

A spectrum of spirituality: Canadians keep the faith to varying degrees, but few reject it entirely

Generally speaking, highly religious people are happier and more engaged with their communities

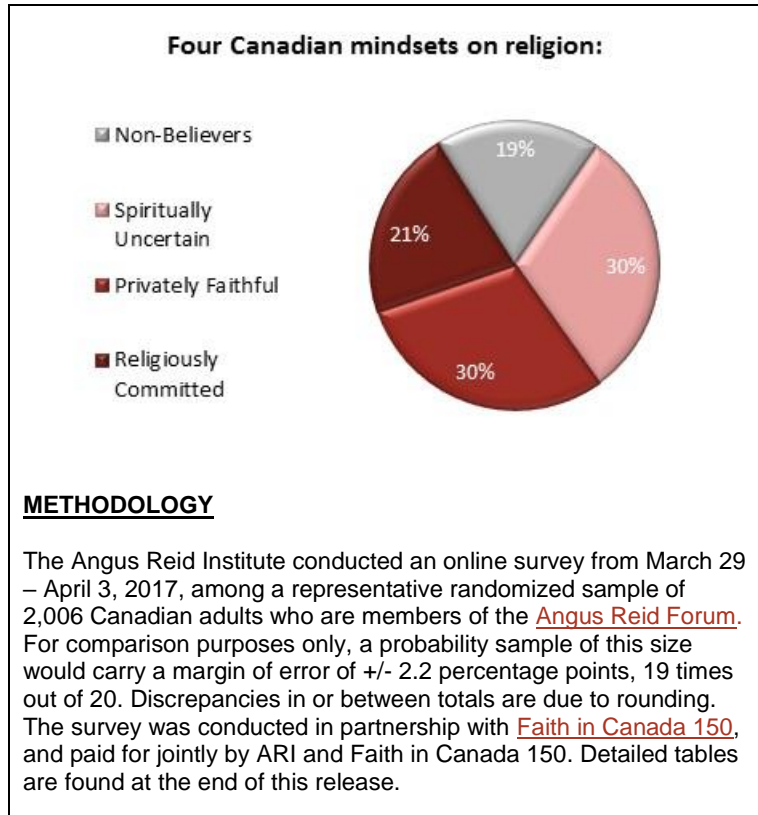
April 13, 2017 – As Christians around the world prepare for Easter, Hindus and Sikhs for Vaisakhi, and Jews for the conclusion of Passover, a new study from the Angus Reid Institute looks at the anatomy of faith in Canada.

Conducted in partnership with [Faith in Canada 150](#), this research builds on [previous Angus Reid Institute studies](#) on issues of faith and prayer in Canada today, articulating a continuum of religiosity that finds Canadians much less hostile toward religion than declining church attendances might imply. Indeed, relatively few Canadians could be described as “not religious at all.” Many more express personal belief in the existence of God or a higher power and have some degree of spiritual life.

This study sorts Canadians into a spectrum that ranges from total rejection of spirituality and faith of all kinds to a strong embrace of organized religion and its role in one’s own life. An individual’s place on this spectrum can serve to predict not only their views on questions of personal faith and public religion, but also more fundamental questions about their outlook on life and their sense of belonging to their community.

Key Findings:

- Four broad segments of this spectrum are analyzed in this survey: The Non-Believers (19% of the total population), the Spiritually Uncertain (30%), the Privately Faithful (30%), and the Religiously Committed (21%)
- Though most Canadians do not rule out personal faith, they are more likely to view the word “religion” negatively (33% do) than positively (25%)



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- Higher levels of belief are correlated with higher levels of personal happiness, charitable giving, volunteerism, and overall community engagement

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PART 1: The Anatomy of Faith in Canada

A spectrum of spirituality, and four mindsets within it

In order to situate faith in Canada, a number of important elements need to be considered. How intensely does one believe? Do they engage with religion regularly? Do they read holy scripture? With the spectrum of spiritual belief and practice in mind, Angus Reid Institute researchers created a composite index based on responses to several questions about faith and experience with God or a higher power. This enabled researchers to group respondents into like-minded segments. The following factors were measured in the data analysis:

- Belief in God or a higher power
- Belief in life after death
- How often, if at all, a person prays to God or a higher power
- How often a person attends religious services
- How often a person reads the Bible or other sacred text
- How often a person feels they experience God's presence
- How important it is to a person that their child to be educated about faith and involved in a faith-based community

ARI researchers used respondents' answers to these questions to create a continuum of faith, with those providing more answers indicating belief near the high end, and those with fewer answers suggesting a degree of personal faith near the low end.

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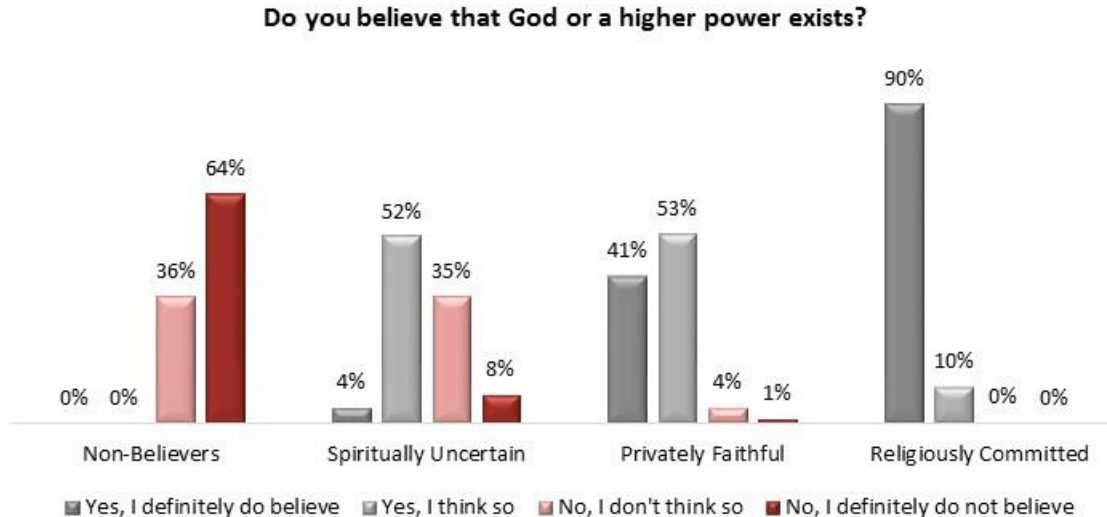
Along this continuum, four distinct groups emerge: **Non-Believers**, **Spiritually Uncertain**, **Privately Faithful** and **Religiously Committed**.

While the role of institutional religion in society has diminished in many respects, faith remains an evolving and important element of Canadian life. Identifying and putting a face on faith has become more difficult as traditional methods of participation – namely church-going – have lessened. Despite this, religion or spirituality play a role in the lives of around eight-in-ten Canadians – all of those not sorted into the Non-Believers group.

Roughly one-in-five Canadians place near one end of the spectrum or the other, either professing no faith, the **Non-Believers** (19%), or professing deep devotion, the **Religiously Committed** (21%).

The remaining 60 per cent of Canadians can be described as either **Privately Faithful** (30%) or **Spiritually Uncertain** (30%). As will be seen in the following section, however, though both of these groups are somewhere in-between the extremes of faith, each one has its own unique attributes.

