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CENTER FOR BIBLE ENGAGEMENT

Americans' Views of Spiritual Growth & Maturity
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Americans' Views of Spiritual Growth and Maturity

Despite the general view that the United States is becoming a more secular country each year, the fact remains that religion and spirituality are still important areas of concern for most Americans. The vast majority indicates they prefer a particular religion and that they believe there is a personal God (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Most Americans also behave in ways which suggest they have at least some interest in spiritual matters. For example, more than half of adults attend church or synagogue at least once a month (Newport, 2007). Research by the Center for Bible Engagement (CBE) shows that about two out of three Americans say that they pray (Cole & Ovwigho, 2009).

In this analysis, we attempt to dig deeper into Americans' spiritual beliefs, beyond just their involvement in particular behaviors. Specifically, we consider how they define "spiritual" and "spiritual maturity", how they view their own spiritual maturity, and what factors they believe facilitate or inhibit their spiritual growth.

Methods

Data for this study are drawn from an internet-based survey of a random sample of 1,000 Americans (n = 581 females and 419 males) between the ages of 13 and 70. The sample was stratified by age with 200 respondents from each of these five age groups: 13 to 17; 18 to 24; 25 to 34; 35 to 49; and 50 to 70. Sample members are predominantly Caucasian (76.7%). Half have never married and 31.4% were married at the time of the survey.

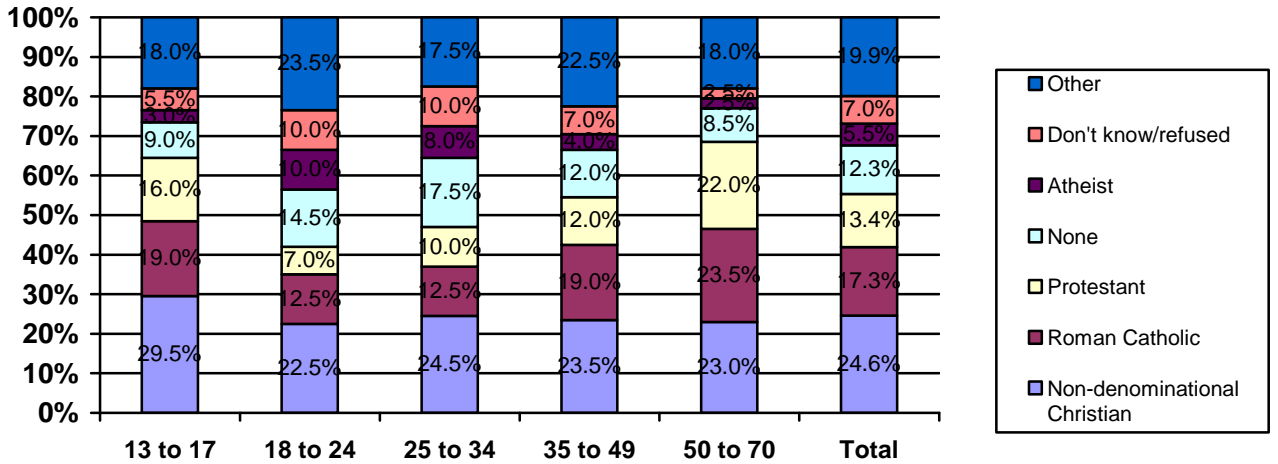
Basic Spiritual Beliefs

Religious Preferences

As shown in Figure 1, most Americans identify themselves with a Christian faith. Non-denominational Christian was the most common faith endorsed, followed by Roman Catholic and then Protestant. Slightly more than one-tenth indicated that they have no religious preference and only 5.5% described themselves as atheist.

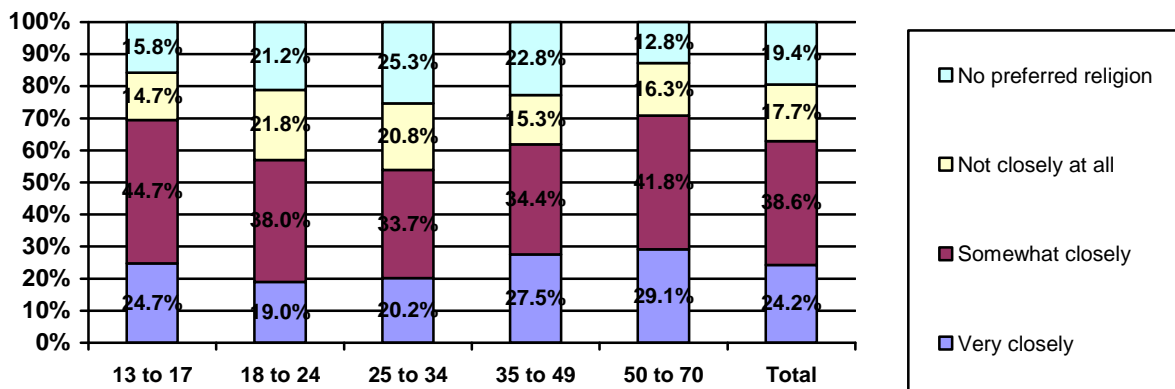
Religious preference varies significantly across the age groups. In general, the youngest (13 to 17 years old) and oldest (50 to 70 years old) respondents were the most likely to express a Christian religious preference. Young adults (18 to 34 years old) were the most likely to say that they have no preference, are atheist, or don't know/refused to identify a preferred religion.

