

**“IS RELIGION RELEVANT TO AUSTRALIAN YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY?”**

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## 1.0 Introduction

This paper discusses the importance of religion in the life of Australian young people, drawing on data from Australian Bureau of Statistics and other specific studies into the religiosity of young people. A discussion on religion and spirituality acknowledges the changing nature of religious commitment among Australian young people and the way that seeing oneself as a reflexive project changes the way that authoritarian religions are viewed in Australia. The rise of fundamentalism is also discussed especially in the view of “risk society”. To conclude the paper, a discussion on the importance of religion in America is included, finishing off with comparisons between the importance of religion in the lives of young people in America and Australia.

## 2.0 Religious Commitment in Australia – “The Times They are a-Changing”

Considerable change has occurred in religious affiliation in Australia over the last 40 years. In 1971 the instruction “if no religion, write none” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007) was introduced to the Census of Population and Housing. Since this time, people identifying with “no religion” have progressively increased to about 16 percent in the overall population and to 20 percent among young adults in the 18-24 years age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). But when taking into account those respondents who did not adequately respond to the question to enable classification of their religion, just over a quarter of all persons stated they had no religion or did not clearly identify with any religion.

The Spirit of Generation Y project – a three year study into the spirituality of young Australians aged between 13-29 years – revealed that religious commitment was even less among the Generation Y. Only a small proportion of this age group is seriously committed to a religious worldview. For example only 15 percent expressed a serious commitment to the Christian faith and four percent to an alternative spirituality. While many of the respondents had an orientation towards a religion, this was a result of their childhood upbringing and they generally displayed a low level of commitment and nominal involvement in religious activities associated with their inherited religious settings (Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007).

In a study conducted among secondary students in Roman Catholic schools in Victoria, over 50 percent of a group of practising Catholic young people felt that their religion did not feed their spirituality and they did not see positive links between their religion and spirituality (Engbretson, 2002). It seems, therefore, that young people are making a clear distinction between religiosity and spirituality and that even among young people who practise a traditional religion such as Roman Catholicism, the Church has lost its influence among Generation Y.

Over 30 percent identified themselves as “humanist” and approximately 50 percent identified themselves as having no religion, while over 50 percent of respondents identified themselves as not believing in God or

being unsure about belief in God (Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007). The significant number of young people who identified themselves as having no religious affiliation, is a clear indicator that young people are not switching between different religious groups to any great extent, but are leaving religion altogether.

In a survey of young people who no longer identified with a traditional Christian religion, the major reason for leaving was “church failings,” in particular hypocrisy of church people and moralising. The moral teaching most objected to was the Church’s stance and teaching on homosexuality. Another significant reason was certain beliefs in the light of science and the perceived incompatibility of science and religion and the confusing role of an omnipotent, interventionist, but yet a loving God in the light of natural disasters (Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007).

### 3.0 The Self as a “Reflexive Project”

Sociologist Anthony Giddens points out that the tendency of generations in the late modern age to see the self as a “reflexive project” where “we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (Giddens, 1991, p.75), lends itself to a rejection of religious tradition and authoritarian meta-narratives, although incorporation of religious tradition into the reflexive self, especially non-theistic spirituality, is quite possible, but this is done on the terms of the individual.

Aspects of traditional culture are adopted rather than received without critique (Giddens, 1991), not in a once off process, but through continual re-evaluation and re-definition. Young people are therefore actively creative (Hughes, 2007) in putting together a worldview and a spirituality, where the formation of spirituality is seen as personal and not communal, “in which one believes personally what one personally wants to believe” (Hughes, 2007). This speaks of a desire for authenticity rather than relativism, where personal integrity as the achievement of an authentic self, comes from the integration of experiences within the narrative of the self (Giddens, 1991), where one’s loyalty to oneself comes before loyalty to handed down tradition, spirituality and perhaps especially to traditional religions. In other words, young people form their views on religion and spirituality in their own time and in their own way (Hughes, & Cook, 2006).

