

DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: A STUDY OF THE “SPIRITUAL BUFFET” PHENOMENON

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Abstract

This article examines the fundamental shift in the relationship between the younger generations and the sacred, arguing that the digital media ecosystem acts as a primary catalyst in the shift from a model of **external**, institutional religious authority to one of **internal**, self-authoritative spirituality. Through secondary analysis of longitudinal sociological data (Pew Research, World Values Survey) and conceptual discourse analysis, the study identifies and defines the “Buffett-type spirituality” (“**Spiritual Buffet**”) – a pragmatic syncretism in which beliefs and practices are individually chosen from a global digital menu, based on the supreme criterion of psychological utility. The analysis maps this transformation in two illustrative contexts: the United States, demonstrating a clear generational gap, and Romania, revealing a striking gap between persistent religious identity and collapsing institutional practice. The article further proposes a typology of the three emerging cohorts (Traditionalists, Cultural Liberals, Secular Nihilists) and discusses the profound implications for religious institutions, community formation, and the market of meaning. It is concluded that this paradigm shift, driven by communicational factors, towards self-authorization is a structural feature of late modernity and if it is not definitive, it is unlikely to be reversible, positioning the individual as the ultimate architect of one’s own belief system.

Keywords: *digital communication, religious authority, youth religiosity, spiritual buffet, self-authorization, media ecology, digital syncretism, generational change, Deistic Therapeutic Morality.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF PERSISTENT SEARCH IN INSTITUTIONAL DECLINE

A defining sociological paradox of the early twenty-first century is the simultaneous decline of institutional religious engagement among young people in the West and the persistent, if not intensified, human search for meaning, community, and transcendence (Berger, 2014; Taylor, 2007). While the global number of

religious affiliations continues to grow, fuelled in large part by the Global South, longitudinal data from North America and Europe generate a consistent picture of the generational disaffiliation from churches, synagogues, and mosques. This decline, however, does not signify the arrival of a uniformly secularized age, but rather the fragmentation of religious authority and the proliferation of new, often hybrid, forms of spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Wuthnow, 1998).

Our article posits that in order to understand this transformation, we need to look beyond theology or demography to the **ecology of communication** in which it is embedded. The digital revolution – characterized by ubiquitous connectivity, algorithmic selection, and a user-centric interface logic – has fundamentally altered the conditions under which religious/spiritual beliefs and practices are formed, practiced, and transmitted (Campbell, 2013; Cheong, 2017). The digital environment is not a neutral sphere, but an active environment (through man-made algorithms!) that rewards choice, personalization, and immediate utility, while eroding the monopolies of the old gatekeepers of information, including religious institutions (Postman, 1993).

The central research question guiding this analysis is: **How does the digital media ecosystem facilitate the fragmentation of traditional religious authority and give rise to new, self-authoritative forms of spirituality among the younger generation?** We argue that this environment catalysed a paradigm shift from **external authority** (vested in clerical institutions, texts, and hierarchies) to **internal authority** (centred on personal experience, the

emotional well-being of the individual, and pragmatic utility). The main manifestation of this shift is what we call the "Buffett-type Spirituality" or "**Spiritual Buffett**" – a mode of religious engagement in which individuals act as sovereign consumers, selecting and combining elements from diverse traditions (e.g., Buddhist mindfulness, Christian prayer, neo-pagan ecology) in order to build a personal, therapeutic, and non-binding spirituality.

To substantiate this argument, the article is divided into five parts. Firstly, it establishes the empirical evidence of the generational gap using comparative data from the United States and Romania. Secondly, it builds a theoretical framework that integrates media ecology and the sociology of religion. Thirdly, it looks at the digital media ecosystem as an operational driver of change. This is followed by the conceptualization of the new paradigm through the prism of Deistic Therapeutic Morality (Smith & Denton, 2005) and Buffett-type spirituality ("Spiritual Buffet"), introducing a typology of the three resulting cohorts. Finally, it discusses the broader community implications, meaning, and future of organized religion in a digitally saturated society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MEDIA ECOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

To analyse the shift from institutional religiosity to the "Spiritual Buffet," this study uses an interdisciplinary framework that combines **media ecology** and the **sociology of religion**. This synthesis argues that changes in dominant modes of communication are not only incidental to religious change, but are constitutive parts of it, reshaping the very foundations of the way authority is constituted and where individuals locate the sacred.