Figure 1. Religious Preference.



Most Americans claim to follow their preferred religion closely. As shown in Figure 2, one-fourth (24.2%) say they do so “very closely”, while two-fifths (38.6%) indicate they follow “somewhat closely”. Again we find differences across age groups with the youngest and oldest respondents being more likely to say they follow closely. More than two out of five young adults said that they either do not have a preferred religion or they do not follow theirs closely at all.

Figure 2. How Closely Do You Follow Your Preferred Religion?

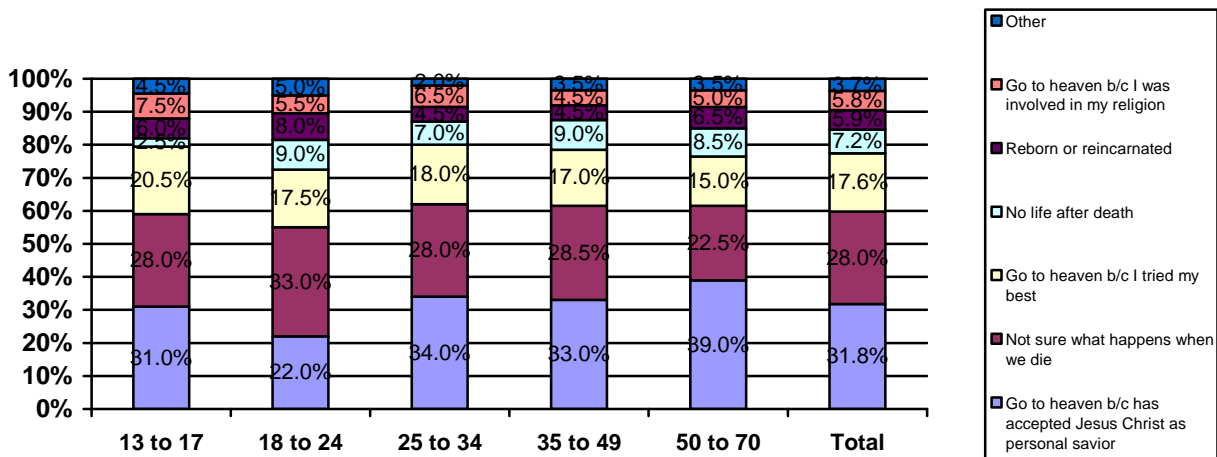


What happens when we die?

One of the most important concerns that prompts spiritual reflection is considering one’s own mortality (Kroll, 2007). Two out of three Americans (63.2%) believe in a spiritual existence that goes beyond their physical death. In fact, only 12.8% disagree there is such an existence, with the remainder saying that they don’t know.

So what do people believe will happen when they die? Figure 3, following, displays their answers. Three out of ten (31.8%) meet our definition of Christ-follower in that they believe “I will go to heaven because I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior.” Almost the same percentage (28.0%) is not sure what happens when we die. An additional one-fifth (17.6%) believe that they will go to heaven because they have tried their best to live the way God desires.

Figure 3. What happens when you die?



What does it mean to be spiritual?

It’s not uncommon today to have someone tell you that they are not religious, but they are “spiritual.” What does it mean to be spiritual? Given that dictionaries list at least 12 different definitions for the word, it’s not surprising to find a wide variety of answers given by survey respondents. As shown in Figure 4, the most common definition of spiritual is “belief” or “faith”. Some said simply belief or faith, while others specified belief or faith in God, a higher power, something beyond the physical world, etc.

TO BELIEVE IN A POWER GREATER THAN MYSELF.

to believe in God or some other being or thing that controls things

follow your beliefs

To have belief, understanding, and connection beyond existence.

spiritual means having faith, faith gives hope what is life without hope it's a living hell

have faith

believe in god and have faith and be happy

Nearly one-third of responses mentioned God specifically. These respondents defined spiritual as believing in, having faith in, or having a relationship with God.

to believe in god, and attend church on your own. Not because you have to.

accept gods

To believe in God and Jesus and to try to do what they want me to do.

