

Research Article

## Losing my Religion: Studying the Dynamics between Religion, Social Media and the Urban Millennials

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### ABSTRACT

The millennials are the generation that lie at the cusp of the pre-internet and post- internet era, having experienced and influenced by the absence and presence of the internet. With each passing year it may appear as though the younger generations are less ritualistic and more skeptical of religious practices. However, skimming through social media may suggest otherwise. Youngsters do share posts that express their religious identity. Many now connect to their religion through newly available apps and Facebook pages. Given India is home to a wide array of religions and also houses the biggest youth population in the world, a majority of whom have access to social media, this study explores the new dimension in relationship between millennials, social media usage and its impact on religious beliefs. It studies if and how social media has aided the demographic to formulate and express their religious identity. The key findings of the study are that the average Indian millennial is gravitating away from organized religion and is questioning the roots of religion imposed on him through family. However, apart from the social media, the social interactions and the exposure has been cited as the cause for the democratic and secular outlook of the youngsters. Most millennial Indians shy away from religious conversation online in the fear that it may snowball into untowards communal hatred.

### Introduction

Karl Marx called it the opium of the masses. Popular Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari called religion a fiction, a popular imagination that ushers in social order. While COVID struck USA and was claiming more than 2000 deaths a day, instead of following 'shelter-in-place' orders of the government, many citizens were agonized and expressed their grievance over not being allowed to attend the Easter Sunday day mass. God was bigger than a life threatening virus. Irrespective of the school of thought that one may belong to, religion seems here to stay.

India, is home to 1.4 billion people, almost 1/6 of the world's population. India is also the largest democracy in the world and is known for its religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity. Currently, its home to the largest percentage of Hindus or practitioners of Hinduism in the world, 80.5%. Besides Hindus, it's also home to a substantial population of Muslims (13.4%), Christian, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and other folk religions. India has the largest percentage of Muslims in the world after Indonesia and in the year 2050 is expected to take over China as the most populated country to the world and home to the largest Muslim population in the world. In the year 1976 the constitution of India was amended to include the word 'secular', giving the right to profess, practice and propagate any religion to its citizens. Though India does not subscribe to any particular belief, over the years it has had a very volatile relationship with religion. Communal conflicts have been many, and religious hostilities have claimed the lives of leaders such M.K Gandhi, and former PM Indira Gandhi. Minority communities do not enjoy the same rights of the constitution and have been ostracized. In recent times, religious tension has been attributed to the rise of the right wing party BJP, currently in power.

Simultaneous with the rise of the BJP has been the growth of social media, a medium that the party leveraged successfully for its election campaigns in the year 2014 and 2019. Social media refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or participate in social networking. They are classified based on their purpose into social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, media sharing sites such as Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube and discussion forums and blogging sites such as Quora and Reddit Today, the internet is synonymous with social media. Social media is used for inter-personal and mass communication, receive news and to forge relationships and personal identity. Therefore, the relationship or the nexus between religion and social media cannot be far behind. 'Digital Religion' a term introduced by Heidi Campbell in her book 'Digital Religion- Understanding religious practice in new media worlds' (Campbell, Heidi 2012) refers to religious practices in new media worlds. Campbell talks about the evolution of religion in the digital space such as live webcasting of church sessions and religion centric Facebook pages and how its reshaping religious practices all over the world.

Facebook is the biggest social media network on the Internet, both in terms of total number of users and name recognition. Founded on 04 February 2004, Facebook has within 12 years managed to accumulate more than 1.59 billion monthly active users which automatically makes it one of the best mediums for connecting people from all over the world.

Facebook by itself may be inconsequential to religion. But it is unwittingly involved in shaping the religious practices and beliefs of people world-wide. Facebook asks for and lists people's religious belief online and also serves as a platform to express one's religious identity. Users then post status, messages, share content supporting their arguments on religion.

Twitter has more than 320 million active monthly users who make use of the 140-character limit to pass on information. Twitter was founded on 21 March 2006 and has its headquarters in San Francisco, California. One of the many uses of Twitter is to post news and personal views on current affairs.

