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# REVOLVE

## RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

By David Fagg, Youth Research Officer

### Contents

#### Introduction: Religion & Spirituality

#### Religion & Spirituality I - Where do we stand?

#### 1. Religious Demography amongst Australian young people

#### 2. Social trends that shape religion and spirituality

- Postmodernity
- The Death of Christendom
- Multiculturalism
- Consumerism

#### 3. Summary

#### Reference List

### Introduction: Religion & Spirituality

Religion is hot news in Australia right now. There is a focus on 'extremist' religion, usually Islamic. Family First, a political party with roots in the Assemblies of God, succeeded in getting a senator elected at the last federal election. Both the Prime Minister and Treasurer have visited Hillsong Church recently. In Victoria, a race and religious vilification case has just finished. Intelligent Design, as alternative theory of origin, has garnered much media attention.

But how do young people interact with issues of religion and spirituality? Do they think about their spiritual journey in the same way as previous generations? What are the differences?

*Even where they live in religious households and local communities that try to shield them from a secular environment, youth in industrialised, urbanised societies see people negotiating life and forming values more from their own initiative, with less dependence on traditional religious guidance.*

Crawford and Rossiter

Australia, since white settlement, has been a defiantly secular nation. We have resisted attempts by religion to play a defining role in our public story. Our politicians don't quote hymns and biblical texts in their speeches<sup>1</sup>. Our cherished authors, in the main, reject a way of life guided by the transcendent. Our academics deride religion and strive for scientific objectivity. Our churches and other religious communities are scorned, and faith is often seen as a crutch for the weak. Clergy are criticised for speaking out on public issues. Although many of us came from so-called "Christian nations", Australia also represented an opportunity to live without the constraints of repressive religion. David Tacey finds several reasons for the 'denial of the sacred' in Australian society, including secularism, anti-authoritarianism, colonial youthfulness, modernity & progress.

But it seems that our desperate attempts to stifle the religious instinct have failed, instead provoking a deep spiritual hunger, one that is shared by many young people. As Christians working with such young people, how should we understand their longings? How can we respond in truthful, authentic and relevant ways? These two questions shape the next two editions of Revolve:

**1. Where do we stand?**

The social trends that are shaping spirituality amongst young people.

**2. How can we move forward?**

Some approaches that may be useful as we serve young people.

## Religion & Spirituality I - Where do we stand?

None of us construct spirituality in a vacuum. We are shaped by the atmosphere of the society we live in and our immediate communities (school, work, family, church), as well as our individual conscience and experience of God. An example of faith being shaped by broader social trends is the breakdown of the "local parish". People are now able to travel long distances to churches of their preference, influenced by the prevailing forces of consumerism and the availability of convenient transport.

Given that faith is shaped by social trends, it is important to understand the 'signs of the times'. In this Revolve, we will look at four social trends that impact young people's spirituality. Each of these deserves a separate paper! If these ideas are familiar to you, simply treat this paper as a reminder to think more deeply about *how* you respond. If they're not so familiar, then this paper should be a helpful introduction to some complex themes.

**A. Post-modernity**

**B. The Death of Christendom**

**C. Multiculturalism + Globalisation**

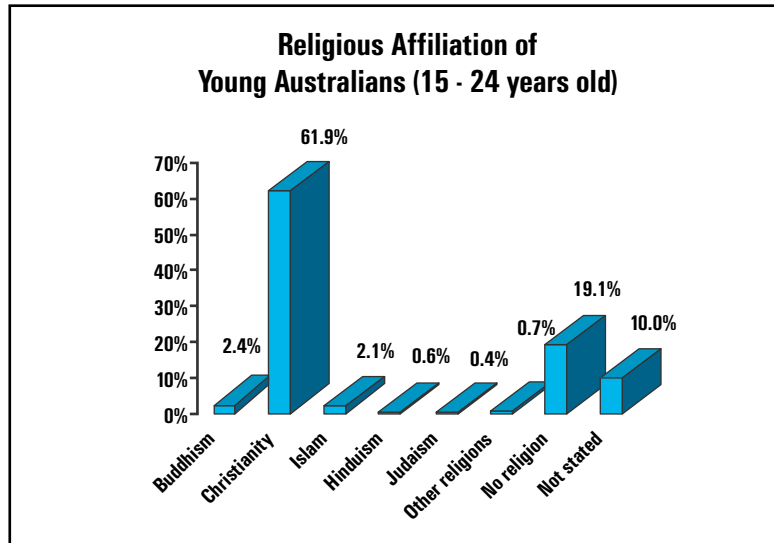
**D. Consumerism**

But first, let's survey the statistical evidence for religion and spirituality in Australia's young people, keeping mind that statistics are a poor tool for measuring spiritual passion!