My belief in God and his teachings

to have god in your life

To be receptive to the things of God's Spirit.

Slightly more than one-tenth of respondents used the term "Higher Power" in their definition of spiritual. A similar percentage indicated that spiritual means belief in something beyond the physical world.

believing in a higher being

Think and pray to a Higher Being.

I think that when someone is spiritual, they believe in a higher power, whether it be Christ or some other deity.

being cognizant of a power greater than myself who can provide me with the guidance I need if I will ask and asking daily.

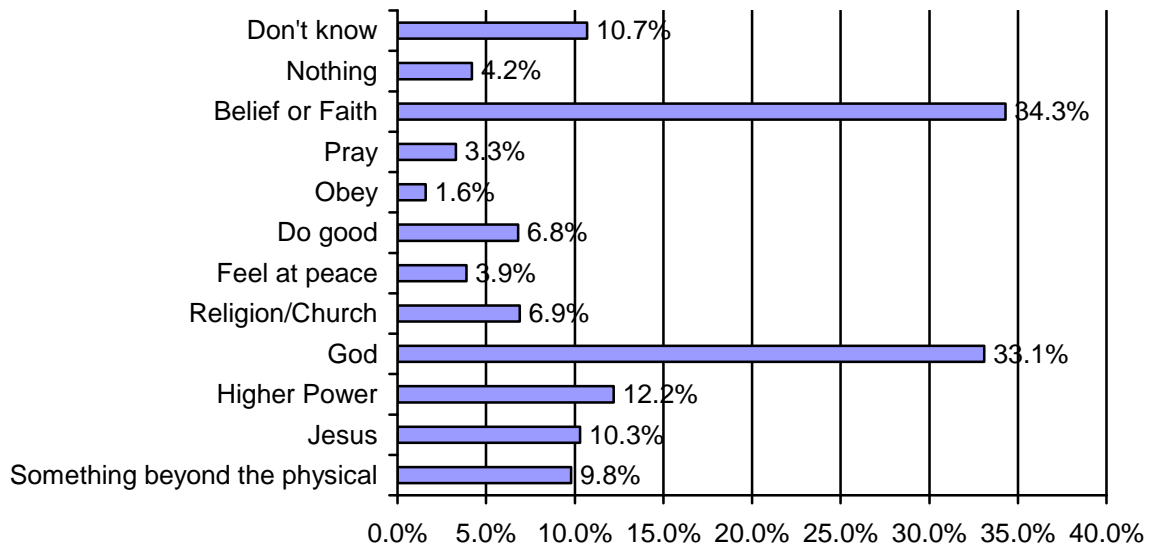
in tune with the cosmic world around you

To believe you are part of the whole

To believe in things that cannot be seen.

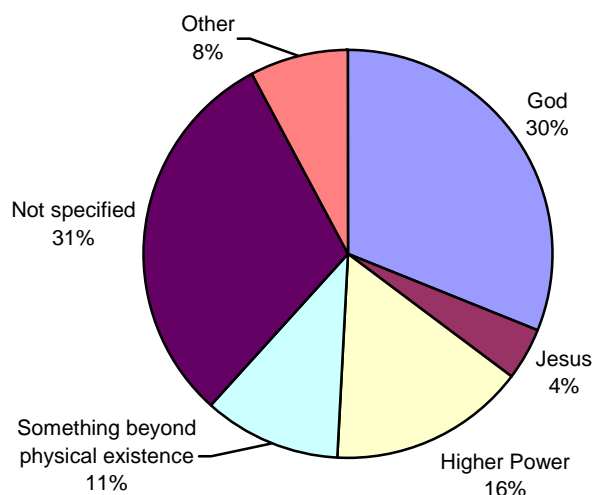
Surprisingly, few felt that involvement in religion or church defines spirituality. Other definitions included obeying God's rules, doing good for others and/or animals, praying, or feeling at peace with yourself.

Figure 4. How Do You Define "Spiritual"?



Expanding on the spiritual definitions presented in Figure 4, the data in Figure 5 focuses specifically on the one-third of responses that reflected belief or faith. What that faith or belief is in varies widely. Respondents were equally likely to specify that spiritual means belief or faith in God (30%) as they were to not specify at all the object of faith (31%).

Figure 5. Spiritual Means Belief or Faith In...



How Americans define spirituality varies significantly by age. For example, half of teens include a reference to God in their definition, compared to only one-fifth of 18 to 24 year olds and about one-third of those over the age of 24. Young adults (18 to 24 year olds) are more likely than any other age group to say spiritual means nothing or involvement in church/religion.

What does it mean to be spiritually mature?

