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Generation Z, Minority Millennials and Disaffiliation from Religious Communities: Not Belonging and the Cultural Cost of Unbelief

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Abstract

Why do America's youngest generation disaffiliate from religious communities? How do disaffiliated minority millennials and Generation Z (Gen Z) view religion? How do they navigate their largely religious ethnic communities? Previous research has examined the religiosity of communities of color. However, there is a rising trend of unbelief among Gen Z and minority millennials. This research project investigates the diversity of unbelief among minority millennials and Gen Z; specifically, Filipino-Americans, the second-largest Asian-American group; African-Americans; and Hispanic-Americans. Through 45 in-depth interviews, the following three themes emerge across the interviews: 1) Race and Religion: "Fitting In" and Cultural Hegemony or Cultural Incompatibility and Unbelief; 2) Problematic History, Race, and Religion: The Legacy of Slavery; 3) Cultural Cost of Unbelief: Negotiating Family. Gen Z and minority millennials express skepticism due to past histories related to the church and subsequently question whether their respective race "fits in" with their religion. Despite these criticisms, most minority millennials and Gen Z report themselves as spiritual. Culturally, they tend to highly regard their parents and grandparents, who tend to be deeply religious. Because of these intergenerational ties, they are unlikely to "come out" as unbelievers in the church. This paper also explores the secularization theory and finds support for the multiple secularities hypothesis.

There is a marked rise in religious disaffiliation: 20% of the American adult population is now categorized as "religious nones," or report having no formal religious ties. Moreover, according to the Pew Research Center (PRC), one in three are millennial, or under thirty years old (Funk and Smith 2012). Of all racial groups, Asian Americans have the highest rate of religious nones (Jeung, Jimenez, and Mar 2020).

Although little is known about unbelief, much less across race/ethnicity, a burgeoning growth of sociological studies currently addresses these lacunae in the literature. In their groundbreaking research, Chen and Park explored Asian American second-generation religiosity relative to the first generation: Drawing from the Pew Asian American Survey 2012, they observed a generational religious decline, and that "different trajectories of retention and religiosity" depend on the religion (Chen and Park, 2019: 666).

Specifically, with respect to their declining religiosity, the second generation, or children of immigrants, exhibited four pathways or patterns: 1) Stigmatized Minorities; 2) Minorities within a Majority; 3) Religious Assimilators; 4) Invisible Minorities. (Chen and Park 2019). Moreover, Filipinos in Detroit report an intergenerational divide between their elders, or first generation, and the second generation, or the children of Filipino immigrants, on how to lead, organize, and conduct church services (Manalang 2018). Consequently, due to this intergenerational divide and lack of "say" in the social structure and organization, some Filipino-American second-generation youth have left the church (Manalang 2018).

Most recently, sociologists have explored the intersections of race and nonreligion and argued that in addition to religion, nonreligion also intersects with race (Wilde and Glassman 2016; Yukich et al 2020; Chen and Park 2019). For instance, Wilde and Glassman's concept of "complex religion" proposes that structures of inequality like race, class, and gender deeply intertwine with religious group membership; therefore, an intersectional approach is necessary in order to more fully understand communities of color (Wilde and Glassman 2016; Wilde et al. 2016). Moreover, in Yukich and Edgell's recent edited volume Religion is Raced, the authors argue that social location plays a key role with respect to understanding racial dimensions of nonreligion: Religion and nonreligion provide "cultural repertoires that people draw on and act upon very differently depending on their social location" (2020: 7). Since "race is a central (perhaps *the* central) social location, race indelibly shapes how people draw on cultural repertoires and therefore shapes religious expression" (Yukich and Edgell 2020: 14). Overall, religious expression (and by extension, I argue nonreligion) is "fundamentally intersectional, constituted by cultural repertoires that are embraced by people in different ways depending on their social location (Yukich and Edgell 2020: 19). Along this vein of intersectional analysis, other research has explored gender

differences in nonreligion, noting that women and members of marginalized groups tend to avoid the most socially risky forms of nonreligion because nonreligion is socially risky, and atheism more so (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart 2017). Indeed, Americans socially stigmatize atheists due to moral concerns, and this distaste extends beyond to spiritual but not religious (SBNRs) and religious nones, or those who have no formal religious tied to a church (Edgell, Hartmann, Stewart, and Gerteis 2016). This social stigma is significant because recent research has found that major religious discrimination is large and widespread in American public schools: Muslims and atheists are significantly less likely to receive responsiveness from their respective schools as compared to other groups. In fact, simply revealing parents' atheist beliefs in the signature part of the email, without mentioning it in the text of emails, corresponds to a major, precipitous drop in responsiveness from school officials (Plaff, et al. 2020). Despite recent scholarly developments, the secularization processes of minority millennials and Gen Z who are increasingly leaving the church, especially in the United States, the most religious industrialized country in the world, remains understudied.

