideas of consumerism, free expression, equal opportunity, and free trade.” Such values are not native to Confucianism and possibly other religions as well. Echoing Noble’s (1999) criticism, Ian Barns (2005) further worries that the secular assumptions built into modern technology might lead to a more nihilistic, disenchanted world (also, Postman 1993). Regardless of whether such prognostications are accurate, however, recent empirical studies point to clear religious outcomes as they relate to some specific types of Internet activity. In a panel study of young Americans, Perry and Hayward (2017) find that viewing pornography may have a secularizing effect and reduce religiosity over time. Serving as a portal to pornographic websites, the Internet traffics in private habits that are negatively related to religious service attendance and frequency of prayer while positively related to having religious doubts. Charlton et al. (2013) investigate the relationship between Internet addiction and religiosity in their study of Malaysian students, finding that

female students who report higher levels of religiosity also have lower levels of Internet addiction. Taken together, these studies show that some people resist the Internet as a part of their daily routines, and viewing pornography or heavily engaging in other Internet-related activities may have an adverse effect on religiosity.

Other scholars seeking to connect religious patterns with technology show that increases in Internet use come at the expense of affiliating with religious organizations. Using data from the General Social Survey, Downey (2014) argues that increases in religious non-affiliation from 1990 to 2010 can be partially explained by increases in Internet use. With similar cross-sectional findings from the Baylor Religion Survey (2010), I expand on this subject theoretically and contend that Internet use encourages a “tinkering mentality” that encourages individuals to experiment with different religious ideas but which also weakens the institutional hold religious authorities have retained over their members (McClure 2017b). While these findings zero in on Internet use as a predictive variable and control for essential demographics, other research explains lower religiosity by the differences between birth cohorts. However, even Twenge’s (2017) landmark study on the youngest generation of Americans, fittingly coined *iGen* for her book, maintains that the least religious birth cohort in American history is also the only one that grew up with the Internet.

In sum, for scholars working at the intersection of technology and religion, evidence can be found to support conflicting positions. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) point out, even religious fundamentalists find ways to repurpose technology for their own benefit. However positive the Internet might be in strengthening religiosity,

though, the bulk of the literature appears to run in a different direction. Writing for the Taylorian inspired website, The Immanent Frame, Bryan Turner (2012) explains why:

Whereas the religious system of communication in an age of revelation was hierarchical, unitary, and authoritative, the system of communicative acts in a new media environment are typically horizontal rather than vertical, diverse and fragmented rather than unitary, devolved rather than centralized. Furthermore, the authority of any message is constantly negotiable and negotiated.

Given these assertions, this paper seeks to concretize Taylor's concept of the buffered self by specifying which practices contribute to lower levels of religiosity. One major contender, as the previous review and foregoing hypotheses illustrate, is that greater Internet use acts as a buffer against the imposition of religion and its normative demands.

### *Hypotheses*

The following seven hypotheses will be examined: Internet use will be negatively associated with religious attendance (H<sub>1</sub>), frequency of prayer (H<sub>2</sub>), reading sacred texts (H<sub>3</sub>), considering religion personally important (H<sub>4</sub>), considering spirituality personally important (H<sub>5</sub>), and positively associated with being religiously unaffiliated (H<sub>6</sub>) and an atheist (H<sub>7</sub>).

### *Data and Methods*

Data from the 2017 Values and Beliefs of the American Public survey were collected with the help of the Gallup Organization. Designed by a research team at Baylor University, this survey constitutes the fifth wave of what is alternatively labeled the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS). Initially, Gallup mailed out 11,000 survey letters, including an invitation letter, return envelope, and a \$1 USD cash incentive on

February 2, 2017. The sample for the study was selected using an Address Based Sample methodology and the latest Delivery Sequence File of the United States Postal Service. The complete survey and return envelope package were sent to those addresses that had accepted the invitation, and respondents completed and returned the questionnaires by March 21, 2017.