With the meteoric rise of social networking sites (SNS), people now have unprecedented access to new ideas, beliefs, and practices. We do not have online and offline personas anymore, we are on-line all the time. SNS 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 percent of adults who use the Internet also use SNS (Brenner and Smith 2013). SNS are most popular among young adults aged 18 to 29, many of whom grew up using them. In fact, 89 percent of young adults report using SNS with some frequency (Brenner and Smith 2013). Despite their usefulness and popularity, these new technologies can produce unintended consequences.

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 worldview 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 "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.

Children become independent and individualism doesn't go well with religion. While religion is about adherence to community, communal worship and respect for higher authority, individualism is about personal liberty and choice. In this context, the Internet could popularize a 'Pick-and-mix' approach to religious beliefs. It is easier than ever to fashion an individualized faith. "The internet and social media help people to do it in more concrete ways," says Campbell. "We have more access to more information, more viewpoints, and we can create a spiritual rhythm and path that's more personalised." Recent trends suggest that religion is more a choice than an obligation.

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 wellbeing (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, particularly in India.

The millennial is a term used in the media, most of the time flippantly. The millennial is now defined as the demographic cohort after Generation X and preceding Generation Z. It refers to persons born between 1982- 2000, until the advent of the Internet. The millennial is currently aged between 20-38. Much of the millennials are possibly parents and belong to the 'sandwiched generation', oscillating between the responsibility of taking care of their parents and children of their own. In most cases, millennials have received their religion from their own baby boomer generation parents and have either indulged in religious activities willingly or grudgingly but not making their displeasure known given the social structure they were born into, which discouraged the questioning of god. The conundrum often comes when millennials have to teach their children. Do they ask them to follow the religion they are born with or allow the children to explore and decide for themselves.

With each passing year it may appear as though the younger generations are less ritualistic and more skeptical of religious practices. However, skimming through social media seems to suggest that many youngsters do put up pictures and posts of their religious celebrations, thereby not shying away from exhibiting their religious identity online.

While on the one hand the internet exposes the millennials to an array of religious traditions, and may encourage them to adjust their views, thereby becoming less exclusive and more inclusive. Alternatively, the Internet could also corral like minded people together, bringing people together in religious duty just as the google algorithm makes us live in an echo chambers customising our searches, views and results based on our preferences. This study seeks to understand and provide answers for questions such as - If social media aids, abet or discourage religious affiliation among the young.

In the context of this study:

**Religious syncretism** refers to the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices.

**Religious Pluralism** is the attitude or policy regarding the diversity of religious belief systems co-existing in society, where one accepts that two or more religions with mutually exclusive truth claims are valid, and one's own religion is not the sole and exclusive source of truth.

**Religious fundamentalism** is the unwavering attachment to a set of irreducible beliefs. It is the belief of an individual or a group of individuals in the absolute authority of a sacred religious text or teachings of a religious leader or god.

This paper seeks to study the relationship between the millennials, the use of social media and its impact on religious identity and religious practices. The main research questions are as follows

1. What role does social media play on the religious beliefs of millennials?
2. Does social media usage allow for religious syncretism or fundamentalism?

### Literature Review

There have been a number of studies aiming to decode the nexus between digital spaces and religion. Many theorists have asked questions if digital space has provided a platform for religions to proliferate. However, not many studies have looked at the relationship between social media, millennials and their personal beliefs about religion.

The millennials may be an interesting generation to study. They lay at the cusp of time of no social media and the advent and boom of it. Hence it could be argued that they have seen both worlds, and adapted to both, unlike their parents from an older generation or the preceding generation Z that grew up in a world where the Internet already had a dominating presence. They know and perhaps understand the pros and cons of both. Like all children the millennials also are born into a faith or have had a religion passed on to them by default. But this study tries to explore if the introduction of the Internet has changed their understanding of religion in any way different from what their parents provided them with.

A study conducted by Baylor University entitled *'Tinkering with Technology and Religion in the Digital Age'* was published in the Journal for the scientific study of religion revealed that 1,714 adults in America undertook the survey. The survey found that one people are spending more time online than watching television and introduced a new term called Tinkering. The author of the study says that Tinkering means that "People feel they are no longer beholden to institutions or religious dogma. "he said that since people spend so much time online, they are more likely to understand religious participation and that they are free agents who can tinker with a variety of religious ideas, some even conflicting and choose the one that suits them."