Through 45 in-depth interviews, this paper explores the lived experience of millennial and Gen Z "nones" in three minority groups: African-American, Filipino-American, and Hispanic-American. It examines: How do disaffiliated Gen Z and minority millennials view religion? How do they navigate within their largely religious ethnic communities?

Answers to these questions will help scholars understand how Gen Z and millennials of color navigate their unbelief, why they are leaving the church, and ultimately advance ethnic understandings of secularism in the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past 20 years, social scientific studies explored topics such as the impact of religion on social structures, family life, education, immigration, race/ethnicity, politics, intergenerational ties, and adolescence (Manalang 2018, 2016a, 2016b; 2013; Ammerman 1996; Arweck and Jackson 2016; Arweck and Nesbitt 2010; Cherry 2014; Hout and Fischer 2002; Smith and Denton 2005; Smith et al. 2002; Smith, Faris, and Denton 2004). This research largely highlighted the prosocial benefits of religion, for instance religious coping (Pargament 1997). Scholars also delineated the impact of religion on the integration of immigrants. Previous work has explored religiosity in a variety of sociological and political contexts. However, research on atheism has largely been neglected (Bullivant 2008; Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Pasquale 2007; Zuckerman 2009, 2008). Researchers have explored how religion has impacted major social institutions among communities of color. Yet, very few research studies have explored the diverse ways unbelief impacts communities of color. This study will fill this gap by exploring how unbelief and

religious disaffiliation impacts young people of color.

Recent research argues against a homogenous, Eurocentric perspective, putting into question the secularization thesis in the context of the 21st century (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012; Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Middell 2015). Casanova points out:

> "Such a recognition in turn should allow a less Euro-centric comparative analysis of patterns of differentiation and secularization in other civilizations and world religions, and more importantly the further recognition that with the world-historical process of globalization initiated by the European colonial expansion, all these processes [of secularization] everywhere are dynamically interrelated and mutually constituted" (2006 11).

This burgeoning research on religion and religious affiliation explores the range from religiosity to unbelief from a global-comparative perspective, advancing a nuanced approach of how to define "belonging" at large, suggesting a need to account for highly diverse experiences, like the conditions of globalization, social environments, and different histories toward secularity. Similarly, in contrast to "Euro-centric comparative analysis," the "multiple secularities" framework has been advanced, defined as:

> "…forms of distinction between the religious and other social domains (which are thereby marked as nonreligious), that are institutionalized and in part legitimized through guiding ideas… these secularities exhibit different structures of meaning that document a specific social history of conflict no less than the competing influence of other forms of secularity" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012: 886-887).

The multiple secularities theory, which draws from Eisenstadt's multiple modernities approach, explores atheism and argues that the analysis of the religious-secular divide cannot be reduced to institutional and structural dimensions (2002). Therefore, with respect to theorizing secularity, meanings differ across regions and circumstances (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). This paper will focus on communities of color and explore the meaning-making processes of how Gen Z and minority millennials conceptualize unbelief.

Scholars have also investigated notions of "believing without belonging," (Davie 1994; Smith, Faris, and Denton 2004). Overall, there is a marked rise in religious disaffiliation: 20% of the American adult population is now categorized as religious nones, or report having no formal religious ties. Moreover, one in three are millennial, or under thirty years old (Funk and Smith 2012). Since the dearth of research persists on unbelief as it relates to communities of color, this paper will also apply a multicultural comparative approach via in-depth interviews to advance the concept of "believing without belonging."

Pioneering research has challenged scholars to reconsider how we quantitatively interpret and analyze terms associated with unbelief like 'nones', 'no religion,' 'not religious,' 'nonreligious' (Lee 2014; Zurlo and Johnson 2016). Moreover, there's a move to enrich our understanding of unbelief and the processes of secularization at-large. This interdisciplinary approach goes beyond survey affiliation data: "Generic nonreligious categories are sometimes used to express substantive positions and public identities, and that these are diverse" (Lee 2014: 466). Scholars should move beyond narrow terms and engage a variety of disciplines and a range of empirical perspectives via an interdisciplinary approach (Arweck, Bullivant, and Lee 2013; Lee 2015; Bullivant and Lee 2012). Thus, this paper moves beyond survey affiliation data by engaging unbelief through in-depth interviews. Interviewees define unbelief on their own terms; therefore, this paper also advances the literature by moving beyond narrow terms of unbelief.

With respect to religious disaffiliation, "religious and non-religious attitudes do not emerge in a vacuum… they are framed by social norms that give them a positive or negative slant" (Wohlrab-Sahr and Kaden 2014). Other research has explored the intergenerational impact of unbelief among families (Manning 2015), which is elaborated upon in this paper. Moreover, religious skepticism, life stressors, sociodemographic characteristics and political attitudes on religious disaffiliation also serve as potential factors that are correlated with considering and disaffiliating from church (Vargas 2012).