The final sample contains 1,501 respondents (13.6% response rate) and compares favorably with the 2016 sample of the General Social Survey (GSS) on numerous measures. For example, when the data are weighted, the average age of respondents for the BRS is 48.8, compared to 47.6 on the GSS. Both samples contain a slight majority of females, with 52.0 percent females on the BRS and 54.8 percent females on the GSS. As for education, the BRS has fewer respondents with less than eight years of schooling (1.4 vs. 4.1, respectively), but both samples are similar in the percentage of respondents who hold a college degree (32.7 for the BRS and 31.2 for the GSS). About half of both samples are currently married, and 28.0 percent of the BRS respondents report that they never attend religious services (compared to 25.0 percent on the GSS). Further, to this researcher's knowledge, the BRS is unique insofar as it asks extensive questions about religiosity as well the respondent's Internet use and practices.

### *Dependent Variables*

This study draws from several dependent variables that measure religious behaviors, the self-rated importance of religion and spirituality, and the religious identities of respondents. Regarding religious behaviors, the BRS asks respondents about their religious attendance: "How often do you attend a religious service?" With

the following options (coding in parentheses), respondents could answer: *Never* (0), *Less than once a year* (1), *Once or twice a year* (2), *Several times a year* (3), *Once a month* (4), *2-3 times a month* (5), *About once a week* (6), or *Several times a week* (7). Respondents were also asked about their frequency of prayer: “About how often do you spend time praying outside of religious services?” For this question, respondents could answer: *Never* (0), *Only on certain occasions* (1), *Once a week or less* (2), *A few times a week* (3), *Once a day* (4), or *Several times a day* (5). Similarly, the BRS asks respondents about their reading habits as they apply to sacred texts. The question on the survey asks, “*Outside of attending religious services*, about how often do you spend time reading the Bible, Koran, Torah, or other sacred book?” Respondents could answer in one of the following ways: *Never* (0), *Less than once a year* (1), *Once or twice a year* (2), *Several times a year* (3), *Once a month* (4), *2-3 times a month* (5), *About once a week* (6), or *Several times a week* (7).

Other measures consider how personally important respondents believe religion or spirituality to be, how they affiliate with religious organizations, and how they identify their belief in God. Allowing for respondents to distinguish between religion and spirituality, the survey consecutively asks, “How religious do you consider yourself to be?” And, “How spiritual do you consider yourself to be?” Depending on the whether the question pertains to religion or spirituality, respondents could then reply: *Not religious/spiritual* (1), *Slightly religious/spiritual* (2), *Moderately religious/spiritual* (3), *Very religious/spiritual* (4), or *I don’t know* (excluded from analysis). The survey also asks respondents about their religious affiliation. Following Steensland et al. (2000) and Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson

(2007), I use a religious tradition schema to categorize respondents into one of seven binary groups. Those who have no religious affiliation (or nones) = 1 whereas all other religious groups = 0. Finally, the BRS measures how respondents identify or describe their beliefs about God. The survey asks, “Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about God?” Several possible answers are listed including: *I have no doubts that God exists; I believe in God, but with some doubts; I sometimes believe in God; I believe in a higher power or cosmic force; I don’t know and there is no way to find out; I do not believe in God; and I have no opinion* (excluded). I recoded these variables so that being an atheist (i.e. saying *I do not believe in God*) = 1 and all other responses = 0.

### *Independent Variables*

The primary independent variables used for this paper draw from questions on the survey that inquire about technology use. The BRS asks, “On average, how many hours per day do you spend using the Internet, for any reason?” Answer choices include: *Zero/None* (0), *1 hour or less* (1), *1 to 3 hours* (2), *3 to 6 hours* (3), *6 to 9 hours* (4), *9 to 12 hours* (5), and *More than 12 hours* (6). A similar question asks about watching television (including Netflix and streaming services) and includes the same answer choices.

Other independent variables in this paper tap into the basic demographic features of the American population. The analyses that follow control for age (measured continuously, 18 and older); race (nonwhite = 0 and white = 1); gender (male = 0 and female = 1); education ranging from 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less (1) to a postgraduate or professional degree (9); total annual household income before taxes



ranging from \$10,000 or less (1) to \$150,001 (7); and place of residence (large city = 1, a suburb near a large city = 2, a small city or town = 3, a rural area = 4). A fifth *don't know* option was excluded from analysis, and the previous answers were recoded so that urbanites = 4, suburbanites = 3, small town residents = 2, and rural residents = 1. I also accounted for marital status as a binary variable (married = 1) and political party, measured continuously ranging from *Strong Republican* (1) to *Strong Democrat* (7).