2.1. The Digital Media Ecology of Religion

The concept of *media ecology*, developed by Neil Postman (1993), examines how communication technologies structure perception, cognition, and social organization. Digital media is not a passive channel, but an

environment with inherent biases that favours certain types of content, epistemologies, and social relations. Applying this perspective to digital media reveals several key biases relevant to religious authority.

- **Prejudice towards access and demystification.** The Internet is demolishing information monopolies. Sacred texts, once mediated by the clerical authority, are now accessible in raw forms, alongside a universe of competing interpretations, scholarly criticism, and alternative traditions (Campbell, 2013). This demystifies the religious hierarchy.

- **Prejudice towards choice and personalization.** The fundamental user experience on digital platforms consists of the selection from menus at their fingertips, the personalization of feeds and algorithmic personalization. This logic trains users to wait and exercise choice in all areas, including worldviews. This makes traditionally externally imposed, non-negotiable dogmas seem alien and restrictive (Van der Veer, 2014).

- **Prejudice towards networks to the detriment of hierarchy.** Digital communication is rhizomatic and networked. It does not respect hierarchies, privileges horizontal peer-to-peer connections and influencer-based authority at the expense of top-down pyramidal structures (Castells, 2010). This corrodes the "chain of being" pattern inherent in many religious institutions.

- **Prejudice towards the experiential and therapeutic.** In an attention economy, the content that generates immediate emotional or psychological engagement (comfort, inspiration, awe) thrives. This favours the spiritual discourses centred on personal well-being, mindfulness, and therapeutic outcomes over those centred on doctrine, duty, or sacrifice (Lynch, 2007).

2.2. The social construction of religious authority

Media ecology operates in a broader sociological context. Peter Berger's (1967, 2014) work on pluralism is central: modernity breaks the "sacred vault" of a single self-evident worldview and forces religion into a competitive marketplace of meaning. Charles Taylor (2007) complements the perspective of the "secular

age” and describes the “subjective return” – the migration of moral and spiritual sources from the external framework (God, nature, tradition) to the internal ones (personal experience, authenticity, feelings). This creates an “ethics of authenticity” in which the ultimate good is to be true to oneself, a value perfectly aligned with the digital bias towards personalization.

José Casanova’s (1994) concept of “deprivatization” adds an additional dimension: although religion may decline in personal faith, it often re-enters the public sphere but not as a hegemonic authority, but as a voice from the crowd in debates regarding identity and values. The digital public sphere is the primary arena for this contested visibility.

2.3. Summary: Digital Media as an accelerator and transformer

Digital media did not invent religious individualism or pluralism. Rather, it argues that digital media accelerates, amplifies, and qualitatively transforms these pre-existing sociological trends (Cheong, 2017). It turns pluralism from a social fact into a daily experience, easy to navigate via smartphone. The digital operationalizes the “subjective return” by offering tools (applications, platforms, influencers) to endlessly explore and select the self. This provides the infrastructure for the religious market, becoming the new “Main Street” where spiritual goods are displayed, valued, and consumed. Therefore, the “Spiritual Buffet” is not just a metaphor, but a direct behavioural result of engaging in a communication environment designed for navigation, selection, and personalization.