To visualize these four groups, consider their responses to the question, “Do you believe that God or a higher power exists?” shown in the graph that follows. The Religiously Committed are all believers, and most of them are certain about their belief. The Non-Believers are all skeptical of the existence of God, and the middle groups tend to embrace uncertainty, saying “I think so” rather than answering definitively:

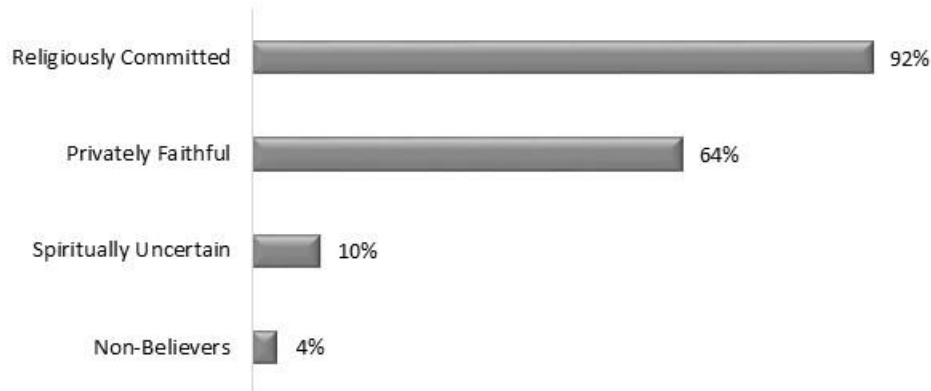


And what about the importance of faith to their children? The number of respondents who say that it would be important to them that their child, or future child, be welcomed into a faith community is illustrative of the how different segments think:

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Percentage of Canadians who say it's "Important" that their child gets formally welcomed into a faith community or religion (for example, Christian baptism)



Beyond these broad strokes of belief, who are these people? Demographic indicators are key to understanding the religiosity of Canada in 2017.

The regional story

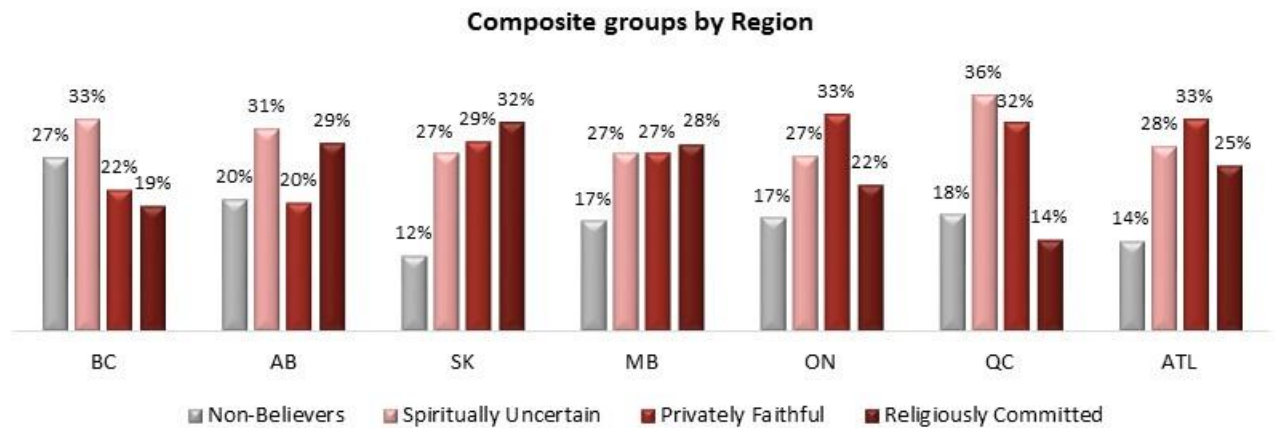
The most devout religious followers in Canada are more likely to be found in the prairies. Approximately three-in-ten from Saskatchewan (32%), Alberta (29%) or Manitoba (28%) fit into this end of the spectrum as Religiously Committed. By contrast, 14 per cent of Quebec residents and 19 per cent of British Columbians can say the same.

For their part, Quebecers are most likely to be found in the middle segments. Two-thirds of Quebecers fit the two middle categories (68%), the largest such grouping in the country. B.C. is home to the highest proportion of Non-Believers at just over one-quarter (27%) and is second only to Quebec in Spiritual Uncertainty (33%).

Of course, members of every group can be found in every region, as seen in the following graph:

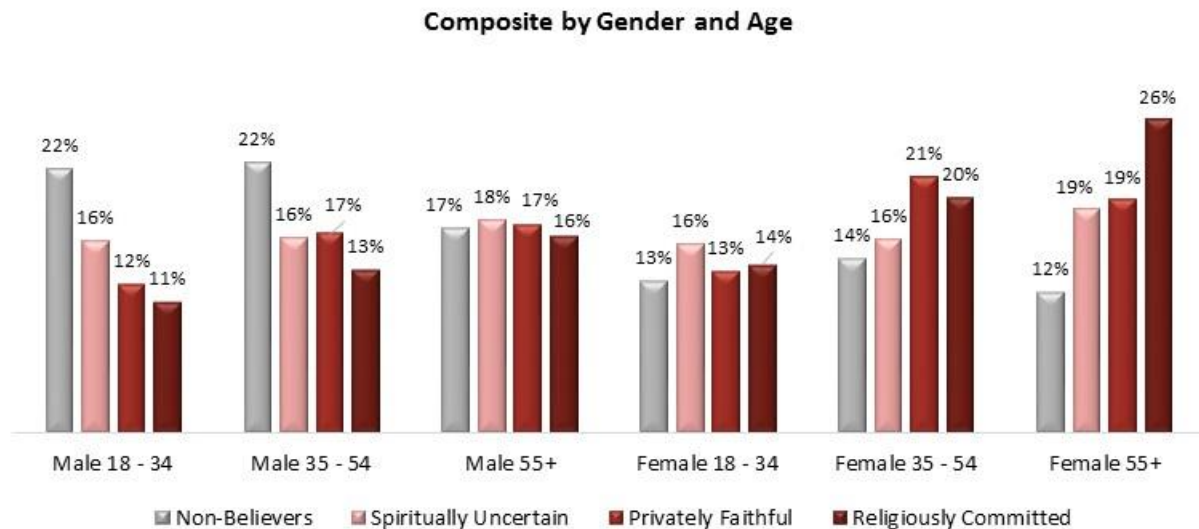
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Gender and generations

Each group across the spectrum of faith has a unique story to tell from an age and gender perspective. The Non-Believers, for example, are comprised of 61 per cent men, and a disproportionate number of them under the age of 55. The more religious segments, meanwhile, tend to be older and female:



Visible minorities and immigration

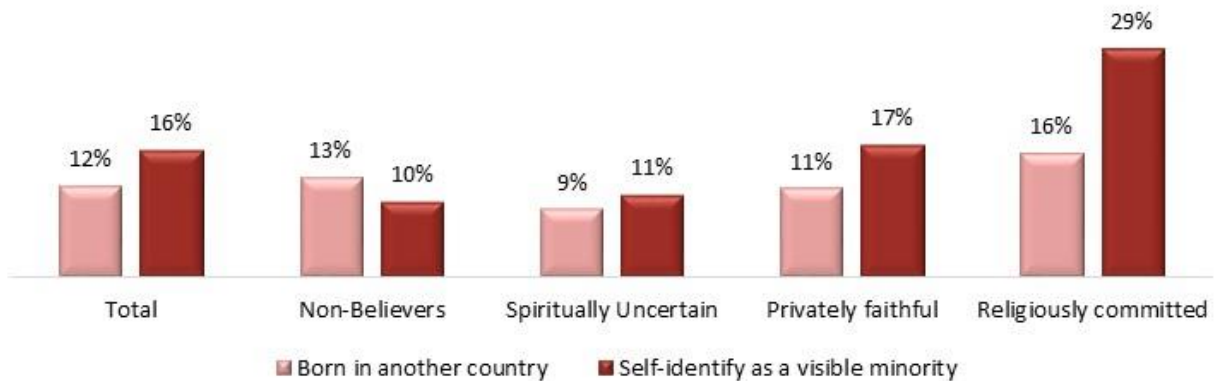
The faith communities in Canada that have been growing in recent years have been those that include large numbers of immigrants, many of whom are non-white and non-Christian. This demographic pattern is borne out in the spectrum of religiosity uncovered in this data. The most religiously active group, the

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Religiously Committed, is also the most likely to contain both respondents who were born in another country and respondents who self-identify as visible minorities:

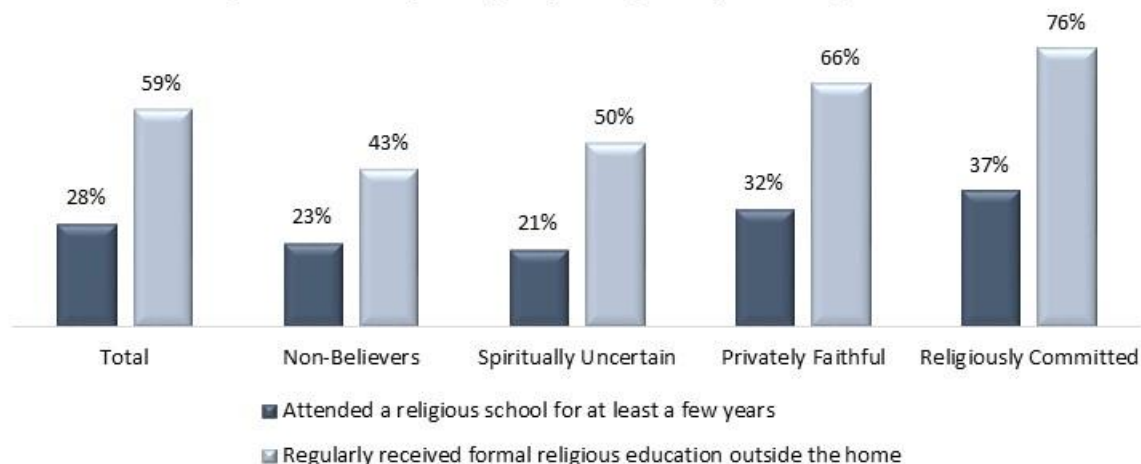
Percentage of visible minorities and immigrants in each composite group:



Experience with religious education

Religious education is also a factor, including whether or not respondents attended religious schools or had some other formal religious education, such as Sunday school, while growing up:

Percentage of each composite group that grew up with religious education:



Notably, a person's overall level of educational attainment does not appear to be correlated with their place on the spectrum of spirituality. Canadians of all educational levels are found in roughly proportional numbers in each cohort ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

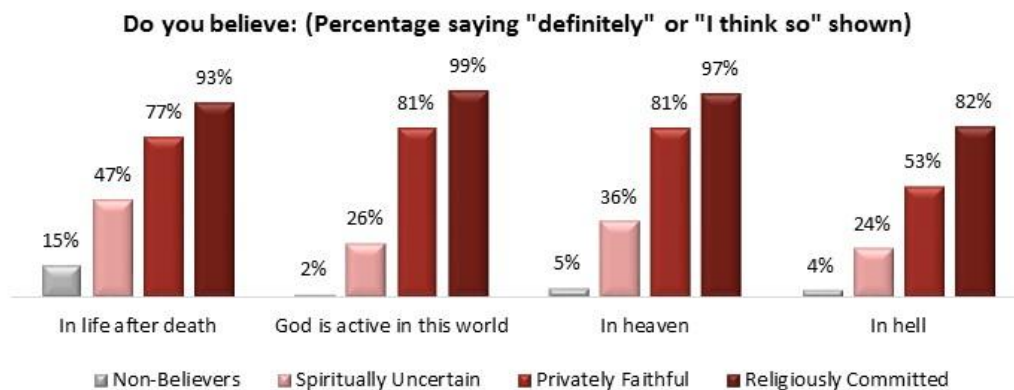
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What do Canadians in each segment believe?

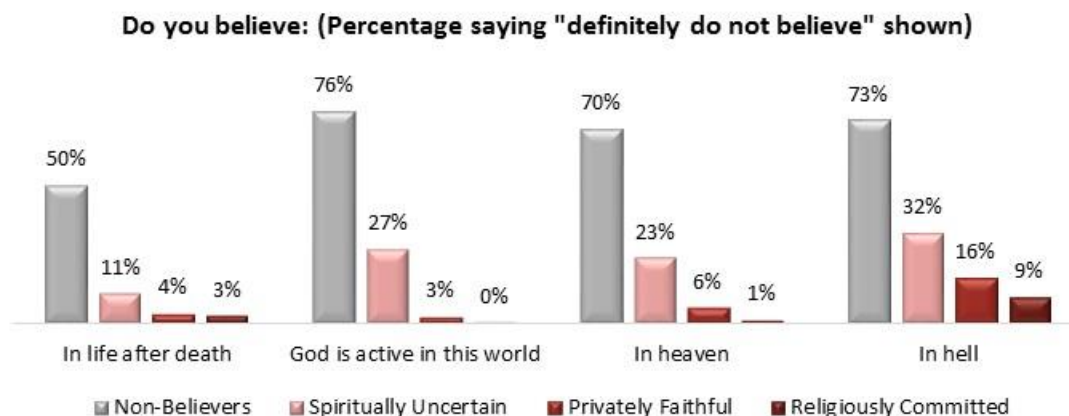
As previously mentioned, belief in God or a higher power is a key differentiator of these segments. Other beliefs are also illuminating, particularly when comparing the Spiritually Uncertain and the Privately Faithful.

The Privately Faithful lean toward belief in life after death, heaven, hell, and an active God, while the Spiritually Uncertain – as their name implies – are skeptical, tending toward disbelief, though less strongly than the Non-Believers:



If a majority of the Spiritually Uncertain do not believe in any of these things, and only a small majority believe in God or a higher power, why are they not considered Non-Believers?

The answer lies in their relative lack of certainty. While at least half of all Non-Believers say they “definitely do not believe” in concepts of God, life after death, heaven and hell, the Spiritually Uncertain are much more likely to choose “I don’t think so” than to say a definitive “no,” as seen in the following graph:



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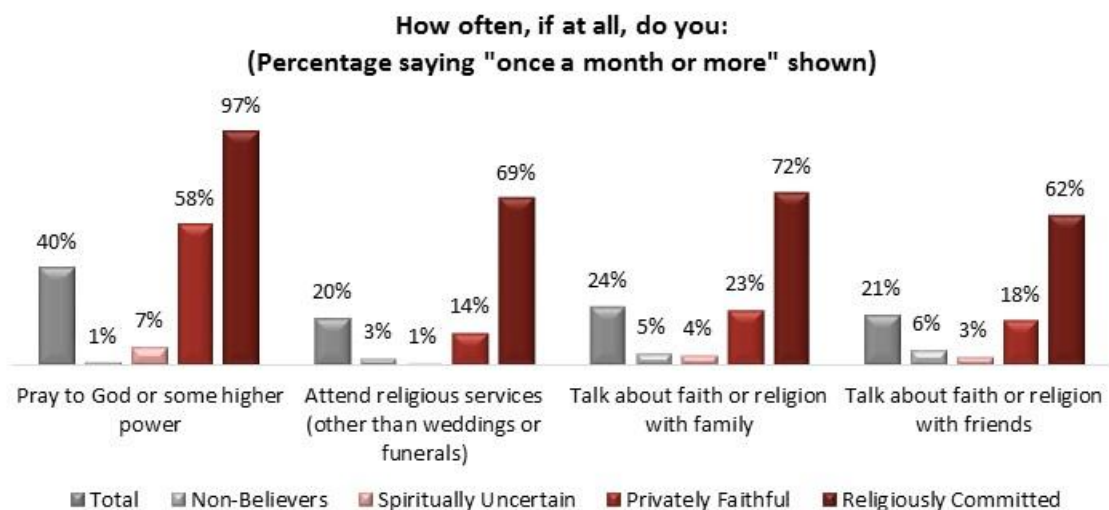
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The beliefs of the groups are summarized in the following table for easy comparison:

Do you believe: (Percentage saying “definitely” or “I think so” shown)					
	All Canadians	Spectrum of Spirituality			
		Non-Believers	Spiritually Uncertain	Privately Faithful	Religiously Committed
That God or a higher power exists	67%	0%	57%	94%	100%
In life after death	60%	15%	47%	77%	93%
God is active in this world	53%	2%	26%	81%	99%
In heaven	57%	5%	36%	81%	97%
In hell	41%	4%	24%	53%	82%

Meanwhile, the Spiritually Uncertain differ from the Privately Faithful by their participation, or lack thereof, in religious behaviours. Fewer than one-in-ten Spiritually Uncertain respondents (7%) say they pray to God or some higher power once a month or more, while doing so is the norm for most (58%) of the Privately Faithful.

