

Spirituality in a changing world: Half say faith is ‘important’ to how they consider society’s problems

Those who say faith is ‘very important’ to their decision-making have a different moral code than most

May 17, 2017 – How does a person’s religious belief – or lack thereof – affect the way they think about social issues?

New data from the Angus Reid Institute and [Faith in Canada 150](#) suggests that faith plays an important role in the way most Canadians see themselves and respond to challenges in their lives. Likewise, roughly half say their personal faith is important in shaping their approach to the issues of the day.

The data, resulting from a year-long partnership between the two organizations, identifies a “[Spectrum of Spirituality](#)” in which Canadians are sorted into four categories based on their religious beliefs and behaviours.

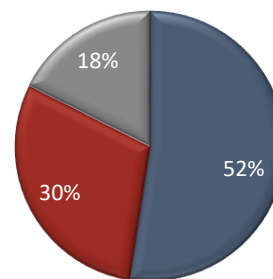
This report looks at how one’s position on the spectrum can affect one’s personal and political beliefs.

Those who fall toward the more highly religious side of the scale – especially the “Religiously Committed” group – are more likely to say their faith plays a “very important” role in the way they interact with the world. These individuals also tend to harbour opinions on social and moral questions that diverge from the national average in significant ways.

Key Findings:

- A slight majority of Canadians say that personal faith and religious belief is important to them in terms of defining their personal identity (54%), overcoming challenges in life (59%) and affecting how they view problems in their society (52%)

How would you describe the importance of your own personal faith and/or religious beliefs in terms of how you think about public issues and the problems facing society?



- Very/Quite important
- Not that/Not at all important
- Not asked (Respondent has no personal faith/religion)

METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from March 29 – April 3, 2017, among a representative randomized sample of 2,006 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was conducted in partnership with [Faith in Canada 150](#), and paid for jointly by ARI and Faith in Canada 150. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

- Two-thirds of Canadians (66%) say that there are absolute rights and wrongs that apply equally to all of humanity, while one-third (34%) say morality can be relative between people and cultures, with different answers for different groups
- The different segments of the Spectrum of Spirituality diverge significantly in their opinions on questions of altruism and sexual morality, while differences are less pronounced on many other social questions

Index:

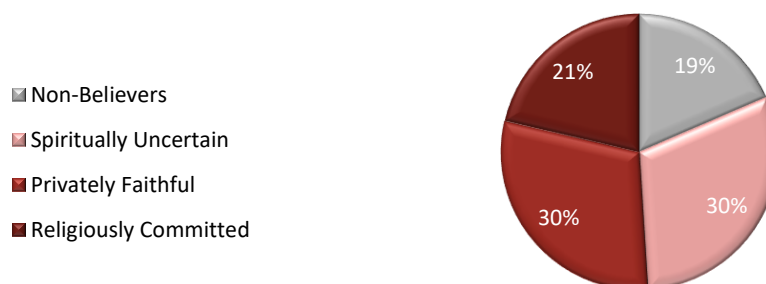
- **PART 1: How important is faith to Canadians' self-perception?**
 - The Spectrum of Spirituality revisited
 - The role of religion in Canadians' lives
- **PART 2: Religiosity shapes personal approaches to morality**
 - Sin and salvation
 - Absolutism or relativism?
- **PART 3: How Canadians answer moral questions**
 - Altruism versus self-interest
 - Massive differences on questions of sexual morality
 - Lesser differences on other social issues

PART 1: How important is faith to Canadians' self-perception?

The Spectrum of Spirituality revisited

As [explained in greater detail](#) in the first report stemming from this research, Canadians' religious and spiritual beliefs fall along a continuum, which can be split into four broad segments: The **Non-Believers** (19% of the total population), the **Spiritually Uncertain** (30%), the **Privately Faithful** (30%), and the **Religiously Committed** (21%):

Four Canadian mindsets on religion:



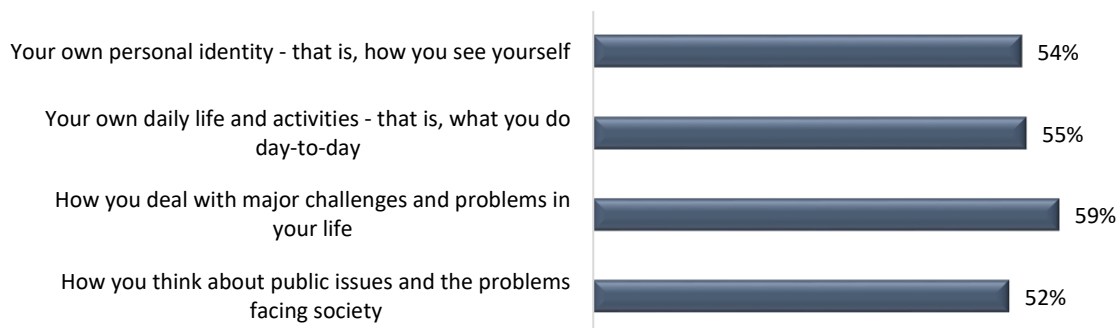
There is a diversity of opinion within each of these groups, but each segment's members tend to have a similar overall orientation toward faith and religion:

- The **Non-Believers**, as their name implies, do not believe in God or a higher power, and do not participate in any religious or spiritual tradition at all. These Canadians skew younger and more male than the general population
- The **Spiritually Uncertain** group includes people who don't necessarily reject the existence of God or a higher power, but express some skepticism. They differ from the Non-Believers by maintaining some semblance of spirituality in their lives, but they place relatively low importance on this facet of their existence. This segment is balanced along gender lines, but still slightly younger than the country as a whole
- Nearly all of the **Privately Faithful** believe in God or a higher power, but they tend to be much less active in organized religious practice, preferring instead to live a more private spiritual life. These Canadians are more likely to be over age 35, and more likely to be women
- The **Religiously Committed** all express belief in God and tend to participate regularly in religious activities and organized religion. Members of this group skew even older and more female than the Privately Faithful

