

God Images: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Faith in Practice
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Student Version

Title: God Images: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Faith in Practice

Summary of the Project and Research Questions:

Recent studies in the US have shown that “Gen Z is the least religious generation... [with] one third [claiming] no religion.”¹ Among this population segment, which Oxford Learners have defined as those born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s,² atheism, the belief that no personal God exists, has doubled in comparison with the rest of the adult population.³ One study shows that over half of those between the age of 14 and 26 have lost all trust in organized religion, though over 20% still claim some traditional affiliation despite not self-identifying as “religious.”⁴ This same group considers pain and suffering a major problem for their moral and theological formation which they find unsatisfactorily addressed by formal religious apparatuses. And while they find Christians and the Church less judgmental than some of their adult peers, they still do not feel a need for organizational affiliation to find connection to the Divine. Many express genuine curiosity and commitment to spirituality, deep conversation about meaningful topics, and practices that heal trauma and moral injury. They frequently reject institutions and authorities that they perceive as hypocritical, but that does not translate to a lack of spiritual interest. For myriad Gen Zers, a lack of commitment to faith community arises out of self-reported bad experiences in organized religion. As the most ethnically and racially diverse cohort in the US population, they care more than previous generations about global connectivity and issues of justice.⁵ In comparison with other age groups, they place greater value on diversity, tolerance, authenticity, and truth that integrates science, technology, history, and other sources of knowing. After more than 15,000 interviews of participants between 18 and 35 in 25 countries in 9 languages, research organization Barna found that despite hyperconnectivity due to technological innovation, interviewees expressed a profound sense of loneliness, elevated anxiety over vocation, concern over financial security, and fear about crises emerging in a chaotic, violent world. However, these same individuals also described a desire for meaningful involvement in justice, expressed longing for genuine relationships, and acknowledge the

¹ <https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-z-is-the-least-religious-generation-heres-why-that-could-be-a-good-thing>, accessed July 22, 2021.

² s.v. “Generation Z,” Oxford Learners Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/generation-z>, accessed July 26, 2021.

³ <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>, accessed July 22, 2021.

⁴ “The State of Religion and Young People,” as quoted in <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/21/gen-z-is-lukewarm-about-religion-but-open-to-relationships-study-shows/>, accessed July 22, 2021.

⁵ <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>, accessed July 22, 2021.

benefits of spiritual practices and openness to faith.⁶ Ultimately, the complex picture emerging of the latest generation transitioning from adolescents into young adulthood shows “a generation of driven adults who are wary and weary, wrestling with questions, longing for deeper relationships and facing significant societal, professional and personal obstacles. Yet, we also found that faith is one important factor associated with their well-being, connection and resilience.”⁷

So how does Gen Z picture God or describe the Divine? If inherited institutional or ancestral imaginations do not resonate with them or serve them well, what have they held onto and what have they challenged? If certain religious beliefs do not feel viable for their ethics or do not fit with their perception of critical reality, how have they developed their morality or navigated the quest for truth?

The research questions that structure this module are:

- How does Gen Z image the Divine? Is God real, active, present, determinative of morality? What narrative and qualities do students use to describe the Divine? Do these images of the Divine differ from those of their parents and/or grandparents or family of origin?
- Do beliefs about God and faith correlate with certain spiritual, economic, environmental, and ethical practices? And does God-image correlate with participants’ practices, emotional states, and values?
- What values do Gen Z students define as important for living a good life? And how do they intend to cultivate them?

By gathering a new data set from a survey of class participants, students will experiment with analysis of datasets that seek to answer these questions. Through a guided group exercise, class participants will work together to interpret data to answer research prompts, experiment with visualization of data in pie charts, word clouds, bar graphs, and charts, and will familiarize themselves with the basic crosstabulation. Each group will present their findings through an infographic presentation in a final roundtable dialogue.

Module Overview: This activity will span three class sessions in the following format:

- A. Pre-project: On day one of the module, the class will gather in person for a presentation of contemporary research on US American God images.

This lecture-discussion based on the findings from *America’s Four Gods* will visualize how mature adults between 2010 and 2015 plotted the existence, active engagement, and moral concerns of the Divine in their moral imaginations. Four quadrants will emerge as “types” or “scientific models.” Further data from the research will be presented to show how research participants’ God images corresponded with certain attitudes about ethical issues (abortion, gay marriage, stem-cell research, etc.), financial practices (donations, income, etc.), group identities (racial subgroups, political affiliations, etc.) and general behavior tendencies.

⁶ Barna, “Key Findings,” from *The Connected Generation*, (<https://theconnectedgeneration.com/>), accessed July 22, 2021.

⁷ Alyce Youngblood, ed., “The Connected Generation.”