3. METHODOLOGY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY DATA AND CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

This study uses a qualitative, multi-method approach designed to map the macro-sociological and cultural change. Given the broad, paradigm-level nature of the research question, the methodology prioritizes the conceptual development and synthetic analysis of existing empirical data to the detriment of primary data

collection. This approach is suitable for building a theoretical model that can inform future empirical testing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.1. Research design

Design represents a **secondary analysis as well as an analysis of the conceptual discourse**. It acts on two interconnected levels:

- 1) **macro-sociological analysis** of trends in affiliation, faith and religious practice.
- 2) **the conceptual/cultural analysis** of the discourse that defines the new paradigm.

3.2. Data sources and selection

A. Secondary quantitative data:

In order to establish the empirical fact of the generational gap, the analysis draws on longitudinal surveys from two distinct contexts: United States: Data from Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Studies (2007, 2014, 2023) and related reports. The U.S. offers a robust longitudinal dataset in a highly digitalised and religiously diverse society.

For Romania, we used data from the World Values Survey (waves 6 and 7) and national surveys (e.g. INSCOP). After half a century of atheism imposed by the authorities, Romania offers a compelling contrast as a post-communist society, with a high nominal religiosity, but ever-changing practices. Here, too, the data illustrates the gap between inherited identity and lived spirituality. The key indicators tracked include: religious affiliation (“nones”), frequency of prayer, attendance at religious services, and importance of religion in life – all divided by age group.

B. Qualitative/conceptual data:

To define the characteristics of the new paradigm, the analysis synthesizes:

a) *Scientific conceptualizations*: The foundational work on Deistic Therapeutic Morality (BAT) by Smith and Denton (2005) serves as a key diagnostic tool for the basic creed.

b) *Digital Culture and Discourse*: Manifestations of spiritual seeking and practice observable in digital spaces (e.g., the branding and discourse of meditation apps like Headspace, #spirituality discourse on Instagram and TikTok, the ethos of communities like Burning Man). We used the

synthesis of the conceptualization of the **Deistic Therapeutic Morality (DTM)**, the discourse in digital culture, and as well as some case studies (e.g., Buffett's principles).

c) *Cultural Commentary and Case Studies*: The analysis of secular life philosophers who perform a quasi-spiritual function (e.g., the popular interpretation of Warren Buffett's principles as "secular spirituality") provides an illustrative depth.

3.3. Analytical procedure

The analysis progressed in three phases:

1) **Descriptive diagnosis** of data. The survey data was analysed to track trends and confirm the presence and magnitude of a generational shift away from institutional metrics in both case study countries.

2) **Thematic and conceptual synthesis** The qualitative/conceptual data were analysed to identify recurring themes: the primacy of psychological well-being, the logic of personal choice and syncretism, the rejection of institutional authority and the language of self-optimization. This phase led to the formulation of the following basic concepts: "Spiritual Buffett" and the triple cohort typology.

3.4. Limitations

This methodological approach has inherent limitations. Based on secondary survey data, the analysis is constrained by the questions posed by the initial researchers. The conceptual analysis of discourse, while informed by observable trends, do not present new ethnographic or interview-based data on the "Buffett" practices experienced by individuals. Therefore, this study is explanatory and generates hypotheses; it provides a robust framework and typology that requires and can guide future ethnographic, interview-based, or algorithmic research on the specific manifestations of the "Spiritual Buffet."

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Mapping the Rupture: Generational Data from the U.S. and Romania

The paradigm shift hypothesis is not a speculative statement, but it is based on

measurable generational trends. Data from two distinct social contexts – the technologically saturated United States and the traditionally Orthodox post-communist Romania – reveal a convergent pattern: a pronounced and growing distance between younger generations and the institutional practice of religion.

4.1.1. The American Lab: Generational Replacement in Action

The United States, long an exception among wealthy nations due to its high religiosity, is undergoing a decisive transformation driven by generational replacement. Key indicators show a steady downward trajectory among young Americans:

Increase in the number of "Nones": The percentage of Americans who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular" has increased from 16% in 2007 to 29% in 2021 and appears to have stabilized following 2023. This growth is concentrated among young adults: 36% of Millennials and 40% of Gen Z identify themselves as "nones," compared to 22% of Boomers.