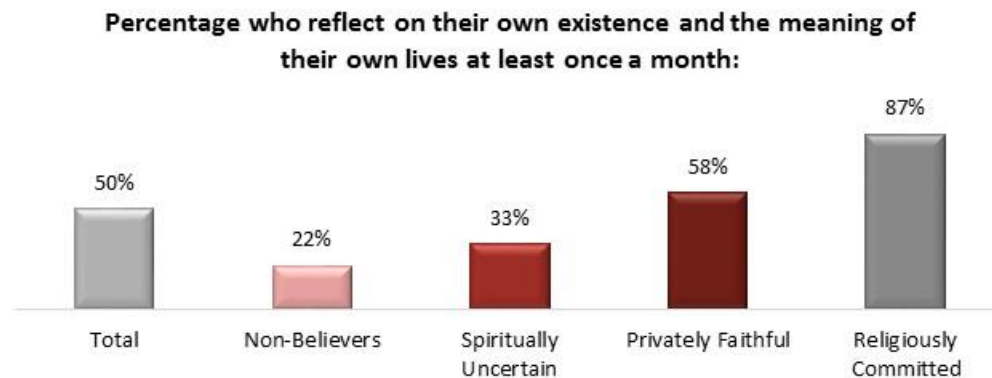
The Privately Faithful are just that – private. While most of them pray to a higher power regularly, relatively few of them attend religious services or publicly talk about their faith with the same frequency:



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One spiritual behaviour that notable portions of every group – including the Non-Believers – engage in once a month or more is reflection on one’s own existence and the meaning of life. The Religiously Committed are much more likely to do this than others, however:



Canadians’ propensity to engage in various religious and spiritual behaviours are summarized in the following table:

Percentage who do each of the following “once a month or more”:					
	All Canadians	Spectrum of Spirituality			
		Non-Believers	Spiritually Uncertain	Privately Faithful	Religiously Committed
Pray to God or some higher power	40%	1%	7%	58%	97%
Attend religious services (other than weddings or funerals)	20%	3%	1%	14%	69%
Talk about faith or religion with family	24%	5%	4%	23%	72%
Talk about faith or religion with friends	21%	6%	3%	18%	62%
Read the Bible, Quran, or other sacred text	15%	2%	0%	6%	58%
Feel you experience God's presence	26%	1%	1%	22%	89%

The vocabulary of faith

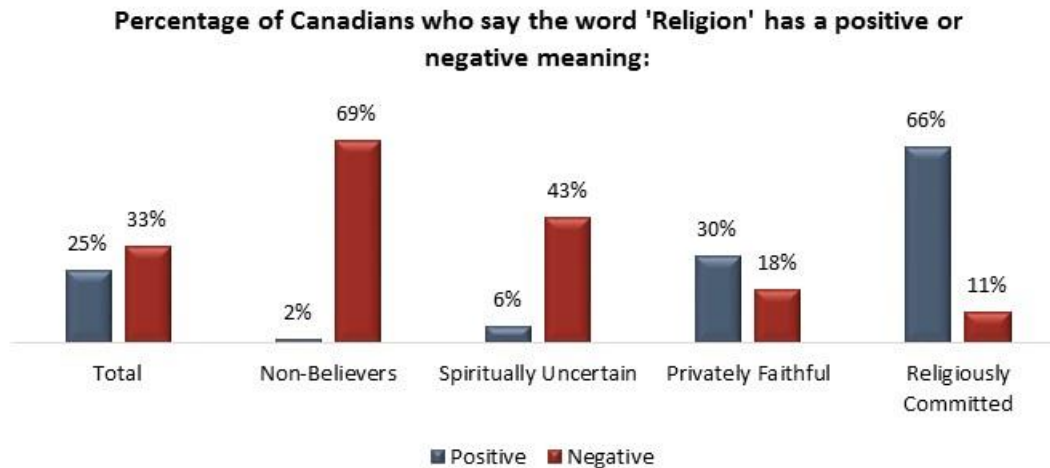
One way to discover more about the mindsets of each of these groups is to present them with various words related to conversations of faith and see how they respond. The Angus Reid Institute offered twelve such words and asked respondents to note which they viewed positively and which they viewed

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negatively. Notably, while many of the concepts that various faiths espouse – forgiveness, morality, and mercy – are viewed positively, religion itself evokes more negative associations.

Indeed, just one-in-four Canadians (25%) selected the word ‘religion’ as having a positive meaning to them while one-in-three (33%) said they view the word negatively. This opinion is highly variable across the four groups:



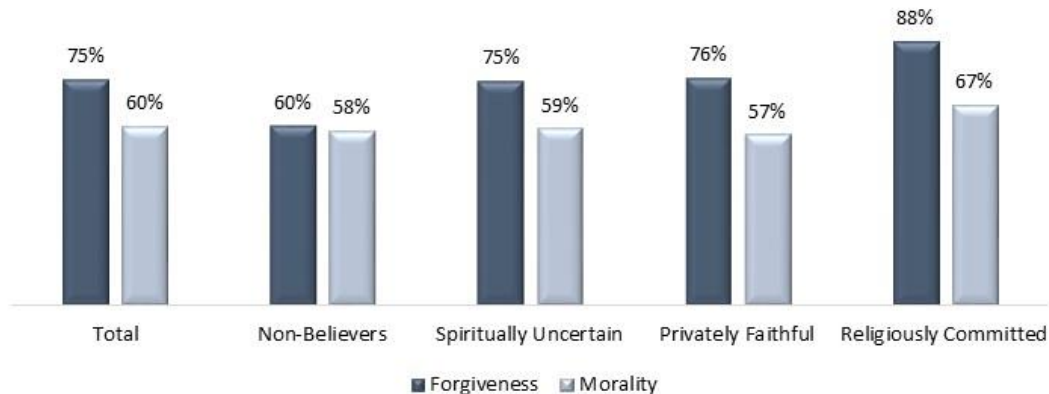
Even among the Privately Faithful, the word religion connotes negativity among close to one-in-five (18%). This may reflect that group’s more-personal relationship with faith, and the fact that they eschew more formal institutional practices, as seen in the previous section.

Forgiveness is particularly valued by the Religiously Committed. Nine-in-ten (88%) from this group say the word has a positive meaning, and they are joined by at least six-in-ten from each of the other three segments. Morality is the only other term on the list with a majority positive response. From Non-Believers across the spectrum to the Religiously Committed, a strong majority agree that this word, the system of values held by a person or group, has a positive meaning.

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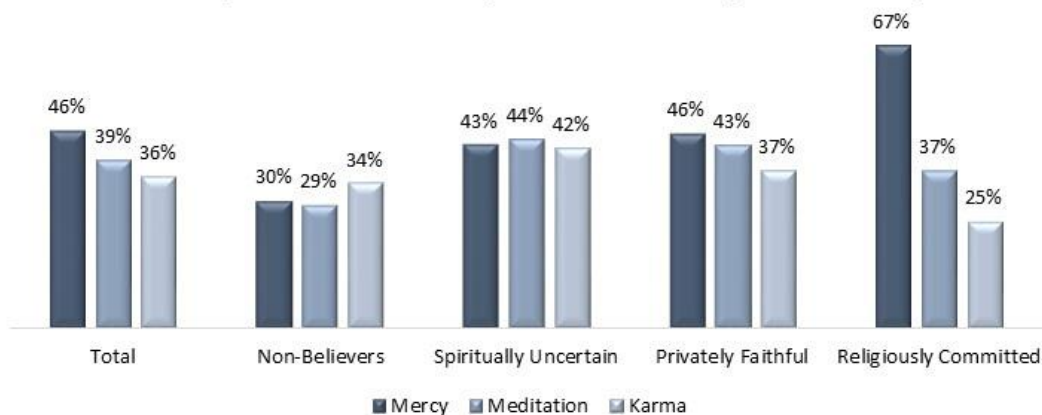
Percentage of Canadians who say these words have a positive meaning:



Subsequent words on the list garner less positivity, but little in the way of negativity. Mercy, a common concept in religion, from Christianity to Judaism to Islam, is viewed positively by just about half (46%) of Canadians, and viewed negatively by fewer than one-in-ten (7%). The Religiously Committed are much more keen on the concept – two-in-three (67%) take the positive view.