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<sup>1</sup> Although some are beginning to realise the power of the Christian vote. Hence the visits by politicians to Hillsong, and preference deals with the Family First party.

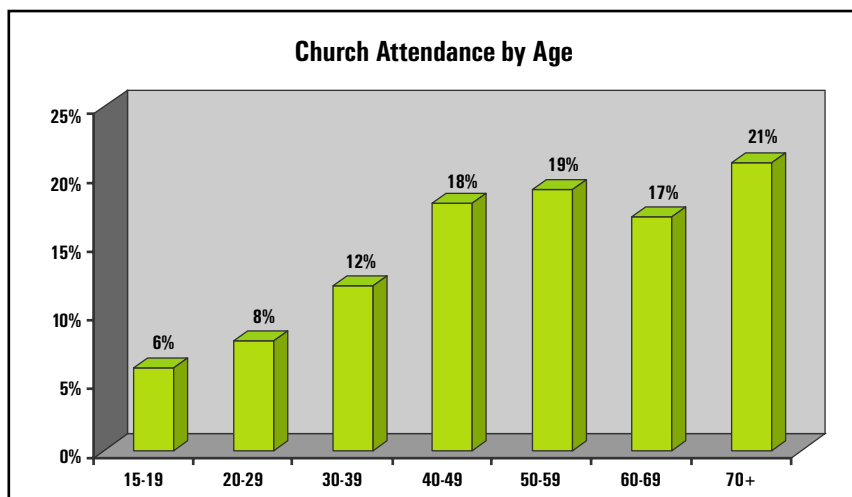
## 1. Religious Demography amongst Australian young people



Graph 1 - Religious Affiliation  
Source: ABS Census, 2001

- 61.9% equals 1,590,365 young people who affiliate with Christianity (see Graph 1).
- 14% of church attenders (60,900 people) were young people aged 15-29 years old (see Graph 2).
- That means at least 1,529,465 (or over 96% of) 15-24 year old Christians are not participating in a mainstream Christian church.

There is a profound disconnect amongst Australian youth - they may 'affiliate' with Christianity, but do not actively participate in the church. That is not to say that they are not participating in some form of Christian community, but it does strongly indicate that the mainstream churches are not able to connect with those who espouse belief, let alone reach out to those young people who are not Christian at all.



Graph 2 - Church Attendance by Age  
Source: NCLS, 2001

In addition, the percentage of young people who stated "no religion" is a greater percentage than the broader population at large: 19.1% compared to 15.3%. This suggests that young Australians are less likely to identify with religion, and that Australia's population, as it ages, is less and less likely to identify with religion.

But does that mean that Australian young people are irreligious, disinterested in questions of ultimate meaning and identity? Are they all materialist and rationalist, and think that there is no meaning outside our senses? Absolutely not. In fact, in some studies, up to 21% of young people reported a religious experience of some kind. It simply means that young people are looking for spiritual insight, experience and resources in places other than the church.

## 2. What are the social trends that shape religion and spirituality amongst Australian young people?

The changes to the way young people approach religion and spirituality need to be seen in context. The context is the way Australian society has changed over the past century. Let's keep in mind that these are broad social trends, and so will affect different young people in different ways.

### A. Post-modernity

*Postmodernity is not a permanent fixture. It is not a place to land. There is no real estate to build on, no viewpoint stationary enough to camp out on. It is a world in transition, a tunnel to the next global metaphysic, a vehicle that will transport its party to another way of thinking...*

Andrew Jones

If we had to name the biggest 'enemy of the faith' in recent years, postmodernity would win hands down in Christian circles. For most Christians, postmodernity equals **relativism**. But for the large majority of young people, the norms of postmodernity are like the water they swim in, the air they breathe.

**relativism**  
the belief that all truths are equally valid

#### What is modernity?

To understand what postmodernity is responding to, we must understand modernity. Modernity is an intellectual school of thought that has its roots in the **Enlightenment** and the **Industrial Revolution**. It has a number of characteristics:

**enlightenment**  
intellectual movement in the 18th century. It emphasized the human reason in understanding the world

- **Reason:** human thought became the standard by which to measure every worldview. Christianity began to measure itself against reason.
- **Objectivity:** the idea that humans can successfully apply scientific principles of analysis to every sphere of society, including religion.
- **Progress:** the belief that modern development was desirable and inevitable in every culture. Christian mission often became blurred with this 'civilising' mission.
- **All problems are solvable:** as science gained more relevant facts, the social evils of disease, poverty, violence and inequality would be solved.
- **Individualism:** the belief that people are free to pursue fulfilment on the basis of choice and preference, separate from institutions such as the church.