The role of religion in Canadians' lives

Overall, slightly more than half of all Canadians say their own personal faith or religious beliefs play a "very important" or "quite important" part in shaping their identities, day-to-day activities, and approach to issues in Canadian society today:

How would you describe the importance of your own personal faith and/or religious beliefs in terms of: (Those saying "very important" or "quite important" shown)



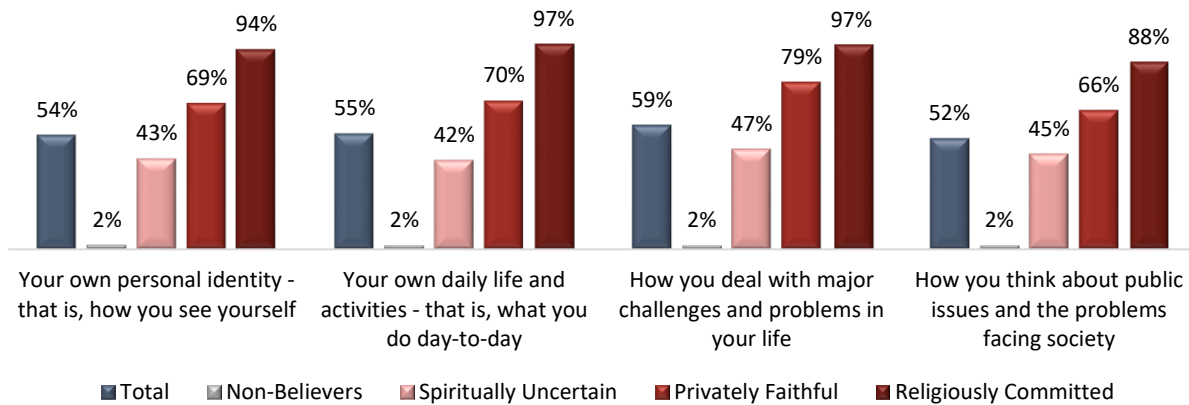
Women and older Canadians are especially likely to say their faith is “very” or “quite important” to each of these aspects of their lives. Older women lead the way in terms of viewing faith as important, as seen in the table that follows.

How would you describe the importance of your own personal faith and/or religious beliefs in terms of: (Those saying “very” or “quite important” shown)							
	Total	Age + Gender					
		Men 18 - 34	Men 35 - 54	Men 55+	Women 18 - 34	Women 35 - 54	Women 55+
Your own personal identity - that is, how you see yourself	54%	44%	51%	50%	53%	57%	66%
Your own daily life and activities - that is, what you do day-to-day	55%	45%	49%	55%	52%	57%	67%
How you deal with major challenges and problems in your life	59%	47%	55%	59%	56%	63%	69%
How you think about public issues and the problems facing society	52%	43%	48%	55%	49%	56%	61%

Respondents who say they do not believe in God and never have any feelings of spirituality – who make up 95 per cent of the Non-Believers category – were not asked this question about the importance of their personal faith, because they were determined not to have one.

That said, a few members of the Non-Believers group and all members of the other segments were asked this question, and their responses follow a distinct pattern. Those professing higher levels of religious engagement also say that their faith is an important consideration in their approach to these aspects of life, while those who fall lower on the spectrum of spirituality also assign less importance to faith:

**How would you describe the importance of your own personal faith and/or religious beliefs in terms of:
("very important" or "quite important" shown)**



Moreover, though large numbers of Spiritually Uncertain and Privately Faithful respondents say faith is important on each of these questions, relatively few of them go so far as to say it is “very important.” On this measure, the Religiously Committed stand out even further.

The following table summarizes this sizeable difference between “quite important” and “very important” responses across segments:

How would you describe the importance of your own personal faith and/or religious beliefs in terms of:								
	Spectrum of Spirituality							
	Non-Believers		Spiritually Uncertain		Privately Faithful		Religiously Committed	
	Quite Important	Very Important	Quite Important	Very Important	Quite Important	Very Important	Quite Important	Very Important
Your own personal identity - that is, how you see yourself	1%	1%	34%	9%	51%	18%	33%	61%
Your own daily life and activities - that is, what you do day-to-day	1%	1%	34%	8%	56%	14%	41%	56%
How you deal with major challenges and problems in your life	0%	1%	37%	11%	60%	19%	32%	65%
How you think about public issues and the problems facing society	1%	1%	37%	8%	55%	11%	43%	46%