Declining affiliation and attendance: Affiliation with Christianity has declined sharply, especially among young people. Weekly worship attendance shows an obvious generational difference. Although about 40% of *Silents* (born between 1928-1945) attend services weekly, this percentage drops to around 28% for Millennials and Generation Z.

Prayer difference: Perhaps the most intimate indicator, daily prayer, reveals a profound inner change. While more than 60% of Americans aged 65+ pray daily, this proportion drops to just 27% among those aged 18 to 24. This suggests a retreat not only from public ritual but also from the traditional forms of private devotion.

4.1.2. The Romanian Paradox: Identity without Institutional Commitment

Romania presents a fascinating contrast that deepens the analysis. Emerging from decades of state-imposed atheism, the country experienced a rapid return of Orthodox Christian identity after 1989. However, the reborn identity is forced to cope with a growing generational gap between belonging and faith/behaviour.

- *Persistent nominal religiosity*: In 2025, 85% of Romanians identify themselves as religious, and belief in God remains almost universal. This high identification reflects the deep cultural and ethnic bond between Orthodoxy and the Romanian national identity.

- *Collapse of practice among young people*: Under this stable identity, institutional involvement decreases dramatically among young people. Although national averages suggest a monthly church attendance of about 50% (2017 data), this number drops drastically for the younger generation. The World Values Survey (Wave 7, 2017-2022) shows that only 15% of Romanians aged under 29 attend weekly religious services, compared to over 45% of those aged 50+. Similarly, while 73% of those 50+ report praying daily, the percentage drops to 49% for those under 30 (World Values Survey, 2012-2014 data).

- *Interpretation*: The Romanian case demonstrates that the rupture is not primarily related to theistic faith or even cultural identity. It is about the institution's authority to command regular participation in rituals and shape daily life. Youngsters in Romanians maintain a position of "belonging without believing" or "believing without belonging" (Davie, 1994), maintaining a symbolic identity while leaving the institutional space. This creates a vacuum in which new, more personalized forms of spiritual search can emerge, less constrained by the monolithic national tradition.

4.1.3. Convergent conclusion

Data from both a historically pluralistic market society (USA) and a monolithic cultural religion society (Romania) indicate the same result: the progressive decoupling of the younger generations from the ritual and communal authority of religious institutions. This empirical rupture establishes the explanandum – the phenomenon to be explained. The following sections argue that the digital media ecosystem is a major factor in causing and shaping this rupture, channelling it towards the "Spiritual Buffet" model rather than the simple secularism.

4.2. The Digital Engine: How Communication Platforms Facilitate Change

The documented generational rupture did not take place in a vacuum. It is facilitated and amplified by the operational logic of the digital media environment, which functions as a powerful social and cognitive engine that reshapes religious engagement. This environment works through three interconnected mechanisms: democratizing access, instilling a consumerist worldview, and transforming the ritual landscape.

4.2.1. The Democratization of the Sacred: From Monopoly to the Market

The Internet has dissolved the information monopoly held by local religious institutions (Campbell, 2013). A seeker in Iasi or Indianapolis no longer depends only on his priest or parish priest for spiritual knowledge. They have instant and low-cost access to primary sources for all the world's religions. Competing interpretations, from academic historical criticism to mystical commentaries. A global range of spiritual teachers, gurus, and influencers, bypassing traditional guardians. This creates a global supermarket of faith where Buddhism, Stoicism, Neoshamanism, and Christian mysticism sit side by side on the same digital shelf. The authority of local tradition is relativized by its placement in this overwhelming plurality. The seeker is no longer a disciple, but a comparative buyer.