### *Analytic Approach*

The seven hypotheses put forward in this paper seek to determine the possible effects of Internet use on religiosity. My contention that Internet activity acts as a buffering agent and thus associated with lower religious participation and affiliation is tested through a series of methodological steps. Further, by controlling for other types of media engagement (i.e. watching television), the results that follow should distinguish between Internet use and other types of technological habits and practices.

Table 4.1 provides descriptive statistics of the key variables used in this paper. In Table 4.2, I run ordinary least squares regression models to predict the effects of Internet use on various religious behaviors. The outcome variables in Table 4.2 include religious attendance, frequency of prayer, and reading of sacred texts such as the Bible, Koran, or Torah. Accordingly, if my first set of hypotheses are correct ( $H_1$ ,  $H_2$ , and  $H_3$ ), the measure of Internet use should have a statistically significant, negative effect on these religious outcomes.

In Table 4.3, I run two binary logistic regressions that predict the effects of Internet use on religious and spiritual salience. Salience is an important construct that

asks respondents to consider how religious and/or spiritual they are. Distinct from religious behaviors, salience taps into an important sense of self-identification and therefore detects how respondents construct their sense of self in relation to religious and spiritual dimensions. Typically, while most respondents conflate religion and spirituality and find little distinction between the two (Hill et al. 2000), the inclusion of two dependent variables in Table 4.3—the first measuring *religious* salience (H<sub>4</sub>) and the second *spiritual* salience (H<sub>5</sub>)—allows for a more nuanced approach. For analytical purposes, binary values are assigned to the responses so that individuals who are *not* or *slightly religious* = 0 while those who are *moderately* or *very religious* = 1. Similarly, respondents who are *not* or *slightly spiritual* = 0 whereas others who are *moderately* or *very spiritual* = 1. Table 4.3 also includes models that separately test the effects of Internet use (Models 1 and 4) and television viewing (Models 2 and 5), while other tests predict the effects of Internet use and television viewing in the same model (Models 3 and 6).

Finally, Table 4.4 shows results from binary logistic regressions that aim to determine whether Internet users are statistically more likely to eschew religious affiliation or belief in God. Accordingly, Models 1-3 in Table 4.4 predict the odds of being religiously unaffiliated and tests my hypothesis (H<sub>6</sub>) that Internet users are less likely to be religiously affiliated. Models 4-6 investigate whether Internet users are statistically more likely to be atheists (H<sub>7</sub>). As with Table 4.3, Models 2 and 4 separately test the effects of watching television on these religious outcomes and are included with the purpose of determining whether Internet use is distinguishable from other types of media consumption and technology use. Taken together, these

hypotheses and the methodological steps explained here intend to concretize Taylor's concept of the buffered self. In this age of secularity, according to Taylor, what are the practices and daily routines which crowd out feelings of transcendence (Taylor 2007:135–37)? Does greater Internet use impact one's religious behavior and affiliation? Are heavy Internet users less likely to consider religion or spirituality to be personally important, or do they feel protected from those "cosmic forces" that traditional religious affiliation has held at bay (Taylor 2007:38)? The results that follow should help answer these precise questions.

### *Results*

As the results from Table 4.1 reveal, the respondents in this study constitute a random sample of the American population. When the data are unweighted, respondents in the BRS are on average 55 years old. Further, 78 percent of the respondents are white, 58 percent are female, and 52 percent are married. Concerning political party identification, most respondents identify as independent (31%), with a roughly equal distribution between Republicans (30%) and Democrats (39%). In terms of education, the average respondent holds a two-year associate degree from a (community) college or university, though 21% percent of respondents report having a four-year bachelor's degree. Regarding technology use, the average respondent spends approximately 3.9 hours per day using the Internet for some reason, while s/he spends 3.5 hours per day watching television.

Concerning the dependent variables, 25 percent of respondents say they never attend religious services, and on the other end of the spectrum, 25 percent indicate that they attend about once a week. Regarding personal prayer, 27 percent say they pray

several times a day, but 34 percent reveal that they never pray or do so only on certain occasions. As for religious and spiritual salience, more respondents claim that they are moderately or very spiritual (78%) than religious (63%). Finally, 16 percent of respondents on the BRS claim no religious affiliation, and eight percent say they do not believe in God.