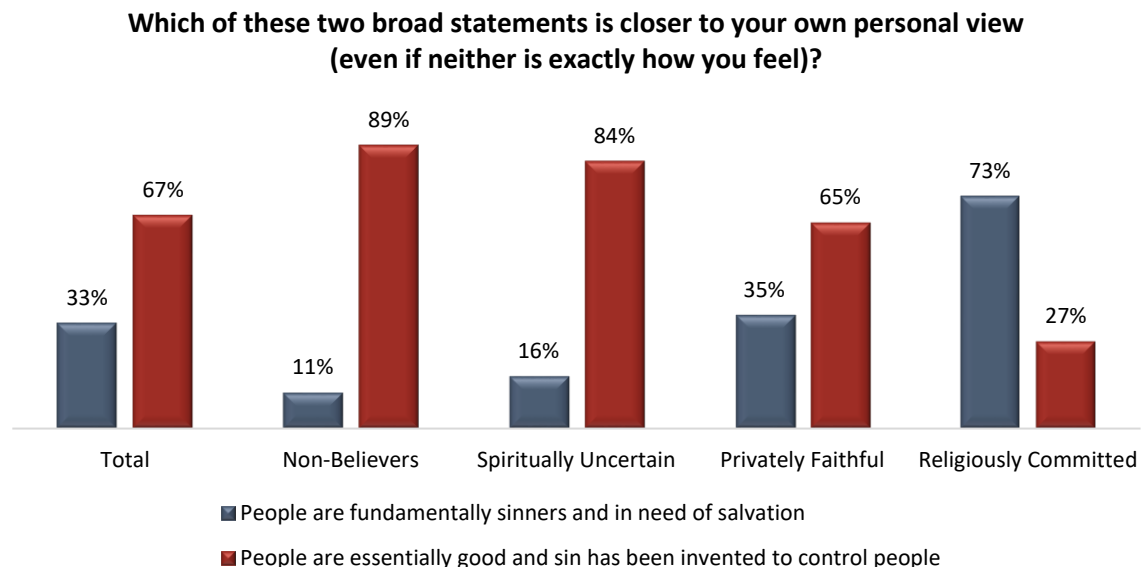
PART 2: Religiosity shapes personal approach to morality

As seen in the previous section, Canadians of different ages, genders, and locations on the Spectrum of Spirituality place varying levels of importance on the role of religion in their lives. These variations correspond with differences in the way these groups approach and think about questions of morality.

To measure these differences, the Angus Reid Institute asked Canadians to respond to a series of “face-offs” – pairs of opposing statements of which respondents are asked to choose the one closest to their own personal view.

Sin and salvation

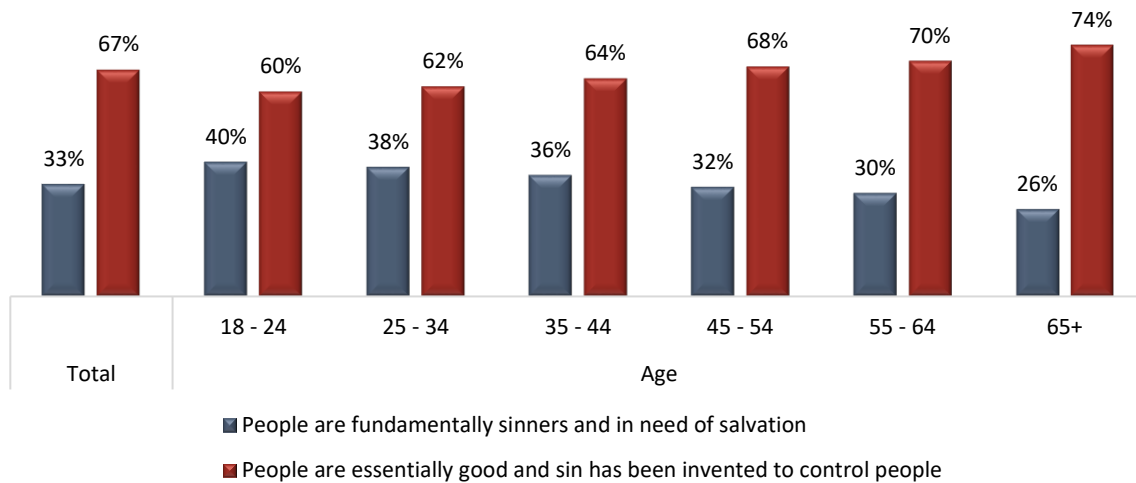
The first face-off dealt with the explicitly religious concept of “sin” as a framework for human behaviour. Overall, two-thirds of Canadians (67%) choose “people are essentially good and sin has been invented to control people” over “people are fundamentally sinners and in need of salvation” (chosen by 33%). As the following graph illustrates, however, those at the far end of the spectrum of spirituality feel differently:



Interestingly, though the more religious segments of the Canadian population tend to be older, those who embrace this Christian concept of sin as part of their worldview actually tend to be younger respondents, not older ones.

That said, majorities of all age groups choose the “people are essentially good” option, as seen in the following graph:

**Which of these two broad statements is closer to your own personal view
(even if neither is exactly how you feel)?**



Absolutism or relativism?

Two other face-offs asked respondents about their overall approaches to morality outside of a religious context. Each of these questions dealt with the opposing concepts of relativism (the idea that right and wrong are malleable concepts that change depending on the situation) and absolutism (the idea that right and wrong are universal, unchanging concepts).

Asked about this idea in the abstract, 68 per cent of Canadians choose “what is right and wrong depends on the circumstances” over “things are almost always either right or wrong” (chosen by 32%).

When asked a relativism versus absolutism question in the context of different cultures, however, Canadians lean toward the absolute: Two-thirds (66%) choose “there are universal rights and wrongs that apply to the whole human race” over “answers to moral questions will be different for different cultures and people” (chosen by 34%).

