

God Images: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Faith in Practice
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Instructor Notes

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

Disciplines/courses suitable for this project: This unit provides an introductory-level interactive activity in political science, sociology, anthropology, or religion/theology. While investigating the relationship between participants' God images, attitudes, beliefs, and practices, the module immerses students in the interdisciplinary connections of the research question, the process of surveying, and the basic tools of data visualization, crosstabulation, and statistics.

Degree of difficulty: This project is Moderately difficult for its multi-day activity plan but Beginner in its skillset.

Project Summary 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

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.

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 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.

Z students define as important for living a good life? And how do they intend to cultivate them?

Background to the Topic of God Images

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

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

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

- A. Froese, Paul and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God and What That Says About Us*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- a. Please see Appendix A: "Introduction, Why God?" in *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God and What That Says About Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1-11. Find this chapter attached as pdf for faculty use and/or a pre-module reading assignment for student use.
 - b. See also Christopher Bader et al., "American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the Us, Select Findings from The Baylor Religion Survey," Waco, TX: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, 2006, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - c. Academic Reviews of *America's Four Gods*:
 - i. Michele Dillon, Review of *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God And What That Says About Us*, *Journal of Church and State* 53, Issue 2, (Spring 2011): 327–329, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csr034>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - ii. Kevin J. Christiano, Review of *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God – And What That Says About Us*, *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13, no. 1, (2012): 128–130, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2012.659499](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.659499), accessed July 22, 2021.
 - iii. Kathryn Lofton, Review of *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God And What That Says About Us*, *Church History* 81, no. 3 (2012): 753–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23252398>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - d. Studies building on quantitative and qualitative methodologies in spirituality:
 - i. Sung Joon Jang, Joshua Hays, Byron R. Johnson et al. "Four Gods' in Maximum Security Prison: Images of God, Religiousness, and Worldviews Among Inmates," *Review of Religious Research* 60 (2018): 331–365, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-018-0329-6>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - ii. Melinda Lundquist Denton, Richard Flory, and Christian Smith, *Back-Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford, 2020).
- B. Quantitative Research on Gen Z Spirituality
- A. Who is Gen Z: Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik, "On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far," Pew Research Center, May 14, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - B. Who is Gen Z: "Gen Z: Your Questions Answered, Barna, February 26, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - C. Barna Key Insights on Gen Z Spirituality: "What Will It Take to Disciple the Next Generation?" Barna, August 27, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/disciple-next-generation/>, accessed July 22, 2021.
 - D. Global Study on Spirituality of Millennials and Gen Z (Barna and World Vision): "Barna & World Vision Partner to Create Largest Study of Its Kind, Offering New Insights into Millennials & Gen Z Worldwide," World Vision and Barna, 2019, <https://www.worldvision.org/about-us/media-center/barna-world-vision-partner-to-create-largest-study-of-its-kind-offering-new-insights-into-millennials-gen-z-worldwide-2>, accessed July 22, 2021.

- E. Key Findings of Barna/World Vision Study: “The Connected Generation,” Barna and World Vision, 2020, <https://theconnectedgeneration.com/key-findings/>, accessed July 22, 2021.
- F. A multiyear longitudinal study tracing the shape of the religious lives of American youth as they transition from adolescents into young adulthood with an associated bibliography of research yielded from the data: Christian Smith, Lisa Pearce, et al., *National Study of Youth and Religion*, University of Notre Dame, <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/>, accessed July 22, 2021.
- G. See also Springtide Research Institute, “The State of Religion and Young People: Relational Authority,” 2020, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1khq081WuzFylAFXQBzdjbcHRALiBcZ_/view?ts=60fc692c, accessed July 25, 2021.

Project Design

- 1) Objective: To introduce students to the use of mixed methods in analyzing questions in the field of religious studies, this activity investigates the perennial question in theology of how social groups imagine the Divine. Further, using statistical analysis it empowers students to gather their own data about their social group and to consider how God images may or may not correlate with actions, attitudes, and beliefs. This unit builds on the insights of the 2010 and 2015 study published in *America’s Four Gods*. Going beyond observing how qualitative and quantitative studies worked in a distant project, this unit enables students to observe the findings of research questions from a different data set, critique outdated God images, and learn how to gather data to begin crafting new God images that make theology viable, intelligible, and plausible for their demographic subgroup in the US.
- 2) Course Delivery Outline
 - a. Day One: Overview of *America’s Four Gods* and Contemporary God Images
 - i. Introduction of Research Questions
 - ii. Overview of Quadrants from *America’s Four Gods*
 - iii. Critiques
 1. What makes sense?
 2. What’s missing?
 3. How would you craft a question to get at what you cannot see in this data?
 - a. Consider adding additional questions for the student survey based on feedback
 - iv. Correlations: God Images, Actions, Attitudes, and Politics From *America’s Four Gods*
 - v. HOMEWORK: Survey distributed for creating a new data set of Students’ God Images (Please see Appendix B – Survey).
 - b. Day Two
 - i. Break out groups (Please see Small Group Instructions in the Student Version of this module)
 - ii. Prompts assigned to each small group for a directed Data Analysis Exercise
 - iii. Students create infographics of their findings
 - c. Day Three
 - i. Group presentations in a roundtable: Students present their infographics to narrativize their discoveries during the Data Analysis Exercise
 - ii. Roundtable response and reflections

- 3) God Images: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Faith in Practice – A Survey
 - i. Please see Appendix B for a version of suggested questions.
 - ii. Consider the best collection instrument:
 1. SurveyMonkey
 2. Microsoft Forms
 3. Tableau
 - iii. Please consider the best data analytic instrument for introductory student analysis:
 1. SurveyMonkey (institutional license required)
 2. Excel
 3. Tableau
- 4) Data Analysis Activity
 - a. Student are introduced to basics of statistical analysis and crosstabulation.
 - i. Equipment/software for student use: The goal would be to use a software that has two functions:
 1. Accessibility for students to experiment with analysis and crosstabulation
 2. Visualization capabilities to help groups easily translate their findings into charts, graphs, and word clouds
 - b. Student groups will then capture their findings in an infographic.
 - i. A definition of infographics, list of free software with templates, and a sample of exemplars are included in the student version of this module.
 - ii. Students should conduct their analyses and then visualize what they see in this graphic, engaging, shareable format.
 - c. Prompts for Each Group
 - i. All prompts are included in the Small Group Instructions subsection, which is also available in the Student Version.

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)?