There are a number of robust research studies and ethnographic fieldwork that have explored religious affiliation, and a growing body of research has advanced in the area of race/ethnicity and religion. Recent research has also turned its attention toward the rise of "religious nones." Still, less is known about the rise of Gen Z and minority millennials who are religious "nones." In particular, few research studies have explored Gen Z, millennials, and the role of race and culture on unbelief. Therefore, this paper will fill this lacuna in the literature by investigating Gen Z and millennials, and the role of race and culture on unbelief.

With respect to the minority groups interviewed in this study, Hispanic Americans are now the nation's largest ethnic or racial minority and comprise 17% of the nation's total population (USCB 2018). 85% of Hispanics affiliate with a religion (USRLS 2008).   Moreover, Filipino-Americans are the third-largest Asian American minority in the United States (Gallardo and Batalova 2020) and constitute the largest Filipino population outside the Philippines (Okamura 2016). Despite their demographic significance, and among the most diasporic groups in the world, Filipino-Americans remain largely understudied, especially in respect to unbelief.

African-Americans overall are largely associated with being among the most religious ethnicities in the United States: 87% of African-Americans report belonging to a religious group and are significantly more religious than the overall

American population on a wide range of measures, such as religion's importance in life, attendance at religious services, and frequency of prayer, (USRLS 2008).

Most of the research on ethnic/racial communities in the United States focuses on religiosity, as opposed to irreligiosity. However, unbelief matters among American racial/ethnic minorities: Slightly more than one-in-ten African-Americans (12%) report being religiously unaffiliated (USRLS 2008). 18% of Hispanics adults are unaffiliated (Martinez and Lipka 2014). Moreover, as many as 26% of U.S. Asians are unaffiliated (PRCSDTP 2012). We have no reason to believe that Filipino Gen Z and millennials are more religious than any other group (Manalang 2013).

This paper will apply Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt's insights on "multiple secularities" to minority millennials and show the complicated and diverse ways that disaffiliation plays out in the 21st century context. This research indicates that although minority millennials leave the church; overall, they still self-report that they believe in God. Even though they do not actively attend church, they also do not necessarily give up their beliefs.

Gen Z and minority millennials "believe without belonging" because they do not use theological arguments as a reason to leave the church. First, Gen Z and minority millennials do not see themselves as "fitting" into the church due to their race and culture. Second, the historically problematic ways in which religious authority and structure has engaged communities of color causes them to feel "uncomfortable" at church. While Gen Z and minority millennials disaffiliate from the church, they do not necessarily leave church permanently. This paper argues that there is a cultural cost to unbelief, which has not been deeply considered in previous scholarship with respect to unbelief. This paper will enrich the "multiple secularities" approach by illustrating *why* Gen Z and minority millennials are "believing without belonging," and also nuance previous research to show that beyond skepticism and theological disagreements, communities of color also consider other factors like family, culture, history, and race with respect to the *extent* that they disaffiliate from the church. Ultimately, this paper argues that the religion-secular divide is problematic and much more complex in daily life and lived practice when it comes to young people of color. Moreover, this research considers secularity from a post-colonial perspective and helps address "secularities and the question of diversity" (Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Middell 2015: 12) from the everyday lived experience of an understudied group.

Table 1: Demographics

	Generation Z	Millennial	Female	Male	Religion of Origin
Ethnicity					
Filipino- American	13	2	9	6	Christian-Catholic
African-American	13	2	10	5	Christian: 5 Southern Baptists; 2 Apostolic; 1 United Methodist; 1 Jehovah's Witness; 1 Catholic; 4 Christian (non-specified); 1 reported no religion of origin
Hispanic-American	8	7	7	8	Christian-Catholic
Totals	34	11	26	19	

METHODS

This research study consists of 45 in-depth interviews (15 interviews per racial/ethnic group) of African-American, Filipino-American, and Hispanic-American Gen Z and millennial "nones" within the state of Virginia, ranging in age from 18 to 34 years old. 34 interviewees categorized as Gen Z, while 11 fell under the category of Millennial. The researcher drew from the Pew Research Center's definition of Generation Z: Individuals born between 1997-2012 counted as Gen Z (Dimock 2019). Millennials are born between 1981-1997 (Dimock 2019).

Participants were largely recruited from the Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia region. The researcher posted Facebook notices regarding the study to multiple universities across the state. Even though targeting university students might lead to skewed data, interviewees with college experience may be more likely to fully articulate their views. African-American participants were primarily recruited from Norfolk State University (NSU), a historically black college/university. NSU also included the research study announcement and recruitment request on weekly campus e-mails.

Hampton Roads also contains the largest Filipino American community in the

Eastern United States (Bearinger 2016), and Filipino-Americans were predominantly recruited through the Philippine Cultural Center (PCC), the largest Filipino center in Virginia.

Hispanic participants were recruited from Northern Virginia. Nearly eight percent of the total Hispanic population resides in Virginia, and over 50% of Virginia's Hispanic population is located in the region (PRC 2016; Versel 2013).