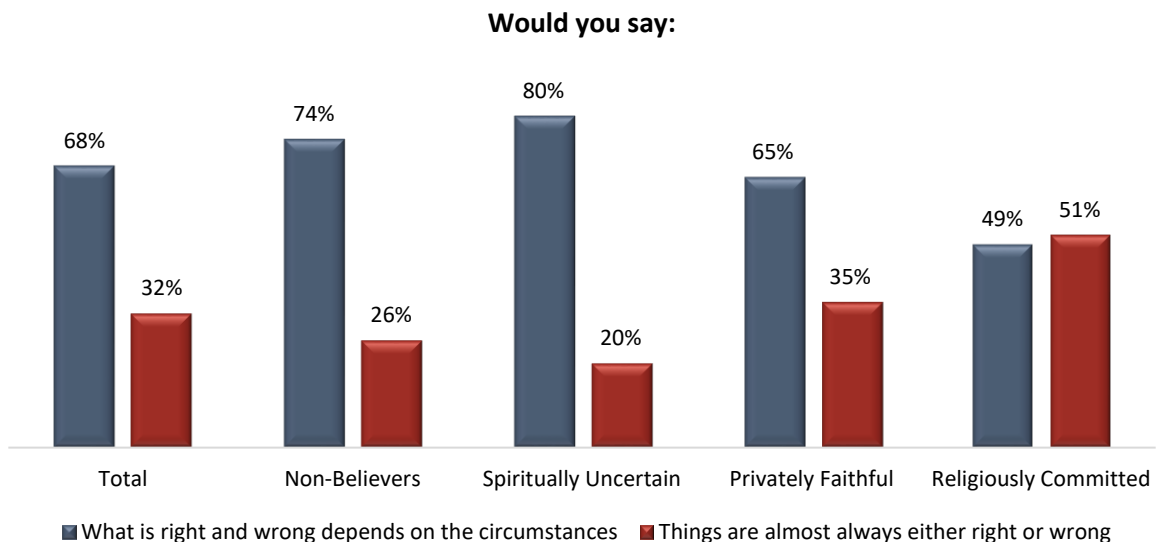
What to make of this apparent contradiction? In broad terms, it suggests that many Canadians approach morality from a position of personal relativism, against a backdrop of a few key absolutes, which they believe are true for all of humanity.

The youngest Canadians (those ages 18 – 24) are more likely to choose the relativist option on both of these questions, though they follow the pattern of the general population in terms of which option they prefer in each face-off, as seen in the following table:

Relativism vs. absolutism face-offs by age:

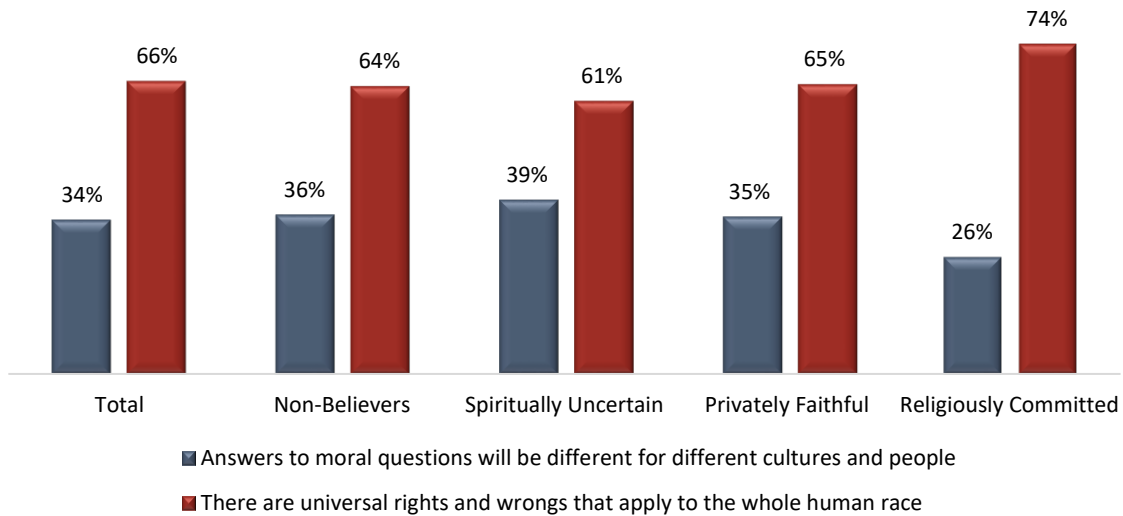
	Total	Age					
		18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65+
Would you say:							
Answers to moral questions will be different for different cultures and people	34%	45%	34%	37%	33%	29%	32%
There are universal rights and wrongs that apply to the whole human race	66%	55%	66%	63%	67%	71%	68%
Would you say:							
What is right and wrong depends on the circumstances	68%	83%	70%	71%	65%	57%	65%
Things are almost always either right or wrong	32%	17%	30%	29%	35%	43%	35%

Those in the Religiously Committed segment of the Spectrum of Spirituality are also outliers on these two questions, but they lean in the direction of absolutism, not relativism, as seen in the graphs that follow.



On the cultural relativism question, the differences between the segments are less pronounced, but the Religiously Committed still distinguish themselves as particularly committed to the “universal rights and wrongs” option:

Would you say:



PART 3: How Canadians answer moral questions

The differences in how Canadians of varying levels of faith consider moral questions leads directly to differences in their responses to those questions.

Angus Reid Institute researchers asked a series of face-off questions related to social and moral issues in Canada today, and found significant differences between the most- and least-religious segments of the Spectrum of Spirituality.