A similar study called *'Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age: The Effects of Social Networking Sites on the Religious Beliefs of Emerging Adults'* was conducted by Paul K. McClure from the University of Notre Dame, using panel data from the National Study of Youth and Religion in the USA arrived at the conclusion that the more time one spends on the internet, the greater the odds are that that person will not be affiliated with a religion.

Religion is also related to self-disclosures. Bobkowski and Pearce (2011), in their article *'Baring their souls in online profiles or not? Religious self-disclosure in social media'*, examined personal attributes associated with religious identification as well as the overall quantity of religious self-disclosures.

This study measured the prevalence of religious self-disclosure in public MySpace profiles. A majority (62 percent) of profile owners identified their religious affiliations online, although relatively few profile owners (30 percent) said anything about

religion outside the religion-designated field. Most affiliation reports (80 percent) were consistent with the profile owner's reported affiliation on the survey. Religious profile owners disclosed more about religion when they also believed that religion is a public matter or if they evaluated organised religion positively. Evangelical Protestants said more about religion than other respondents.

Along the same lines of analysis, an extensive survey conducted by *Pew Research Centre* believed that millennials in particular are more questioning of their faith.

Pew research centre's survey, spoke to 3,217 adults from May and June 2014 as a part of their nationally representative American trends survey. It analysed whether American adults engaged in religious activities during the week. 20% of the respondents said they shared their religious beliefs online, on Facebook and Twitter, while 46% said that they saw religious content being posted online. The study found that religious behaviour corresponded with behaviour on social media. The survey also found young adults (between the ages of 18-29) share ideas about their faith online - specifically white evangelicals and black protestants.

Drawing on this research study, a news story titled '*Millennials are losing their religion and social media might explain why*' by health and science reporter Eathen Ellen Toley for the Quartz states that a growing number of American millennials are less likely to identify with religion.

However, in response to the Pew Research survey a few other news stories in media made an important distinction. An article for *slateonline.com* by author Hannah McCullam argues that though the survey believes that many millennials are questioning their religious identity, it does not mean that they don't believe in God. She reasons that they have said quits to organised religion but are clinging on to spirituality instead. Anthropology professor Christopher Kovats-Bernat believes this shift from religiosity and spirituality has stemmed from the democratising effects of social media. "There's a much more public and free dialogue that exists for your generation that may not have existed, say, for my generation anyway," he said. "And I think too that there is that sort of democratising ethos that exists because of the openness of social media."

Kovats-Bernat believes millennials' ability to question authority figures on social media is creating a less tolerant environment for a hierarchical system, such as organised religion. Agreeing to the same line of thought, communication/journalism professor Kyle Heim suggested that there is a correlation between social media's powerful abilities and the weakening of trust of higher institutions in our society.

Millennials prefer this generalised picture of God rather than an interventionist God, and they prefer God to Jesus, because he's non-specific," says Phillips. "He stands behind them and allows them to get on with their own lives rather than Jesus, who comes in and interferes with everything. In his opinion, a major factor to this "none" phenomenon is that the increase of power that is placed in the hands of citizens leads to a decrease of their need for government and religious organisations. "People are not as reliant on those powerful institutions, and instead they are turning to other sources to satisfy their spiritual needs," Heim said.

Many have argued that another factor is the tools millennials have access to, to gain more information and reach like-minded communities. Heim noted social media's ability to open a dialogue with people of different backgrounds and connect smaller communities to a much bigger world. "I think that being in contact with people from so many different beliefs may mean that people are less likely to adhere to one specific religious belief," he said. Heim used an example of someone living in a small, rural community where everyone in the area is Catholic and shares the same beliefs. However, with the internet, people could easily come into contact with someone who is Buddhist or Muslim, which opens up an entire world of possibilities.

In a research paper published in the journal *PLOS one* the survey that had 11 million respondents - from 8<sup>th</sup> graders to college goers found that though many identified with religion, a sizeable and a growing number said that they didn't, perhaps indicating a future trend. In 1970, 12% said they didn't attend any religious service, while in 2000, 25% said that they didn't. All these research studies seem to indicate that organised religion was dying.