### 4.0 Religiosity and Spirituality

Although young people are leaving traditional faiths and religions in significant numbers, it would be a mistake to use religious observance or membership in organised faith communities as a gauge of the spirituality of young people today. Young people are not turning away from spirituality, but are energetically searching for meaning and answers to life’s big questions (Nilan, Julian, & Germov, 2007).

Religiosity denotes a commitment to a divine being, to a set of beliefs and practices, with an emphasis on moral and ethical code, transcendence and “otherworldliness.” Spirituality, however, may or may not involve a belief in a divine or higher power and talks more about a way of living in the world and a way of making meaning of one’s place in it.

Spirituality for many young people is often not about another world, but about this one (Tacey, 2002). Spirituality is a search for meaning and guiding ideals and values, which help young people to find their place in the world and to navigate through life’s challenges. Such spirituality is often practical and applied, developing a social conscience which focuses not only on one’s responsibilities towards each other as humans, but also for example on humanity’s ecological responsibilities.

Although the self as a reflexive project is a private journey, where one’s spirituality is worked out in one’s own time and in one’s own way, the pragmatic outworking of such spirituality is often collective and communal. In this way, spirituality for many young people is private *and* communal, internal *and* external. It is not communal in the process of spiritual formation and it does not take its navigational notes from authoritarian religion, but it develops a communal sensitivity and awareness and engages with broad public issues, such as racism, ecology, prejudice and the place of the most vulnerable in society, such as asylum seekers. It can be said that in this way young people in Australia have migrated away from the shores of organised religion and immigrated into the world of spirituality.

## 5.0 Risk Society and the Rise of Fundamentalism

Giddens argues that reflexivity of the self is experienced as a balance between opportunity and risk (1991). This perception of living in a risk society, motivates young people to search and “re”-search their identity to find one’s place in life. As one continues on this trajectory of self-actualisation, identity becomes something that is formed and shaped continually and not inherited as a given. This often leads young people in one of two directions.

One of the directions is a journey in search of a postmodern spirituality, a deeply personal eclectic spirituality that is not only informational about *who* young people are, but is also transformational in regards to *how* they live in the world (Tacey, 2002). This spirituality may or may not include belief in a divinity or higher power, but it characteristically transforms young people into people with a social conscience and “a kind of cosmic religious awareness” (Tacey, 2002, p.178) where the spiritual is also political.

The other journey is a search for security and a sense of belonging among likeminded people, a form of tribalism where beliefs and values are shared by everyone in the group and one’s experience in such a group brings not only external sanctuary, but ontological security. To have ontological security is to possess answers to fundamental existential questions that all people have (Giddens, 1991). Soren Kierkegaard points out that anxiety derives from “the possibility of freedom” (Giddens, 1991, p.47) and where

freedom is curbed by absolute truths—as is the case of fundamentalist groups that provide a position of safety and certainty—anxiety is reduced and security is increased.

For many young people this takes place in the context of fundamentalist Christianity or Islam. In her essay, *What are we Doing Wrong and What is Hillsong Doing Right?*, Monika Wheeler argues that much of the success of fundamentalist Christian groups such as Hillsong can be contributed to a sense of community and therefore security and certainty in an age of risk and insecurity (2005).

The perception of risk and insecurity become apparent when God leaves the world stage. When Nietzsche declared that God is dead, humanity was suddenly responsible to find non-theistic explanations for personal and communal “blessings” and calamities, rather than attributing such events to an interventionist divine being. There is therefore a close connection between secularisation and the perception of risk (Beck, 2006) and the increase in the membership among some fundamentalist groups such as Pentecostals.

The increase in the numbers of Pentecostals in Australia can, however, be easily overstated. As noted above, statistics show that young people today are not transferring between Christian denominations, but are leaving religion altogether. The misperception that Pentecostal groups are a significant part of youth spirituality in modern Australia is easily made as one observes the decline of youth among traditional Christian denominations. In many ways, the increase in youth membership in Pentecostal groups is inversely proportional to membership of young people in traditional Christian denominations. It must be noted, however, that the total membership of Pentecostals of all ages in Australia is only around one percent of Australia’s population or around 200,000 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007).

## 6.0 Religious Commitment in the USA

Religion is an important part of culture and life in the United States, much more important than among comparable western nations and similar to the religious convictions of people in many third world countries in Africa and South America.