Recent studies have suggested that many Christians and pastors have difficulty defining spiritual growth and maturity (Barna, 2009; CBE, 2009). Given a lack of consensus on the terms among the Christian community, it's not surprising to find considerable diversity among the definitions given by teens and adults from various faith backgrounds. As shown in Figure 6, more than one-fifth of responses provided only a vague definition of spiritual maturity, such as:

to know what you do or say

you grow with God

to be mature in thoughts words and deeds

experience with God

strong faith

The next most common response is that being spiritually mature means that you are firm in your spiritual beliefs. Definitions in this category generally indicated that the spiritually mature person knows what and why he or she believes. For example:

knowing what you believe in spiritually, not something you can see, but believe in it anyhow

Really believe in, and understand, your beliefs.

Having a full understanding of the religion, being able to connect and integrate it into you life and knowing right from wrong.

To be unwavering in your fidelity to your religion

Knowledge of the Bible or following what the Bible says ranked as the third most common definition of spiritual maturity. Similarly, living morally or following God's will was also viewed as indicating spiritual maturity.

they have lived as God instructed...all their life

KNOWING, AND UNDERSTANDING AND LIVING A GODLY LIFE.

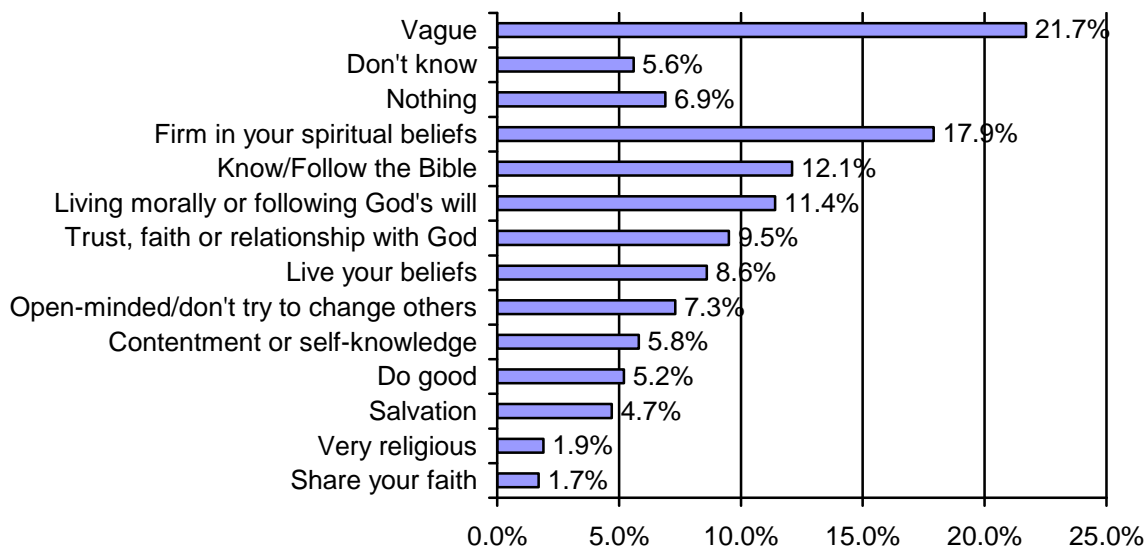
Being spiritually mature means that one is constantly striving to obey all of the commandments and teachings of the Bible and leading the life that Jesus expects of us.

It means following the rules of the Bible and being able to joyfully share the messages in the Bible with others.

to be as learned as possible in the word of god and to share my belief with others but not push it on them .

Notably many of the themes evident in Americans' definitions of spiritual maturity reflect only the very beginning stages of what Christians view as spiritual growth. For example, some responses defined spiritual maturity as having a relationship with God (9.5%) or having accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior (4.7%).

Figure 6. Definitions of Spiritual Maturity.

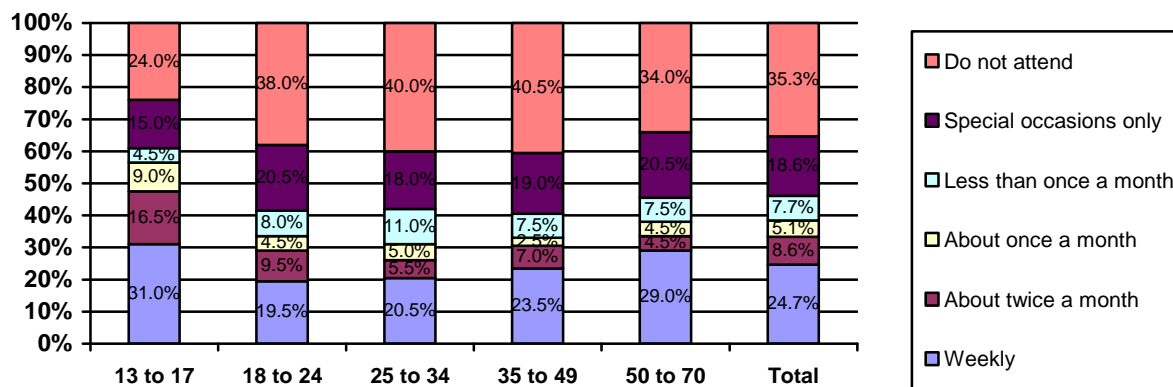


The only statistically significant difference across age groups was in defining spiritual maturity as knowing what you believe. Generally, younger respondents (under age 35) are more likely to define spiritual maturity in this way than are older respondents.