Interviews covered the range of religiosity to unbelief. The researcher developed and adapted the in-depth interview guide from the Sloan Family Working Center's project (affiliated with the National Opinion Research Center, NORC), "Youth and Social Development" in order to investigate the role of unbelief and its impact on political attitudes and civic behavior, and how that might emanate transnationally (e.g., possible connections to the homeland). Since all interviewees grew up in the church, the researcher also investigated the religious histories and/or religious socialization of participants. The interview guides unraveled understandings of unbelief, and how race/culture/ethnicity may play a role in shaping unbelief. Moreover, interview questions explored the departure from religion to unbelief, or roughly when and why respective participants left the church.

The author first conducted in-depth interviews, and then carefully transcribed the interviews. Afterward, applying a "ground-up" approach, she read each interview and inferred that three patterns consistently emerged from the interviews. When themes emerged consistently either within or across all three ethnic groups, she determined that this relevant theme deemed worthy to report. Themes were dropped if they did not consistently emerge within or across the three ethnic groups interviewed. Moreover, in order to retain reliability and validity, the researcher conducted informal follow-up interviews in order to explicate and contextualize their unbelief. In other words, if in the informal interviews, the respondents replicated the proposed themes, then the author felt comfortable reporting the themes and explicated upon them. However, if when respondents elaborated on their unbelief departed greatly from the hypothesized themes, then the author dropped them. Or if in the follow-up interviews a new theme emerged altogether, then the author carefully re-read and listened to the transcribed and audio-recorded interviews to ensure that she did not miss a possible key theme. Ultimately, these three themes strongly and consistently emerged throughout the interviews. By focusing on how Gen Z and minority millennials perceive, interpret, and construct unbelief on their own terms, this research addresses the call for research and advances a "new understanding and explaining religion in the twenty-first century, one that looks at specifically historically and institutionally embedded religious repertoires from an intersectional perspective" (Yukich and Edgell 2020: 16).

Table 2

	Religious	Spiritual	Irreligious	Nonreligious	Agnostic	Atheist
Millennials & Gen Z						
Filipino-American	4	8	2	1	None reported	None reported
Hispanic-American	3	8	1	None reported	1	2
African-American	3	11	1	None reported	None reported	None reported
Total	10	27	4	1	1	2

RESULTS

Race and Religion: "Fitting In" and Cultural Hegemony or Cultural Incompatibility and Unbelief

Across all racial/ethnic groups, a small but notable number of participants report ambivalence towards "fitting in" to the church due to their cultural background. For instance, one Filipino Gen Z who attends the University of Virginia shared mixed feelings regarding his relationship to the Catholic campus ministry at his university. He discusses an article that circulated on campus about multiculturalism within student groups:

> "I recall an opinion article coming out about religious groups at our university. This article came out during a time when there's a lot of conversations going on about if certain groups should be more multicultural, if they should be more diverse, if they should include more voices in them. …/
>
> [In the article,] the claim that the author made was that religious groups don't need to be cultural. The idea is that if the religious culture is the center of what the group's ideals are and that's what you need to focus on. You don't really need to worry about the cultural background of that group."

The campus article posits that religious groups do not need to be multicultural due to the unifying values of their religion. The interviewee rejects this claim:

> "When considering Catholic life, I don't know the demographic background of it, but there's a significant amount of people who are cultural who consider themselves to be Catholic but not always engaging in the same way that some of our other white peers do. …/

> It got me thinking because I didn't think about it too much. Of Catholic Hoos[1] most of the people in that group were in fact white. I noticed that a lot of activities they engage in are not that appealing to me. I don't know if it's because of the group of people there or if they are generally uninteresting but I don't feel like engaged by them, especially at a cultural level. Given my Filipino background, I can't think of a good way for them to engage me in that way."

This Filipino Gen Z shared that the Catholic religious community does not appeal to him because he does not feel engaged by them, "especially at a cultural level." Fitting into his religious community poses a challenge for this millennial, and the relationship and strength of his religiosity subsequently weakens.

Another interviewee, a Hispanic millennial who left the church at age 25, shared that in addition to the skepticism to God, she had taken issue with "Jesus portrayed as white:"

> "…I would like to see this blonde haired blue eyed Jesus that my mother always told me I had to pray to…It confused me because my mother always wanted me to pray to somebody but can't show me any proof about this person…or anything. There's certain questions they tell you to go read in the bible and it doesn't answer anything for you. There's questions in there that you can't answer at all."

Not only was this Hispanic millennial skeptical of the efficacy of the prayer to God, she also sarcastically quipped that she "would like to see this blonde-haired blue-eyed Jesus that [her] mother told [her] to pray to." Not only does race play a role with respect to unbelief, as with the previously quoted Filipino Gen Z, so does culture:

> "The Catholic Church doesn't involve [culture] basically. I'm Puerto-Rican and Cuban. That type of religion and their beliefs are way different than the way that the Catholic Church deals with God."