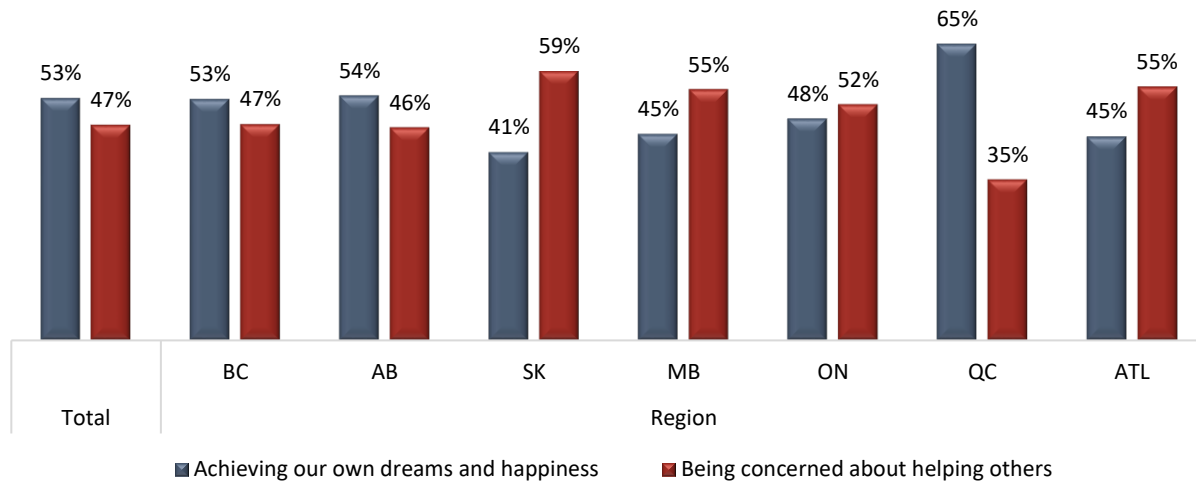
Altruism versus self-interest

Asked a broad face-off about the best way to live life, Canadians are divided. A slight majority (53%) say achieving one's own dreams and happiness is the best course of action, while nearly as many (47%) prefer to focus on "being concerned about helping others."

This question yields significant regional variation, with nearly two-in-three Quebec residents (65%) choosing the achieving dreams option, while residents of next-door Ontario lean slightly toward concern for others (52%).

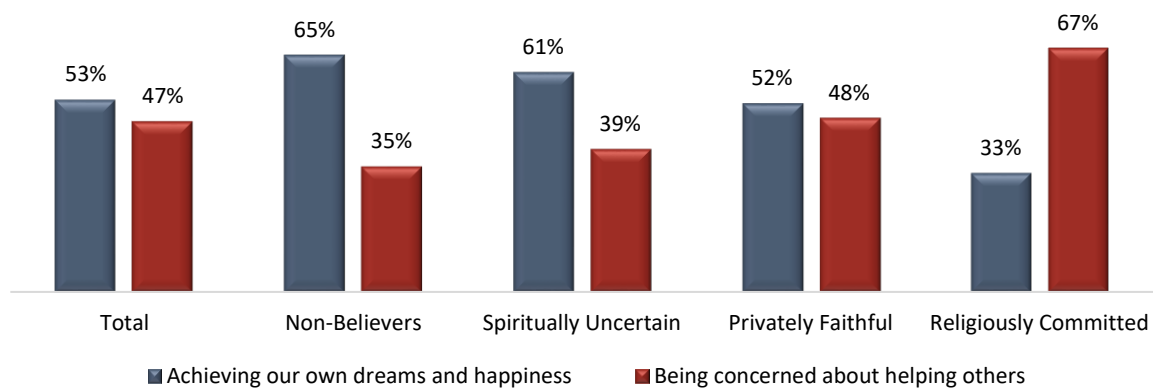
Among predominantly English-speaking regions of the country, only British Columbia and Alberta opt for pursuing one's own happiness, as seen in the following graph:

What is the best way to live life? Should we be more focused on:



The Privately Faithful struggle with this question, their responses roughly mirroring the national total. Other groups, however, tend to fall somewhat strongly on one side or the other, with the more moral-absolutist Religiously Committed preferring the “help others” option, and the less religiously inclined, more moral-relativist groups favouring a focus on personal happiness:

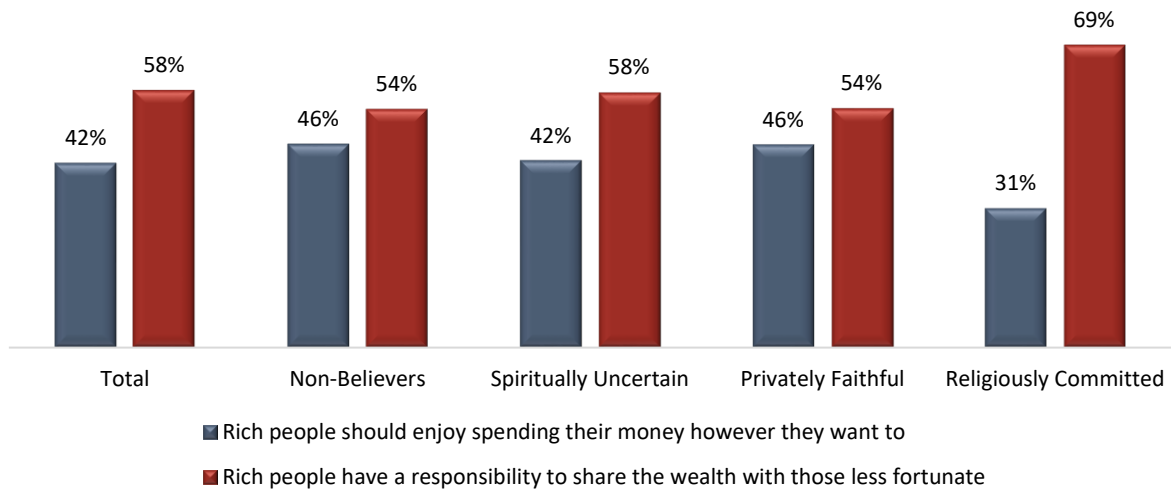
What is the best way to live life? Should we be more focused on:



Likewise, asked what sort of responsibility the wealthy have to share their personal wealth with society as a whole, 58 per cent of Canadians choose the statement “rich people have a responsibility to share the wealth with those less fortunate” over “rich people should enjoy spending their money however they want to” (42%).

There is more agreement across segments on this question, but the Religiously Committed again set themselves apart in their professed desire for altruism:

What is closer to your view?