However, on the other side of the spectrum, some research indicates that social media might be leading to a boost in organised religion, making it more accessible and relatable to the young. Pioneering this study is the book *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* by Cheong, Pauline Hope Fischer-Nielsen Peter which is an anthology of some of the research and reflection on the complex interactions between religion and computer-mediated communication (CMC). This book suggests that social media has been nothing but a boon for religion. Through its seventeen

chapters supported by empirical evidence, the book points out that online services and availability of pastors on social media has united the community better.

In her book *'When Religion meets Social media'*, author Heidi Campbell describes the iPhone, synonymous with a smartphone as the 'Jesus phone'. She describes how the launch of the iPhone as akin to a religious gathering and people saw the phone as a one-stop solution to all their problems, much like they view Jesus. She brings out an interesting correlation between religion and technology- that both are seen as saviours of humanity.

Jennifer Preston's popular article for the New York Times titled *"Jesus Daily on Facebook nurtures high active fans"* chronicled the success of the *Jesus daily* page on Facebook. With 43 million subscribers, this page is run by a doctor in North Carolina who shares quotes by Jesus everyday, and on an average records 8.5 million daily interactions ( in the form of likes and comments) while popular teen icon Justin Bieber's page was only 3.4 million.

*Rabbi Jason Miller* who runs a similar page concurs. In an article for Huffington Post, he says that social media has helped synagogues such as his reach a wider audience and has helped the young feel more connected through their sharing of public calendars, photos, news and important information. An active presence on social media has made the communication process complete by providing a back channel for feedback too. Rabbi Jason Miller posts motivational teachings from the Torah everyday.

*Rabbi Laura Baum*, a social media maven who is part of [OurJewishCommunity.org](http://OurJewishCommunity.org) was quoted in the article explaining how social media has changed lives. She said, "There are those people who prefer to check out our tweets on their phone or listen to our podcast. I don't think the use of technology needs to be for everybody. But we have found a community online. Many of them have never felt a connection to Judaism before." Our Jewish Community.org, was launched in 2008

Rev. Kenneth Lillard, author of *"Social Media and Ministry: Sharing the Gospel in the Digital Age,"* adds that social media tools like YouTube, Twitter and Google+, in addition to Facebook, represent "the best chance for religious leaders to expand their congregations since the printing press helped Martin Luther usher in the Protestant Reformation."

*Rabbi David Wolpe*, the popular author and spiritual leader of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, has a Facebook page that boasts more than 19,000 fans. Wolpe utilizes Facebook to offer short sound bites that both motivate and challenge his readers. He makes a point of trying to respond to all questions on the page as well.

Other studies, such as the one on [worldreligionnews.com](http://worldreligionnews.com), point out that besides Facebook pages, the plethora of prayer apps and bible apps have spurred the young to connect with their religion. This statement is supported by two news stories from England. In his story for *BBC*, author *Chris Stokel Walker* says that smartphones, social media and even memes are helping the young engage with christianity in England. A similar story in the *Telegraph* titled, *Putting the faith into Facebook: how millennials are modernising the Church of England* by *Gabriela Sterling* demonstrates that online church workshops and sessions have ushered more youth into the Church of England.

Sharing Bible verses on social media lets worshippers find their own readings rather than sitting through ones chosen by a priest every Sunday. The most popular Bible verses bookmarked, highlighted and shared on social media via YouVersion's app are frequently those which reflect the secular and inclusive ideals. Many concern things like personal struggles or dealing with anxiety, for example – rather than promoting the glory of God.

Looking at the confluence of religion and social media in Africa, researcher

*Mookgo Kagtle* in his research paper titled *Social media and religion: Missiological perspective on the link between Facebook and the emergence of prophetic churches in southern Africa*, takes a missiological perspective or approach to social media and religion and explores the specific role of Facebook in the emergence of prophetic churches in the continent. The background of prophetic churches is discussed in the paper to demonstrate the growth of these churches and how such growth is linked to the use of Facebook.