Because of this skepticism with religion vis-à-vis race and culture, this respective Hispanic millennial reported that she is "not at all active." At 34, the oldest interviewee, she left the church nearly a decade ago.

Another young Hispanic millennial (24 years old) also expressed that with respect to church and fitting in, "felt a little bit out of place." Even though he was involved in the church since he was young, he lamented:

> "It almost seemed like we was out of place there because it seemed like most of the people there were successful or at least they put on that

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[1] Catholic Hoos is the name of a student Catholic organization at the University of Virginia. "Hoos" is an unofficial nickname for students and graduates of the university: https://catholichoos.org/

> front of you know success and then when we stepped into the church, into those events, we were kind of like the odd ball out, because we were in poverty, or you know my parents was divorced, my mama was left with four kids, plus most of the people in the church, they was white. And my mom and she had all of us, and she's a white woman, and we don't look too white. So we kind of stood out, and everybody just kind of turned their heads on us."

This Hispanic millennial shared that he felt like "the odd ball out" because his family did not fit the 'mold' of what he felt belonged in the church. Race also plays a role on his unbelief because he said that although his mother was white, he and his siblings "don't look too white." he felt that he and his siblings "kind of stood out." Subsequently, he felt that within the church setting, "everybody just kind of turned their heads on us." In the above quote, this Hispanic millennial also notes that he does not feel like he belongs to the church because he comes from a poor, divorced family. Therefore, not only does race play a role in his feeling of unbelief, but so does class. Ultimately, this respective Hispanic millennial left the church in the 5th grade and reports that he "does not believe in God." Overall, minority millennials and Gen Z report that they felt that their cultural background felt incompatible with their religiosity, which subsequently contributed to their unbelief.

Problematic History, Race, and Religion: The Legacy of Slavery

Gen Z and minority millennials' unbelief also partly reflects an indictment on how religion has treated communities of color in the past due to their racial background. Specifically, African-American Gen Z and millennials reported that they felt excluded from the church because of the racial history of slavery. African-American and Hispanic Gen Z and millennials report that the legacy of slavery is a major tension point that hinders their religious affiliation.

For instance, one Hispanic millennial, born in New York, shared that she grew up in a Spanish Catholic household:

> "… Europeans brought [Christianity] into Africans as they were slaves to practice something else. So it wasn't really their religion, it was Europeans' religion that they forced on to certain people."

As someone who left the church but still identifies as spiritual, this Hispanic millennial shares that:

> "people who are religious they should do research on their own history…. find gods or goddesses…Look for things that represent you. Don't follow something someone else said that doesn't look like you, that doesn't come from the place where you came from."

The legacy of slavery negatively impacts her perspective on religion, stating that it was "Europeans' religion" that was "forced" onto African Americans and Africans. Therefore, religion is viewed through a culturally hegemonic lens, which subsequently negatively impacted her sense of belonging to the church. As a result, this Hispanic millennial cautions others to "look for things that represent you" rather than follow "something someone else said" and "doesn't come from the place where you came from." Subsequently, the epistemic knowledge of religion is directly undermined by the fact that it came from a culturally hegemonic, Eurocentric perspective that she does not personally identify or connect with.

Compellingly, while this Hispanic millennial laments that Christianity was "Europeans' religion" that was "forced on to certain people;" African-American Gen Z and millennials report that this ambivalent history also explains why African-Americans are highly religious. The same culturally hegemonic institutions which limited African-Americans also served as a public sphere during the Civil Rights era, to mobilize and fight for freedom. In other words, African-American "older generations" also "revere in God" because this generation socially and politically organized in their respective religious communities. African American interviewees expressed a highly ambivalent relationship to the church. While Gen Z and minority millennials report that they left the church partly because of feeling they did not "fit in" due to race, culture, and the legacy of slavery, it is still not a 'black' and 'white' issue per se. To elucidate, one African American Gen Z shared that even though this problematic history is a source of angst among African American millennials, he explains why African Americans are still religious overall, and why African Americans tend to be the most religious among the millennials:

> "…I think in general the reason why African Americans I think are often seen as the more religious group in America is because, you know, we did come from slavery and we attributed our freedom in a lot of cases to God. And you know that was the only literature that really that we only ever heard ever being read to us or you know that we're allowed to maybe ever really visibly see because we were hindered. So I think definitely, you know, in being how we are so close, even still in generation, I think that's still you know, how people, especially the older generations, revere in God."

This aforementioned quote is in contrast to the Hispanic millennial who expressed negative views of slavery and religion. African-American Gen Z and millennials appear sympathetic toward religion. Another African-American millennial shared similarly:

> "Religion has always been a big part of the African-American community. Even going back to slavery times, even although people sometimes don't agree how it was presented to us. It's always been a big

part of our culture. And I feel like participating in religious activities does preserve the culture."