Modernity has many positive features, including an emphasis on individual conscience. But it also failed to recognise that reason and knowledge could be used for good and evil. Nazism, fascism, scientific racism and the nuclear bomb all have their sources in modernist thinking.

#### Modernity and Postmodernity

Gradually, scholars began to posit the idea that not everything was knowable. They proposed that meta-narratives are not true in an absolute sense. They proposed that **meta-narratives** (scientism, capitalism, communism, Christianity) are stories told by those who hold power in society, while the stories of minorities are suppressed.

**meta-narrative**  
all-encompassing story. Presented as 'the way things are'

For example, scientism is an example of a meta-narrative, because it claims that *everything* can be understood in scientific terms. We can understand the world by applying scientific principles to it. Post-modernity suggests that science is a way of trying to control the world by reducing it to what we can see and verify through our senses.

The important thing to grasp here about postmodernity is that it sees stories as having an agenda or a purpose - they are not simply 'the way things are'.

However, postmodernity is not simply an intellectual movement. People may not have even heard of the term 'postmodernity', but will act and think in ways that are postmodern. Use the word "postmodernity" with most teenagers, and they won't understand you. Why is this?

Technological changes in areas such as communications and travel mean that people have been exposed to many other worldviews, religions and ways of life. This has the effect of relativising their culture and worldview. To use a simple example, my Anglo-Saxon heritage has taught me that dinner etiquette includes sitting on a chair at a table, using a knife and fork. However, my exposure to other cultures, through travel and multicultural friendships has relativised my dinner etiquette worldview. I no longer think that my Anglo-Saxon heritage is the only 'normal' in the world.

### How should we respond to post-modernity?

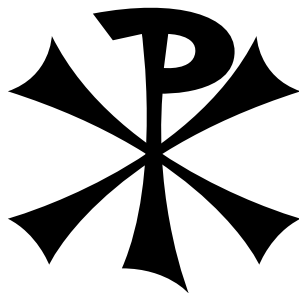
We shouldn't be afraid of post-modernity. It corrects some of the excesses of modernity, and encourages us to seek out the marginal and silenced voices in our world. It also encourages Christians to realise that we do not know all of God's truth - an attitude of humility that will assist us immensely in our missional efforts.

Postmodernity is also a transitional worldview. The culture will not revert back to modernity, but nor will it be postmodern in the future. However, despite its transitional and temporary nature, postmodernity can tell us something about the cultural landscape we'll inhabit in the future, and something about the people who will inhabit that landscape.

#### The impact of post-modernity on young people's spirituality

- Suspicion of religious authorities.
- Not likely to accept truth simply because an 'authority' says so.
- I make my truth - I do not have to conform to established ways of thinking.
- An emphasis on knowing only part of the truth.
- An emphasis on dialogue as a way of knowing more truth.
- Willingness to hold contradictory beliefs.
- Absolute truth claims are seen to be exclusive, even oppressive.
- Personal experience is more valid than tradition, reason or scripture.
- Can produce a sense of apathy, scepticism and even despair.
- Openness to spirituality, particularly traditions that have been suppressed by the church.
- An attraction to people's stories, rather than to belief systems.

## B. The Death of Christendom



Constantine had a dream in which the God of the Christians told him to place the Chi Rho (at left) symbol of Christianity on his soldier's shields and he would win the day...

In gratitude, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire...<sup>2</sup>

### What is Christendom?

Christendom is a word used to describe the overlap between the church and state power.

- Before the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion in AD 312, Christianity was a marginal and persecuted movement.
- When made the state religion, Christianity gained prestige, official protection and immense wealth. Unsurprisingly, the church began to bless the status quo, rather than critique it.
- Over time, the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the World became less clear. The aims of the church became synonymous with the aims of empire.
- The church used the means of empire to achieve its aims. For example, the Crusades aimed to reclaim the Holy Land for Christianity. Instead of using the methods of Jesus and Paul (evangelism by peaceful persuasion) they used the violent methods of empire.
- The empire needed unified front, so the church became homogenous. Constantine forced church leaders to produce a creed that would be the standard for Christian belief (the Nicene Creed).
- Christian groups that dissented from Christendom were persecuted as heretics and criminals.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/timelines/britain/rom\\_constantine\\_i.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/timelines/britain/rom_constantine_i.shtml)