Table 4.1

<i>Descriptive Statistics, Baylor Religion Survey 2017</i>					
Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Independent</i>					
Age	1400	55.01	17.03	18	98
White	1501	0.78	0.42	0	1
Female	1467	0.58	0.49	0	1
Political Party	1443	4.28	1.84	1	7
Married	1501	0.52	0.50	0	1
Education	1469	5.99	2.24	1	9
Income	1417	4.45	1.70	1	7
Residence	1457	2.70	0.98	1	4
Internet Hours	1455	2.26	1.41	0	6
TV Hours	1458	2.08	1.23	0	6
<i>Dependent</i>					
Attendance	1445	3.32	2.56	0	7
Prayer	1436	2.83	1.86	0	5
Reading	1477	2.94	2.84	0	7
Religious Salience	1429	0.63	0.48	0	1
Spiritual Salience	1430	0.78	0.42	0	1
No Affiliation	1449	0.16	0.37	0	1
Atheist	1501	0.08	0.28	0	1

Results from the ordinary least squares regression models in Table 4.2 suggest there are indeed significant associations between religious behaviors, demographic traits, and technology use. With regard to religious attendance, many findings confirm previous research in the social sciences. Older individuals, females, and married persons are more likely to attend religious services, whereas Democrats and wealthier individuals are less likely to attend. Nonwhite minorities and those with greater amounts of education are also more likely to attend religious services. As for

technology and media, Table 4.2 shows that greater Internet use is linked with lower religious attendance, but there are no significant effects associated with watching television. Nearly the same demographic and technological effects are connected to frequency of prayer and time spent reading sacred texts. Thus, while there are no significant associations between television viewing and religious behaviors, higher levels of Internet use are associated with lower levels of religious attendance, frequency of prayer, and the amount of time people spend reading sacred texts.

Table 4.2

*Ordinary Least Squares Regressions Predicting the Effects of Internet Use on Religious Behaviors, Baylor Religion Survey 2017.*

Variable	Religious Attendance		Frequency of Prayer		Reading Sacred Texts	
	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$	b	$\beta$
Intercept	4.093***	0	4.165***	0.131	4.997***	0
Age	0.021***	0.136	0.015***	-0.161	0.021***	0.123
White	-0.909***	-0.139	-0.769***	0.190	-1.597***	-0.222
Female	0.505***	0.098	0.719***	-0.289	0.591***	0.104
Political Party	-0.330***	-0.240	-0.292***	0.089	-0.424***	-0.278
Married	0.654***	0.128	0.335**	0.010	0.462**	0.082
Education	0.115**	0.098	0.009	-0.114	0.073	0.056
Income	-0.154**	-0.100	-0.128***	-0.014	-0.175**	-0.103
Residence	0.023	0.009	-0.026	-0.070	0.011	0.004
Internet Hours	-0.208***	-0.115	-0.093*	-0.028	-0.134*	-0.066
TV Hours	-0.040	-0.019	-0.043		-0.064	-0.027
N	1246		1238		1274	
R <sup>2</sup>	.13		.17		.14	

Note: \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001

In Table 4.3, several independent variables are shown to have a statistically significant effect on religious and spiritual salience. For example, for each year of increase in a respondent's age after 18, individuals can be predicted to have a 2 percent increase in considering religion or spirituality important in their lives, which may contribute to substantial differences between young adults and older generations over time. Racially, whites and nonwhites are shown to have varying levels of religious and spiritual salience, with whites being generally less religious or spiritual than

nonwhites. Similarly, females have 60 percent greater odds of considering religion important than males, and they are over 2.5 times more likely than males to consider spirituality important. Apart from those variables which have significant effects across all models (including political party), some results reveal associations on religious salience but not spiritual salience. For example, married persons are statistically more likely than non-married persons to be religious, but they are not any more likely to report being spiritual. Similarly, increases in income can be shown to have a significant effect on one's religious salience but not whether s/he considers spirituality to be important. Likewise, as for technology and its effects, increases in Internet use can be predicted to have a negative impact on one's sense of religious salience but not spiritual salience. In fact, for every unit of increase in Internet usage, individuals have 14 percent lower odds of considering religion personally important in their lives, but the same is not true of Internet use and spiritual salience. At the same time, watching television appears to have no association with religious or spiritual salience. In brief, then, while there may still be substantial overlap between religion and spirituality in the eyes of many Americans, the impact of certain predictor variables—namely, marital status, income, and Internet use—are here shown to have significant associations with religious (but not spiritual) salience.