One explanation that may shed light on why black millennials tend to be more religious than other millennial groups is that religion is also embedded within African-American community and culture. As evidenced by this African-American millennial, while slavery is problematic, and while "people sometimes don't agree how [religion] was presented to [African-American community]," Christianity is still a "big part of [their] culture." Therefore, while some interviewees disaffiliate from the church due to slavery, others feel ambivalent about it, because the church is still a highly significant part of African-American community, especially among the older generations. As a result, Gen Z and minority millennials feel a lack of faith in religious authority and critically disengage from the church.

Cultural Cost of Unbelief: Negotiating Family

One-third of Gen Z and minority millennials consider and negotiate family with respect to their unbelief and, overall, share that religion is "very integrated in the family dynamic." Although Gen Z and minority millennials feel ambivalent about their relationship to the church, they do not regard unbelief as either atheistic or religious per se, but a more nuanced negotiation in their daily lives.

In fact, only 2 interviewees among all 45 interviewees self-reported as an atheist. Subsequently, overwhelmingly, Gen Z and minority millennials identify as spiritual. Gen Z and minority millennials are more likely to report themselves as spiritual rather than atheist also because family plays a role in their religiosity: Gen Z and minority millennials report that they consider their family approval as important and value their cultural communities; therefore, they attend church occasionally or when home to maintain their familial and cultural ties.

In other words, Gen Z and minority millennials pay a social, cultural, and psychological cost when they leave the church because their parents, grandparents, relatives, families, and even friends tend to be religious. Moreover, Gen Z and minority millennials describe there is a cultural cost to unbelief, which they may not be willing to pay. They do not necessarily want to be excluded from their families, friends, and respective cultural communities. For example, one Hispanic millennial cautioned the risk of leaving the church:

"Yes I know coming from Hispanic background, its usually strict Roman Catholic and if you don't necessarily believe that, you can be shunned from your own ethnic group I guess."

Thus even if this respective Hispanic millennial does not necessarily believe in God, she does not want to be "shunned" by her community.

Another Hispanic American millennial, who grew up as a "very strict" Southern Baptist, shared that at the height of her and her family's church involvement, "we would go about 5 times a week. We were pretty involved with everything with the religious aspect of it." She expressed:

> "I used to really enjoy going to church…I would enjoy it more when I was with my family…so I could get that if the whole family is on board you just stick with it, but if not, you don't."

Family plays a strong role in religious socialization. Even though this Hispanic millennial grew up "very religious," she now states: "I'm not personally very religious. I don't really believe in that stuff I guess? I don't agree with that stuff." Strikingly she still attends church "maybe once or twice a year." Therefore, family ties not only play a role with religious socialization, but also with respect to unbelief, as well.

Along a similar vein, another Hispanic millennial shared the role that family played with respect to their relationship with the church:

> "I don't really go to church anymore… It's more of a family thing you know. You have family there. Like it's just not necessarily looking at it with the mindset or verbiage of cult or rituals. It's just family that's it. And family helps each other out. No matter what."

The only reason why this Hispanic millennial attends church, in the rare case that he does, is because of his family. Rather than a sense of belonging to church or religious affiliation per se, he simply states it is "more of a family thing," rather than "looking at it with the mindset or verbiage of cult or rituals." Therefore, belonging without believing applies in this case because of family.

Filipino-American Gen Z and millennials were also very expressive about their conflicted relationship to the church and cited family as being one of the major reasons why they still attended, even if they did not normally attend church otherwise:

> "I'm only doing it out of care for my mom because she's very Catholic and so if I came out as not Catholic there would probably be heart attacks involved and all sorts of trouble that I don't really want to put her through. It's just easier to when I go home to go to church, Christmas go to church, tell her oh yeah I'm going to mass and praying and whatnot, you know, it just prevents trouble, also motivation is 80-90% I don't want her dying on me 10-20%. I'll get written out of the will if I don't stay."

A self-identified "irreligious" person who generally does not attend church, this Filipino-American Gen Z expressed major concern for his mother as the biggest reason why he attends church. Specifically, he fears that he will induce "heart attacks and all sorts of trouble that [he doesn't] really want to put her through."

Rather than going through the inconvenience of inciting "trouble," he would rather "prevent" any possibility of his mother "dying on [him]" as a result of his religious disaffiliation. Therefore, he attends on an as-needed basis, or when his mother is around. Another Filipino-American millennial begrudgingly attends church and cites: "I know I personally don't [attend church], but I do it because of my family." Specifically, she shares: "I'm involved in the religious community on Sundays when I'm home with my family so not during the school year. But whenever I am at home my mom will make us go to church on Sunday."

Family ties therefore plays a major role with respect to church attendance; when family is around, Filipino-American Gen Z and millennials tend to attend church more. When left to their own devices, Filipino-American Gen Z and millennials tend not to attend church (Manalang 2013). Another Filipino-American Gen Z shares similarly with respect to her involvement in the church:

> "Really, not involved at all. Like I said I kind of just go during days of obligation or holidays or even when I'm home because my parents still go to church regularly, so when I'm home for winter break or over the summer, like for those few months, I'll go every week. Like when I'm here by myself, I'm not really active in religious communities…personally I have a religious spiritual life, but outwardly I'm not really that involved at all….

