

Querying “No Religion”: State, Society, and Spirituality in Australia

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SPIRITUALITY AND NATURE-CONNECTION: NEW WORLDVIEW TRENDS

The number of people declaring themselves to have ‘no religion’ in Australia has been rising in recent decades,¹ as the number of those identifying as Christian has been falling. Yet, by digging deeper into the demographic trends of this religious change than the Australian Census religion question allows, it becomes clear that the picture is far more complex.

Recent research in Australia,² as in other so-called Western societies, has focused on the decline of mainline Christianity, the rise of the ‘Nones’, and increased religious diversity. Yet there are two parallel trends that are only beginning to receive more substantive scholarly attention in and beyond Australia. These are the large percentages of people who identify as spiritual³ — be that ‘Spiritual but not Religious’ (SBNR) or ‘Spiritual and Religious’ (S&R) — and those who report a strong connection with nature⁴ (which may or may not be spiritual).

The most recent version of the Australian Census did not adequately capture these trends, with the Census religion question still largely modelled on an outdated ‘world religions’ framework expanded to include ‘No Religion’. Consequently, Census data alone does not reflect the historical and contemporary reality of worldview diversity in this continent,⁵ that is, *spiritual*, *religious*, and *non-religious*.

THE AUSTRALIAN GENERATION Z STUDY

While the Census religion question indicates that large numbers of Australians are not religious, a recent survey reveals a more complex picture, with significant portions of young Australians being SBNR or S&R.

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¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Religious Affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the Changes in Reported Religion in the 2021 Census’ (Article, 4 July 2022) <<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>>.

² See Anna Halafoff et al, ‘Spiritual Complexity in Australia: Wellbeing and Risks’ (2023) 70 (2) *Social Compass* 243 (‘Spiritual Complexity’).

³ See *ibid.*

⁴ See Paul Bramadat et al (eds), *Religion at the Edge: Nature, Spirituality, and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest* (University of British Columbia Press, 2022).

⁵ See Gary D Bouma and Anna Halafoff, ‘Australia’s Changing Religious Profile: Rising Nones and Pentecostals, Declining British Protestants in Superdiversity: Views from the 2016 Census’ (2017) 30(2) *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 129.

A nationally representative survey of 1200 Australians aged 13–18 years, the ‘Worldviews of Australia’s Generation Z’ (‘AGZ’) study⁶ asked the same Census religion question but also included more nuanced questions on religion and spirituality. It also applied a latent class analysis to survey results. Responding to the Census religion question, 52% of these young Australians identified as not religious. However, the latent class analysis also examined whether Australian teens considered themselves spiritual, their spiritual and religious practices, and the importance of religion in their daily lives, which revealed a more complicated picture. Only 23% were strongly non-religious and non-spiritual (labelled ‘this-worldly’), and 15% were indifferent. The rest engaged with religion and spirituality: 18% were identified as spiritual but not religious, 8% were both religious and spiritual, 20% were nominally religious, and 17% were classified as religiously committed.

Australian Gen Z teens also partook in a number of spiritual practices,⁷ with the most popular being meditation (28%) and yoga (22%). Substantial proportions believed in karma (50%), reincarnation (29%), and astrology (20%). While they did so for personal development and self-care, these practices and beliefs were also deeply social, things they had learned from their parents and also enjoyed doing together with family, friends, and spiritual communities. Seventy-six percent of the teens also reported a strong connection to nature.⁸ This was experienced by teens across the full spectrum of worldview types; some saw it as spiritual, and others as completely material yet no less ‘sacred’. The AGZ teens’ spirituality and nature connection also impacted their politics.⁹ Some reported being vegan and committed to animal rights and/or environmental activism, such as by participating in protests to protect forests.

These findings demonstrate that the spiritual — SBNRs and S&Rs — are a significant cohort among young Australians, as are those who report a strong connection to nature. However, these worldview types are yet to be reflected in state policies and curricula that still problematically display a strong privileging of Christianity, and Abrahamic faiths of Judaism and Islam.¹⁰ They have adapted in some ways to recognise this continent’s secular and multifaith reality, but not yet the significance of spirituality or nature-connection to Australians, despite their historical and contemporary prevalence.

MARGINALISATION OF SPIRITUALITY

The story of spirituality and nature-connection in Australia begins with this continent’s First Peoples — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders — who have always had diverse knowledges, languages, beliefs, and practices.¹¹ This spiritual and religious diversity increased with subsequent flows of migration between Australia and Asia,¹² then Europe and other parts of the world, related to fishing, mining, pearling, and sugar cane industries. Migrants and workers from Asia brought their Muslim, Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh traditions with

⁶ Andrew Singleton et al, ‘The AGZ Study: Project Report’ (Research Report, ANU, Deakin, and Monash Universities, January 2019).