4.2.2. User Interface as a Worldview: Cultivating Buffett's "Habitus"

The daily interaction with digital interfaces trains users in a specific habit (Bourdieu, 1977) that is directly transferable to the religious realm. The core actions of the digital experience are the following:

- *Choice*: choice from menus, lists, and flows;
- *Personalization*: customizing algorithms, profiles, and news feeds to personal preferences;
- *Fluidity of engagement*: easy subscription and unsubscription; Relationships with content and communities represent "low stakes."

This "interface logic" (Van Dijck, 2013) cultivates an expectation of *personal sovereignty and non-binding exploration*. When applied to

spirituality, it naturalizes the act of cultivating a personal belief system from various sources (a "buffett") and letting go of elements that no longer "serve" the user. The internal metric of utility ("does this work for me?") replaces the external metrics of truth ("is this doctrinally correct?").

4.2.3. Competing Rituals: The Mindfulness Economy

Digital platforms don't just provide information; they host competitive rituals that compete for users' time and engagement (Lövheim & Lynch, 2011). The Sunday service broadcast on YouTube or Facebook now has to compete for attention not only with other churches, but also with an infinite range of alternative meaning-making practices:

- Guided meditation sessions on Calm or Headspace.
- Yoga and wellness tutorials.
- Podcasts about self-optimization and philosophy.
- Immersive video game narratives or fandoms that provide community and purpose.

In this attention economy, spiritual content is pressured to conform to the algorithms of platforms that reward engagement. It favours content that resonates emotionally, therapeutically, personally, visually appealing, and unifying—exactly the hallmarks of the Creed of Deistic Therapeutic Morality and the "Buffett" offerings. Rituals that are demanding, intellectually complex, or ethically challenging are algorithmically disadvantaged.

4.2.4. Algorithmic Selection (Guidance) and the "Filter Balloon" of Faith

Ultimately, this shift is accelerated by algorithmic personalization. Platforms such as Google, YouTube, and TikTok use algorithms to recommend content based on past behaviours, creating a vicious cycle (Pariser, 2011). A user who shows interest in mindfulness can gradually receive more content about Buddhism, secular meditation, and wellness influencers, subtly building a coherent "spiritual" path for him. This process can create algorithmically assisted syncretism, where the machine (and not a religious authority!), becomes the unseen guide

assembling a personalized worldview. This reinforces the internal authority of the user's "taste" while hiding the external engineering that shapes that taste. In conclusion, the digital engine does not simply make the old forms of religion more accessible. Structurally, it encourages a new form of religious involvement, aligned with its own biases: non-hierarchical, choice-based, personalized, therapeutic, and subject to the metrics of the attention economy. This environment makes sustained, subdued commitment to a single institutional authority an increasingly countercultural act.

4.3. Conceptualizing the New Paradigm: From DTM to the "Spiritual Buffett"

The break with institutional authority and its digital engine has coagulated into a distinct, new paradigm in order to interact with the sacred. This paradigm can be understood on two levels: a common, minimal belief that forms its core ideology, and a dominant methodology that characterizes its practice.

4.3.1. Basic Faith: Deistic Therapeutic Morality (DTM)

Research among young Americans has identified a common, often inarticulate belief system called Deistic Therapeutic Morality (DTM) (Smith & Denton, 2005). Its five principles serve as the de facto creed for the new paradigm, perfectly suited to a pluralistic, therapeutic and digital culture: There is a God who created and orders the world. God wants people to be kind, nice, and fair to each other. The central purpose of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself. God is only involved in my life when it is needed in order to solve a problem. Good people go to heaven when they die. DTM is notable for what it omits: specific doctrines, demands for sacrifice, appeals to community loyalty, divine judgment, or a God who disrupts personal autonomy. The deity is a distant and benevolent therapist or cosmic life coach. This creed provides a flexible and undemanding theological foundation that creates a large, inclusive tent — ideal for people navigating a pluralistic digital marketplace where more demanding truth statements cause tension.

