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Shifts in American Religiosity and Spirituality from 1995 to 2014: How Did Community Life Change?

Markus H. Schafer*
Baylor University, USA

Laura Upenieks
Baylor University, USA

This article examines the shifting landscape of American religiosity and spirituality alongside supposed declines in community life during recent decades. We leverage three waves of longitudinal US data spanning 1995–2014 to investigate whether adults' self-designations of religion/spirituality are associated with their sense of contribution to others and the extent of their perceived social connectedness. Overall, more adults became spiritual but not religious (SBNR), even as the sample charted a diverse range of religious and spiritual pathways. Over time, individuals consistently endorsing both religiosity and spirituality had relatively high levels of connectedness and contribution, contrasting with those embracing neither. SBNR adults occupied somewhat of a middle ground. Those both religious and spiritual appeared to tap most fully into two complementary mechanisms—the self-transcending motivation of spiritual engagement plus the integrative functions of congregational activity. Findings prompt questions about the evolving roles of religiosity and spirituality in more recent cohorts, particularly post-COVID-19.

Key words: religiosity; spirituality; community; American Society; survey research.

The late twentieth century played host to a repeated alarming refrain: individualism, diminished social engagement, and an erosion of community were threatening the American way of life and its prospects for continued vitality (Bellah 1985; Putnam 1995). These concerns—rearticulated most cogently, perhaps, at the turn of the century in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000)—continued

*Direct correspondence to Markus H. Schafer, Department of Sociology, Baylor University, Tidwell Building One Bear Place #97326 Waco, TX, USA. E-mail: markus_schafer@baylor.edu.

unabated from thinkers across the political spectrum over the following decades (e.g., Hertz 2021; Levin 2017).

In seeking to describe the fullness of this supposed breakdown—and sometimes, in seeking to explain it—many have pointed to recent American religious change (Glazier 2020; Sherkat 2014). Ample data from the past several decades attests to declining religious service attendance, a growing number of "religious nones," emerging forms of privatized or alternative religions, and the apparent supplanting of religion by spirituality (Bengtson et al. 2015; Hout and Fischer 2014; McClure 2017). Observers have begun to ask: are these trends tearing away at the social fabric? What might they suggest about the social connectedness of Americans? (Hastings 2016; Yu et al. 2017)

Existing research provides different ways to begin answering these questions. On the one hand, traditional American congregational life may well have nurtured many of the social habits and inclinations that seem to have dissipated from their high-water mark earlier in the twentieth century (Lim and Putnam 2010; Putnam 2000). Perhaps a retrenchment of institutionalized religion implies social detachment. On the other hand, recent studies have begun to investigate how religion and spirituality influence the social lives of individuals who, though not formally involved in religious institutions, maintain a vibrant spiritual interest. For example, while those identified as "Spiritual but Not Religious" (hereafter, SBNR) may appear to practice their beliefs primarily in private, scholars offer compelling examples of non-religious communities performing spirituality together (Bender and Klassen 2010; Oh and Sarkisian 2012). Other authors document how spirituality effectively "substitutes" for religious motivations in the realm of political engagement (King, Duffy, and Steensland 2024; Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Steensland, King, and Duffy 2022). Indeed, the growth of individualized spirituality may mean another path to engaged community life—even, or especially, for people who do not identify as religious. Ammerman (2013) argues that social scientists must pay greater attention to the heterogeneity of those who do not affiliate with or participate in conventional religious traditions. We embrace that assessment, but to it would add the necessity of documenting how people's attachment to religion and to spirituality shift over time. For example, are people coming to spirituality from a stance of low religious attachment, or stripping away religious commitment but remaining spiritual?

This study examines how changing affinities with religion and spirituality are linked to the strength of American adults' community life between 1995 and 2014. Community life has multiple dimensions, and so we consider both Americans' *connectedness* and their sense of *contribution* to others. We take 1995–2014 as a purposive observation period for several reasons. For one, the mid- to late-1990s marks an important inflection point in long-term American religious trends, signifying a precipitous drop in several indicators of traditional religiosity (Inglehart 2021). Second, the mid-1990s approximates the moment at which disengagement and disconnection captured the public's attention as significant social problems; the other bookend, meanwhile, brackets the social and religious

turbulence triggered soon afterward by the 2016 election, ensuing Trump presidency, and COVID-19 pandemic. Third, the period reflects the ascendancy of Baby Boomers' cultural and institutional imprint, capturing this cohort at peak public role influence and before reaching retirement en masse. Millennials and Generation Z play an important role in the unfolding story of American religious change, but it will take more years until the impact of these cohorts can be fully told.

The rest of the study unfolds as follows. We first provide a brief sketch of religion and spirituality, particularly the rise of "SBNR" as a concept in American life. We then consider how religion and spirituality are linked to community life, identifying several key gaps in the existing literature. The empirical section of the paper incorporates three waves of data from the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) survey to document religious/spiritual change over time and to examine whether stability and/or shifts in the relative importance of each is linked to people's connectedness and sense of contribution to their community. We close by summarizing the results, pointing to church involvement and personal transcendent experiences as complementary, but largely unique pathways for explaining why different configurations of religion and spirituality matter for people's sense of community life.

RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN AMERICA

Religion and spirituality are concepts with overlapping boundaries, but scholars often distinguish "religion" as something "corporate, public, and stable," while "spirituality" emphasizes an individualized search for meaning and the sacred (Bender 2007; Oh and Sarkisian 2012). Most religious individuals also identify as spiritual, and many Americans develop their spiritual practices within specific traditions (Ammerman 2013; Mahoney and Cano 2014).

Yet, many Americans who reject religious affiliation still identify with forms of spirituality disconnected from major traditions, a phenomenon scholars label "believing without belonging" (Davie 1990), "spiritual seeking" (Roof 2001), or being SBNR (Fuller 2001). This "spiritual turn" emphasizes self-realization, authenticity, and individual freedom (Watts 2022; for an account of the movement's more distal cultural and historical undercurrents, see Weber 1958).

This phenomenon has accelerated since the 1990s. Though precise estimates vary according to definitions of the SBNR, the Pew Research Center (2017) put the group at 27% in 2017, up from 21% in 2012. Research using the 1998–2014 General Social Survey (GSS) reports lower proportions, but a similarly substantial rate of growth, 1.9%–6.7% of American adults (Hastings 2016). An associated trend is increasing participation in spiritual practices, such as yoga and mindfulness meditation (Chen 2022; Kucinskas 2019), practices which are prevalent, especially among Americans who do not identify with any formal religious group (Pew Research Center 2023). Explanation of these developments often

starts with accounts of religion's decline, including the weakening generational transfer of participation, political disenchantment, and the waning authority of traditional institutions (Baker and Buster 2009; Chaves 1994; Hout and Fischer 2002).