Table 4.4 displays the odds ratios and significant effects of certain variables on claiming no religious affiliation (Models 1-3) and declaring oneself an atheist (Models 4-6). In line with previous findings, one's age, race, gender, and political party are shown to have statistically significant effects on whether or not one claims religious affiliation or states that they do not believe in God. As Table 4.4 indicates, older

adults, nonwhites, and females are all less likely to be religiously unaffiliated or identify as an atheist. Further, while Democrats are more likely than Republicans to be a none or an atheist, not all variables in Table 4.4 have statistically significant associations across the board. Being married, for example, is associated with one's religious affiliation but not one's (dis)belief in God. Finally, when Internet use and watching television are examined, Table 4.4 shows that Internet use has a positive association with having no religious affiliation and with being an atheist. Indeed, for every unit of increase in Internet use, respondents can be predicted to have 14-16 percent greater odds of being a religious none (Models 1 and 3), and respondents have 22 percent greater odds of being an atheist (Models 4 and 6). Watching television, on the other hand, has no apparent effect on these religious outcomes.

Table 4.3

*Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of Internet Use on Religious and Spiritual Salience, Baylor Religion Survey 2017.*

Variable	Religious Salience			Spiritual Salience		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	1.022***	1.028***	1.022***	1.019***	1.022***	1.019***
White	0.546***	0.526***	0.549***	0.547**	0.529**	0.541**
Female	1.601***	1.605***	1.600***	2.580***	2.608***	2.596***
Political Party	0.709***	0.707***	0.708***	0.751***	0.755***	0.757***
Married	1.582**	1.616***	1.573**	1.103	1.106	1.095
Education	1.022	1.010	1.023	1.029	1.021	1.026
Income	0.850***	0.833***	0.854**	0.973	0.964	0.973
Residence	0.894***	0.887	0.891	0.835*	0.830*	0.831*
Internet Hours	0.860**	--	0.857**	0.935	--	0.942
TV Hours	--	1.016	1.034	--	0.925	0.933
N	1240	1240	1236	1243	1243	1239
Max-rescaled R <sup>2</sup>	.20	.19	.20	.15	.15	.15

Note: \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001

Table 4.4

*Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting the Effects of Internet Use on No Religious Affiliation and Atheism, Baylor Religion Survey 2017.*

Variable	<u>No Affiliation</u>			<u>Atheism</u>		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	0.978***	0.973***	0.978***	0.988	0.981**	0.989
White	1.790**	1.802**	1.746*	2.420**	2.294**	2.388**
Female	0.591**	0.578***	0.582***	0.375***	0.382***	0.370***
Political Party	1.436***	1.455***	1.446***	1.507***	1.496***	1.496***
Married	0.660*	0.647*	0.664*	0.885	0.914	0.901
Education	1.045	1.043	1.031	0.996	1.009	0.991
Income	1.174**	1.214**	1.182**	1.155	1.192*	1.152
Residence	1.008	1.010	1.005	1.020	1.053	1.033
Internet Hours	1.141*	--	1.160*	1.216*	--	1.221*
TV Hours	--	0.964	0.939		1.048	1.003
N	1249	1249	1245	1256	1256	1252
Max-rescaled R <sup>2</sup>	.17	.17	.17	.16	.15	.16

Note: \*p<.05 \*\*p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

The purpose of this article is to assess the possible impact of Internet technology on specific religious behaviors and identities. The research question behind this undertaking is relatively simple: Since the Internet has drastically altered social institutions in general and daily routines in particular, how might it impact the way people practice religion or integrate religion and spirituality into their personal identity and sense of self? Framing such questions, of course, requires a theoretical starting point before any empirical testing can be done. To that end, this paper draws heavily from Charles Taylor (1992, 2003a, 2007), who has extensively articulated the “modern social imaginaries” that shape both what we do and how we understand our place in the world. As Taylor contends, the modern “buffered self” emerges from this background and learns to navigate the social complexities of today with less regard for organized religious practices or identities. While not a straightforward rehashing of the secularization thesis, this is the secular age that Taylor (2007) artfully describes and



the context in which recent technologies have emerged. Despite Taylor's formidable contributions, however, little is said in his work about technology and its effects, or about how technology has revolutionized modern social life. This paper, therefore, spotlights a Taylorian concept—the buffered self—and grounds this abstraction in specific practices that may intensify metaphysical disengagement or dismissal of the divine.