The church and state were inextricably wound together, each reinforcing and validating the other. It was undergirded by the belief that "God is on our side" - politically, economically, culturally and militarily.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch compare the early church with Christendom:

<b>The Early Church: Apostolic and Post-Apostolic (AD 32 - 313)</b>	<b>Advance and Triumph of Christendom Mode (313 - current)</b>
Did not have dedicated sacral buildings. Often underground and persecuted	Buildings became central to the notion, and experience, of church
Grassroots movement	Institutional-hierarchical notion of leadership and structure
Church is on the margins of society	Church is perceived as central to society
Missionary, incarnational-sending church	Attractional forms of mission

### Examples of Christendom practice

The church and state intertwined in many ways. Here are a few:

- **Baptism** - baptism was a mark of citizenship of a city. To refuse baptism or to refuse to have your children baptised, or to restrict baptism to those who believed, was a crime against the state. The Anabaptists were persecuted for this, as they practised "believer's baptism".
- **Forced conversion**
- **Legislated morality** (usually biased towards the Old Testament)
- **Obligatory tithing & church attendance.**
- **Crusades** - military/religious operations blessed by religious leaders
- **Monarchy** - seen to be chosen/ordained by God.
- **Mission** - "civilising" was integral to mission.
- **Church offences, such as heresy, were made criminal offences**

### Consequences of Christendom

- A weakened criticism of the government of the day
- A tendency to see one's own nation as godly, blessed and included by God, and other nations as pagan or heathen
- Suppression of Christian groups that were not 'orthodox'
- Downplaying of Christian values that threatened the status quo
- Lack of credibility to marginalised groups

### The Death of Christendom

Christendom does not exist anymore, in terms of an explicit partnership between the state and the church. That was destroyed by conflict between popes and emperors, the insistence on individual faith in the Reformation and the emergence of science and reason as the dominant criteria for truth.

However, that does not mean that Christendom has not left scars. More importantly, Australian Christians often still operate as if we were in Christendom, or as if this were desirable. As Hirsch and Frost comment: *"Constantine, it seems, is still the emperor of our imaginations."*

### **The Legacy of Christendom in Australia**

In Australia, Christendom has never really taken root, perhaps because of our convict history, in which Protestant churches were identified with the rulers and were therefore resented. Also, those who came to Australia may have seen Australia as a place to break free of the stifling bonds of religion.

However, for most of its white history, Australia has been a Christendom nation. The Church has been allowed a privileged, if resented, place in the public sphere. "Christian values" have shaped laws and public policy, and in turn, the state has shaped Australian religion. In the 20th century, and in the current context, the Australian church has believed (less strongly) that it has a right to be at the centre of the public sphere.

### **Recent or current examples of Australian Christendom practice:**

- Christian prayers in parliament
- Politicians gaining office on an explicitly Christian platform
- Public holidays on Christian festivals eg. Good Friday, Christmas Day
- Chaplains in schools, the armed forces
- RE in primary schools
- Gideon Bibles in motels and schools
- Nativity scenes in shopping centres
- Churches receiving tax concessions on land
- Pastors not having to declare fringe benefits for tax purposes
- Ban on Sunday trading

My intent with these examples is not to say that these things are good or bad, but to demonstrate the presence of Christendom. Christendom, as Frost and Hirsch suggest, is less about specific practices and more about the way we imagine the relationship between the church and the world.

### **The impact of the death of Christendom on young people's spirituality**

- Biblical illiteracy - many young people are not familiar with the language, imagery and concepts contained in the Bible
- Lack of patience with Christians who are perceived to be pushing Christian faith and values into the public sphere, especially from the 'conservative' edge of the church.
- Decline in church numbers - declining cultural loyalty to church
- Young people will be dissatisfied with traditional models of church
- Church that practices community-building, dialogue, journeying in faith will be attractive to young people.
- Openness to Christianity that is not bound up with institutions
- Impatience with formal church expressions.

## C. Multiculturalism

Australia, for a long time, was dominated by Anglo (Anglo-Saxon; Anglo-Celtic) traditions, customs and worldviews. People from different cultures comprised a very small minority of our country, not large enough to affect the cultural 'atmosphere' of Australia. Even though Australia (from 1901) was a democracy, it was still a nation that was consciously 'British'. This changed in the post-World War II era.

Travel, communications and globalisation have meant that we experience many differing and/or conflicting worldviews, cultures, lifestyles, languages, religions. In such circumstances, it becomes difficult to keep affirming that white, Anglo-Saxon culture should be the standard by which all others are judged.