In a facilitated class discussion, course participants will then interrogate the proposed paradigm of America's so-called Four Gods:

- Do these Four Gods correspond with your own sense of the Divine?
- What's helpful in what you see?
- What do you not see?
- What do you wish the researchers had asked or investigated?

- B. Project: A survey will open for class participants to complete as homework. This assignment will create a new data set for use in class. This will be the only homework assignment of the week.

On the second day of class, participants will break into small groups (see the Small Group Instructions below). Each group will receive some data collected from the survey and a set of prompts to investigate. The group will spend 30 minutes investigating their data set and performing crosstabulation exercises to "see" if there are any correlations between different subsets of data. Finally, they will collaborate as a group to visualize the data to share with colleagues through the creation of an Infographic.

What is Crosstabulation?

"Cross tabulation is a method to quantitatively analyze the relationship between multiple variables. Also known as contingency tables or cross tabs, cross tabulation groups variables to understand the correlation between different variables. It also shows how correlations change from one variable grouping to another. It is usually used in statistical analysis to find patterns, trends, and probabilities within raw data."⁸

"Cross-tabulation analysis has its own unique language, using terms such as "banners", "stubs", "Chi-Square Statistic" and "Expected Values." A typical cross-tabulation table comparing the two hypothetical variables "City of Residence" with "Favorite Baseball Team" is shown below. Are city of residence and being a fan of that team independent? The cells of the table report the frequency counts and percentages for the number of respondents in each cell."⁹

⁸ Amrutha Aprameya, "Crosstabulation: What It Is and Why You Should Use It," <https://humansofdata.atlan.com/2016/01/cross-tabulation-how-why/>, accessed July 22, 2021.

⁹ "Cross-Tabulation Analysis: A Researchers Guide," <https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/cross-tabulation/>, accessed July 22, 2021.

Cross tabulation		What is Your Favorite Baseball Team?			
		Toronto Blue Jays	Boston Red Socks	New York Yankees	Row Totals
In What City Do You Reside?	Frequency	11	33	7	51
	Percent	21.57%	64.71%	13.73%	34.93%
	Boston, MA	23	14	9	46
	Row Percent	50.00%	30.43%	19.57%	31.51%
	Montreal, Canada	22	13	14	49
	Row Percent	44.90%	26.53%	28.57%	33.56%
	Montpellier, VT	56	60	30	146
	Column Percent	38.36%	41.10%	20.55%	100.00%

In this example, the table lists different data in rows and columns. Professionals call the column variables “Banners.” These signal specific fixed data points that will be used in analysis. They call the row variables “Stubs.” In crosstabulation, researchers look for relationships between banners and stubs that meet the requirements for statistical significance.

What is an Infographic?

An infographic visually depicts information using charts, graphs, colors, space, and text purposefully to give a snapshot of the most important data. The design of the layout intends to communicate key ideas, terms, and statistics with minimal writing allowing striking graphics, diagrams, and carefully selected definitions, frames, or questions to craft a memorable story. The presentation encourages engagement, offers easy messaging for diverse populations, and extends reach through networked sharing. See examples below.¹⁰