4.3.2. The dominant practice: the “Spiritual Buffet”

If DTM represents the creed, the “Spiritual Buffet” is the methodology practiced. It is the behavioural manifestation of the digital habitus applied in the field of meaning. This model is characterized by:

- *Syncretism as a method*: Deliberate selection and combination of beliefs, rituals, and practices from disparate religious and secular traditions (e.g., using a Buddhist mindfulness app, celebrating the winter solstice with pagan-inspired rituals, valuing the ethical teachings of Jesus, following the Stoic principles for resilience, etc.).

- *Sovereignty of the Consuming Self*: The individual is the supreme authority, the “chef” at the buffet. The main criterion for selection is pragmatic utility, often formulated in terms of psychological well-being: “Does this reduce my anxiety?” “Does it give me a sense of peace or purpose?” “Does it help me perform better?”

- *Low-cost, low-commitment engagement*: Practices are often private, downloadable, and time-limited. Someone may “try” a meditation practice or participate in a sound bath workshop without any long-term obligation to a community or faith.

- *Marketing spirituality*: Spiritual elements become products or services in a wellness and self-help marketplace, with influencers, branded content, and subscription models.

The “Spiritual Buffet” does not represent a coherent system, but a DIY process (Lévi-Strauss, 1966), in which individuals build a personal vision of the world from the fragments of cultural and religious traditions available in the global digital repository. This process is supported by the democratization of access by the digital engine and its logic of choice.

4.3.3. Fragmentation: the typology of the three cohorts

The new paradigm does not produce uniformity, but rather a fragmented landscape. Based on their stance towards institutional authority and the buffet model, one can therefore identify three distinct cohorts emerging among younger generations, especially in European and North American

contexts (based on patterns from European Social Survey data and sociological literature):

1. *Traditionalists* (~25%): This cohort explicitly rejects the buffet model, seeking stability in clear dogmas, moral boundaries, and community identity offered by institutional religion. They often take a countercultural stance, seeing the dominant culture (of the generation) as morally relativistic and spiritually superficial. Their religious involvement represents a conscious choice against the mainstream.
2. *Cultural Liberals* (~40-50%): This group constitutes the new main spiritual current and the main consumers of the “Spiritual Buffet.” They identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). Their supreme value is radical inclusion and personal authenticity. They are deeply sceptical of religious institutions, often considering them exclusive, dogmatic, or oppressive (especially in terms of gender and sexuality). Their spirituality is hybrid, therapeutic, and closely aligned.
3. *Secular nihilists* (~20-30%): This cohort rejects both institutional religion and the language of spirituality. They are materialistic, sceptical, or apathetic, seeing the world as meaningless. Their values often focus on personal freedom (a “negative freedom” to be disturbed), scientific realism, and pragmatic survival. For them, the market of meaning is empty; They are non-consumers in the spiritual economy.

This typology illustrates that the main cultural and religious tension of the future is not between the religious and the secular, but between traditionalists and cultural liberals – between a model of external, limited authority, and a model of internal, fluid authenticity. The digital environment structurally favours this second option, with the ethics of expressive individualism (Taylor, 2007) and digital consumerism.

4.4. Case Study: The “Buffett Spirituality” – Secular Counterculture

The paradigm of the “Spiritual Buffet” is not limited to explicitly religious or metaphysical elements. Its logic – the choice of principles for

life based on personal utility and well-being – extends into completely secular domains, where selected life philosophies fulfil a quasi-spiritual role. The popular interpretation of investor Warren Buffett's principles, which we call the "Buffett Spirituality," serves as a revealing case study of this phenomenon.

4.4.1. Principles as a secular creed

Although he is a completely secular financial figure, Warren Buffett has become an unexpected source of wisdom in life. Its widespread principles, distilled from letters and biographies of shareholders, form a coherent set of principles that reflect the structure of a secular creed:

- *Simplicity and frugality*: Rejection of consumerist excess and disorder in favour of a focused and modest lifestyle.