But declining religiosity on its own does not provide a complete explanation of SBNR, namely why many Americans would embrace spiritual identification and/or practices. For some non-religious Americans, the cultural decoupling of spirituality from religion might offer a fresh outlet for engaging with the transcendent and immaterial—topics once seen as the province of organized religion and inconsistent with secularity (Barker 2021). For those in a more religious camp, the disentanglement may provide an occasion to reconsider, reweight, and rearticulate the role of religion and spirituality in their life, retaining interest in the latter while shedding religious accompaniments (Mercadante 2020). For still others, being SBNR could be the way station in a personal secularization journey, serving as a softer initial exit point for the once-devout than full-blown irreligiosity (Upenieks and Ford-Robertson 2022; Wilkins-Laflamme 2021). In short, Americans identifying as SBNR, or endorsing a mix of priorities consistent with that designation, represent a heterogeneous mix of people with differing life experiences and pathways into the group (Chen, Cowden, and Streib 2023; Wixwat and Saucier 2021). For the current study, that reality forms the major motivation for tracking people's attachments to and from both religiosity and spirituality during a key period of recent social change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY LIFE? EVIDENCE FROM EXISTING STUDIES

Social scientists closely monitor changes in spirituality and religion among Americans because such practices and values can impact the health of community life, influencing, among other things, people's sense of connection and contribution. The bulk of existing literature focuses on conventional religiosity. Compared to religious people, the non-religious are less likely to volunteer (Yeung 2018), to participate in political activities (Putnam and Campbell 2012), to join sports or recreation leagues, or to be active in local groups or neighborhood associations (Jansen 2011). Further, religiosity, particularly when sustained over many years of life, is associated with heightened social flourishing, a construct that combines a sense of social integration with feelings about one's impact on the world (Upenieks, Andersson, and Schafer 2021).

Explanations for these empirical regularities include: (1) the fact that conventional religion places a high value on corporate activity done in congregations—sources of belonging, repositories of social capital and support, and bridges to other community institutions (Beyerlein and John 2006; Lewis, Ann MacGregor, and Putnam 2013); and (2) behavioral effects of the others-oriented values prevalent in religious teaching and doctrine, including admonitions to "love one's

neighbor" and to "do good works" (Bekkers and Pamala 2011; Bekkers and Theo 2008). These religious virtues, we would note, are also often prescribed and reinforced within congregational groups (Merino 2013).

Many religious people are, of course, also spiritual; but the literature is only beginning to document how and to what extent people more spiritual than religious connect and contribute to others. Drawing on GSS data, Hastings (2016) finds that the SBNR have larger confidant networks than the non-religious, yet maintain approximately the same number of close discussion partners as the religious. That study also suggests, however, that highly religious people spend more evenings out with others than their SBNR counterparts. Frost and Edgell (2018) report from a national sample that SBNRs are just as likely as religious people to volunteer for political or hobby/interest groups in the past year (see also Speed and Edgell 2023); still, given that churches do more than any other institution in channeling the American volunteering force (Wuthnow 2010), examining total hours spent volunteering across all sectors would yield a different conclusion.

More recent research has asked explicitly about religion and spirituality as direct motivators of civic engagement. Using the National Religion and Spirituality Survey, Steensland, King, and Duffy (2022) examine how spirituality and religion are independently and jointly linked to civic engagement, such as volunteering in the community or donating to charity. The authors find that spirituality is a prevalent motivator for civic activity, often more so than religion alone. While spirituality operates as an internal resource for many, it frequently intersects with organized religion, which continues to facilitate civic involvement. Building from that premise, these same authors more recently discovered that spiritual salience predicts volunteering and charitable giving, sometimes even more than religious salience (King, Duffy, and Steensland 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest a new, substitutionary role for spirituality available to those outside of traditional religion.

This emerging body of work challenges some earlier qualitative findings, such as Mercadante's (2014) depiction of SBNRs as primarily focused on personal transformation and lacking the organizational infrastructure necessary for civic involvement. And even those religious nones who embrace an intentional "ethics of care"—expressed through a sense of interconnectivity and mutual responsibility—tend to engage in ways that are more provisional and less structured compared to religious contexts (Drescher 2016).

Existing research can be extended on at least two fronts. First, extant studies give little attention to people's pathways of religious and spiritual attachment, mostly failing to determine, for instance, whether someone comes to SBNR from the starting point of religiosity or secularity (Frost and Edgell 2018; King, Duffy, and Steensland 2024; Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Steensland, King, and Duffy 2022). Large, longitudinal samples are necessary to parse these developments. Second, past quantitative studies have provided only a limited view of how religion and/or spirituality shape the quality of community life. One's count of confidants and frequency of evenings out tells us something informative about

avoiding isolation (Hastings 2016), but a more expansive set of outcomes can say more about whether social lives are meaningful and fulfilling. Likewise, voting or supporting political campaigns are important, organized aspects of civic life (Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Stewart 2024), but such engagement glosses over the other myriad ways that Americans connect with and contribute to those in their communities.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Prior to answering our primary research question, we documented several descriptive patterns for our cohort of adults born from 1921 to 1970 and tracked from 1995 to 2014. First, do social outcomes dip during that historical period? We expect that, in aggregate, they did; but we also note that there will be individual patterns of rising and falling between individuals. Second, is there growth in the contingent of SBNR individuals? Again, we expect there to be in aggregate but emphasize that there should be some variability in individual life patterns amidst population trends. Third, building from the premise that American adults have charted an increasingly complex set of spiritual and religious pathways over the past several decades, are distinct routes to or from religion and spirituality linked to overall levels of social connection and contribution? Is stable (un)attachment to religion/spirituality different from transitions between such categories?

The current study then pinpoints two explanatory mechanisms that may account for why people of varied backgrounds report different levels of connection and contribution as they undergo continuity or change in religion/spirituality. We see these two mechanisms, *church involvement* and *individual spiritual experiences*, as emblematic of an important continuum underlying American religion and spirituality—the organizational and the self-experiential.

While participation in church organizations is an activity mainly for the religious, spiritual experiences are potentially accessible to a wide range of individuals. Of course, such experiences may arise from different practices (e.g., prayer or congregational worship vs. yoga or walks in nature) or take on different meanings (e.g., connecting to personal Deity vs. awareness of impersonal force). But personal experience of the spiritual could—like being embedded in a congregation—contribute to a healthy sense of community life.

Indeed, though the impact of regular spiritual experiences on community life remains less explored than that of formal religious involvement, several clues indicate its importance for the current study. Spiritual experiences are a vehicle of self-transcendence. That is, spiritual consciousness can orient people beyond themselves and connect them to broader, more universal concerns, such as the treatment of others (e.g., the golden rule or the parable of the good Samaritan). Likewise, those who are SBNR may be just as prone as their religious counterparts to experience an inward transformation and cultivate ethically informed subjective states (Steensland, King, and Duffy 2022). Cross-sectional evidence implies

that spiritual habits and motivations may meet or exceed religious ones for fostering social connectedness and contribution (King, Duffy, and Steensland 2024; Steensland, King, and Duffy 2022), but panel data to examine such patterns has yet to be considered.

In sum, we ask whether church involvement and experiences of self-transcendence explain gaps in community life between people of different religiosity and spiritualty configurations. From the balance of existing evidence cited above, we expect that people remaining both religious and spiritual during the study period will score highest in self-reported social contribution and connection, in part, because they draw upon both the organizational *and* the personal pathways. What is less certain is whether the SBNR tracks more closely to the religious and spiritual—despite having little access to the organizational pathway—or, whether SBNR adults more closely approximate those neither religious nor spiritual. We anticipate that people coming to the SBNR group from an earlier attachment to religiosity will approximate those religious and spiritual, while those arriving at SBNR from non-religion will report levels of connectedness and contribution on par with the non-religious and non-spiritual. Our proposal is that those in the former group may have already absorbed and internalized the habits of organizational religiosity, which mostly foster identities tied to communal participation (Stewart, Dacey, and Kucinskas 2024). In contrast, those arriving at spirituality from non-religion in our study are doing so in an era when spirituality has, arguably, become reimagined as a project of self-discovery, where spiritual practices are increasingly inward-focused and less oriented toward collective empowerment (Chen 2022). Those with long-running SBNR inclinations, on the other hand, represent a group for which expectations based on existing evidence are less clear-cut, so we refrain from offering a definitive hypothesis. We likewise take as exploratory whether spiritual experiences or church involvement, when compared side-by-side, more consistently explain differences across religious/spiritual designations in the outcomes featured in our study.