To recap, the results lend support to six of the seven hypotheses put forward in this paper:

Internet use is negatively associated with religious attendance (H<sub>1</sub>), frequency of prayer (H<sub>2</sub>), reading sacred texts (H<sub>3</sub>), and considering religion personally important (H<sub>4</sub>), but there is no association between Internet use and spiritual salience (H<sub>5</sub>). At the same time, Internet use is positively associated with being religiously unaffiliated (H<sub>6</sub>) and an atheist (H<sub>7</sub>).

Naturally, these findings prompt a further round of questions. What is distinctive about Internet use that negatively impacts these religious behaviors, especially considering that other practices such as watching television apparently have no effect? How could activities and routines as mundane as surfing the Internet weaken the importance that individuals place on religion and spirituality? Further, why is the Internet, though still a relatively recent technology, a possible culprit and player in a nearly two hundred-year-old debate on secularization? In other words, is the Internet really a potential contributor to the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, and perhaps further, associated with increases in atheism?

Conclusively answering these questions will of course require further theoretical and empirical work, but even so, researchers can at least look to some previous studies in the field and pay attention to Taylor's work in *The Secular Age* to

put forward some provisional answers. First, despite being a relatively recent technology, the Internet is distinctive in its meteoric rate of adoption in First World homes and workplaces. Rivaling the television for rate of diffusion (Putnam 2000), the Internet now commands more user time and attention than TV. As the results from the BRS indicate, the average consumer spends approximately 3.9 hours per day on the Internet and 3.5 hours watching television. Thus, whatever the effects of the Internet may be, they will become more pronounced as this technology becomes ubiquitous. Further, as the findings in this paper suggest, Putnam's (1995, 2000) concerns that the television is largely responsible for declines in civic engagement may now carry over to the Internet. Applied to the current discussion, even though I found in earlier work (McClure 2017b) that Internet use does not impact time-related religious behaviors, this could change with more recent data.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, researchers should consider the extent to which technology use competes with other social activities such as religious participation and community engagement.

Second, one might object that Internet use by itself cannot weaken religious or spiritual salience because the Internet is just a neutral tool incapable of producing such change. While flitting from one webpage to another may be a mundane occurrence for many, scholars have persuasively shown that the Internet embeds certain values and assumptions that may be contrary to religious customs (Goh 2005; Twenge 2017). Perhaps, runs another objection, time-related practices displace other social practices, not how individuals construe the importance of religion and spirituality in their life.

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<sup>2</sup> McClure's (2017b) study draws from Wave 3 data of the Baylor Religion Survey (2010). At that time, respondents spent more time watching television than surfing the Internet. Means comparisons of that study show that respondents, on average, watched television for 4.5 hours/day and surfed the Internet for 3.0 hours/day.

Here too, however, Taylor suggests otherwise, for he reminds us that secularization is not merely a “subtraction story” where religious authorities gradually fade out. Rather, as he explains, “the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life” (Taylor 2007:437). Put differently, while religious institutions might lose some of their momentum in the modern world (Chaves 1994), something must fill their place, and Taylor, along with other scholars, argues that secularization occurs today alongside self-directed spiritual quests (Heelas et al. 2005; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Huss 2014). Applied here, this may explain why Internet use is associated with lower levels of religious salience but not spiritual salience.

Third, the fact that the Internet is a relatively new technology does not preclude its possible secularizing or deinstitutionalizing effects. Using GSS data, Downey (2014) has already shown that the rise of nones, which began in the early 1990s, occurs alongside the diffusion of the Internet, so this may not be a mere coincidence. As for its contribution to atheism, the results in this paper indicate that increases in Internet use are associated with 22 percent higher odds of not believing in God, even after controlling for numerous demographic variables. Explained by way of Taylor’s lexicon, Internet technology acts as an insulating, protective buffer against the conditions which make belief in God more likely. Through the technology that puts the entire world at our fingertips, the need to join ranks with religious organizations becomes less pressing. In market terms, we are all free agents today.