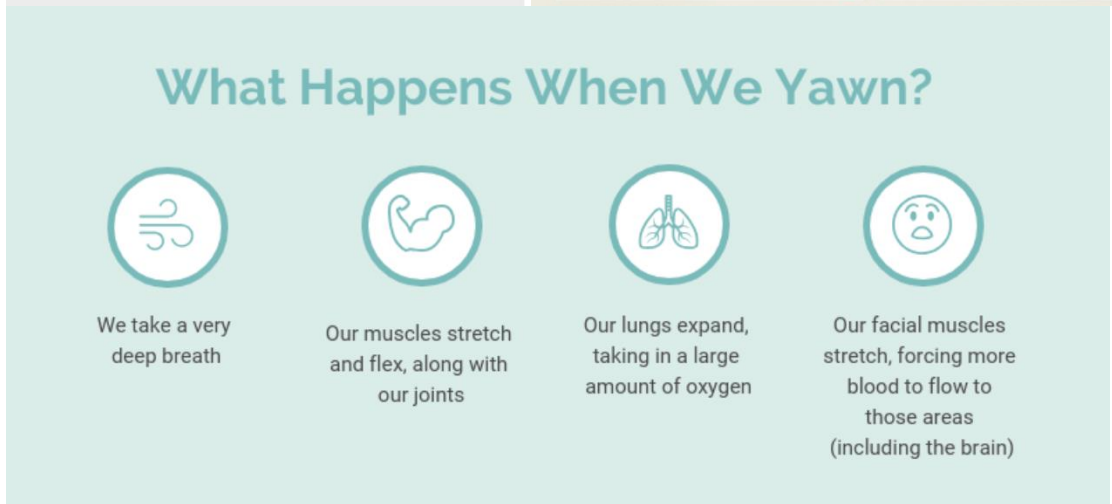
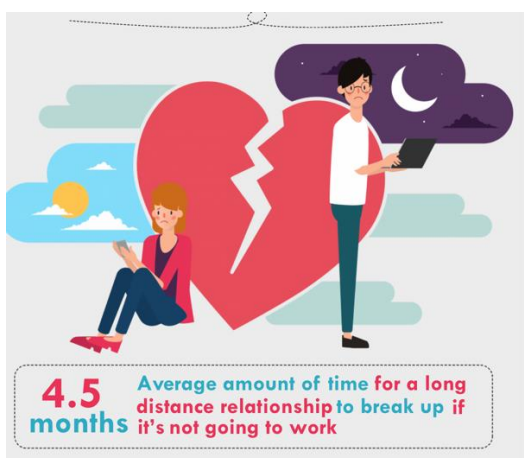
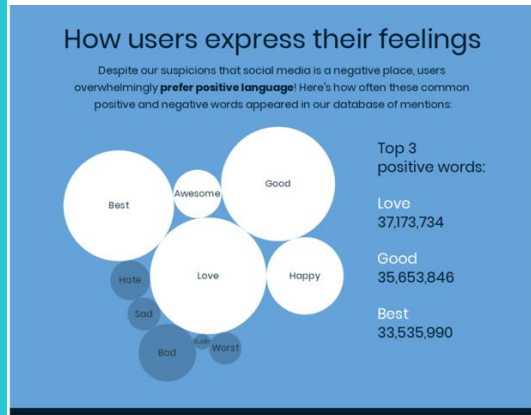
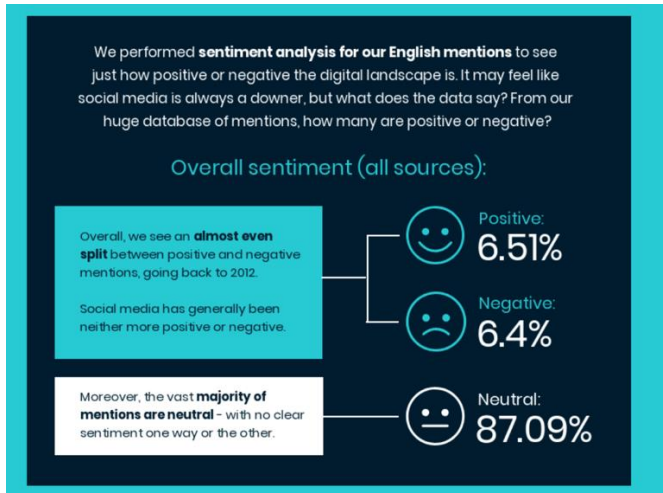
Students can find free templates for the creation of their infographics at:

<https://venngage.com/templates>

<https://www.canva.com/infographics/templates/>

<https://piktochart.com/formats/infographics/>

¹⁰ These visuals come from exemplar examples on <https://www.creativebloq.com/graphic-design-tips/information-graphics-1232836>, accessed July 22, 2021, and <https://venngage.com/blog/what-is-an-infographic/>, accessed July 22, 2021.



C. Post-project: On the final day of this unit, student small groups will present their findings to their peers in a roundtable discussion.

Each student group will present their infographic to the class. Presentations will also integrate group discussion on how students came to their discoveries, feedback from peers about how the findings do or do not fit with students' experiences, and what more the class would like to know based on the correlative relationships suggested.

Small Group Instructions:

Students will break out into groups of 2-6 members. Each group will be assigned some data collected from the survey and a set of questions to investigate using their data. As groups find significant data, they will visualize their finding and then report to their peers using an iconographic.

GROUP ONE

Word Cloud

- Word Cloud C: How do your colleagues imagine God in Four Words (Q. 35)?

Bar Graphs

- What were the characteristics that your colleagues were most trained to associate with Divine/God (Q. 40)?
- What characteristics do your colleagues most associate with Divine/God (Q. 50)?
- Is there a significant change in any of the traits that your adult colleagues have adopted or rejected from their family of origin?
 - Compare two bar graphs

Crosstabulation:

- Is there a correlation between ethnicity and race (Q. 7-10) and the following?
 - How frequently they were brought up to attend religious services or events (Q.?)
 - How frequently they now attend religious services or events (Q. 16)?
 - Political activism and community service involvement (Q. 25)?
 - How they politically identify (Q. 26)?
 - How they see the state of the US (Q. 27)?
 - Beliefs about most urgent issues facing the US (Q. 28)?