METHOD

Sample

We identified the survey of MIDUS as an ideal data source for this study, given its multi-decade span and range of variables included. The MIDUS began in 1995 with a survey of 7,108 English-speaking adults ages 25–74 (MIDUS I). The survey's first follow-up, MIDUS II, was undertaken in 2004–2005, with a mortality-adjusted response rate of 75% (n = 4,963). MIDUS III, the most recent available wave, proceeded in 2013–2014 and features a mortality-adjusted response rate of 77% (n = 3,294).

Participants were initially recruited from a national random-digit-dial (RDD) sample of non-institutionalized adults living in the 48 contiguous states. To this main RDD sample (n = 3,487) was added a sample of siblings for selected

respondents (n = 950), plus twins (n = 1914), and an oversampling of adults from five metropolitan areas (n = 757). Upon completion of a phone interview, respondents were mailed a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) that spanned a range of topics, including religion and community life. Particular measures (described below) were introduced at MIDUS II, thus different portions of our analysis draw from distinct subsets of the available data.

The analytic sample for our first, descriptive study aim consisted of all respondents who completed at least the phone interview at all three waves. With the use of full information maximum likelihood methods to restore missing data from respondents not completing the SAQ in a given wave, we use data from 3,066 respondents for that first aim. Turning to the second study aim, which seeks to understand key mechanisms accompanying religious and spiritual change, we present results selected results from the three waves, but most analyses rely on observations from MIDUS II and III only.

Across both aims we elected to use the full MIDUS sample—not just the RDD sample—to maximize statistical power, particularly as we attempt to differentiate numerous forms of religious/spiritual transition over time. This practice of full inclusion is consistent with prior studies on religion/spirituality and social connectedness using MIDUS (e.g., Friedman et al. 2024; Rudaz, Ledermann, and Grzywacz 2019), though we make numerous comparisons to ensure that the patterns we document align with the smaller sample.

Outcome Variables

We sort outcome variables into two sets, *social contribution* and *social connection*. Both encompass how people relate to society beyond only their circumscribed and immediate surroundings, e.g., their immediate household or workplace.

Our analysis includes three contribution outcomes. First, we use a 0–10 evaluation of people's own *contribution to others' welfare* and well-being. This rating was framed in the survey as part of people's "community involvement" and came with instructions to "Take into account all that you do, in terms of time, money, or concern, on your job, and for your family, friends, and the community." Second, we use a measure of self-assessed *effort into others' welfare*, again rated on a 0–10 scale. Participants were specifically prompted with the question "how much thought and effort do you put into your contribution to the welfare and well-being of other people these days?" Finally, we used a three-item index derived by Keyes (1998) to capture people's perceived *capacity to contribute*. The three index items, all measured from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7), include "I have something valuable to give to the world," "My daily activities do not create anything worthwhile for my community," and "I have nothing important to contribute to society" (alpha = 0.7 at all three waves, second and third items reverse-coded). We refer to this index as a capacity measure because the statements relate more to whether people feel they *can* contribute, than the extent to which they have—or have tried to—contribute(d) to others.

We gauge social connectedness first through a three-item index tapping a sense of *social integration*, again devised by Keyes (1998). The three items ask people to agree or disagree with the statements "I don't feel I belong to anything I'd call a community," "I feel close to other people in my community," and "My community is a source of comfort," with response options the same as above (alpha = 0.7 at MIDUS I and II, 0.8 for MIDUS III, first item reverse-coded). Second, we incorporate self-reported volunteering hours in the past year, derived from a series of survey questions asking about participation in educational, health-related, political, and other volunteering efforts. To reduce the right-skew of this count, we take the natural log of hours after adding a small constant (1) to eliminate 0 scores. Volunteering is a form of social participation commonly incorporated into summary measures of social connectedness (Cornwell and Waite 2009).

Conceptually, there is of course some overlap between contribution and connectedness—the point of volunteering is typically to enhance others' welfare, and contributing to one's neighborhood is a central part of feeling integrated. We therefore view the five outcomes as distinct yet complementary measures, reflecting different underlying dimensions of healthy community life.

Religion and Spirituality Self-Designations

A common way religion and spirituality have been conceptualized in the MIDUS has been with a two-by-two formulation (Ellison, Bradshaw, and Roberts 2012; McClure and Wilkinson 2020): religious and spiritual; religious but not spiritual; SBNR; and neither religious nor spiritual. We follow that convention, using two separate MIDUS questions from the SAQ to devise the categorization scheme. Participants were asked "How religious [spiritual] are you," and we coded those endorsing "very" or "somewhat" as religious [spiritual], and those answering "not very" or "not at all" as non-religious [non-spiritual].

To understand how people's self-designations shift over the study period, we created a multi-category scheme that documents which combination of religion and spirituality they end up in at MIDUS III. This scheme is summarized in table 1.

Given the proportional rise in—and theoretical importance of—the SBNR group, our categorization scheme charts the pathways to being SBNR by Wave 3, differentiating those who downgraded religion while remaining spiritual from those who previously endorsed neither religion nor spirituality. Table 1 indicates that nearly half of all MIDUS respondents endorsed high levels of religion and spirituality consistently across all waves. About 12% were neither religious nor spiritual at Wave 3, slightly more of those maintaining consistent disinterest in both across waves (7%) or than those who had earlier endorsed either spirituality and/or religion (5%). For those defined as SBNR, there was also a relatively close split between those holding steady across waves and those who came to SBNR from a previous endorsement of religion (both 5–7%). Just over 3% came to SBNR from the previous position of "neither."

TABLE 1. Coding Scheme for Religious/Spiritual Pathways from MIDUS I to MIDUS III

Category	MIDUS I		MIDUS II		MIDUS III	
N (%) in full sample	Religious	Spiritual	Religious	Spiritual	Religious	Spiritual
Stable neither 160 (6.6%)	No	No	No	No	No	No
Became neither 129 (5.3%)	Yes to	Either	Yes to	Either	No	No
	Yes to	Either	No	No	No	No
Stable both 1,215 (50.3%)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Became both 274 (11.4%)	No to	Either	No to	Either	Yes	Yes
	No to	Either	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stable SBNR 124 (5.1%)	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
SBNR, from religious 162 (6.7%)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
SBNR, from neither 83 (3.4%)	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Variable[a] 268 (13%)						

[a]Category of "variable" agglomerates multiple unusual pathways (e.g., neither → both → SBNR; both → neither → SBNR; religious but not spiritual across three waves).