Two other concepts found in a number of religions, Meditation and Karma, are viewed positively by just under four-in-ten, with much less variability across the segments:

Percentage of Canadians who say these words have a positive meaning:

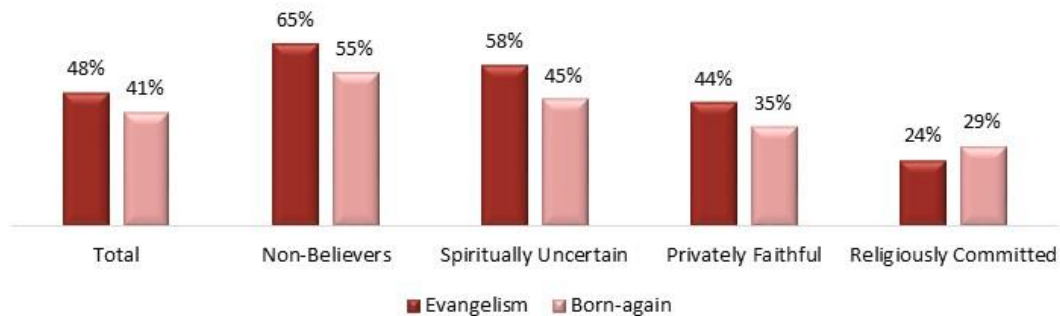


Two words in particular attract the most negativity – ‘Evangelism’ and ‘Born-Again’. Each carries a negative meaning for at least four-in-ten Canadians, and at least one-quarter of each of the four groups along the continuum. Evangelism – the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or proselytizing – and Born-Again – a phrase used for a person who is converted to faith in Christ – share a Christian-centric meaning. Many of the other, less contested terms, are shared by multiple faiths.

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Percentage of Canadians who say these words have a negative meaning:



For easier comparisons between groups, consider the following table:

Percentage saying each word has a positive meaning:					
	All Canadians	Spectrum of Spirituality			
		Non-Believers	Spiritually Uncertain	Privately Faithful	Religiously Committed
Forgiveness	75%	60%	75%	76%	88%
Morality	60%	58%	59%	57%	67%
Mercy	46%	30%	43%	46%	67%
Meditation	39%	29%	44%	43%	37%
Karma	36%	34%	42%	37%	25%
Salvation	29%	9%	18%	28%	61%
Religion	25%	2%	6%	30%	66%
Resurrection	23%	5%	8%	22%	60%
Born-again	15%	6%	7%	15%	34%
Mystical	13%	8%	14%	15%	13%
Theology	12%	3%	5%	11%	29%
Evangelism	8%	0%	1%	4%	29%

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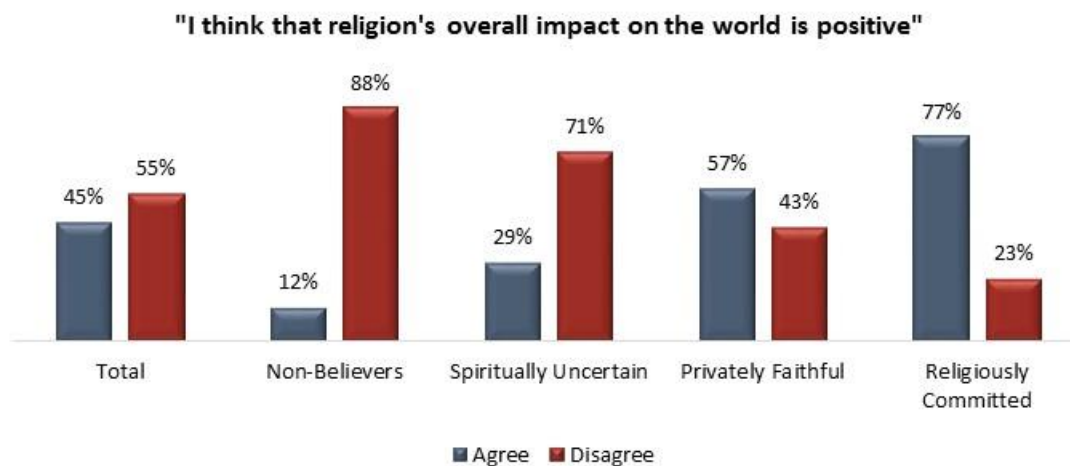
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PART 2: Findings on personal happiness, community, family

The segments' attitudes about religion

The differences between the four groups are highlighted in their responses to a series of statements about personal faith and attitudes toward religion. Consider, for example, the segments' reactions to the statement "I think that religion's overall impact on the world is positive."

Nearly nine-in-ten (88%) of the Non-Believers disagree with this statement, while more than three-in-four (77%) of the Religiously Committed agree. Overall, Canadians are split on this question, with a small majority (55%) saying they disagree:



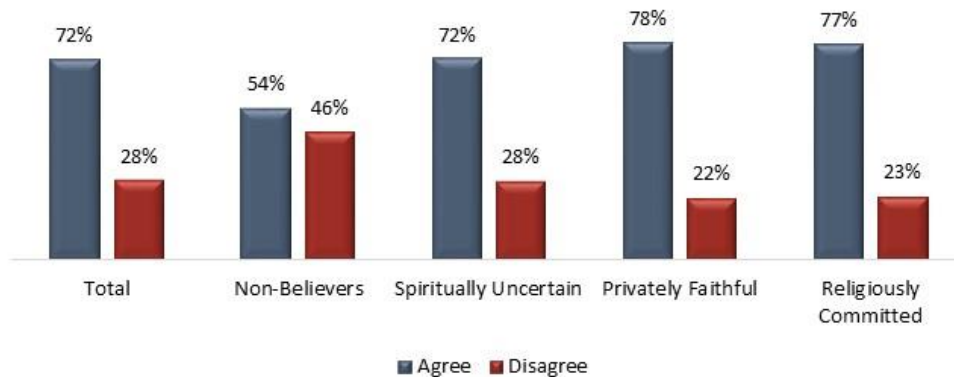
This question highlights a key difference between the Spiritually Uncertain and Privately Faithful, with the former largely united in disagreeing, while the latter are more divided, but lean toward agreement.

Asked to consider the impact of a specific religious figure – Pope Francis – on the world, Canadians are much more united. Almost three-in-four (72%) respondents see the Catholic leader's impact as positive, and even a majority of the Non-Believers (54%) feel this way:

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"I think Pope Francis is having a positive impact on the world"



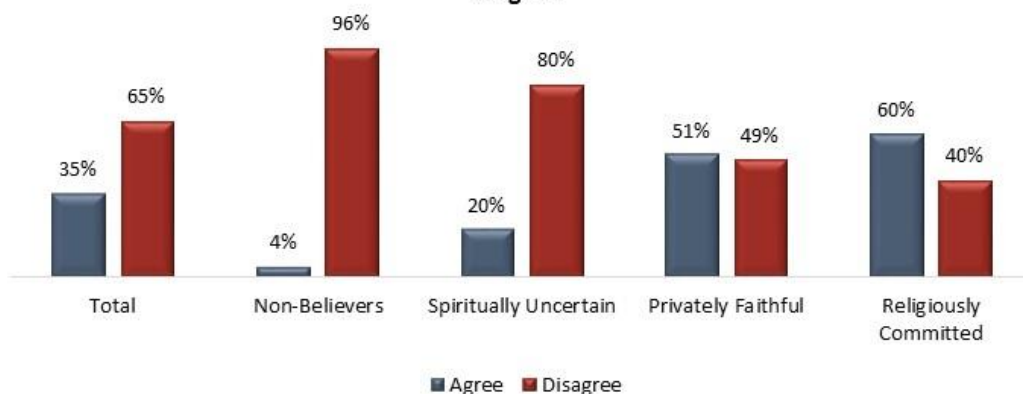
This finding helps to illuminate the ways in which the four groups are, in fact, a continuous spectrum. A great many of the 28 per cent of Canadians who disagree with this statement about Pope Francis may do so out of a deep mistrust of all religions and religious figures, but the fact that fewer than half of those in the least religious segment respond in this way suggests an openness to the possibility that people of faith can be a force for good – even among those who have no use for faith themselves.