Spiritual Practices

Despite the fact that most teens and adults in our survey identify with the Christian faith, only a minority attends religious services regularly. As shown in Figure 7, about one fourth attends church weekly and an additional 13.7% attends once or twice a month. These overall percentages, however, mask significant differences across age groups. Teens report the most frequent church attendance, with almost three out of five participating at least once a month. Adults under the age of 50 are the least likely to attend, with two out of five saying that they do not attend at all.

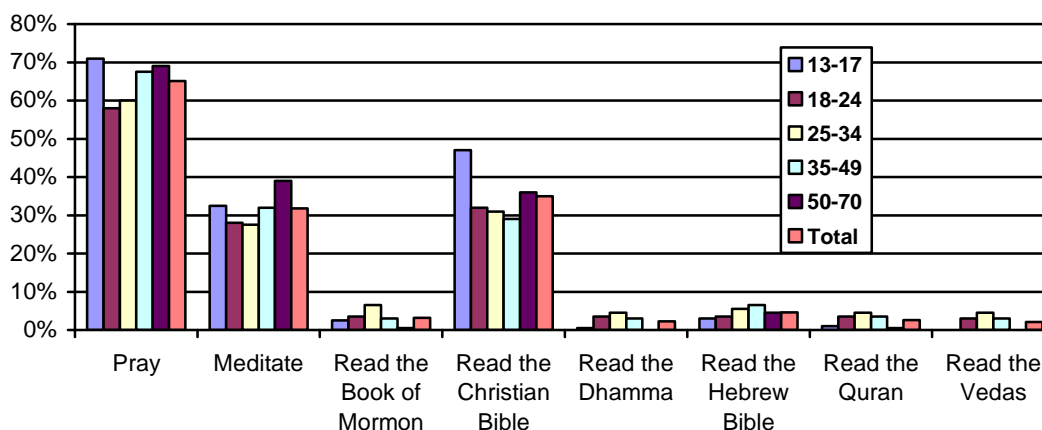
Figure 7. How often do you attend church?



In addition to attending religious services, people engage in a variety of other practices to nurture their spiritual growth including prayer, meditation, and reading religious texts. Figure 8 presents data on American teens' and adults' spiritual practices in the previous week. The majority prayed at least once in the past week. A significant minority read or listened to the Christian Bible and/or meditated. Very few read a text from one of the world's major religions, other than the Christian Bible.

Involvement in spiritual practices varies significantly by age. Consistent with findings presented elsewhere in this report, young adults (ages 18 to 34) are the least likely to engage in spiritual activities such as praying, reading the Bible, or meditating. However, it is important to note that even among this group, a majority say that they prayed at least once in the past week.

Figure 8. Percent engaging in this activity at all in the last week.