In their paper *'Information Seeking behaviour of college students on religious tolerance through social media'*, researchers *Haekal Fajri Amrullah, Mohd Nor Shahiza Ali and Mohd Fauzi Sukimi* found that University students in Indonesia use social media predominantly to find information regarding their religion and each of them have their own pattern of doing so. Social media was seen as a possible tool for inculcating religious tolerance

In one of the only studies conducted in India, scholar *Sahana Udapa* in her research paper ‘Enterprise Hindutva and social media in urban India,’ published in November 2018, defines ‘enterprise Hindutva’ as a mediatised form of Hindu nationalism shaped largely by the affordances of social media and the cultural practices surrounding them in urban India. Ms Udappa says that ‘Enterprise Hindutva’ is argumentative, experientially voluntary and capable of working with contradictions. She posits that it is through the very bickering on social media and repetition of simplified summaries of key ideological principles that Hindutva finds its latest mediatic conditions for renewal, in India today.

In the light of India being the most populated country in the world, with largest percentage of young population, and given that threats to its secular fabric have only been increasing in the recent past, this research paper aims to fill the void and understand if the growth of social media engagement among the youth has spurred religious syncretism or fundamentalism.

**Methodology**

The methodology used in this study was quantitative analysis. It was conducted using a questionnaire consisting of close-ended questions that measured respondent’s religion and social media .

**Sample**

10.14 respondents (both male and female) in the age group of 20-38 years from the different metropolitan cities in India were chosen to take part in this research. The participants were chosen through a random sampling method across India. The questions that were used in this survey posed little risk to the respondents. The questions gathered information on attitudes towards religion and social media within this context. The act of participating in the study was completely voluntary

**Findings and Discussion**

1. What is your age?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
20-25	50.35%	504
26-30	18.18%	182
31-35	17.58%	176
36-38	13.89%	139
TOTAL		1,001

The survey was answered by 1012 participants.50% of the respondents were from the age group of 20-25. They are the last of the millennials, or the youngest millennials who most certainly have grown up in an environment with Internet and social media. Given that the participants are from Indian metropolitan cities, it could be asserted that most of this demographic still live within the nuclear family set-up, ie with their parents/close family, and have not yet started a family of their own.

2. Sex?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Male	37.66%	380
Female	62.14%	627
Others	0.20%	2
TOTAL		1,009

The survey was answered by a majority of women.

## 3. Which religion were you born into?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Hindusim	69.44%	700
Christianity	16.67%	168
Islam	7.44%	75
Jainism	4.76%	48
Sikhism	0.89%	9
Buddhism	0.30%	3
Others	0.50%	5
TOTAL		1,008

Though India is a multi- ethnic and secular state, the responses to this question clearly demonstrate the geographical spread and majoritarian influence of Hinduism, the largest religion in India. India may be a secular country but the dominant religion is Hinduism.

## Q4: Do you identify with the religion you were born into?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	45.65%	457
No	18.78%	188
Sometimes	25.27%	253
Rarely	10.29%	103
TOTAL		1,001

A little shy of 50% of the respondents said that they identify with the religion they are born into. But the interesting statistic here is the 25% who say that they relate to their religion only *sometimes*. This may suggest that factions of the millennials are not entirely identifying with their religion and maybe in the process of questioning and introspecting. Given the largest demographic that answered this survey are college going or fresh out of college students, this could suggest why they are in the throes of confusion/introspection/deliberation over their religion.

## Q5: How would you describe your religious beliefs?

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very religious	2.40%	24
Religious	20.68%	207
More spiritual than religious	46.65%	467
I am an atheist	19.88%	199
I am confused	10.39%	104
TOTAL		1,001

This question proves the hypothesis and earlier research articles presented in the review of literature that a growing number of millennials in Indian cities are questioning religion and religious practices. While they are probably reluctant to entirely get rid of their religious identity as such decisions may involve difficult conversations with their extremely religious families, there

appears to be a confusion on the personal front. Through the graph, it's amply clear that millennials are not very religious. However, it's interesting to note that there is an equal percentage of those who call themselves religious and those who are atheist. Sandwiched between this demographic is the group who seem to have one foot in either groups, describing themselves as more spiritual than religious. Most Indian millennials are leaning towards this liberal and philosophical outlook. This philosophy believes that religions are nothing but different paths to the same god/truth. This section believes in god, but not necessarily in organised religion. This could perhaps be read as an early sign of Indian youngsters moving towards atheism in the future. The questions that need to be asked are - Are Indian millennials disenchanted with religion? Is religion losing its group over the young?