In this case, this Filipino-American Gen Z identifies as believing without belonging to church. Her family plays a vital role with respect to church attendance—since her parents still attend church regularly, she also feels like attending church. Left to her own devices, she is "not really that involved at all…" One Filipino-American millennial shared that the only time that she attends church is when she is at home with her parents, and even then she "fake[s] illness to not go." For another Filipino-American millennial, he expressed his desire for family approval in his life. Specifically, with respect to religion:

> "I want to be able to make my parents proud in that kind of sense…. but the only thing that he said that he wanted me to do is to be a Catholic when I grew up…so it's also a way of appeasing my parents."

Like the other Filipino-American youth in this study, this Filipino-American youth value family approval. Therefore, even if he is not religious per se, he wants to honor his father's wish to be "Catholic" to appease his parents.

African-American Gen Z and millennials, who largely grew up in church, shared that their parents and grandparents played a big role in their religious socialization.

> "I think the biggest thing about religion is I used to always go to church because my grandma really wanted me there. I did like that bonding time with her…once she passed away, and I tried to go again on my own,

> it wasn't the same…and I felt it really wasn't a necessity. I've been to mosques, I've been to Catholic churches, I've been to nondenominational churches, I'm seeing pretty much the same things in all churches, like being a good person. I feel like that's one of the most important things to take away."

This African-American Catholic Gen Z attended church primarily because her grandmother brought her to church and enjoyed "bonding" with her. When her grandmother passed away, she did not feel like it was necessary to attend church anymore. As someone who officially disaffiliated from the church, this respective Gen Z is not so much concerned by religious belonging, per se but that the "most important" take-away from the church is in "being a good".

CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the following questions: How do disaffiliated Gen Z and minority millennials view religion? How do they navigate within their largely religious ethnic communities? Overall, across the interviews, three themes emerged with respect to minority millennial unbelief: 1) Race and Religion: "Fitting In" and Cultural Hegemony Or Cultural Incompatibility and Unbelief; 2) Problematic History, Race, and Religion: The Legacy of Slavery; 3) Cultural Cost of Unbelief: Negotiating Family.

Interviewees were categorized as: religious if they regularly attend church and believe in God; spiritual if they believe in God but infrequently attend church; irreligious if they expressed indifference to church and their relationship to God; atheist if they stated that they did not believe in God. One Filipina-American explicitly self-identified as "nonreligious" and was the only interviewee to do so.

Most minority Gen Z and millennials self-identify as spiritual rather than religious. They do not find religious practice and ritual as an important aspect of their daily lives. Among Filipino-American millennials, 4 were religious; 8 were spiritual; and 2 were irreligious, meaning that they reported being *neither* religious or spiritual. 1 Filipino-American reported themself as "nonreligious." Among Hispanic-American Gen Z and millennials, 3 were religious; 8 were spiritual; 1 irreligious; 1 agnostic; and 2 were identified as atheist. With respect to African-American Gen Z and millennials, 3 were religious; 11 were spiritual; and 1 was irreligious. There were no reported atheists among the African-American Gen Z and millennials. Interestingly, even though 4 African-American Gen Z and millennials reported that they have family members who serve as pastors, all of these respective respondents self-identified as spiritual but not religious. Overall, across the groups, 10 were religious, 27 were spiritual, 4 were irreligious, 1 was nonreligious, and 2 were atheists.

These research findings lend support to the multiple secularities hypothesis: Gen Z and minority millennials perceive, interpret, and construct unbelief not in a social vacuum per se, but alongside other social spheres of their life such as their families and cultural communities.

Race and Religion: "Fitting In" and Cultural Hegemony or Cultural Incompatibility and Unbelief

This research shows that Gen Z and minority millennials feel racially and culturally excluded from their church, and their religious identities are dissonant due to their racial and cultural difference. Hispanic and Filipino Gen Z and minority millennials implicitly view church and religious authority as a form of cultural hegemony: Religion as a form of epistemic knowledge is questioned and undermined largely because minority millennials feel that the respective religion that they have been socialized into drew largely from a Eurocentric perspective and did not consider their personal identities or cultural background. Not only was it not considered from a historical perspective, but some Gen Z and minority millennials also feel discomfort because they note that even in the current leadership and social structure of their religious communities, their cultural expressions of faith are excluded as part of religious practice and ritual. This critical critique has also been discussed among theologians who acknowledge that race and racism has broadly been overlooked in theology and they urge their fellow theologians to develop antiracist theologies to combat this issue (Cone 2004; King 1963a, 1963b; Niebuhr 1949; Bonhoeffer 1995). The findings in this paper lend support to other research demonstrating that religious identity does not necessarily provide ethnic communities with a sense of cultural belonging (Manalang 2018).