Church Involvement and Daily Spiritual Experiences

Beyond characterizing American adults on the basis of their self-professed religiosity and spirituality, the current study seeks to identify behavioral mechanisms that may accompany such self-designations and that may help explain differences in social contribution and connectedness. The MIDUS SAQ included two questions about frequency of involvement in religious institutions, one asking about attendance at "religious or spiritual services," the other about "church/temple activities" (both measured from 1 = never to 6 = once a day or more). We averaged both responses (correlation $r \sim 0.75$ at both MIDUS II and III) to encompass both corporate worship as well as other ways people can engage with a congregation (e.g., meals, small group studies, and support groups).

The other explanatory factor we consider when linking religious/spiritual identification to study outcomes is people's sense of regular spiritual engagement. The MIDUS SAQ asked respondents to indicate, on a scale from 1 (never) to 4 (often) how often they experience five states of mind: feelings of "deep inner peace or harmony," "being deeply moved by the beauty of life," "strong connection to all of life"; a "sense of deep appreciation"; and a "profound sense of caring for others" (alpha = 0.73 at MIDUS III).

TABLE 2. Changes in Outcome Variable Average Scores, MIDUS 1 (M1) to MIDUS 3 (M3)

Full MIDUS sample		% change	Full MIDUS sample (attrition-weighted)	% change	RDD MIDUS sample (for comparison)	% change
Contribution to others' welfare						
M1	6.77		6.64		6.47	
M3	6.47	−4.4%	6.34	−4.5%	6.36	−5.6%
Effort into others' welfare						
M1	6.76		6.65		6.76	
M3	6.62	−2.1%	6.47	−2.7%	6.58	−2.7%
Capacity to contribute						
M1	16.08		15.75		15.88	
M3	15.47	−3.8%	15.12	−4%	15.34	−3.4%
Social integration						
M1	14.43		14.28		14.22	
M3	14.73	+2.1%	14.52	+1.7%	14.53	+2.2%
Volunteering (ln)						
M1	0.41	−9.8%	0.4		0.39	
M3	0.37		0.35	−12.5%	0.36	−7.7%

Other Covariates

Our analysis adjusts for a range of covariates. These include marital status (married, widowed, divorced/separated, and never married), whether the respondent has any children under 18, educational attainment (<high school, high school completed, some college, college degree, or higher), sex, race (white vs. non-white), age, working for pay, and dummy variables denoting the sample from which the person was drawn.

Analytic Details

Descriptive statistics first depict how outcome variable scores changed from 1995 until 2013/2014, then trace movement in people's religiosity/spirituality self-designations over that period. For this descriptive aim, we also generate predicted scores from multivariable linear regression models, ascertaining expected scores at the endpoint of the study period based on a multi-decade characterization of a person's religious and spiritual pathway and based on their covariate scores at the study baseline. Missing data are handled through listwise deletion, though sensitivity analyses with full maximum information likelihood yield identical findings. Inclusion in the analytic sample for this descriptive portrait is conditional on being followed across all three waves, which may induce selection bias. To address this, we developed inverse probability weights to give more importance to cases least likely to have been successfully followed to MIDUS III on the basis of

observed covariates (Weuve et al. 2012). The weights were devised from a logistic regression model predicting survey retention, using a variety of health and demographic variables at MIDUS I.

Our attention then shifts to examining how changes in contribution and connectedness correspond to shifts in religion and spirituality. Here we apply the between-within model for panel data, also known as the hybrid method for fixed and random effects (Allison 2009). This method enables between-person comparisons, an important consideration for variables that are stable over time, as is religion and spirituality for many MIDUS respondents. But by also modeling deviations from person-specific means, this hybrid approach enables us to observe how a change in the mechanisms corresponds with outcome change, essentially using each subject as their own "matched control," providing stronger causal inference in the form of fixed effects estimates. Ultimately, these models provide the framework for documenting whether church involvement and daily spiritual experience explain observed differences between the religion/spirituality groups. We fit these models with ordinary least squares estimation with robust standard errors, accounting for the clustering of participants within the same family of origin.

RESULTS

Descriptive Portrait

Patterns of change in contribution and connectedness. Table 1 begins with an overview of how each of the five outcome variables changed from the study baseline in 1995 until 2013/2014 (Wave 3). The table shows how means differ for the full unweighted sample versus a weighted version of the sample accounting for attrition. The reasoning for such a comparison is that MIDUS respondents lost to follow-up may be systematically different from those tracked wave-by-wave (e.g., less healthy, wealthy, and keen on survey research participation), and so an uncorrected statistical portrait may underestimate the extent to which Americans dropped in these social outcomes (Table 2).

And indeed, mean scores were lower for four of the five outcomes in 2013/2014 than in 1995: Americans at this later point downgraded their evaluations of contributing to others' welfare, their effort to that end, their capacity to contribute to society, and their volunteering engagement. And, as expected, weighting for attrition resulted in slightly larger drop-offs (in addition to lower starting values). That said, even weighted changes from 1995 to 2013/2014 were relatively modest, with decrements ranging from about 3% (effort into others' welfare) to 13% (volunteering hours). The only exception to these downward trends was social integration, which showed a slight uptick (approximately 2% in the attrition-weighted column). We also note that the patterns manifesting in the full MIDUS sample do not appear to be an artifact of any peculiar sample

agglomeration; the third column compares our main estimates to those limited only to the nationally representative, random digital dial-up sample and mean scores show a high level of convergence.

Patterns of change in religion and spirituality. We now turn to a brief description of religion and spirituality over time, starting with their intersection across the three MIDUS waves. As above, we show these descriptive statistics under three scenarios, favoring the attrition-weighted full sample estimates, but offering the other two for comparison and context.

The most noticeable changes over time come in the form of more people describing themselves as not very religious but as spiritual (e.g., 17% at W3 vs. 13% at MIDUS 1, weighted full sample), and fewer endorsing high religiosity but low spirituality. The latter category, however, was relatively small to begin with. Interestingly, the slight increase in high religion, high spirituality was boosted when accounting for attrition—this is likely due to the relatively high scores for these variables among the oldest Americans, people most likely to leave the sample due to death or disability.

While table 3 confirms that the SBNR category has picked up steam, it only presents aggregate snapshots at each wave and overlooks individual life pathways and how people shift between these categories of religion and spirituality over time. For instance, the religious and spiritual designation at any time reflects some people in the previous wave who were neither and others who have remained durably high on both accounts. Figure 1 therefore displays a Sankey diagram to reveal wave-by-wave flow between categories. The figure shows there is heterogeneity in migration between particular religion/spirituality groups, though some

TABLE 3. Religious and Spiritual Change, MIDUS I (M1) to MIDUS III (M3)