Perceptions of Spiritual Growth

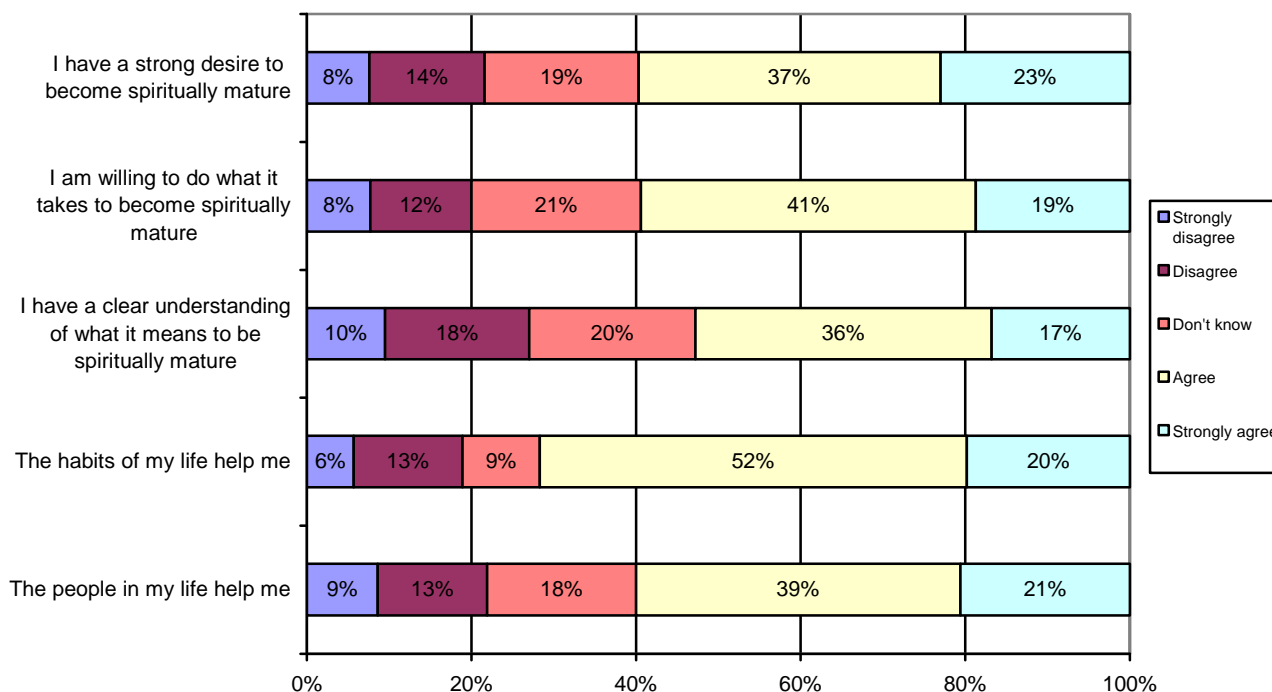
In this last section, we explore what American teens and adults think about their own spiritual growth. Specifically, we examine how much they desire to grow spiritually, what factors help them grow and what factors hinder growth.

Figure 10 presents data on the five-item Spiritual Growth Readiness Scale (Cronbach's alpha = .867). Most people indicate a strong desire and a willingness to do what it takes to grow spiritually.

Half of respondents agree or strongly agree that they have a clear understanding of what it means to grow spiritually. Although still a majority, this is much lower than the agreement rates for the other Spiritual Growth Readiness questions. In fact, consistent with the findings presented earlier from the open-ended question asking how to define spiritual maturity, one-fifth of Americans answered "don't know" to the understanding question. More than one quarter disagreed or strongly disagreed that they have a clear understanding, the highest disagreement rate among all of the Spiritual Growth Readiness questions.

The last two bars in Figure 10 show that most people believe that the habits and people in their lives help them to become spiritually mature. Habits generally received greater endorsement with almost three-fourths of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Figure 9. Spiritual Growth Readiness Scale.

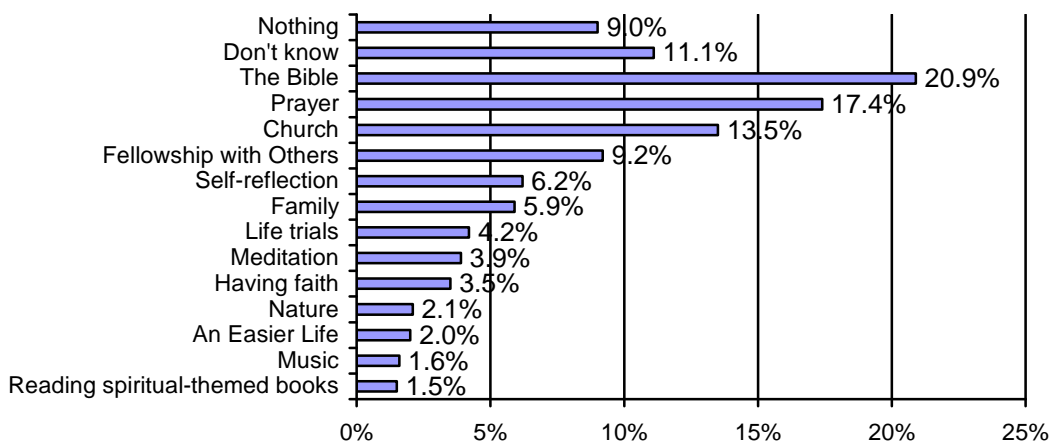


In general, there are few statistically significant differences among the age groups on these questions assessing readiness for spiritual growth. The only differences are found in respondents' perceptions of how helpful their habits and the people in their lives are. Adults (over the age of 18) are more likely than teens to disagree that the people in their lives and their habits help them become spiritually mature.

What helps you grow spiritually?