Problematic History, Race, and Religion: The Legacy of Slavery

This research also explored and nuanced racial tensions vis-à-vis church with respect to unbelief. Due to their ambivalent connection and recognition of their problematic histories, minority millennials critically engage race, colonial history, and slavery. In other words, Hispanic and Filipino Gen Z and minority millennials' increasing unbelief, or leaving the church, is partly contributed to by the fact that they do not necessarily see themselves as "fitting in" church due to this painful history. While Hispanic and Filipino Gen Z and millennials reported that they felt culturally excluded in church, in contradistinction, African-American Gen Z and millennials pointed out that Christianity is culturally embedded as a historically important component of identity and community. As one African-American Gen Z reported, Christianity is still a "big part of [African-American] culture."

Cultural Cost of Unbelief: Negotiating Family

Gen Z and minority millennials are clearly hesitant to officially disaffiliate from the church because they feel a cultural cost of unbelief vis-à-vis their families. In other words, just because they are skeptical of the church and state they do not believe the teachings of the church does not necessarily mean they will disidentify with the church either. Family acceptance and fear of disapproval also play a major role with respect to *how* Gen Z and minority millennials navigate unbelief. For example, one Filipino-American interviewee articulated his irreligiosity, but also his ambivalence in letting his mom know that he is irreligious. When asked if he considers himself religious or spiritual, he responds:

> Neither. Just not a religious or spiritual person. The subject is interesting, but I just can't bring myself to believe. I'm very tangible; I like tangible things. I'm not a very faithful person. You know? I can't really do a leap of faith.

He went on to share that the role of religion is "not present," but when he is home, he attends mass with his family. This compelling example highlights the cultural cost of unbelief in negotiating family with respect to unbelief: Although this Filipino-American Gen Z is irreligious, he still attends church to appease his family because of the cultural costs associated with leaving the church. He would rather avoid "all sorts of trouble" than induce a "heart attack" to his mother.

How do disaffiliated Gen Z and minority millennials view religion?

Disaffiliated Gen Z and minority millennials express an ambivalent relationship to religion. On one hand Gen Z and minority millennials do not necessarily officially affiliate to religious communities; on the other hand, they do not necessarily completely leave the church either. Gen Z and minority millennials share a complicated relationship to religion due to the painful legacy of slavery and colonial history.

How do Gen Z and minority millennials navigate between their religious and cultural communities?

Gen Z and minority millennials are keenly aware that religion matters to their families and cultural communities; therefore, they also will not "come out" completely as unbelievers or atheists per se. Culture, social justice and activism, as well as empowerment matter also to minority millennials. It is reasonable to assume that the motivations for *why* Gen Z and minority millennials are leaving the church are for different reasons than whites: Since whites tend to be the demographic majority in churches, they are far less likely to feel racially and culturally excluded.

Because Gen Z and minority millennials feel racially and culturally excluded, their sense of empowerment, and the ability to organize around social justice related issues of race for instance, are not necessarily seen as part and parcel of the political or social agenda of the church per se. Subsequently, it appears that these respective Gen Z and minority millennials are more easily able to organize and mobilize for human rights issues like immigration and equal rights more easily among their co-ethnic peers and via pan-ethnic solidarity *outside* of their religious communities and in secular organizations, like cultural campus groups, as will be explored in a forthcoming paper.

Multiple Secularities Thesis

Overall, this research lends support to the multiple secularities thesis. While there is a national trend of rising religious nones, this research suggests that there are culturally specific pathways toward unbelief. This research helps address the lacunae in the literature on culturally diverse manifestations of unbelief, especially as it relates to younger people: This fundamentally intersectional analysis accounts for the interviewees' "complex religion" and subsequently their social location. Indeed, Gen Z and minority millennials' unbelief are varied and embraced in different ways depending on their social location (Yukich and Edgell 2020).

More research should explore how unbelief manifests across more diverse contexts. The researcher would like to expand and advance analysis on culturally specific pathways toward unbelief.

Recently, sociologists of religion have begun to acknowledge "multiple, overlapping, conflicting, and changing structures of inequality and its impact on religious expression (McCall 2001: 14; Yukich and Edgell 2020). Considering the tragic George Floyd murder (and numerous similarly unjust deaths) and in juxtaposition with the Black Lives Matter movement, a secular social movement led largely by young African-Americans, I argue that social scientists should also deeply consider in their analyses the multiple and overlapping nonreligious identities among Gen Z and minority millennials specifically and communities of color at-large. In brief, research would benefit from exploring how nonreligious identity impacts claims-making in the public sphere among Gen Z and minority millennials.

Since this analysis is limited to Gen Z and minority millennials within the state of Virginia, further research should expand on this study and comparatively explore minority millennials and unbelief in states and countries to conduct cross national comparative analyses. Overall, Gen Z and minority millennials do not regard their relationship to the church as either atheistic or religious per se, but as a more nuanced negotiation in their daily lives.

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