These points aside, there are limitations to this project that require further mention and which point to profitable areas of inquiry for future researchers. First, the

main independent variable used in these analyses measures Internet use, but this measure undoubtedly captures a variety of online activity and differs from user to user. Some people depend on the Internet for their work, others use it for leisure, and many toggle back and forth between the two. Are these web activities uniform in their effects? While I have chosen to analyze the broadest, most inclusive Internet variable found in the BRS, future researchers might wish to disentangle the effects of using the Internet for work and leisure, or investigate the effects of time spent on social networking sites.<sup>3</sup> Second, beyond the issues present for the key independent variables, there are problems with studying the religious outcomes analyzed in this paper. Across religion surveys in the United States and elsewhere, most variables are geared toward measuring organized, Abrahamic faith traditions and are less useful if researchers want to study spirituality, New Age beliefs, Eastern religions, or other contemporary North American religious movements. All too often, quantitative researchers miss the complexities and “cross-pressures” (Taylor 2007) that attend religion and spirituality in an age of “multiple modernities” (Berger 2014; Eisenstadt 2000). Third, it is possible that religious behaviors and identities predict Internet use rather than vice versa. Some researchers have shown that religiosity diminishes Internet addiction for certain populations (Charlton et al. 2013), and subsequent analyses with BRS data indeed show that religious nones use the Internet more so than other religious groups. Does using the Internet contribute to their lack of religious affiliation, or are nones spending more time online for reasons unrelated to their

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<sup>3</sup> The fifth wave of the BRS has multiple Internet-related measures that allow researchers to choose their target more precisely.

religious identity? Perhaps both are true, but researchers may wish to locate or launch longitudinal projects that are sensitive to temporal ordering and causation.

In the final analysis, as the Internet cements itself as the defining technology of the age, it will undoubtedly demand the attention of more researchers who wish to know not only what it does *for* us, but *to* us. Apart from a few exceptions, sociologists have been late to the party and have failed to explore many of the ways that the Internet impacts social life. This is fruitful territory to explore, however, and as social life is increasingly mediated through online platforms, scholars would benefit from paying more attention to the ways the Internet facilitates unforeseen consequences. As this paper makes clear, increases in Internet use are associated with lower levels of religiosity. By acting as a buffering agent, the Internet insulates and individualizes, blocking out the structures that make belief in God more plausible and the communities that make affiliating with religious groups more likely.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Conclusion

In light of the previous chapters, the time has come to review the two research questions that brought this dissertation out of the mud and into existence. First, what are the social and cultural effects of new technologies that have become increasingly adopted in everyday life? And second, what accounts for some of the recent changes witnessed across the North American religious landscape? In response, this dissertation draws from three different datasets, deploys mixed methods, and shows that these two questions may ultimately be linked. The underlying conviction here, then, is that by paying more attention to the cultural values embedded in today's most popular technologies, scholars may find new gears that leverage religious change.

But what, precisely, are those cultural values, and how are they baked into the technologies we use? In this digital age, it is hard to deny the enormous influence that Facebook, Google, and other technology giants exert over the flow of information and the social processes that govern daily life. When individuals get on Facebook or use Google's search engine, they implicitly inherit a set of assumptions about how to spend time and navigate the world. By encouraging users to like, share, and comment on every conceivable topic under the sun, Facebook underwrites "expressive individualism" on a global scale (Bellah et al. 1985; Taylor 1992, 2003, 2007). Put in digital terms, this is "networked individualism" writ large, an age where linked individuals circumvent traditional patterns of authority and community in favor of new media outlets and information sources (Castells 2003; Rainie and Wellman 2014;

Wellman 2001). Further, while Google's search engine provides access to an unprecedented volume of information, it also allows unchecked truth claims to proliferate and multiply at extraordinary rates.

Thus facing an epistemic crisis foretold by Berger (1969) and Lyotard (1984), people must learn to navigate the mostly uncharted waters of the Internet and social media in new ways. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that one of these ways is the adoption of what can be called "modular religion." Theoretically, I have borrowed from stalwarts in the study of secularization and religion—notably, Berger, Taylor, and Wuthnow among others—and found evidence that the technology prevailing in everyday life nurtures and perhaps intensifies the cultural values of fluidity, self-reliance, and experimentation. Confronted by a seemingly endless supply of information and competing truth claims, today's "Digital Natives" (Prensky 2001) cobble together varied religious beliefs and practices that will help them make sense of reality. This is, in essence, modular religion, but is there good evidence for it?