- *Long-term patience* ("The market is a tool for transferring money from impatient to persevering"): An ethic of deferred gratification and resilience against short-term emotional reactions.

- *Rational calm*: Emphasis on making clear and sober decisions, avoiding the "crowd noise" or media cycles.

- *Integrity and responsibility*: A deep sense of responsibility for one's own resources (financial and otherwise) and obligations to others.

4.4.2. Function in the Digital Attention Economy

Buffett's spirituality is gaining ground precisely because it functions as a countercultural antidote to the pathologies of the digital economy of attention that also fuel the "Spiritual Buffet." The digital environment thrives on:

- *Novelty and speed*: W. Buffett advocates slowness and patience.

- *Emotional reactivity*: Buffett promotes rational calm.

- *Personal branding and consumption*: Buffett models anti-materialistic simplicity.

- *Fragmentation and multitasking*: Buffett's philosophy places intense emphasis on a few key aspects.

Thus, the adoption of this "spirituality" represents a pragmatic act of self-optimization and mental hygiene against digital overload. It provides a stable and coherent framework of identity—a "secular sacred"—in a liquid and overwhelming world. It does not require belief

in the supernatural, but it does provide order, meaning, and a community of practice (e.g., followers of value investing, minimalist lifestyle forums).

4.4.3. Implications for the broader argument

This case study demonstrates two key points:

The universality of the "Buffett" logic: The methodology of selecting a personal belief system from the available cultural fragments applies as much to assembling a financial philosophy from Buffett's principles as it does to assembling a spiritual practice from Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer. The consuming self is the common denominator.

- *Existential emptiness and necessary values*: Withdrawal from institutional religion creates a vacuum not only for the spiritual meaning, but also for the existential frameworks that guide daily life and decision-making. This vacuum is filled by a competitive marketplace of offerings, where secular gurus like Buffett compete with religious traditions and wellness influencers in order to offer these frameworks. All are evaluated through the same filter of internal authority and pragmatic utility.

In conclusion, the "Buffett Spirituality" is not an anomaly, but a symptom of the same paradigm shift. It confirms that the basic dynamic is the shift from comprehensive, externally imposed worldviews (whether religious or ideological) to internally selected pragmatic toolsets for navigating life and achieving well-being. The digital environment is the delivery system and amplifier both for the problem (overload, anxiety) and for this category of solutions (selection, secular wisdom).

5. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY AND MEANING

5.1. For religious institutions: the dilemma of adaptation

The rise of the paradigm of the "Spiritual Buffet," fuelled by the digital engine, has profound implications that go beyond the sociology of religion, reaching the sphere of

community health, identity formation and the very fabric of public discourse.

5.1. For religious institutions: The dilemma of adaptation

Consecrated churches face a strategic paradox with two high-risk paths:

- *Path A: Adaptation.* It involves embracing the language and values of the cultural liberal mainstream – which emphasizes personal experience, inclusion, therapeutic benefits, and digital innovation. The risk is the loss of distinctiveness, becoming just another wellness or personal development brand on the digital market, thus moving away from its traditionalist core.

- *Path B: Withdrawal.* This path involves a conscious countercultural stance, reaffirmation of dogma, clear moral boundaries, and a strong community identity against the perceived chaos of the buffet. The risk is marginalization, shrinking into enclaves perceived as socially regressive or sectarian by the mainstream.

Most institutions will likely experience internal schisms in this regard as the wider fragmentation of society replicates within their walls.

5.2. Risks of the New Paradigm for Society:

Although the “Spiritual Buffet” empowers individual autonomy, it presents significant social challenges:

- *Spiritual narcissism:* Reducing faith to a tool for self-optimization can eclipse its traditional dimensions of self-transcendence, sacrifice, and obligation to others and the common good. The ultimate metric becomes the personal feeling, not truth or virtue.