The 44-nation survey of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, subtitled *Among Wealthy Nations, U.S. Stands Alone in its Embrace of Religion*, identified that 59 percent of people in the United States say that religion plays a *very* important role in their lives (Albright, Kohut, McIntosh, Stokes, & Gross, 2002). Recent studies found that 92 percent of North Americans say that they believe in God and more than half of Americans attend religious services regularly and pray daily (Miller, 2008).

These statistics are in stark contrast to other affluent western nations. Only 21 percent in Germany agreed with the statement that “religion plays a very important role in my life,” 11 percent in France and 27 percent in traditionally religious and Roman Catholic Italy (Albright, Kohut, McIntosh, Stokes, & Gross, 2002). Although Australia was not part of the Pew Global Attitudes Project, similar studies in

Australia have identified that only 13 percent of the population identified religious faith as “very important” and this decreased to 9 percent among 15 to 29 year olds (Evans, 2009).

In the United States 75 percent of people in Generation Y identified with a particular faith (Miller, 2010), which is around 25 percentage points higher than in Australia (Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007). Studies into young adults under 30 in the United States show that young people believe very similarly to older generations about life after death, heaven and hell and miracles, with around 75 percent believing in life after death and heaven, 62 percent in hell and 78 percent in miracles (Miller, 2010).

Not only are young people in the United States actively religious with traditional religious convictions, young people under the age of 30 are *more* inclined than their elders to believe that their religion is the “one true path to eternal life” (Miller, 2010, p.17). Nearly three in ten of religiously affiliated young people (29 percent) believe this, compared to 23 percent of religiously affiliated people 30 years or older (Miller, 2010). In other words, when it comes to the faith convictions of young people in America, they are more conservative in this area than are older generations of Americans.

## 7.0 Comparison – Australia and USA

Although studies show that there is some move away from traditional religions among young people in the United States, this shift away from traditional religions is very small compared to Australia. The critique of religious ideas begins among university students in the United States, whereas in Australia it already happens among primary aged children (Hughes, 2007).

Perhaps the most significant contrast among young people in the United States when compared to young people in Australia is the lack of a deeply personal eclectic postmodern spirituality that is individually constructed according to one’s own experiences and journey, which is very common among young people in Australia. Unlike their Australian counterparts, if American young people embrace a religion, they embrace their parents’ faith, which is often a traditional authoritarian based religion. They rarely switch between denominations but “believe in the God their parents handed on to them” (Bachand, 2010, p.140).

For those Americans who are religious, their religious convictions and practices are also stronger and more active than those of Australians. The weekly church attendance of Americans is almost double to that of Australians (39 percent vs 20 percent) and *more* than double for young people (33 percent vs 14 percent) (Miller, 2010; Nilan, Julian, & Germov, 2007).

The faith of Americans is also more conservative than in Australia, with 34 percent of Americans considering themselves “born again” or “evangelical” (Kosmin, & Keysar, 2009) compared to around one percent in Australia who identify themselves as “Pentecostal” (Australian Bureau of Statistics,

2007). It is not only socially acceptable for young people to have strong religious convictions in the United States, but it provides social benefits to young people (Bachand, 2010).

## 8.0 Conclusion

America is a religious country that was clearly established on overtly religious values by its founding fathers. Australia is a more secular country, which did not have a clearly religious beginning, although faith communities have been part of Australia's history since its birth. In America traditional religions are widely accepted by all generations to this day, while Australians identify less and less with organised religion. The apparent secularity of Australians, however, does not mean that Australians do not embrace spirituality or don't search for religious meanings and values in life.

Where young people in America are clearly religious, it can be said that young people in Australia have moved away from being religious to being spiritual. And while church attendance and the practice of one's faith is a good gauge in America of young people's religiosity and spirituality, no such gauge can be used in Australia. In Australia, one needs to dig deeper and to look beyond the surface to find spirituality among young people. But the search is well worth it, as many young Australians are actively creative in putting together a spirituality that has authenticity, integrity and honesty, especially towards themselves and their own experiences in the world around them.

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