And make no mistake, nearly all of those in the Non-Believers group feel they have no use for faith. A pair of statements about personal religiosity make this abundantly clear:

First, 96 per cent of the Non-Believers disagree with the statement “I sometimes feel guilty for not being more involved in a faith or religion.” Fully eight-in-ten (81%) disagree “strongly.”

Interestingly, the group most likely to express these feelings of guilt for lack of involvement in religion is also the group most heavily involved in religion overall, as seen in the following graph:

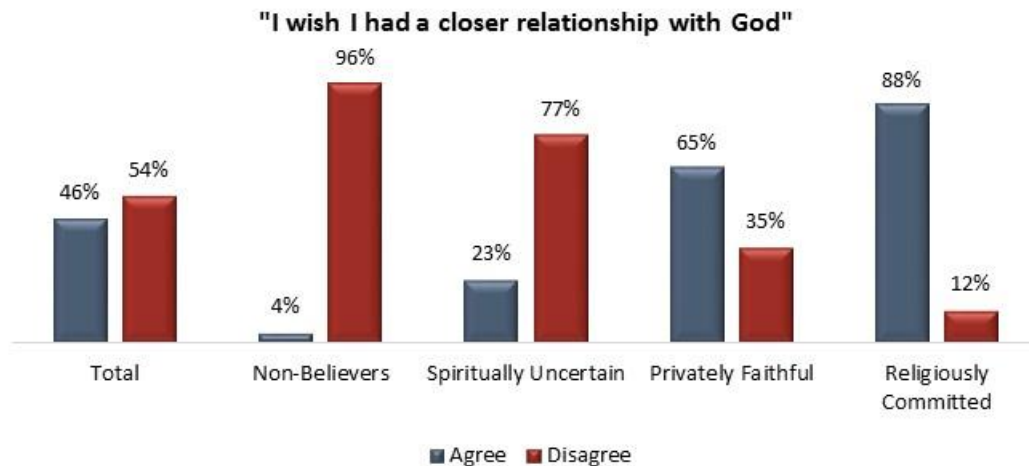
"I sometimes feel guilty for not being more involved in a faith or religion"



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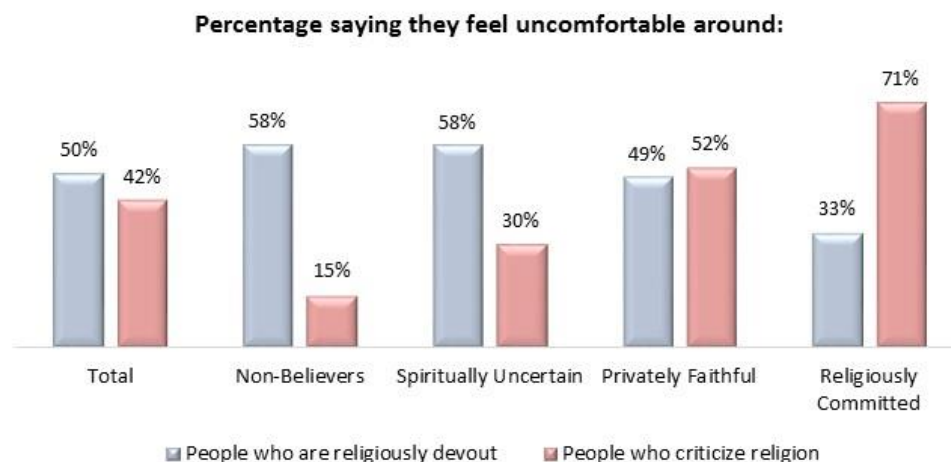
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The other statement about personal religion – “I wish I had a closer relationship with God” – yields similar results, with Religiously Committed in firm agreement on this measure:



The Non-Believers and the Spiritually Uncertain are generally not interested in a closer relationship with their deity of choice. The Privately Faithful, meanwhile, are generally more inclined to embrace both personal faith and organized religion – even if they don’t regularly attend services – than the Spiritually Uncertain. This desire for closeness with God reflects that.

The members of different groups also react differently to the religious beliefs of others, with more than seven-in-ten Religiously Committed (71%) saying they feel uncomfortable around people who criticize religion, and almost six-in-ten of the Non-Believers and the Spiritually Uncertain saying they feel uncomfortable around the religiously devout:



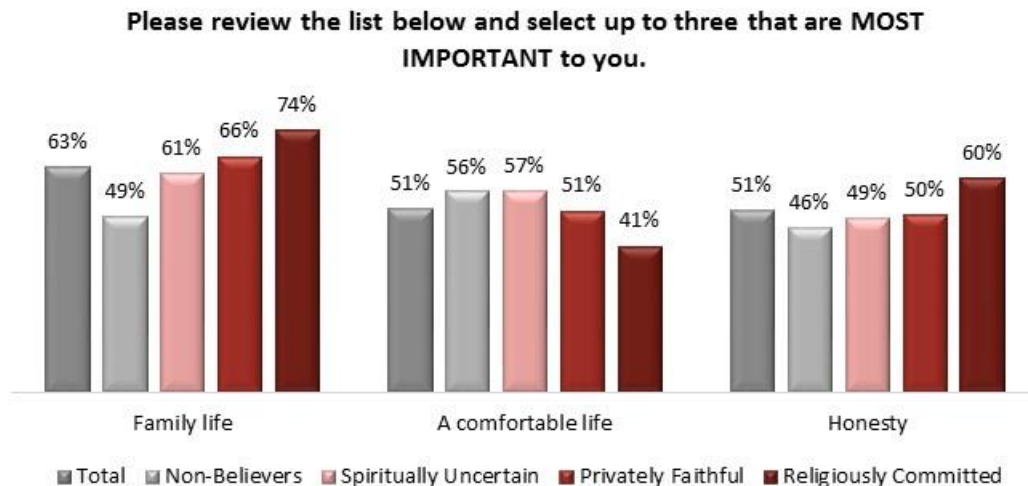
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Differing opinion on what is most important in life, varying happiness

What is most important in life? Presented with a list of nine values and asked to choose their top three, Canadians across all four segments are most likely to choose family life, comfort, and honesty, but there is significant variation in how they prioritize the three.

Among Religiously Committed, nearly three-quarters (74%) choose family life. This drops to fewer than half of the Non-Believers group. For that group, “a comfortable life” tops the list at 56 per cent. The Non-Believers are also less likely to put a premium on honesty (46% do) compared to Religiously Committed (60%):



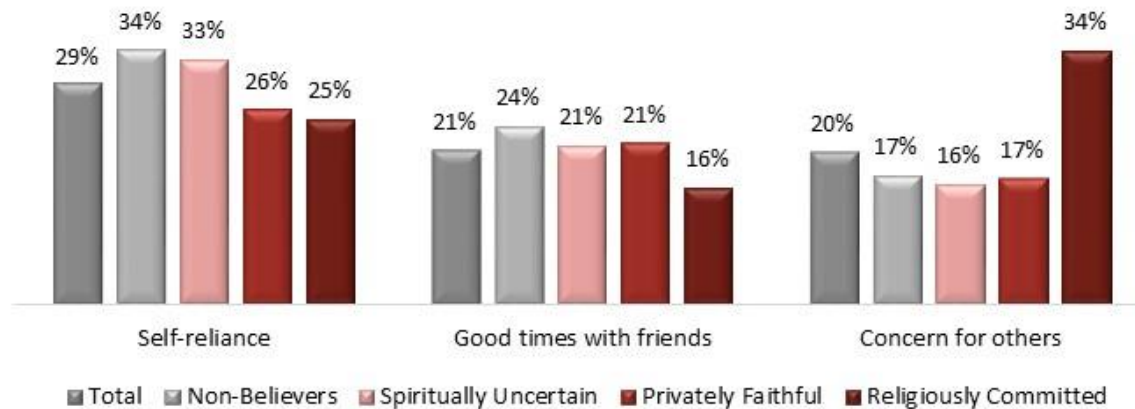
Further, members of the Religiously Committed group are twice as likely as members of any other group to say “concern for others” is one of the most important things on the list for them, as seen in the graph that follows.