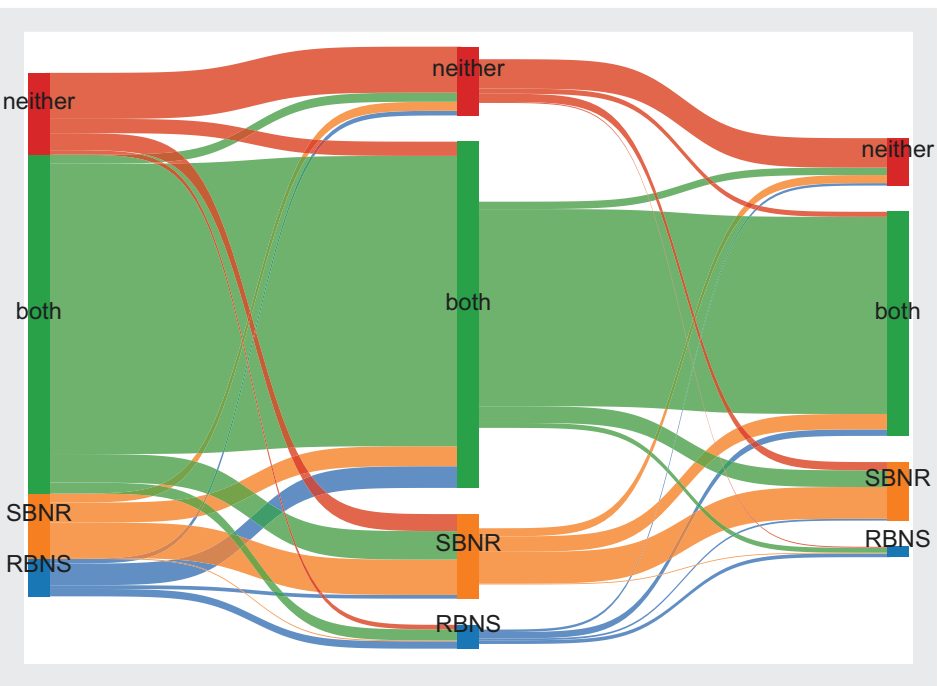
	Religion and spirituality, %				
	Neither	Both	Spiritual, not religious	Religious, not spiritual	Total
Full MIDUS sample					
M1	15.5	64.1	13.5	6.9	100
M2	12.4	66.4	17.2	4.1	100
M3	14	65.5	17.4	3.1	100
Full MIDUS sample, weighted for attrition					
M1	16.2	63.4	13.4	7.1	100
M2	12.8	66.2	16.7	4.3	100
M3	14.4	65.5	16.9	3.2	100
MIDUS RDD sample, for comparison					
M1	15.6	62.3	15.4	6.6	100
M2	11.8	64.8	18.9	4.5	100
M3	13	64.6	19.2	3	100

flow patterns are more common than others; e.g., some of the religious and spiritual become neither, but far more migrate to SBNR.

Is change in religion and spirituality linked to contribution and connectedness? Finally, we seek to understand how religious and spiritual change is linked to levels of social contribution and connectedness, predicting each outcome score in the final wave (2013/2014). We calibrate this model-based prediction to the group's mean score for its relevant outcome variable in 1995 (e.g., predicted social integration for the stable SBNR group at MIDUS III is computed with that group's mean score from MIDUS I). This approach helps document how people would be expected to end up on each outcome, given a starting level typical of peers with similar levels of religion and spirituality. Predictions held other covariates at their mean. Predicted scores for the five outcomes are shown in figure 2, with several general patterns standing out.

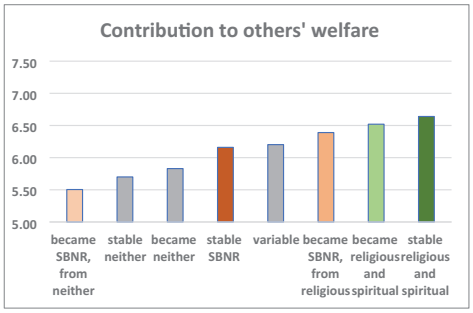
First, those consistently high in religion/spirituality consistently gravitated toward the top of all groups defined by religious/spiritual transitions, whereas those *becoming* highly religious and spiritual were in the top half but never higher

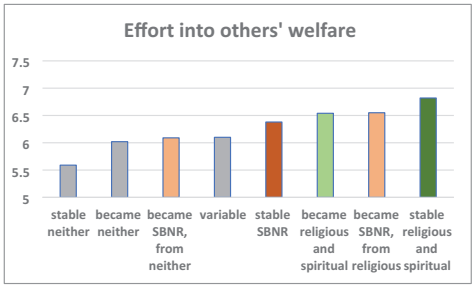
FIGURE 1. Sankey Diagram Showing Religiosity and Spirituality across MIDUS I–III. *Notes*: neither, neither religious nor spiritual; both, both religious and spiritual; SBNR, spiritual but not religious; RBNS, religious but not spiritual.

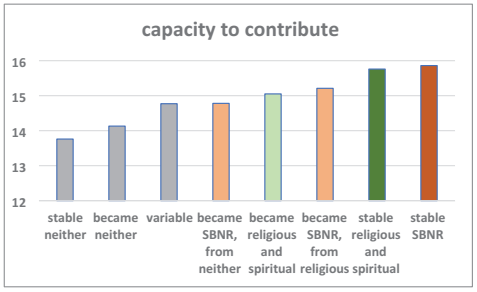


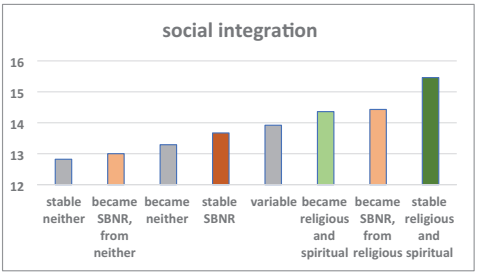
Notes: neither = neither religious nor spiritual; both = both religious and spiritual; SBNR = spiritual but not religious; RBNS = religious but not spiritual

FIGURE 2. Predicted Outcome Scores at MIDUS III from Baseline Models in figure 2, Setting Values for MIDUS I Outcome at Group-Specific Mean. *Note*: Covariates in the baseline model from figure 2 are included and held at their means.









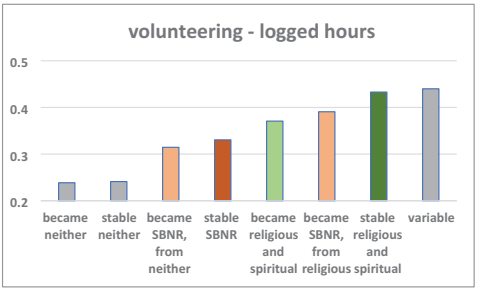


TABLE 4. Linear Panel Regression Models, Between- and Within-Effects, Social Contribution Outcomes (MIDUS I–III)

	MIDUS I–III	MIDUS II and III only			
	Self-designation	Self-designation	+ Church	+ Daily spiritual	Both
	MODEL A	MODEL B	MODEL C	MODEL D	MODEL E
	Contribution to others				
	Between estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.93***** **[A,B]**	**0.93***** **[A,B]**	**0.41***** **[A]**	**0.44***** **[A]**	0.12
SBNR	**0.59*****	**0.59*****	**0.46*****	0.2	0.16
Religious only	**0.41****	**0.45***	0.15	**0.39***	0.18
Mechanisms					
Church			**0.38*****		**0.28*****
Daily spiritual practices				**0.48*****	**0.42*****
	Within estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.24*** **[A,b]**	0.13 **[a]**	0.05 **[a]**	0.11	0.03
SBNR	0.01	−0.13	−0.21	−0.13	−0.2
Religious only	0.03	−0.2	−0.3	−0.18	−0.26
Mechanisms					
Church			0.08		0.08
Daily spiritual practices				**0.2*****	**0.19*****
n—person (person-waves)	12,240 (6,146)	6,217 (3,919)	6,199 (3,914)	6,171 (3,897)	6,157 (3,894)
	Effort into contributing				
	Between estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**1.1***** **[A,B]**	**1.08***** **[A,B]**	**0.51***** **[b]**	**0.51***** **[A]**	0.17
SBNR	**0.68*****	**0.71*****	**0.56*****	0.24	0.19
Religious only	**0.35***	**0.5***	0.16	**0.43***	0.21
Mechanisms					
Church			**0.42*****		**0.29*****
Daily spiritual practices				**0.58*****	**0.52*****
	Within estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.34**** **[a]**	0.23	0.21	0.17	0.16
SBNR	0.15	0.12	0.07	0.08	0.04
Religious only	**0.37***	**0.64*** **[c]**	**0.59*** **[b,c]**	**0.61*** **[b,c]**	0.57 **[c]**
Mechanisms					