### A multi-ethnic, multi-religious society

Migratory travel and refugee movements over the last 50 years have meant that previously monocultural societies have changed incredibly. Australia is no longer a predominantly Anglo society. Australia has incorporated many different foods, languages, worldviews and religions. Tides of immigrants and refugees have made their way to Australia, from Greece, Italy, Vietnam, Korea, Cambodia, China, Serbia, Croatia, Sudan, Ethiopia etc. These were either 'economic migrants' or migrations made necessary by civil war and oppression in home countries.

What is the effect of such migration? How did it, and how does it continue to, change Australian society with respect to religion and spirituality?

Australia once assumed it was a 'Christian' nation. Even if the church was not as popular in Australia as in England, Australians considered themselves 'Christian'. Other cultures and religions were seen to be antithetical to Anglo culture and inferior to Christianity. This view was strengthened by a lack of knowledge and exposure to other religions.

When we were white, Christian and British in our outlook, our worldview was affirmed everywhere we looked. With the migrations described above came many different cultures, religions and expressions of Christianity.

This has had two effects:

1. Anglo Christianity is relativised by the presence of other expressions of Christianity, such as Greek and Serbian Orthodox, Italian Catholicism etc. Anglo Christianity is no longer the only Christian option.
2. Christianity itself is relativised by the presence of other religions. These had always been in Australia, but in such small numbers as to be hardly visible, and easily suppressed or ignored. Now large numbers of adherents to Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Ba'hai, Hinduism and other religions are establishing themselves in Australia. It is obvious that Christianity is not the only option in terms of religion or spiritual path.

### Impact of multiculturalism on young people's spirituality

- Young people are likely to have a non-Christian or non-Anglo Christian background
- Anglo church forms may not connect with young people from non-Anglo backgrounds
- Young people have to negotiate many different belief systems
- Young people may be less willing to believe in absolute truths - diversity of worldviews tends to discourage this.
- "Cultural Christianity" is in decline
- Young people may be part of quite vibrant ethnocentric congregations, which are an important part of their cultural heritage

## D. Consumerism

Whether you call it affluence, a rise in discretionary income, or triumphant capitalism, it is clear that Australia enjoys a standard of living far beyond most of the world, and far beyond the experience of previous Australian generations.

Consumerism is the ideology of acquisition, and the belief that having more will result in greater satisfaction in life. In his important book, *Affluenza*, Clive Hamilton points out that most Australians are pre-occupied with an endless cycle of working and buying, in order to gain fulfilment that cannot be gained through working and buying.

Why is this topic relevant to discussion about young people's spirituality? Because discussion of religion and spirituality is about questions of ultimate meaning, we must examine other sources of allegiance in young people's lives. As Anne Greenberg states:

*While religion - even in its more pluralistic and informal form - is a fundamental part of identity for young people, it is also in competition with all other sources of "achievement" from which identity can be acquired. The role religion plays in young people's lives is negotiated in the context of a range of concerns where religion may not be primary.*

That is, religion and spirituality may be important to young people, but there are other important factors into which they are investing time and energy. In Australia, one of these factors is creating an identity based on what one buys.

### Impact of consumerism on young people's spirituality

- Consumerism is profoundly centred on the self. A consumerist mindset is a major barrier to becoming part of a religion or becoming more spiritual, which implies a surrender of the self to a greater, more powerful and complete, identity or power.
- Consumerism encourages people to 'shop around' for what they want, and to use their consumption to construct an image for themselves, whether through clothes, cars, houses, kitchen appliances etc. Authentic religion and spirituality, again, requires that people give up their images of themselves.
- Young people are more likely to have goals in life which revolve around the acquisition of more goods and services. Moreover, these acquisitions are increasingly going to be seen as "needs" not "wants". Young people will, following on from the previous generation, see luxury items as necessary to a satisfying life. Spiritual questions may well be subordinated to these priorities.

### 3. Summary

Australian young people are affected by many social trends, which impact their approach to religion and spirituality. The social trends we've surveyed here are:

- **Postmodernity**
- **Death of Christendom**
- **Multiculturalism**
- **Consumerism**

These trends impact young people in a variety of ways, including:

- A suspicion of established religious communities
- An emphasis on personal experience, rather than what is 'true'.
- A concentration on the self
- The need to negotiate personal meaning in a pluralist context.
- An openness to questions of spirituality

In the next Revolve, we will look at where we can go from here. Given what we know about their culture, how do we engage with young people on the level of religion and spirituality?

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