- *Religious and ethical illiteracy:* A superficial, à la carte, engagement with traditions risks producing individuals who understand the “ingredients” of different beliefs, but who do not have a deep knowledge in a particular narrative, theology, or ethical system. This impoverishes public discourse and the capacity for rational moral debate.

- *Fragile community:* Buffett-type spirituality favours liquid communities based on fleeting affinity rather than solid communities of shared destiny and obligation. Connections created

around a joint yoga class or online meditation group can dissolve as easily as they form and this can compound the loneliness and anomie that may have spurred the spiritual quest in the first place.

- *Algorithmic determinism:* The unseen hand of algorithmic guidance in shaping an individual’s “buffet” raises questions regarding autonomy. Is spirituality truly self-written, or is it a product designed by platforms optimized for engagement?

5.3. The future of meaning: a fragmenting message

The long-term result is not a unified secular society, but a permanently fragmented landscape of meaning. The three cohorts – traditionalists, cultural liberals, secular nihilists – are likely to coexist with a dwindling common vocabulary and common ground. Public debates about ethics, identity, and purpose will become more difficult because they will stem from fundamentally different premises regarding authority, the good life, and the nature of reality itself.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study argued that the widely documented decline in institutional religious involvement among younger generations in the West is not a simple step toward secularism, but a paradigm shift in the very location and nature of religious authority. Driven by the structural biases of the digital media ecosystem, this move is shifting from the external, institutional authority towards the internal, self-authorizing spirituality. The digital environment acts as more than a context; It is an active engine that democratizes access, instils a consumerist habitus of choice, and creates a competitive economy of attention for rituals and meaning. We conceptualized the result of this shift as “Buffet spirituality” – a pragmatic, syncretic practice in which individuals select personal belief systems from a global digital menu, guided by the ultimate criterion of psychological utility and well-being. This practice is based on the fundamental creed of Deistic Therapeutic Morality, which provides a minimal, flexible, and undemanding theological framework. The societal landscape resulting from this shift is not

homogeneous, but fragmented into three distinct cohorts: Traditionalists (clinging to institutional authority), Cultural Liberals (the main consumers of the Buffet), and Secular Nihilists (people who completely reject the spiritual market). The case study of the "Buffet-type spirituality" demonstrated that this paradigm goes beyond what is explicitly religious, showing how the secular philosophies of life are equally well designed to provide existential frameworks and mental hygiene against the tensions of digital life. This confirms that the underlying dynamic represents the rise of the sovereign consuming self as the supreme architect of meaning, whether the materials come from religious traditions or secular wisdom. The implications are profound. Religious institutions face a dilemma between adaptation and reduction. Societies must face the risks of spiritual narcissism, religious illiteracy and fragile and liquid communities. The public square will likely become a more fractured space as these different cohorts, operating with different fundamental assumptions regarding authority and well-being, struggle to find common ground.

Directions for Future Research:

This analysis provides a macro-level framework that requires micro-level investigations.

Future research should focus on:

- Conducting ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews to document the lived experience of the "Buffet" practitioners, exploring their decision-making processes, the role of algorithms in discovering spiritual content, and the nature of the communities they form.

- Conducting algorithmic audits of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok in order to systematically map how they recommend and group spiritual content, potentially creating "filter bubbles" of faith.

- Investigate the long-term life outcomes and community resilience of individuals in the three cohorts, comparing in particular the well-being and social capital of the cultural liberals engaged in liquid communities with the traditionalists within strong institutions.

- Exploring the global dimensions of this change, examining how the "Spiritual Buffet" model is adopted, resisted, or transformed in non-Western, non-Christian contexts with different digital cultures and religious histories.

In conclusion, the fragmentation of religious authority represents a communicative phenomenon in essence. As the digital environment continues to evolve, so will the forms of spirituality it cultivates. Understanding this relationship is crucial not only for religion and media researchers, but also for anyone concerned about the future of community, identity, and meaning in a hyper-connected age.

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