**Q6: Have you listed your religion in any of your social media profiles? Ex. Facebook**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	13.76%	139
No	77.33%	781
Not sure	8.91%	90
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,010</b>

An overwhelming majority of millennials clearly do not like exhibiting their religious identity on social media. The reasons could be several including privacy and the thought that religion is a private belief.

**Q7: Have you seen your friends or family posting/sharing religious content on social media?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	71.30%	718
No	7.55%	76
Sometimes	17.38%	175
Rarely	3.77%	38
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,007</b>

This question clearly demonstrates that religious content (opinion, status, articles, pictures, quotes, rants etc.) are a regular feature of social media. Millennials say that they have seen such content online.

**Q8: What are your thoughts on conversations about religion on social media?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
They bring out diverse points of view	15.48%	156
They are toxic and border on hate speech	15.38%	155
The arguments get tedious and serve no purpose	25.40%	256
They help clarify thoughts on a religion or a certain issue	6.94%	70
I don't follow such conversation	33.04%	333
Others	3.77%	38
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1,008</b>

So while millennials notice religious conversation, many of them say that they don't follow such conversation. The major reason for that could be stated by the millennials themselves, that they feel the conversations on religion could mutate into tedious arguments that serve no purpose.



**Q9: Have you ever posted or shared religious content on social media? (Quotes, pictures, rants, opinion on religious issues)**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	18.02%	182
No	70.69%	714
Maybe	11.29%	114
TOTAL		1,010

While millennials state that they have seen religious content being posted online by their family and peers, a huge percentage state that personally they haven't any. At this point one must note that this may not be completely true. Perhaps they are unwilling or shy to accept that they have posted such content online too. It could also be possible that the predominantly urban millennials that this study focused on do not post such content while they have observed such content from their peers from 2<sup>nd</sup> tier or 3<sup>rd</sup> tier cities. However, this is merely a speculation at this point.

**Q10: In general, how do you find people's posts on religion on social media?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Negative. Shows communal bias	15.12%	152
Positive. It gives good vibes	6.27%	63
Dangerous. It could rankle communal hatred	16.82%	169
Inappropriate. Religion is personal and must not be expressed on social media	34.43%	346
Inspiring. Gives food for thought	6.77%	68
Others	20.60%	207
TOTAL		1,005

34.43% of the millennial population opine that sharing or writing posts on religion on social media is inappropriate as religion is personal and therefore must not be expressed online. This thought goes in tandem with earlier observations that millennials are gravitating towards spirituality than organised religion. Spirituality is seen as a more intense personal experience and this could explain why a majority feel that one must refrain from expressing on public and social platforms. Also, it is interesting to note that on average, more than the fact that religious posts can be positive or negative, a large percentage contend that religious content is dangerous and could rankle communal hatred. That could also be a reason why millennials choose not to discuss religion on social media.

**Q11: Do you follow or subscribe to any religious pages online?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	10.42%	105
No	83.13%	838
Sometimes	6.45%	65
TOTAL		1,008

Contrary to research studies that showed millennials were more clued up on religion and are rediscovering their religious roots through Facebook pages and apps, this study shows that in India, a majority of Indians do not follow any religious pages. This adds to the finding that millennials in India do not use social media for religious purposes. One could argue that this trend is because the majoritarian religion Hinduism does not have community worship places or associations like churches. This lack of cohesiveness in the religion could partially explain why such pages are not popular in India.