GROUP TWO

Word Clouds

- Word Cloud 1A: What were the most significant values that your colleagues were raised to imagine as definitive of the good life (Q. 48)?
- Word Cloud 1B: What are the values that your colleagues have decided as adults to set as the vision of the good life (Q. 58)?

Pie Charts

- How much do your colleagues believe that God defines and/or participates in good and evil (Q. 36)?
- How present and active in history do your colleagues believe God is (Q. 37)?

Crosstabulation

- Is there a correlation between how frequently your colleagues attend religious services (Q.16) and any of the following?
 - How frequently they pray (Q.15)?
 - How frequently they meditate (Q. 17)?
 - Eating or drinking habits (Q.18)?
 - Physical or bodily habits (Q. 19)?

- How frequently they journal or write (Q.20)?
- How frequently they volunteer (Q. 29)?
- Donations (Q. 30)?

GROUP THREE

Word Clouds

- Word Cloud 2A: What were the words that your colleagues were raised to associate with a threat to wellbeing (Q. 49)?
- Word Cloud 2B: What words do your colleagues use to describe the threats they feel to their wellbeing (Q. 59)?

Pie Charts

- How were your colleagues raised to understand God's justice and/or mercy (Q. 41)?
- How do your colleagues understand God's justice and/or mercy (Q. 51)?
- How were your colleagues raised to understand the wrath of God in relationship to vindictiveness (Q. 42)?
- How do your colleagues imagine the wrath of God in relationship to vindictiveness (Q. 52)?

Crosstabulation

- Is there a correlation between how close or distant your colleagues feel to God (Q. 32) in relationship to the following?
 - How frequently they pray (Q. 15)?
 - How frequently they meditate (Q. 17)?
 - What type of bodily practice they use (19)?
 - How frequently they volunteer (Q. 29)?
 - Whether or not they practice therapy (Q. 22)?
 - Whether or not they have a spiritual director (Q. 23)?
 - Whether or not they have a mentor (Q. 24)?

GROUP FOUR

Word Cloud

- Word Cloud D: How do your colleagues describe their most frequent emotional state (Q. 62)?

Pie Charts:

- How distant or close do your colleagues feel to the Divine/God (Q. 32)?
- How distant or close do your colleagues feel from the spirituality and beliefs with which they were raised (Q. 33)?
- How distant or close do your colleagues want to be with the Divine/God (Q. 34)?

Crosstabulation

- Is there a correlation between how active or present your colleagues believe God is history in relationship to the following?
 - Political identity (Q.26)?
 - Beliefs about the state of the US (Q. 27)?
 - Beliefs about urgent issues facing the US (Q. 28)?
 - Beliefs about the mercy and justice of God (Q. 41)?
 - If they were raised to believe God hears and answers prayer (Q. 44)?
 - If they believe God hears and answers prayer (Q. 54)?

GROUP FIVE

Pie Charts

- What are the percentages of your colleagues raised with certain religious affiliations or socio-religious identities (Q. 12)?
- Are there any trends among religious identity or affiliation among the various ethnic groups?
 - African American/Black pie chart (Q. 7) and (Q. 12)
 - Hispanic/Latinx pie chart (Q.8) and (Q. 12)
 - Native American pie chart (Q. 9) and (Q. 12)
 - White pie chart (Q. 10) and (Q. 12)

Bar Graphs Side-by-Side

- Is there any significant change in religious affiliation or socio-religious identities among your colleagues in their adulthood?
 - Bar Comparison of Q.12 and Q.13

Crosstabulation

- Is there any correlation between the type of socio-religious identity of your colleagues' family of origin (Q. 13) and the following?
 - Those who were raised in family systems that had intentional rhythms and habits (Q. 39)?
 - Those who were raised to believe God and Science were at odds (Q. 43)?
 - Those who were raised to believe in religious pluralism or value of religious diversity (Q. 46)?
 - Those who were raised to question or lean into doubts (Q.47)?
 - Beliefs about the existence of Truth (Q. 60)?
 - Beliefs about the Truth in multiple religions (Q. 61)?
- Is there any possible correlation between the socio-religious identity of your colleagues in adulthood (Q. 14) and the following?
 - Those who were raised in family systems that had intentional rhythms and habits (Q. 39)?
 - Those who were raised to believe God and Science were at odds (Q. 43)?
 - Those who were raised to believe in religious pluralism or value of religious diversity (Q. 46)?
 - Those who were raised to question or lean into doubts (Q.47)?
 - Beliefs that God and Science are at odds (Q. 53)?
 - Beliefs about the existence of Truth (Q. 60)?
 - Beliefs about the Truth in multiple religions (Q. 61)?