TABLE 4. CONTINUED

	MIDUS I–III	MIDUS II and III only			
	Self-designation	Self-designation	+ Church	+ Daily spiritual	Both
	MODEL A	MODEL B	MODEL C	MODEL D	MODEL E
Church			−0.03		−0.05
Daily spiritual practices				**0.18****	**0.18****
n—person (person-waves)	12,405 (6,171)	6,319 (3,956)	6,303 (3,952)	6,272 (3,935)	6,259 (3,932)
	Capacity to contribute				
	Between estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**1.99***** **[B]**	**1.92***** **[A,B]**	**0.91***** **[B]**	**0.64***** **[B]**	0.09
SBNR	**1.92***** **[C]**	**1.62***** **[C]**	**1.37***** **[A,C]**	**0.56**** **[c]**	**0.48*** **[A]**
Religious only	0.26	0.26	−0.32	0.04	−0.3 **[C]**
Mechanisms					
Church			**0.76*****		**0.48*****
Daily spiritual practices				**1.30*****	**1.20*****
	Within estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.54***** **[A]**	**0.53*****	0.44	0.39	0.31
SBNR	0.26	0.33	0.29	0.27	0.24
Religious only	0.31	0.46	0.35	0.39	0.29
Mechanisms					
Church			0.16		0.12
Daily spiritual practices				**0.39*****	**0.38*****
n—person (person-waves)	12,515 (6,191)	6,399 (3,999)	6,380 (3,994)	6,347 (3,976)	6,333 (,3973)

Notes: ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$; A, compare "both" to SBNR, different at $p < 0.05$; a, different at $p < 0.1$; B, compare "both" to religious only, different at $p < 0.05$; b, different at $p < 0.1$; C, compare religious only to SBNR, different at $p < 0.05$; c, different at $p < 0.1$.

than those showing stability. Social integration was an outcome where the stable high religion and spirituality people jumped out most notably from the pack.

Second, in most cases, the SBNR who came to that designation from religion tended to score higher on most outcomes than those who were stable SBNRs. On the other hand, those who arrived at SBNR from low religion and spirituality scored far lower on most outcomes. The one outcome where adults stably SBNR exceeded all those migrating to SBNR by MIDUS III—and indeed surpassed *all*

other groups—was the capacity to contribute, though we note that they were basically in lockstep with the level predicted for the stably high religion/spirituality group.

Finally, those who were stably neither religious nor spiritual, plus those who became neither over time, scored noticeably lower on most outcomes. This was especially pronounced for volunteering.[1]

What Explains the Association between Religious/Spiritual Change and Social Contribution and Connectedness?

The second stage of the analysis moves beyond description, seeking to understand the mechanisms linking religion/spirituality self-designations to outcome variables. Our point of access to this research question comes from a series of linear between-within-panel regression models, starting with a series of dummy indicators capturing whether one is designated as neither religious nor spiritual, both religious and spiritual, SBNR, and religious only. This baseline model (Models A and B) features (1) *between* estimates, which compare individuals who differ in these religious categorizations at a given measurement occasion (top panel for each outcome), as well as (2) *within* estimates, which pick up change in a person's own dependent variable corresponding to changes in his or her religious/spiritual designation (bottom panel). The difference between Models A and B is that the former takes advantage of all possible data—the three waves in which religious and spiritual self-designations were measured. Model B, by contrast, marks the transition to using only the final two MIDUS waves, the occasions in which church involvement and daily spiritual experiences were also measured. These purported mechanisms are added to the panel models—one at a time (Models C and D), then both together (Model E). The point of estimating baseline Model B with only the two waves is to facilitate comparison (i.e., coefficient change in self-designation variables) with the final three mechanism-based models, for which two waves are the only option. As far as having sufficient information for panel change in spirituality/religiosity self-designations, Model A is clearly the best scenario; but to test mechanisms

[1]We also offer a description of how church involvement and daily spiritual experiences changed between MIDUS II and III, the only wave of which these particular dimensions of religion/spirituality were measured in MIDUS (see Supplementary appendix). Overall, church involvement held essentially steady (mean = 2.74 at both waves), while respondents tended to report slightly higher levels of daily spirituality (mean = 3.12 at W2, 3.18 at W3) across nearly a decade. Supplementary appendix table A1, however, shows that these religion/spirituality dimensions differed in expected ways across the eight groups shown in table 3. Not surprisingly, stable both were highest on both measures at Waves 2 and 3, the stable neithers lowest at both waves, and the stable SBNRs essentially hold a middle ground at both time points, at least in an ordinal sense. But the differences between church involvement and daily spiritual experiences are instructive. Stable SBNRs and stable neithers both tended to be very uninvolved in church—the most significant distinction is between these groups and those endorsing high religion and spirituality. For daily spiritual experiences, each of the groups tended to be relatively similar, though again the ranking between them stayed consistent.

TABLE 5. Linear Panel Regression Models, Between- and Within-Effects, Social Connection Outcomes (MIDUS I–III)

	MIDUS I–III	MIDUS II and III only			
	Self-designation	Self-designation	+ Church	+ Daily spiritual	Both
	MODEL A	MODEL B	MODEL C	MODEL D	MODEL E
	Social integration				
	Between estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**2.43***** **[A,B]**	**2.44***** **[A,B]**	**0.86***** **[B]**	**1.1***** **[A]**	0.07
SBNR	**0.98*****	**1.25*****	**0.86***** **[c]**	0.17	0.03
Religious only	**0.92*****	**1.15*****	0.21	**0.92***** **[C]**	0.22
Mechanisms					
Church			**1.22*****		**0.91*****
Daily spiritual practices				**1.35*****	**1.15*****
	Within estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.51**** **[A,B]**	−0.02	−0.22	−0.15	−0.34
SBNR	0.05	−0.4	−0.12	−0.48	**−0.55***
Religious only	0.04	−0.03	−0.23	−0.11	−0.3
Mechanisms					
Church			**0.42*****		**0.39*****
Daily spiritual practices				**0.58*****	**0.57*****
n—person (person-waves)	12,518 (6,191)	6,402 (4,000)	6,383 (3,995)	6,349 (3,977)	6,335 (3,974)
	Volunteering				
	Between estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.22***** **[A,B]**	**0.24***** **[A,b]**	**−0.06***	**0.16***** **[A]**	**−0.09***
SBNR	**0.11*****	**0.11*****	0.04 **[A]**	0.05	0.02 **[A]**
Religious only	**0.11*****	**0.15****	−0.03	**0.14**** **[c]**	−0.02
Mechanisms					
Church			**0.22*****		**0.21*****
Daily spiritual practices				**0.08*****	**0.04*****
	Within estimates				
Neither (ref)					
Both	**0.10**** **[A,B]**	0.06 **[A]**	0.004 **[A]**	0.04 **[A]**	−0.01 **[a]**