**Q12: When you see people posting pictures of their religious activities or celebrations on social media, what do you infer?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
They are religious and their religious identities are clear	30.71% 308
They are probably not very religious, but just like posting pictures of their celebrations	28.71% 288
It doesn't say anything about their religion. Its social media pressure.	25.92% 260
Others	14.66% 147
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,003</b>

This table exhibits a close call. Pictures posted of religious festivities and celebrations elicit mixed signals among people. While the majority percentages see it as a reflection of religious identity, an almost equal percentage read it as a social media fad. In this case, the researcher reckons that both cases might be true. For some of the religious millennial population it's an expression of their religious identity, whilst for most others, it's merely an opportunity to get dressed, take pictures and mint social currency-it has nothing to do with their religious affiliation or how strongly or not they feel about their religious identity.

**Q13: When you see someone posting/sharing a post with a strong religious opinion on social media, how does it make you feel?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Its a free society, people can post whatever they want	34.10% 342
I feel uncomfortable	15.35% 154
I feel religion is personal and must not be exhibited on social media	24.93% 250
I ignore it	25.62% 257
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,003</b>

The results of this question demonstrate that the average Indian millennial believes in the democracy of social media. Social media is a free space that allows for exchange of diverse ideas, thoughts and freedom of expression. Though at personal level millennials feel religious opinion must not be exhibited on social media they also believe that people are entitled to their opinion and have the freedom to express it however they want to.

**Q14: In terms of religion, what does social media do?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Allows for religious pluralism- for different religious opinion to coexist	12.32% 123
Accentuates ones religious identity and causes strong, one-sided religious opinion	23.75% 237
Its a mix of both and its for the individual to be wary	57.11% 570
Social media has no impact on religion	6.81% 68
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>998</b>

Millennials use social media, but they believe it must not be used for expressing religious opinion because religion is personal. They normally ignore posts on religion and refrain from posting such content themselves. And if one were to probe why they

don't, its largely because they feel social media could work in extremes- it could either pave way for religious pluralism or in the other end can accentuate one's identity and cause one to be less welcoming of other religions. Millennials are aware that religious posts are a double-edged sword and generally like to keep away from such posts.

**Q15: Have you ever felt angry or incensed by an online post attacking the religious community you are affiliated with ?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	25.33%	253
No	35.64%	356
Sometimes	22.12%	221
Rarely	16.92%	169
TOTAL		999

The religious content he sees online doesn't affect the average millennial, though it could get offensive to his community. This goes in line with the findings that millennials see religious content but choose to ignore and also believe in the freedom of speech and expression, religious or otherwise on social media. As most of them also identified as more spiritual than religious and each person's spiritual journey is subjective they don't get agitated by content they see online

**Q16: In terms of religious beliefs or the lack of, has social media allowed you to meet more like-minded people ? (Ex if you are a Buddhist, has it allowed you to meet more Buddhists, or if you are spiritual/ atheist, has it allowed you to meet people with similar views?)**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	23.94%	238
No	55.23%	549
Sometimes	20.82%	207
TOTAL		994

Social media has not helped the average millennial to network or meet like-minded people/people sharing similar views.

**Q17: When you meet people with similar religious/irreligious views on social media, how does that make you feel?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I feel emboldened by their company	4.89%	49
I feel safe	3.09%	31
I feel more confident of expressing my views	20.64%	207
I feel uncomfortable	2.59%	26
It doesn't make a difference to me	63.41%	636
Others	5.38%	54
TOTAL		1,003

Allying with the earlier finding that social media doesn't have much use for religion among the millennials, this graph shows that meeting people with similar religious views is not the criteria or important for millennials.

**Q18: Over the years you find yourself becoming**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More religious	3.81%	38
Religious, but less ritualistic	10.03%	100
More spiritual than religious	34.00%	339
The Same	21.16%	211
Less religious	17.15%	171
I have never believed in religion	13.84%	138
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>997</b>

Over the years, the millennial has become more spiritual than religious. Though he or she may not live up to his religious identity completely, he has learnt to become more tolerant, pluralistic and appreciative of all religions. Religion has become a more personal and private experience. However, at this point it's interesting to note that there are a growing number of atheists in the country.

**Q19: How much has social media contributed to your religiosity or the lack of it?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
A great deal	4.71%	47
A lot	6.41%	64
A moderate amount	16.03%	160
A little	21.14%	211
None at all	51.70%	516
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>998</b>

Millennials do not believe that social media has anything to do with their religious belief or the lack of it.

