

The 2021 Australian “Mark ‘No Religion’” Campaign

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Since the Second World War, Australia, like many other Western nations, witnessed a significant rise in people claiming no religious affiliation. In 1947, ‘religious nones’ represented less than one percent of the Australian population.¹ This percentage increased to 6.7 per cent in 1971, 16.6 per cent in 1996, and 38.9 per cent in 2021 — with the percentage having more than doubled in the last two decades alone.² ‘No Religion’ now stands as the second most common religious affiliation recorded in the Australian national census after Christianity (43.9 per cent).³

A voluntary question on religious affiliation has been included as part of the Australian census throughout its entire history. In the first national census in 1911, the question on religious affiliation was open response, allowing respondents to state if they did not have a religion via free text. In the 1971 census, the open response religion question was revised to explicitly state: ‘If no religion write none’. A check box list of religions was introduced in the 1991 census and included a category for ‘No Religion’ at the bottom of the list as well as an option for free text. In 2016, the ‘No Religion’ box was moved to the top of the list and remained there on the 2021 census form.

While the census form provided from 2016 an explicit box at the top of the list to tick ‘No Religion’, these changes were not enough for some. This paper thus discusses a small yet ambitious subcommunity of Australian nonbelievers that aim to ensure that religion is not unfairly privileged in contemporary society. While they do not have a specific identity per se, they represent a network of like-minded individuals whom we will call the ‘active irreligious’, that is, nonbelievers who participate in irreligious organisations and activism.

In Australia, there is quite an array of these organisations. For example, activist atheist organisations such as the Atheist Foundation of Australia and Sydney Atheists, are equally joined by other groups upholding principles of secular humanism and secular rationalism, in their beliefs that atheism should be socially accepted, that science and rationality are opposed to religion, and that pro-secular ideals such as separation of church and state are worth advocating and defending in the public sphere. Between them, these organisations carry out a variety of activities from hosting social events, to conducting academic presentations, to

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¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Special Feature: Trends in Religious Affiliation* (Catalogue No 4102.0, 27 May 1994)

<<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs%40.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/10072ec3ffc4f7b4ca2570ec00787c40!OpenDocument>>.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Religious Affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the Changes in Reported Religion in the 2021 Census* (Report, 4 July 2022) <<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>>.

³ See *ibid.*

sponsoring the lecture tours of popular pro-atheist speakers, and as will be addressed in this paper, to supporting public campaigns to impact on social policy.

One such initiative was the ‘Mark “No Religion”’ campaign from 2021 — a public awareness project spearheaded by a coalition of these very irreligious organisations prior to the most recent national census — which aimed to persuade religiously ambivalent Australians to mark ‘No Religion’ on their census form. Featuring posters and an information website,⁴ as well as promotion via social media platforms, the stated goal of the ‘Mark “No Religion”’ campaign was to ensure that the religious population of Australia were not over-represented in national statistics and that accurate information was being gathered in relation to the religious makeup of Australia. To achieve this, the website⁵ clarified to visitors what the status of ‘No Religion’ actually entails and encouraged visitors — through presenting a range of hypothetical cases — to reflect on whether a non-religious status may apply to them. For example, a picture of a decayed religious building is captioned ‘No longer believe in God? Mark “No Religion”’. Another has a cross separated from its rosary with the text reading ‘Lapsed Catholic? Mark “No Religion”’. In these examples, reassurance is provided with respect to the meaning of non-religion — as a non-religious status does not necessarily denote lack of belief in the existence of god(s) as per atheism, but rather, a lack of affiliation with a religion. Finally, as if speaking directly to the almost 48,000 Australians who marked ‘Jedi’ as their religious identity on their census form in 2016,⁶ the campaign suggested ‘No Religion’ as a more appropriate response for those who were unsure of how to answer. It is accompanied by a picture of a ‘Jedi Knight’ with a colander on his head (a reference to the parody religion Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) with the caption ‘Can’t decide? Mark “No Religion”’.

Regarding the active irreligious, the reasoning behind their support for this particular campaign is symptomatic of a larger pattern of behaviour that tends to dominate their dealings with religion, that is, the active irreligious tend to see religion in the public sphere as representing a risk. In order to explain this, it is first necessary to address the cultural context the active irreligious are embedded within, and then go on to discuss the relevance of risk theory as understood by Beck.⁷ For Beck, who regarded the changing nature of risk as a central and defining characteristic of contemporary society, risks are fundamentally geared towards the future. They are anticipatory — threatening catastrophic consequences that have yet to occur, and through doing so, providing a stimulus for corrective action. But at the same time, risks are also open to casual interpretation — able to be altered, dramatized, and even diminished, in accordance with the knowledge about them.⁸

Gower⁹ conducted participant observation of 15 gatherings and interviewed 31 active irreligious individuals between the last two national censuses. He uncovered an application of risk dynamics through how these irreligious groups regard Australian social and political life as continuing to unfairly privilege religious traditions in a number of ways, despite the drop in

⁴ Census 21 Alliance, *Census 21: Not Religious? Mark ‘No Religion’* (Web Page) <<http://censusnoreligion.org.au/>>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Census Reveals Australia’s Religious Diversity on World Religion Day’ (Media Release, 18 January 2018) <<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/8497F7A8E7DB5BEFCA25821800203DA4?OpenDocument#>>.

⁷ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Sage Publications, 1992).