TABLE 5. CONTINUED

	MIDUS I–III	MIDUS II and III only			
	Self-designation	Self-designation	+ Church	+ Daily spiritual	Both
	MODEL A	MODEL B	MODEL C	MODEL D	MODEL E
SBNR	0.01	−0.05	−0.07	−0.06	−0.07
Religious only	0.01	−0.02	−0.07	−0.03	−0.08
Mechanisms					
Church			**0.11*****		**0.11*****
Daily spiritual practices				0.02	0.01
n—person (person-waves)	12,357 (6,166)	6,276 (3,946)	6,259 (3,941)	6,226 (3,924)	6,215 (3,921)

Notes: $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$; A, compare "both" to SBNR, different at $p < 0.05$; a, different at $p < 0.1$; B, compare "both" to religious only, different at $p < 0.05$; b, different at $p < 0.1$; C, compare religious only to SBNR, different at $p < 0.05$; c, different at $p < 0.1$.

requires shifting to a data format with change assessed only between MIDUS II and III. Our analysis attempts to carefully balance these trade-offs. Returning to our overall goal, we seek to answer these questions: how much does each group change relative to the change experienced by the stably non-religious and non-spiritual? And are differences in church involvement and/or daily spiritual experiences responsible for these gaps? (tables 4 and 5).

Contribution to others . In the between estimates, people identifying as religious and as spiritual report higher levels of social contribution than those who endorse neither. While those identifying as SBNR also exceed the neither group, they report lower social contributions compared to the religious and spiritual groups. Church participation fully explains the difference in self-assessed contribution between these groups. After accounting for churchgoing, the gap between those endorsing both and the SBNR becomes non-significant, and the difference between the both group and the neither group reduces by more than half (from 0.93 to 0.41).

This pattern is largely replicated when spiritual experiences are tested as the mechanism (Model D), though its role is more sizeable, the standardized coefficient (0.48) exceeding that of churchgoing (0.38) in Model C. With both mechanisms in the model (Model E), the gap between the religious and spiritual group and the SBNR disappears. While both churchgoing and daily spiritual experiences are positively associated with contribution, spiritual experience clearly surpasses the former in effect size.

Within-person effects, while understandably smaller, reveal that becoming both religious and spiritual is associated with reporting higher levels of social

contribution over time, relative to becoming neither or SBNR (Model A). These effects diminish, however, when reducing the sample to only MIDUS II and III, though increases in spiritual experiences over time are linked to growing social contribution (Model D), a finding that parallels the between-person estimates. We are unable to document such an association with changing church involvement.

Effort into contributing. Patterns for self-reported effort in contributing to others follow a similar track as the first outcome. Between-person effects indicate that those both religious and spiritual score a full point than those designated as neither, a difference that is halved after accounting for church involvement (Model C) or spiritual experiences (Model D). With both mechanisms considered, the religious and spiritual group's scores become indistinguishable from the neither group. As above, the between estimates suggest that while SBNR adults report more effort in contributing to others than the neither group, they score lower than those endorsing both. And again, spiritual experiences dwarf the effect size of churchgoing in Model E.

Within-person effects reinforce the importance of the spiritual experience mechanism, as changes in that variable significantly predict increased effort, while changes in church involvement do not. Though not a focus of our analysis—given its small size (especially by MIDUS III)—we note that those becoming religious only tend to exceed the neither group in self-reported effort in contributing to others.

Capacity to contribute. People's self-assessed capacity to contribute to others stands out somewhat from the previous two outcomes. Specifically, between-person effects show little difference between those both religious and spiritual and the SBNR group. However, both churchgoing and spiritual experiences are associated with this outcome, spiritual experiences having the larger effect size. Accounting for both mechanisms, the difference between the both group and the neither group is reduced to non-significance, whereas people endorsing SBNR remain higher than neither.

Within estimates, however, reveal that becoming both spiritual and religious is linked to an increased sense of capacity to contribute, relative to becoming neither; whereas no such association is found for transitioning to SBNR (Models A and B). This may suggest that stable individual traits explain much of the relationship between SBNR designation and contribution capacity. Yet, increases in spiritual experiences, rather than church involvement, seem to explain why those entering the religious and spiritual group report a higher capacity to contribute than others. That is, the coefficient for spiritual experiences dwarfs its counterpart in Model E, and the inclusion of spiritual experiences drives the coefficient for "both" closer to "0" from its original value of >0.5 in Models A and B.

Social integration. Differences in social integration are pronounced between groups. Between-person estimates reveal a sizeable gap between those non-religious and

non-spiritual (reference) and all others. Churchgoing and spiritual experiences independently explain more than half of the difference between those endorsing both religion and spirituality and the reference group; and together, the mechanisms fully account for it (Model E). For the SBNR group, only spiritual experiences account for differences with the neither group (D).

Within-person analyses in Model A suggest that it is only the shift to both religious and spiritual, relative to neither, that boosts social integration over time (comparison to all other groups, $p < 0.001$). That said, shifting to the data-limited model draws using only two waves makes this pattern disappear. Still, it is informative to observe how within-person shifts in both mechanism variables link to integration. Corroborating the pattern detected in between-person estimates, changes in church involvement and daily spiritual experiences are each associated with growing social integration, and effect sizes remain relatively stable when considered together (Model E).

Volunteering. Volunteering, unlike other outcomes, shows a comparatively large influence from church involvement. Between-person estimates reveal that both the religious and spiritual group and the SBNR group volunteer more than the neither group. Church involvement drives much of this difference. With church churchgoing held constant, the difference between those endorsing both and neither flips direction (Models C and E), suggesting that in a scenario where church involvement is equal, the neither group would volunteer more than the religious and spiritual group.

Within-person estimates again show that becoming spiritual and religious over time is associated with increased volunteering, though the effect diminishes when focusing on only two waves. Importantly, only church participation, rather than spiritual experiences, is robustly linked to higher volunteering over time (table 5).

DISCUSSION

Since de Tocqueville's time, observers have noted unique features of community life in the United States, yet have also expressed concerns about its continued vitality (Bellah 1985; Putnam 1995). Consistent with those who see signs of its erosion (Lim and Putnam 2010; Yu et al. 2017), we documented a slump in several measures of how much people feel connected and contributing to their communities between 1995 and 2014—though, overall, we emphasize that downturns for our study cohort over this period were modest. Further, there was individual variability in issues like social cohesion, volunteering, self-assessed effort and contribution toward others' welfare, and perceived capacity to contribute.

The overall goal of this article was to link such changes in community connectedness and contribution to recent changes in American religiosity and spirituality. Consistent with claims that such behaviors and identifications have

proliferated into new and varied forms, particularly a "spiritual turn" (Watts 2022), we also observed an increasing number of SBNR adults from 1995 until 2014 (from around 13%–17%). The prevalence we identify in the final follow-up is still less than figures reported in some cross-sectional studies (e.g., Pew Research Center 2017)—likely a function of the fact that we observed a study cohort changing across multiple waves, rather than tracking numbers from a set age range over time, the way one would using repeated cross-sectional studies with cohort replacement. That feature of our study design may also explain why we did not observe a drop in those considered both religious and spiritual—indeed, at the population level, people appear to stay consistently religious as they age (Voas and Chaves 2016). Yet within the aggregate patterns, individual American adults traversed a diverse range of religious and spiritual pathways during this era.