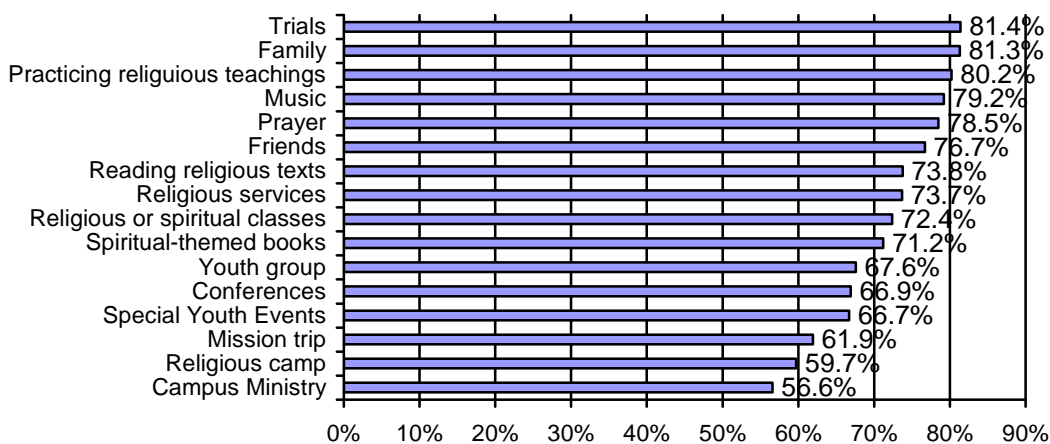
When asked what helps them grow towards spiritual maturity, adults and teens gave a wide variety of answers. As shown in Figure 11, respondents named the Bible most commonly, accounting for one-fifth of all responses. Prayer ranked second, followed by church attendance or involvement. The remaining responses, each accounting for less than one-tenth of responses, ranged from self-reflection and meditation to an easier life with fewer worries.

Figure 10. What helps you grow spiritually?



We also asked respondents directly about how helpful specific activities or resources have been to them. Figure 12 shows the percentage of respondents who agreed an activity or resource was helpful among those who participated in it or used it at some point. Regardless of the specific resource or activity considered, the majority say that it was at least somewhat helpful.¹

Figure 11. Percent Who Say This Activity/Resource Has Helped Them Grow Spiritually.



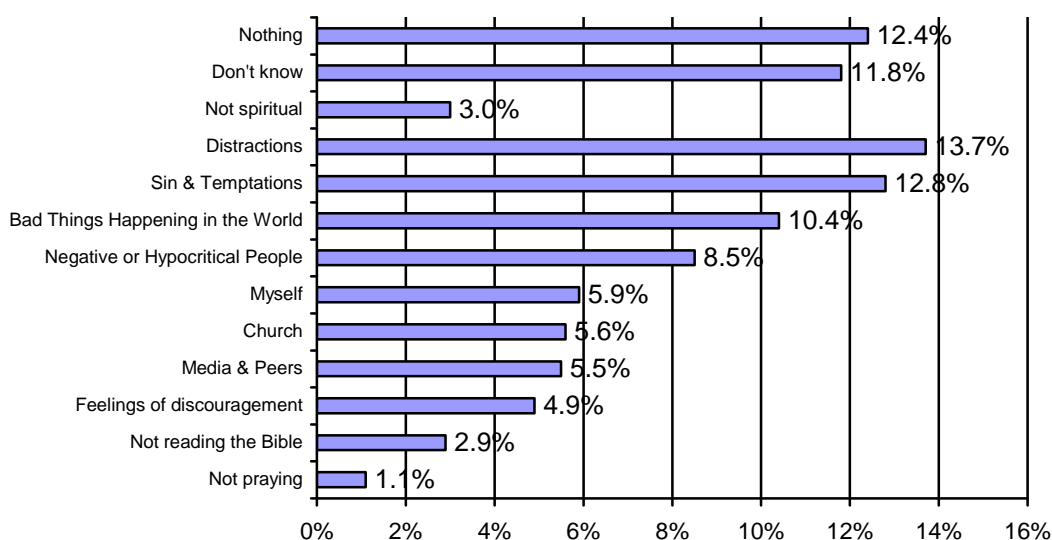
¹ Appendix A displays differences across age groups in their perception of how helpful difference resources and activities are in helping them grow spiritually.

What hinders you from growing spiritually?

Most models of spiritual growth acknowledge that the process is not always linear and that setbacks and stalls are common. In our study, one out of two people said that they experience frequent setbacks in their spiritual growth. In fact, respondents indicated that they had felt stalled in their spiritual growth for an average of 3.5 months in the previous year.

What types of things hinder spiritual growth? Figure 14 shows that distractions of the world, sin and temptations, and bad things happening in the world in general or to the respondent in particular were the most common hindrances mentioned. Negative or hypocritical people were also mentioned in about one-tenth of responses. Curiously, not reading the Bible was mentioned infrequently, despite the fact that two out of three had not done so at all and nine out of ten did not on most days of the previous week.