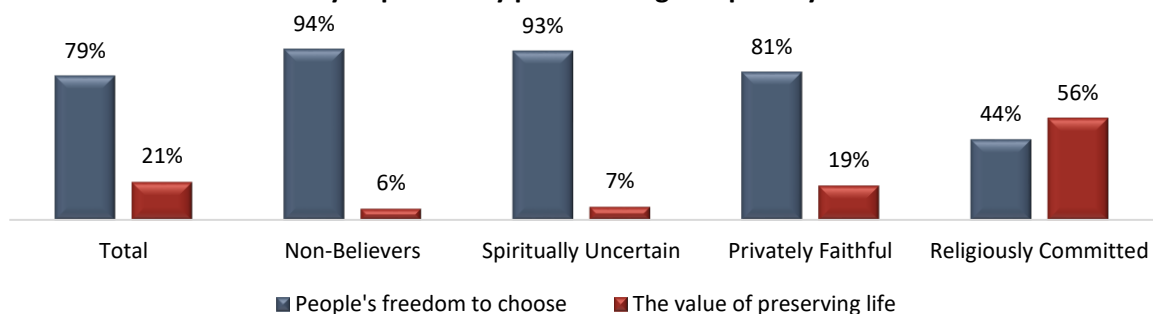
This expression among the Religiously Committed toward helping others – especially the poor – reflects the traditional focus of many faith communities on fostering social good.

Massive differences on questions of sexual morality

The Religiously Committed also diverge significantly from the general population on several other questions that reflect another traditional focus of faith communities: social conservatism.

Nowhere is this clearer than in a face-off question about abortion and physician-assisted suicide. Canadians overwhelmingly prioritize “people’s freedom to choose” (79%) over “the value of preserving life” (21%) when it comes to these two issues, but those in the Religiously Committed group feel very differently, as seen in the following graph:

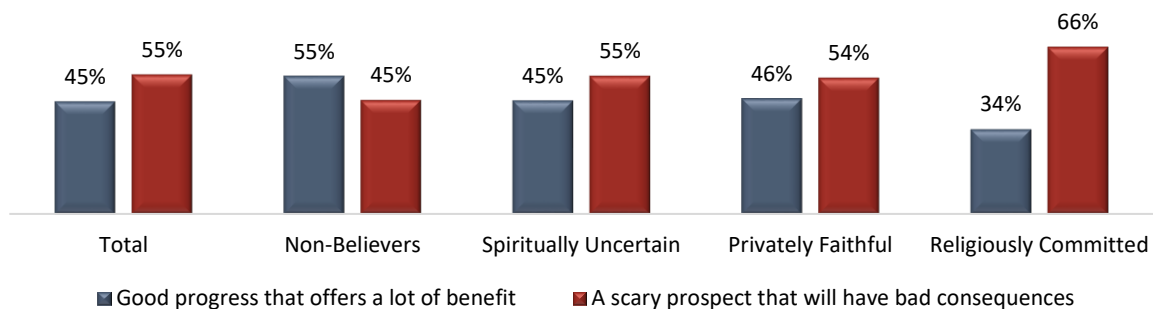
When it comes to issues like abortion and doctor-assisted death, where do you personally place the highest priority?



Similarly, the Religiously Committed are the most likely to say the prospect of people being able to choose the genetic characteristics of their babies is a “scary” one “that will have bad consequences,” rather than “good progress that offers a lot of benefit,” as seen in the graph that follows.

That said, this most religious group has much more company on this question. A majority of Canadians (55%) choose the “scary prospect” option on this question, and the Non-Believers are the only segment in which a majority of respondents lean the other way:

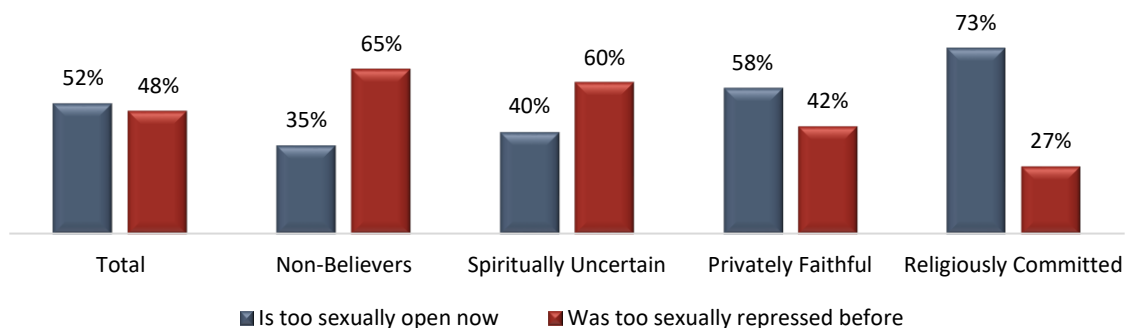
Science is getting to the point where people will be able to make some choices about their baby's characteristics before it is born. Do you consider this to be:



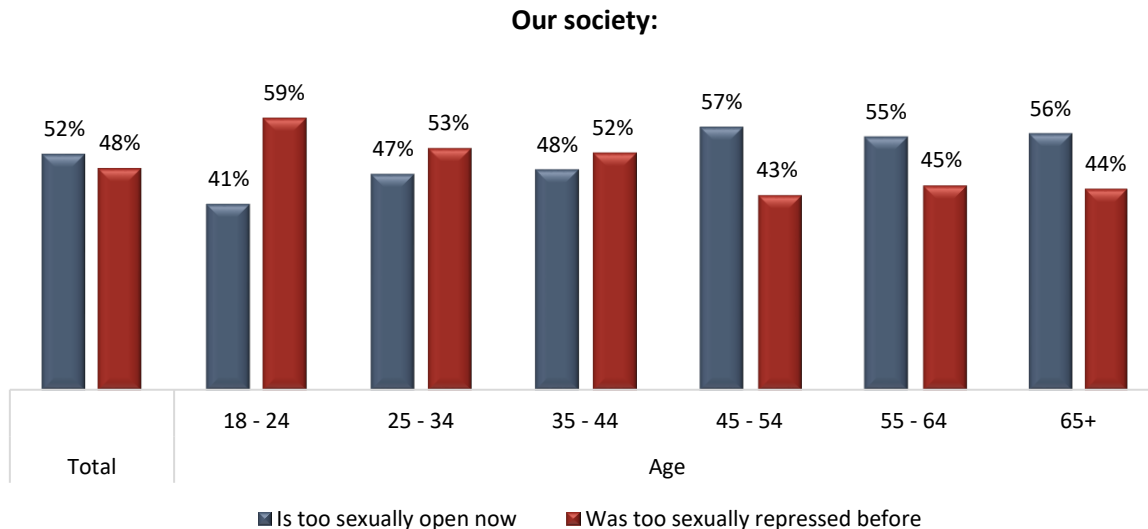
Canadians are similarly divided on the overall question of sex and sexuality in society today. Some 52 per cent say society “is too sexually open today,” while the rest (48%) say it “was too sexually repressed before.”

Here, respondents’ positions on the Spectrum of Spirituality are highly correlated with their response. The Religiously Committed are, again, the group that feels most strongly, but the Non-Believers lean almost as heavily in the opposite direction. This is also one of the only face-offs on which the two middle groups have distinct mindsets, rather than agreeing with one another:

Our society:

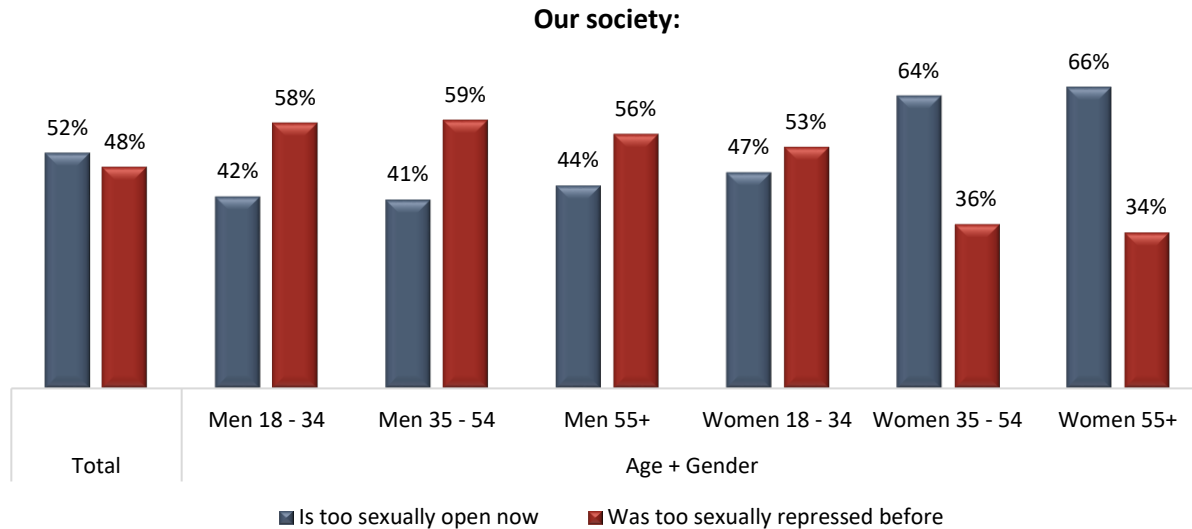


This question also yields notable differences along demographic lines – particularly age and gender. Most Canadians under age 45 say society was too sexually repressed before, while most of those ages 45 and older say today’s society is too sexually open:



Men and women offer divergent opinions on this question, with 60 per cent of women, overall, believing society is too sexually open now, while nearly as many men (57%) choose the opposite response.

Looking at gendered responses by age, however, it becomes clear that women ages 35 and older are driving this difference. Women under age 35 are divided on the question overall, but lean toward the belief that society was too repressed in the past, a view held by men of all ages:



Lesser differences on other social issues

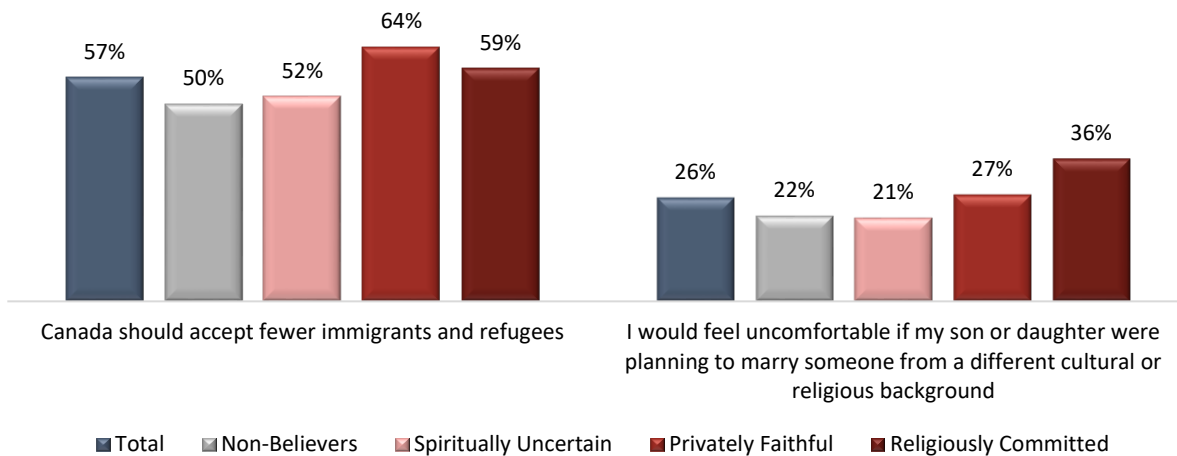
Most Canadians see themselves as fairly engaged in both Canadian and international news and current affairs. More than six-in-ten across all four segments say they follow each either “very” or “fairly closely.”