To answer our starting research question, those maintaining high levels of both religiosity and spirituality during the study period (1995–2014) indeed appear to be most connected and to have the strongest sense of contributing to their communities. Comparisons with those neither religious nor spiritual is most telling—this latter group consistently scored lower than others across all outcomes. Given the "neithers'" relatively low marks on community life metrics, we expected SBNR adults to definitively exceed them, ultimately falling in line with those embracing both religion and spirituality. Though MIDUS respondents that were stably SBNR across the study period felt more integrated, volunteered more often, and evaluated their capacity to contribute as higher than the neithers, their community life profile did not consistently rise to the level of those who embraced both religion and spirituality. Interestingly, the sense of having the capacity to contribute was the one place where stable SBNR adults appeared to meet or exceed the levels observed for those whose spirituality was accompanied by religious attachment. In other words, for this cohort, being SBNR appears to provide optimism about one's ability to make a positive difference in the world. All the same, spirituality alone does not necessarily translate into feeling that one has accomplished that, as evidenced by the findings on contribution evaluations. Tellingly, our hybrid panel models, which accommodate comparisons of both religious/spiritual stability but also between-wave change, consistently suggest that *shifting into* the designation of religious and spiritual elevates connection and contribution in a way that becoming SBNR does not.

Our second research question turns to mechanisms that might explain these patterns. The story of volunteering, alongside other outcomes, helps clarify what we take to be a central empirical contribution of the current article. Namely, gaps in volunteering between the religious/spiritual and those attached to neither were explained entirely by church involvement, whereas other gaps between the groups—in integration, in contributing to others—could also be accounted for by having different exposure to transcendent experiences. We had expected that frequent church involvement and regular spiritual experiences would *both* be relevant for explaining why different configurations of religion and spirituality mattered for community life. Indeed, in most cases, *both* channels were

independently important explanatory pathways in boosting community life, though as anticipated by recent cross-sectional research on civic and political engagement (King, Duffy, and Steensland 2024; Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Steensland, King, and Duffy 2022), regularly encountering the spiritual realm edged out its institutional counterpart in effect size, and in robustness across both between- and within-person effects. Crucially, however, only those highly religious *and* spiritual tap fully into the two complementary mechanisms—access to the private but self-transcending orientation of spiritual experience plus the integrative functions of congregational activity. Volunteering was the sole case where an organizational tie to church was alone important. On the flip side, we were unable to document any scenarios where it was *only spirituality* linked to a dimension of community life across scenarios of stability and change. Across outcomes, we were able to detect the operation of these two mechanisms most clearly for explaining between-person effects. This means that our dual-pathway explanation is more robust for American adults with enduring religious and spiritual dispositions than for those who transitioned between categories.[2] Still, the within-person shifts observed over time affirm our hypothesis that those designated as SBNR occupy an intermediate position between the religious/spiritual and the non-affiliated.

Overall, we conclude that the SBNR—remaining so or arriving at that combination—do not robustly exceed the relatively low levels of connectedness and self-assessed contribution shown by those who are non-religious and non-spiritual. In contrast, the religious and spiritual groups in this sample do. At first glance, this takeaway diverges somewhat from a key finding of Hastings (2016), who reported that those who were stably or became SBNR had larger personal confidant networks than the non-religious (though, like the non-religious, SBNR adults spent fewer social evenings out than the highly religious). Several methodological differences may account for this discrepancy—for instance, different samples and a shorter observation window (2006–2014). Additionally, Hastings's analysis emphasizes the *quantity* of close ties, whereas our results underscore the *quality* of people's community life.

Other research has focused on political engagement, finding that spiritual motivations can effectively substitute for more traditional religious motivations when it comes to donating to organizations or turning out to vote (Kucinskas and Stewart 2022; Stewart 2024). Our findings suggest a "both/and" interpretation rather than a simple substitution story; while we underscore the relative salience of spiritual experience, we do not identify this mechanism as a single comprehensive explanation. One area where our results align more directly with existing research is volunteering, where studies have shown that belonging to a religious community surpasses more individualized expressions of spirituality or

[2]This is likely due, in large part, to the fact that church involvement and daily spiritual experience measures were gathered only in the final two waves, limiting instances of within-person change.

private religious practice in fostering volunteer activity (Paxton 2020; Paxton, Reith, and Glanville 2014). This may be due to religious organizations' extensive experience with mobilizing volunteers (Bekkers and Pamala 2011; Merino 2013). Other observers note that cultural features of American spirituality, such as its grounding in a romantic liberal ethos emphasizing individualism and private self-expression, may lead individuals to underappreciate the potential civic contributions of their spiritual practices (Watts 2022). Although it remains to be seen whether such patterns will prevail—or perhaps intensify—in the post-COVID world and among incoming cohorts of adults, the social benefits of volunteering appear to be disproportionately available to adults who embrace religion alongside spirituality.

Altogether, we think this tapestry of prior results ultimately highlights the multidimensionality of social well-being and the need for ongoing, integrative research using multiple samples, analytic designs, and outcome variables. To that point, interpretations from the current study must be tempered by important caveats, issues that we hope can be addressed in follow-up studies.

First, future research must attend to newer cohorts of American adults and to the period in and following the polarizing 2016 election of Donald Trump and the disorienting interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study featured adults from the tail end of the Greatest Generation, the full span of the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers, and early Generation X cohorts. Moreover, the observation period featured these latter groups at the height of their institutional influence as midlife adults. Obviously, there is a pressing need to observe not only Generational X coming into those realms of influence, but also in time, Millennials and Gen Z. Baby Boomers may have laid the groundwork for contemporary expressions of spirituality (Roof 2001), but on various dimensions of religiosity, the period from the early 1970s until the early 2010s has seen successive secularization, cohort by cohort—with an increased acceleration in those processes among people born in the late 1970s and 1980s (Voas and Chaves 2016). Have newer cohorts recovered a stronger sense of connectedness and contribution without religion? Has the role of spirituality among them gained even more importance? We are planning a companion study using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health to consider these questions.

Finally, we would emphasize that our analysis can only document associations, not establish causal relationships. For instance, social desirability bias is a potentially important confounder, particularly for behavioral measures like volunteering. Fortunately, the within-person (i.e., fixed effects) aspects of the hybrid model help mitigate this concern. Our results show that even when controlling for time-stable traits—such as tendencies to please others or overreport prosocial behavior—higher church attendance remains associated with increased volunteering over time.

It is also possible that people's sense of connectedness and their contributions to others leads them to pursue or to deepen their commitment to religion and/

or spirituality; or, conversely, that feeling estranged from others undercuts these impulses. Again, given the widespread concern about a breakdown in American community life, coinciding with recent, unprecedented change in the population's religiosity, the task of pinpointing the direction of these associations seems an essential one for social scientists. Our next step is to examine this issue too, employing panel data methods—along with a twin sample design to rule out unmeasured confounding variables—to clarify how and to what extent conventional religious attachments bring value-added to community life.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

A supplementary section is located with the electronic version of this article at Sociology of Religion online (http://www.socrel.oxfordjournals.org).

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Publicly available data from the MIDUS study was used for this research.

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