One-third of both the Non-Believers and the Spiritually Uncertain, meanwhile, prioritize “self-reliance,” while one-quarter of the other two groups do the same:

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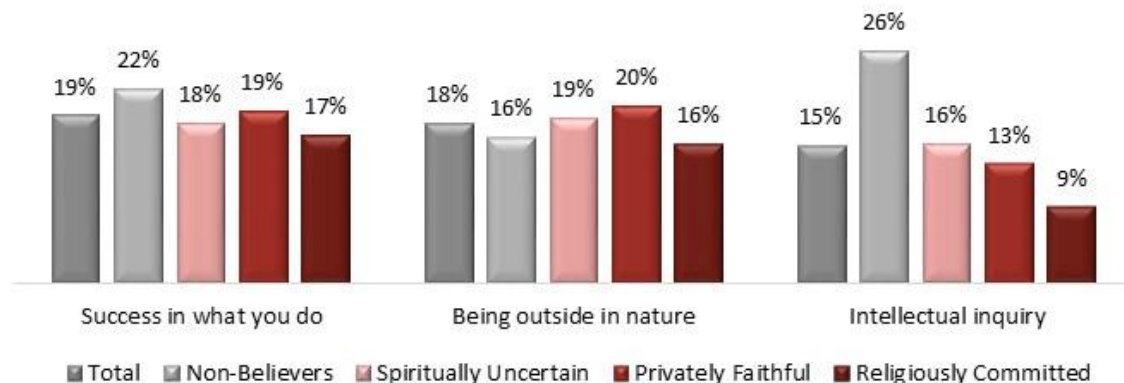
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Please review the list below and select up to three that are **MOST IMPORTANT** to you.



The least-chosen items on the list also offer some insights into the four religious mindsets identified in this study. Notably, more than one-in-four Canadians in the Non-Believers group (26%) choose “intellectual inquiry” as one of their most important considerations. This compares to one-in-six or fewer of each other group, and fewer than one-in-ten (9%) of the Religiously Committed group:

Please review the list below and select up to three that are **MOST IMPORTANT** to you.



The following table contains all nine dimensions canvassed for easier comparisons across groups:

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Please review the list below and select up to three that are MOST IMPORTANT to you:					
	All Canadians	Spectrum of Spirituality			
		Non-Believers	Spiritually Uncertain	Privately Faithful	Religiously Committed
Family life	63%	49%	61%	66%	74%
A comfortable life	51%	56%	57%	51%	41%
Honesty	51%	46%	49%	50%	60%
Self-reliance	29%	34%	33%	26%	25%
Good times with friends	21%	24%	21%	21%	16%
Concern for others	20%	17%	16%	17%	34%
Success in what you do	19%	22%	18%	19%	17%
Being outside in nature	18%	16%	19%	20%	16%
Intellectual inquiry	15%	26%	16%	13%	9%

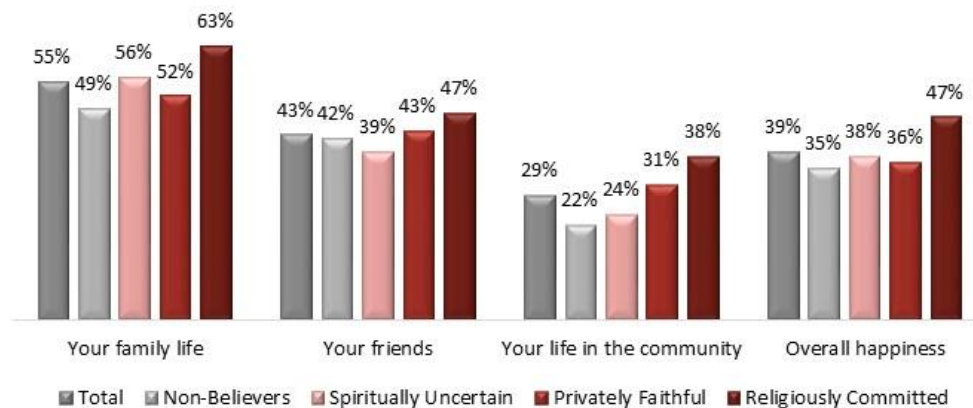
In addition to finding different aspects of their lives important, the four cohorts express varying degrees of happiness with their lives.

Members of the Religiously Committed are consistently the most inclined to say they are either “extremely” or “very” happy with their friends, their family life, their community life, and their lives overall:

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How happy would you say you are in these areas of life?
(Percentage saying "very happy" or "extremely happy" shown)



This finding – that those expressing the highest degree of religiosity are also happiest – follows [a well-documented pattern](#) seen in other research.

The reasons for this consistently higher happiness among the Religiously Committed may have to do with them taking comfort in the tenets of their specific faiths, or simply the higher degree of connectedness they feel with their communities, which will be discussed in the following section.

Community engagement and charitable giving

Higher degrees of religiosity not only correlated with higher self-professed happiness, they also correspond with higher degrees of community involvement, volunteer work, and charitable giving.

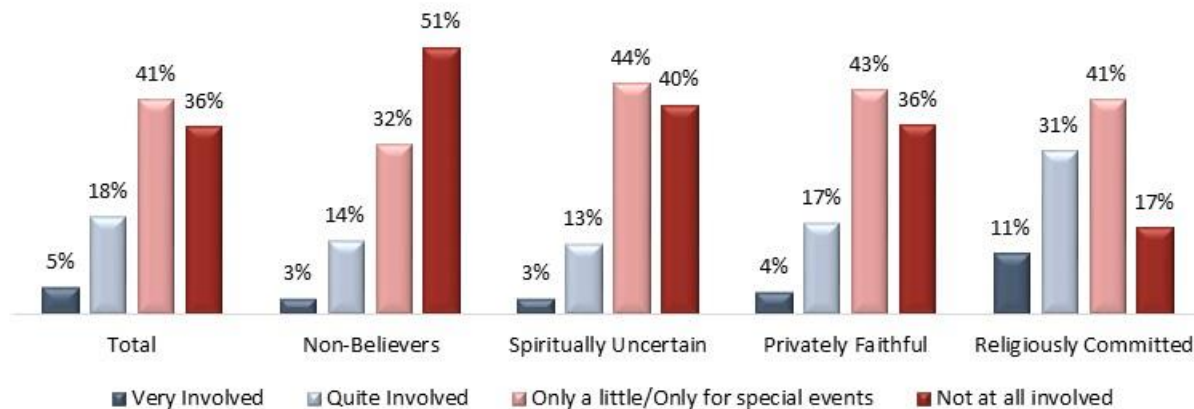
Asked to describe their personal involvement in community groups and activities, Religiously Committed are more than twice as likely as members of any other group to see themselves as “very involved” or “quite involved” (43% do so compared to 21% or fewer across other groups).

The Non-Believers, by contrast, are most likely to say they are “not at all involved,” not even for special events:

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How would you describe your own involvement in community groups and activities? Would you say you are:



One possible explanation for this disparity in self-described involvement is that Religiously Committed – who are overwhelmingly more likely than other groups to belong to a church or some other formal spiritual community – have access to a form of community participation that non-churchgoers do not.

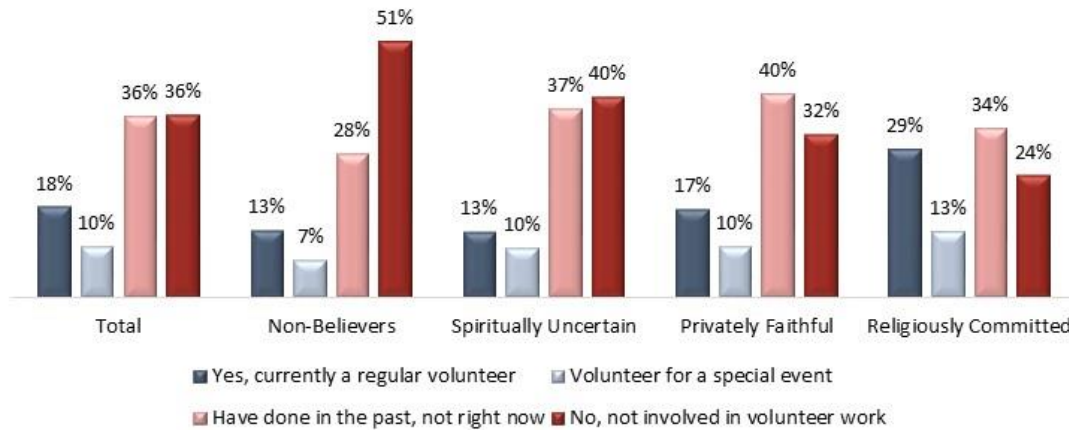
That said, this data suggests that people who are not regular participants in a spiritual community aren't replacing that community involvement with membership in some other, more secular group.