Figure 12. What hinders you from growing spiritually?



Conclusions

In this report, we have explored the spiritual beliefs and practices of American teens and adults. Even in today's society, most identify at least nominally with Christianity and feel they follow it at least somewhat closely. Three out of ten claim to have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. However, the same number has still not answered one of the great questions of life: What happens when we die?

Survey responses indicate a lack of consensus on what the terms “spiritual” and “spiritual maturity” mean. Most commonly, spiritual was described as faith, belief, and/or a relationship with God. Even among those who describe spiritual as belief, the object of that faith varies. In fact, seven out of 10 people who said belief or faith left the object unspecified or said something other than God.

One out of three teens and adults say they don't know what spiritual maturity means, believe it means nothing, or provide only a very vague definition. Being firm in your spiritual beliefs was the next most common definition, although being open-minded was also an indication of spiritual maturity among a significant minority. Also noteworthy is the finding that many of the definitions given for spiritual maturity reflect what are only the beginning stages of faith from a Christian perspective.

Prayer is by far the most common spiritual practice among American teens and adults, with the majority in all age groups praying at least once a week. Meditation and reading the Christian Bible are the second most common practices. However, only one out of three people read or listened to the Bible at all in the previous week.

Responses to the Spiritual Growth Readiness Scale indicate that most people feel a strong desire to become spiritually mature and a willingness to do what it takes. They also believe the habits and people in their lives help them grow spiritually. A slim majority says that they have a clear understanding of what spiritual maturity is. However, 48% either do not know if they have such an understanding or do not think they do. This finding is consistent with the fact that one-third had difficulty defining the concept in the open-ended questions.

Ironically, given the low rates of Bible engagement among respondents, the Bible is named most commonly as what helps them grow spiritually. Distractions of the world, sin & temptation, and evil happenings in the world are the most common-named hindrances to spiritual growth. Together these findings suggest that an effective Bible engagement strategy should build on people's expressed desires to grow spiritually by increasing their understanding of what spiritual growth and maturity are, of what the Bible is and what it is for. In particular, emphasizing that the Bible provides answers to the big questions of life, including what happens when we die and why there is evil in the world, would help to meet a common need and to address one of the most common hindrances to spiritual growth.

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Appendix A. Percent of Respondents Rating This Resource or Activity As Helpful in Their Spiritual Growth by Age.

13 to 17		18 to 24		25 to 34		35 to 49		50 to 70	
Family	87.9%	Trials	85.5%	Music	82.7%	Family	78.7%	Trials	79.6%
Prayer	87.3%	Family	84.4%	Practicing religious teachings	79.6%	Trials	78.5%	Practicing religious teachings	79.4%
Practicing religious teachings	86.1%	Music	81.3%	Prayer	78.7%	Prayer	78.0%	Friends	78.1%
Trials	85.5%	Practicing religious teachings	79.5%	Trials	78.3%	Music	77.3%	Family	77.7%
Special Youth Events	84.6%	Friends	75.8%	Family	77.7%	Practicing religious teachings	76.0%	Music	75.7%
Religious or spiritual classes	83.1%	Prayer	74.1%	Friends	77.0%	Friends	75.8%	Prayer	74.3%
Reading religious texts	83.0%	Conferences	73.0%	Reading religious texts	75.0%	Reading religious texts	73.8%	Religious services	72.7%
Youth group	81.8%	Mission trips	71.8%	Spiritual-themed books	72.5%	Spiritual-themed books	73.5%	Reading religious text	69.3%
Religious services	81.6%	Religious services	71.3%	Religious services	71.4%	Religious or spiritual classes	73.0%	Religious or spiritual classes	66.9%
Music	79.7%	Religious or spiritual classes	70.5%	Special youth event	69.7%	Conferences	71.4%	Spiritual-themed books	66.5%
Spiritual-themed books	77.5%	Youth group	70.0%	Conferences	68.8%	Religious services	71.2%	Conferences	55.1%
Friends	76.8%	Special youth events	69.0%	Religious or spiritual classes	68.4%	Youth group	65.6%	Youth group	53.7%
Religious camp	72.0%	Reading religious texts	68.3%	Youth group	67.2%	Special Youth Event	61.3%	Special youth event	47.5%
Mission trip	71.4%	Spiritual-themed books	66.4%	Mission trips	61.2%	Religious camp	60.9%	Mission trips	46.8%
Conferences	68.3%	Religious camp	65.5%	Campus ministry	59.2%	Mission trip	60.0%	Religious camp	43.0%
Campus Ministry	65.1%	Campus ministry	64.8%	Religious camp	58.7%	Campus Ministry	57.3%	Campus ministry	38.7%