In Chapter two, I analyzed panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion and argued that social networking sites underwrite a process of religious customization and experimentation across and independent of various religious traditions. In comparing two distinct groups—social media users and non-users—I found evidence that social media users are more likely to pick and choose their religious beliefs and endorse the practice of multiple religions, independent of what their religious tradition teaches. Put differently, Facebook and other social media platforms promote a syncretistic, "cut and paste" mentality that carries over into other institutions, including religion.

Chapter three takes a different, qualitative approach to understanding the relationship between religion and technology. While some have speculated that science and technology will hasten the secularization of the world (Bruce 2002), this chapter finds that some of the leading journalists and writers at *Wired* magazine are reluctant to discuss technology and religion within the parameters of a typical secularization narrative. In contrast, on the occasions when *Wired* writers actually discuss religious or spiritual matters, they more often than not use religious and spiritual vocabulary in a positive light. Further, in opposition to narratives of *conflict* or *compatibility*, they view technology as the natural *fulfillment* of traditional religious ideals and beliefs. In this sense, *Wired* often frames technology as a substitutionary realization of God, something that is both subject to our manipulation and all the while worthy of worship and reverence (Kelly 2002, 2011; Kelly and Johnson 2010).

In Chapter four, I take a final look at how technology, and particularly the Internet, might alter religiosity. Using recent data from the Baylor Religion Survey, I find that higher levels of Internet use are associated with lower levels of prayer, religious attendance, reading sacred texts, considering religion personally important, and affiliating with a religious tradition. Increases in Internet use are also linked with atheism but not spirituality, and other media activity such as watching television is also not similarly connected. These findings, I believe, help ground Taylor's (2007) theoretical work and concept of the "buffered self" by specifying empirically measurable, contextual conditions that partially explain recent declines in religiosity.

While there are definite limitations that I discuss in each chapter, this dissertation ideally paves the way for researchers, religious professionals, and a



broadier public to move forward in the study of how religion, technology, and culture interact. For social scientists, one lesson to be learned is that digital technology disrupts social life. As social interactions increasingly occur within digitally mediated spaces, researchers risk misunderstanding the social world that is their domain if they fail to study digital technology's effects. For religious professionals and others who may wish to know how to apply the evidence presented here, a main takeaway from this dissertation is that the technologies often used to promote a certain faith tradition might simultaneously undercut the plausibility of that very tradition. Either by nurturing a syncretistic approach to religion, or by buffering against the imposition and relevance of religion in the modern world, digital technology presents real obstacles that religious leaders should take seriously. Lastly, for the public at large, the final reminder is that technology is powerful and value-laden. Yes, digital technology reflects the culture and values of our society as well as the mindsets of its inventors, but at the same time, once created, technology exerts an influence on its users independent of its original purposes and manifest functions. Taken together, these chapters therefore show that religious institutions and thought patterns are not immune from the digital revolution. Social media natives, Internet users, and even journalists at a highly visible Silicon Valley magazine all bear the symptoms—knowingly or not—of this change.

What this change amounts to is the further encroachment of technology into modern social life and its complicated relationship with religion. On one hand, social media allow for broader visibility of religious ideas, habits, and practices to spread, thus scaling religious syncretism and the mixing and matching of various, perhaps

even conflicting, religious beliefs. At the same time, however, the prominent secularization narrative of the past century has failed to capture these tendencies and has preferred instead to tell a story of religion's demise in the face of technological and scientific advancements. But this is neither the only story, nor even the most popular one, since technology and its promises are often cast as the natural fulfillment of traditional religious ideals. By fusing technology with spiritual meaning and purpose, some technology elites offer a counter-narrative to the age-old secularization hypothesis.

Even so, this does not mean that religion as it has been traditionally understood has an entirely compatible relationship with technological progress. As Charles Taylor (2007) explains, while the cross-pressures of modern life occasionally allow for transcendent interruptions, citizens of the postindustrial twenty-first century normally inhabit an immanent frame that precludes metaphysical engagement. Insulated and encompassed by the assumptions of modern technology, individuals today are buffered and, as such, are less likely to read sacred texts, attend religious services, or consider religion personally important. Further, with upticks in atheism and religious disaffiliation, scholars wishing to understand and explain these developments ought to look at the role technology plays. Given the rapid pace of technological change and with unpredictable religious and cultural developments surely on the horizon, we should not be unmindful of the less obvious ways in which technology, religion, and culture interact.

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