**Q20: Have you ever defended your religious beliefs on social media ? ( in response to a post or view that someone shared/posted)**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	15.25%	152
No	84.75%	845
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>997</b>

An overwhelming majority state that they have never defended their religious beliefs online.

**Q21: With age, would you say that you have become more tolerant and accepting of all religions?**

	(NO LABEL)	(NO LABEL)	TOTAL
Yes	3.94% 16	96.06% 390	406
No	2.22% 2	97.78% 88	90
I was always tolerant	0.00% 0	100.00% 582	582

More than 50 %of the millennials feel that they have always been tolerant while remaining do believe with age and understanding they have become more tolerant.

**Q22: If yes, and if you could single out one reason for said growth of religious tolerance, what would you attribute it to ?**

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Reading	15.45% 137
More exposure to diverse perspectives on social media	13.64% 121
Meeting different kind of people	42.62% 378
Travel	6.88% 61
Conversations with family	6.43% 57
A particular incident in life	2.14% 19
Others	12.85% 114
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>887</b>

Millennials do not care for religion. Religion is personal. Millennials also believe

in the importance of freedom of speech, that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. Most importantly, millennials in India are tolerant. But what contributes to their tolerance? It's not social media, but the meeting and interacting with different kinds of people followed by reading and then exposure to diverse perspectives on social media. Perhaps it then bodes well for India that it's a multi ethnic space- the fact that it is cosmopolitan and allows different kinds of people to coexist has allowed its people to become tolerant of views. Millennials do not give social media the entire credit for their liberal ideas. Social media can cause pluralism and fundamentalism and the onus is on the individual to ensure which side of the spectrum he falls on. The only factor that can cause religious pluralism is the exposure and interaction with different kinds of people

### Conclusion

The average Indian millennial is slowly deviating from religion. Religion is an integral part of all Indian homes and children usually unflinchingly accept the religion they are born into. But the millennials are an interesting cohort that is beginning to question it. This research study shows that the Indian millennial is gravitating away from organised religion and moving towards individually charted paths of spirituality and discovery. The exposure and the opportunity to meet and interact with different kinds of people in social setups like colleges, universities and workplaces, have opened up their eyes to different perspectives.

The Indian youth doesn't draw much connection between social media and religion. He doesn't like to display his religious identity online. He notices that a vast number of people post religious content online but chooses to ignore it as he knows the perils of the conversation, could snowball into pointless arguments that reek of dangerous hatred –. Most millennials believe that religion is a deeply personal issue and exhibiting it online is inappropriate. The Indian millennial is clear- social media can cause religious pluralists and fundamentalists. There is no clear answer and given algorithms have a huge role to play in the kind of content that one is exposed to and given that most people live in internet echo chambers, it's possible that one's ideology is only exacerbated by the content he sees online. A right wing Hindu reformer may be under the impression that

India is filled with people such as him and may find nothing wrong in his views that India is a Hindu state. However, an average millennial with his liberal views may see the opposite trend. This usually sets off a clash between the two factions as seen in the recent anti-CAA protests in the country.

India has been hailed as the largest democracy and the largest secular nation in the world. Married to that thought, the modern Indian millennial believes that social media is a democratic space. Every person is entitled to have an opinion. Millennials attribute this democratic mind-set to their interactions with different minds of people. This reigns in the fact that the biggest saviour or the glue that keeps India's secularity together is that fact that it is secular and allows for multiple religions to coexist. In the last 10 years, the Indian state has been accused of moving towards right wing populism. In December 2019, protests over the Citizenship Amendment Act erupted all over India, over the grounds that the bill was deeply discriminatory and reeked of religious bias. It must be noted that the movement was largely spearheaded by the youth and particularly the millennial population that this study has focussed on. As the millennials fear, the country might descend into religious fundamentalism and that may soon become the larger fabric of the society, replacing secularism.

Another interesting trend noticed through the course of the paper is that a relatively big percentage of atheists exist in the country. Atheism once unheard of in a deeply conservative country like India seems to be making its mark. One needs to explore the causes behind this trend. Is this a new trend or have the atheists always existed and have now come out to express themselves?

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