The Religiously Committed are more likely to say they pay close attention to each type of news, but this is driven almost entirely by their propensity to say they follow the news “fairly closely.” There is little difference between groups in the number of respondents who say they follow news “very closely” ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

Unlike their distinctive approach to morality, the Religiously Committed group’s slightly higher rate of engagement with news and current events doesn’t seem to consistently affect their views on various issues in the news.

That’s not to say there aren’t any differences between the segments on these issues, however. Asked to agree or disagree with a pair of statements related to immigration and cultural diversity, the more religious groups take a noticeably distinct approach, as seen in the graph that follows:

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements (Those saying "agree" shown)

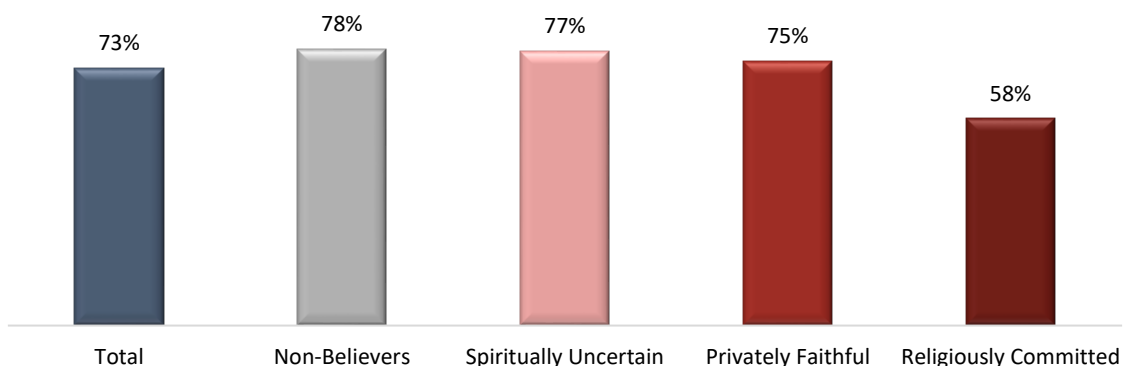


It's worth noting, of course, that a majority of Canadians (57%) overall agree with the statement "Canada should accept fewer immigrants and refugees," so the relatively higher propensity of the Privately Faithful and Religiously Committed to agree does not represent a significant departure from the Canadian consensus.

Likewise, on the statement about children marrying someone of a different cultural or religious background, majorities across all four segments *disagree*.

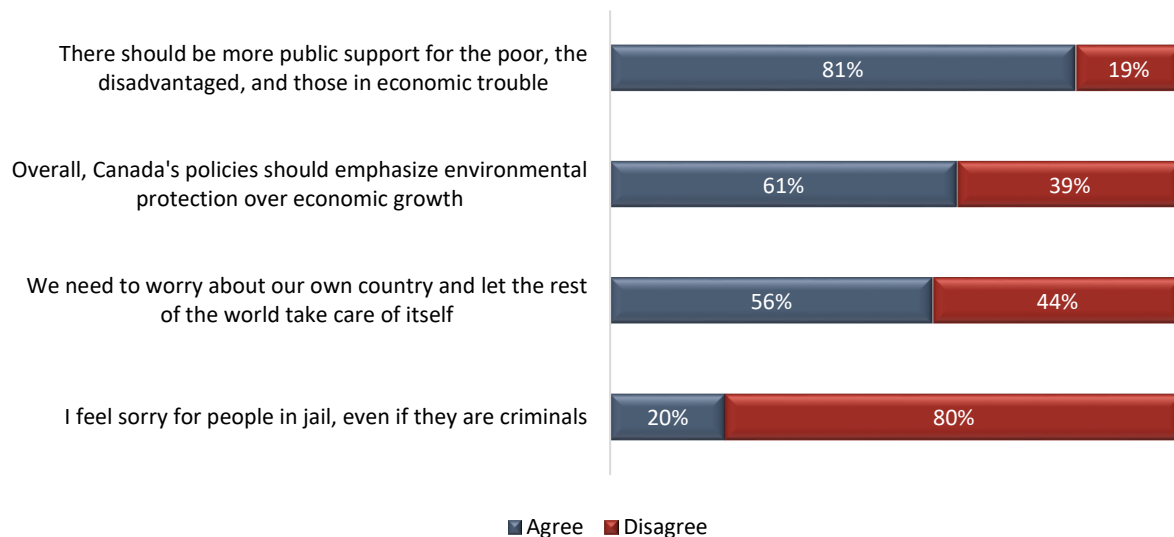
Another statement on which the segments are in agreement – albeit with the Religiously Committed less so – is "Canadian society should work towards greater acceptance of people who are LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer)."

"Canadian society should work towards greater acceptance of people who are LGBTQ" (Percentage saying "agree" shown)



Several other statements yield near-consensus responses from all four groups. Overall responses to these statements are summarized in the following graph:

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.



Coming up next

This report is the second installment in a year-long partnership between the Angus Reid Institute and Faith in Canada 150. The [first installment](#) explained the Spectrum of Spirituality and its effects on Canadians' personal happiness and community engagement. Future releases will deal with 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.*

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

For detailed results by the four segments of the Spectrum of Spirituality, [click here](#).