⁸ See *ibid.*

⁹ Rhys Gower, ‘Exploring Trajectories of Active Atheist Identity Formation in Australia’ (PhD Thesis, Western Sydney University, 2021).

number of Christians in census data.¹⁰ A common theme is a belief among the active irreligious that the religious possess an unfair advantage within the Australian political sphere — a privileged voice when it comes to policy making — from which the religious are able to advocate or oppose social and economic policy in accordance with their beliefs.¹¹ From this, religiously justified objections in areas such as voluntary euthanasia, LGBTIQ+ rights, stem-cell research, and abortion debates are subsequently heeded, and thus, come to represent an undue risk to the active irreligious. Similarly, active irreligious members from this sample also discussed religious influence in public schools (including the National Student Wellbeing Program, formerly known as the National School Chaplaincy Program) as well as the tax-exempt status enjoyed by religious entities as lacking justification.

This risk perception is derived largely from a secularist ideology formed specifically in line with, and in the spirit of, classic modernist assumptions — specifically that of rationalisation, intellectualisation, and disenchantment (as per Weber¹²). Indeed, the active irreligious demonstrate an overt appreciation for science, they ferociously differentiate between the natural and the supernatural spheres, and they endorse the modernist metanarrative in which the secular is considered as having emancipated itself from the irrationality of pre-modern superstition and mysticism. It is from this grounded, ‘this-worldly’ belief set that the active irreligious then become unwilling (or perhaps unable) to entertain the notion that religious elements — including miracles, god(s), and afterlives — may operate under differing rules to that of the natural world. Instead, the active irreligious subject all phenomena (including religious phenomena) to the same laws and principles that govern nature in order to evaluate credibility or ‘realness’. As a result, justifications going beyond what is ‘this-worldly’ are considered baseless at best, and at worst, infringing on human rights and equality (and thus, presenting a societal risk).¹³

To be clear, public religion — that is, the perceived application of religious doctrines to political, economic, and social life — becomes a risk to the active irreligious not because it represents an undesirable outcome for their community, but because it reflects the *probability* of such. As they see it, if left unchecked, there is a *likelihood* that religious influence in public life can lead to undesirable outcomes for nonbelievers — and it is this perception that incentivises the active irreligious to take corrective action. Their subsequent response — the means by which the irreligious attempt to mitigate and avoid these religious risks — is to pursue secularism, a society which places restrictions on where and when religious ideas can be engaged with (which for the most part, pertains to limiting religion to the private sphere).

It is through noting this behavioural pattern that we can employ Beck’s risk framework¹⁴ as a method of interpreting irreligious behaviour, for in line with Beck’s conceptualisation, the term ‘risk’ refers to both the probability of an undesirable outcome as well as a systematic means by which undesirable outcomes are dealt with. In this case, it is through engagement with their ‘this-worldly’ belief system that the active irreligious come to perceive religious influence in the public sphere as representing a risk. This in turn incentivises the active irreligious to take irreligious action — such as advocating for secularism — in order to mitigate the perceived risk. Indeed, the degree with which religion is perceived as a risk is a major crux upon which

¹⁰ See *ibid.*

¹¹ See *ibid.*

¹² Max Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’ in Hans Heinrich Gerth and C Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Routledge, 2009) 129–56.

¹³ See Gower (n 9).

¹⁴ See Beck (n 7).

the active irreligious in Australia operate, effectively informing several of the more characteristic actions which differentiate them from ‘non-active’ atheists and agnostics. Through provoking varying degrees of fear and alarm among the active irreligious, perceptions of religion as a risk determine levels of disapproval for religious sentiment in public life. This subsequently incentivises irreligious group membership and activism.¹⁵

Returning to the ‘Mark “No Religion”’ campaign, we can now understand this initiative as an elaborate exercise in risk management. It was ultimately created to reduce the perceived privileging of religious bodies in Australian society, and we can indeed find evidence of this religious risk perception within the ‘Mark “No Religion”’ campaign itself. First off, included on the homepage of the ‘Mark “No Religion”’ website as well as on their printable flyers is the following justification for marking no religion:

The current census data does not accurately reflect our country’s religious views. This is due to a large number of Australians marking that they belong to a religion in the census when in fact they no longer really practice or hold those beliefs. Census data is used by government and many other organisations to inform important decisions like the amount of public funding religious organisations receive, and the voice and influence religion is given in public affairs and media.¹⁶

The emphasis here is placed on the idea that a significant portion of the Australian population are not properly recognising that they are indeed not religious (and subsequently not reporting this as part of the census). The statement then highlights to the reader the risks posed by religious overrepresentation in the national census and why it is a situation worth addressing urgently. In this sense, not only is public funding emphasised as at stake, but also public influence — themes which are subsequently repeated when the campaign goes on to outline ‘[f]ive good reasons to mark “No Religion”’. These are: 1) Let’s get it right, 2) Fairness in public funding, 3) Fairness in voice and influence, 4) Let’s be honest, and 5) Do it for you.¹⁷ Points 2 and 3 are thus at the core of how this campaign aims at influencing policy.

While perhaps standing as a unique example then, advocating for secularism via a campaign such as this does not necessarily reflect an unexpected mode of behaviour on the part of the active irreligious. This irreligious act is carried out in order to manage perceived religious risk. Reflecting on interviews conducted with the active irreligious in Australia,¹⁸ group members would also describe protests they have attended as being carried out for the same purpose. Even the act of getting involved with an irreligious organisation initially is often justified out of a need to ‘push back’ against perceived religious influence — and as such, risk perception becomes an effective incentive to becoming actively irreligious.¹⁹ As for the ‘Mark “No Religion”’ campaign, seeing how non-religious affiliation saw a significant rise in 2021 from the 2016 census, the active irreligious would have undoubtedly seen the campaign as an overall success. However, so long as nonbelievers continue to perceive religion operating in the public sphere as a risk, they will continue to take irreligious action in response.

¹⁵ See Gower (n 9).

¹⁶ See Census 21 Alliance (n 4).

¹⁷ See *ibid.*

¹⁸ See Gower (n 9).

¹⁹ See *ibid.*