This same explanation could be offered for patterns in volunteer work, where the Religiously Committed are again the most involved and the Non-Believers are again the least. Belonging to an organized religious group offers volunteer opportunities not afforded to those who aren't members, but those who aren't members of a religious group don't seem to be compensating by finding volunteer opportunities elsewhere:

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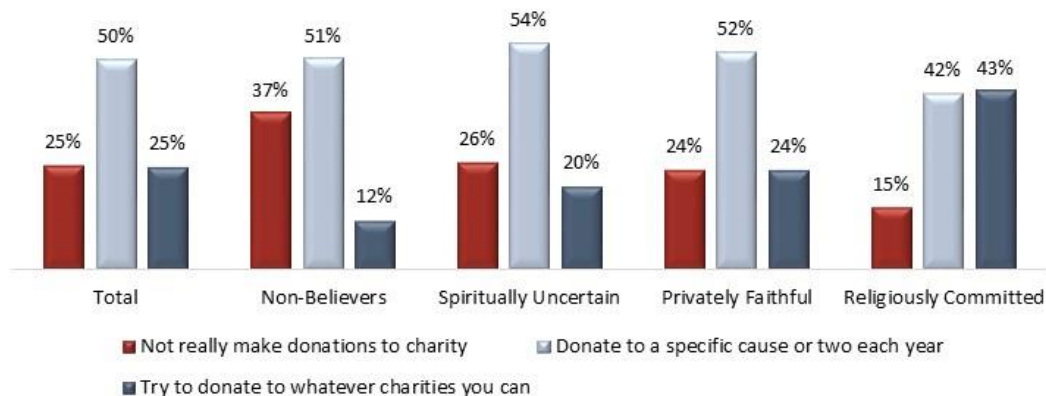
Are you personally involved in doing volunteer work?



Respondents near the high end of the religiosity spectrum are also more likely than those near the bottom to make charitable donations, both formally and informally.

As seen in the graph that follows, Religiously Committed are almost twice as likely as any other group to say they “try to donate to whatever charities they can.” They’re also less than half as likely as the Non-Believers group to say they “don’t really make donations to charity”:

What's your own general approach to charitable donations? Do you:

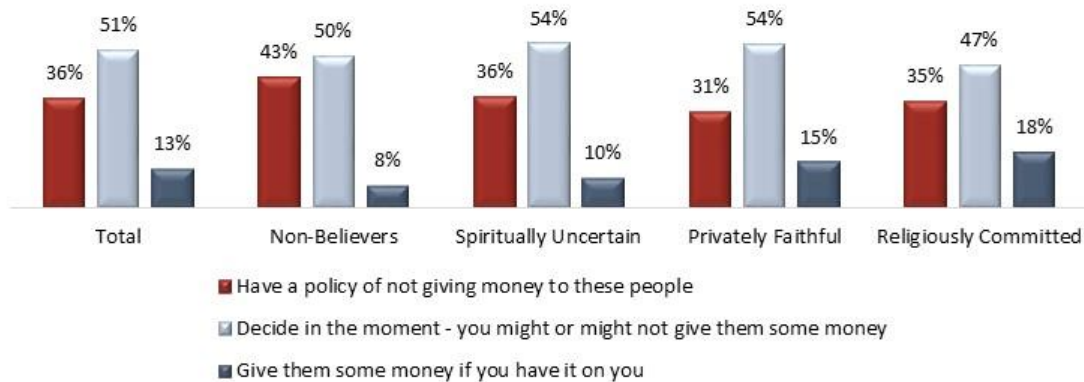


In a similar vein, Religiously Committed are more likely than members of other segments to say they give money to people “panhandling” on the street, though the percentage of Canadians who do this is considerably lower across all groups than the percentage who make formal charitable donations:

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Everyone has their own idea about how to respond to people "panhandling" or asking for money on the street. What is your own typical response to this?
Do you:

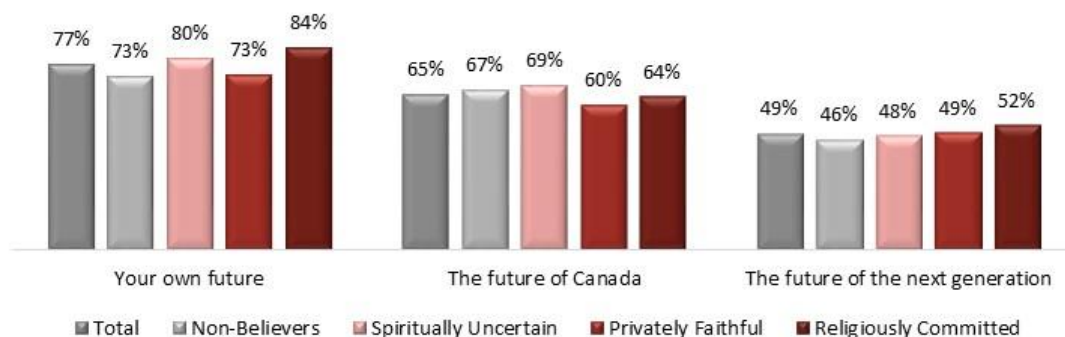


What about the future?

One's place on the spectrum of spirituality does not appear to have much effect on one's outlook for the future.

While those in the Religiously Committed group are most likely to say they are "very" or "moderately" optimistic about their own future, all four cohorts tend to be bullish on this measure. On other measures, differences between the groups are minor, as seen in the graph that follows:

Overall, would you say you are optimistic or pessimistic about each of the following? (Percentage saying "very" or "moderately" optimistic shown)

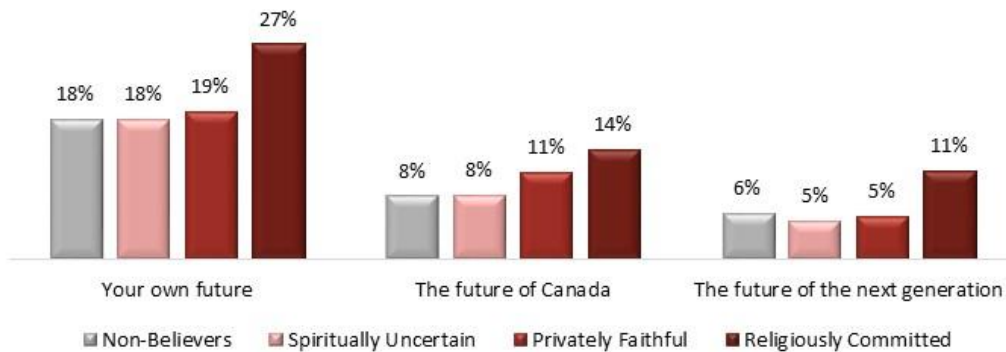


Notably, though they are not outliers on the question of overall optimism, Religiously Committed are decidedly more likely than members of other segments to say they are "very optimistic" about each measure, as seen in the following graph:

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Overall, would you say you are optimistic or pessimistic about each of the following? (Percentage saying "very optimistic" shown)



Coming up next

This report is the first installment in a year-long partnership between the Angus Reid Institute and Faith in Canada 150. Future releases will deal with the effects of one's position on the spectrum of spirituality on socio-political and moral beliefs, as well as Canadians' views about the role of faith and religious belief in shaping Canada's history and its potential to shape Canada's future.

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research organization established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

***Faith in Canada 150** exists to celebrate the role of faith in our life together during the anniversary celebrations in 2017. The interfaith initiative is committed to celebrating the role of faith in the formation of Canada's rich and diverse culture; reminding Canadians of the contributions religion has made to our common life; telling stories from our past that resonate through our present and future; encouraging diverse communities for faith to greater participation in and celebration of Canadian life; and building a network of leaders across public, private, religious, and secular institutions who seek to nurture the place of faith in our life together.*

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results comparing the four mindsets, [click here](#).

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