⁷ See Halafoff et al, ‘Spiritual Complexity’ (n 2).

⁸ See *ibid.*

⁹ See *ibid.*

¹⁰ See Enqi Weng and Anna Halafoff, ‘Media Representations of Religion, Spirituality and Non-Religion in Australia’ (2020) 11(7) *Religions* 332.

¹¹ See Vicki Grieves, ‘Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy, The Basis of Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing:’ (Discussion Paper No 9, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2009).

¹² See Anna Halafoff et al, ‘Buddhism in the Far North of Australia Pre-WWII: (In)visibility, Post-colonialism and Materiality’ (2022) 23(2) *Journal of Global Buddhism* 105 (‘Buddhism in the Far North’).

them, attested by the material record of mosques, temples, cemeteries, and shrines across the continent.

Ghassan Hage argues that Australia remains stuck in a White Nation fantasy that was socially constructed at Federation by the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*, known as the White Australia Policy.¹³ It attempted to curtail migration and trade, and control and suppress relations between Indigenous and Asian communities, particularly across the far north of Australia. Indeed, the reality of cultural, spiritual, and religious diversity of Australia still competes with the myth of a White Christian Nation.¹⁴

Since the demise of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s, there has been gradually more acceptance of the need to be aware of and recognise the rise of the ‘Nones’ and of religious diversity in political and scholarly spheres. Spirituality has yet to achieve the same salience.¹⁵

European scholars Anna Fedele and Kim E Knibbe, have rightly argued that spirituality is marginalised in scholarly and state sectors as it is associated with women and the private sphere.¹⁶ Australian scholars have also argued that spirituality is taken less seriously given its association with Indigenous and Asian knowledges and communities.¹⁷ Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, by contrast, receive far more serious treatment in Australian media, policy, and curricula.¹⁸

SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION

An example of this marginalisation is that Australia’s supposedly secular public education system has produced an Australian Curriculum that has gradually included more Christian content and emphasis since its first iteration in 2009. Before that, each state had its own curricula. The Australian Curriculum came into being as part of former conservative Prime Minister John Howard’s nation building agenda, founded on ‘Judeo-Christian ethics’ and values.¹⁹

By the time the Australian Curriculum was published, Howard had been replaced by a more socially progressive Labor government. Australia was described as a ‘secular and multifaith’ society within the first national curriculum in Civics and Citizenship.²⁰ After a major review and revision in 2015, at the time of conservative Catholic Prime Minister Tony Abbott, this descriptor was changed to Australia being ‘a secular nation and a multi-faith society with a Christian heritage’. The most recent iteration in the 2022 Australian Curriculum, version 9, which was reviewed and redrafted when conservative Pentecostal, Scott Morrison was the nation’s leader, states:

¹³ Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Routledge, 1998).

¹⁴ See Halafoff, ‘Buddhism in the Far North’ (n 12).

¹⁵ See Halafoff et al, ‘Spiritual Complexity’ (n 2).

¹⁶ See Anna Fedele and Kim E Knibbe (eds), *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves? The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality* (Routledge, 2022).

¹⁷ See Halafoff et al, ‘Spiritual Complexity’ (n 2).

¹⁸ See Weng and Halafoff, (n 10).

¹⁹ See Marion Maddox, *Taking God to School: The End of Australia’s Egalitarian Education?* (Allen & Unwin, 2014).

²⁰ See Douglas Ezzy et al, (eds), *Religious Diversity in Australia: Living Well with Difference* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

Australia’s secular democracy and pluralist, multi-faith society draws upon diverse cultural origins, including Christian and Western heritage, distinct First Nations Australian histories and cultures, and migrant communities.²¹

Christianity is once again privileged here, listed problematically before Indigenous Australian ‘histories and cultures’ and ‘migrant communities’.

While the secular and faith, in ‘multi faith’, is mentioned in all three of these Civics and Citizenship iterations, spirituality is not. Spirituality does feature in History and particularly in Geography in the 2022 (version 9) Curriculum,²² largely related to First Nations Australians’ connection to Country and water. There is a single mention of the spiritual significance of water to ‘Asian culture’ (singular not plural), to the spiritual significance of persons, places, and buildings in their local community, and of people’s relationship to the environment having a spiritual dimension. Yet content on religion, and specifically Christianity, far outnumbers content on spirituality or so-called ‘other’ faiths, and Christianity and Islam receive much more considered treatment than spirituality or Hinduism and Buddhism. This is a result of substantive Christian lobbying,²³ and undermines the principle of secular state education.

SBNRS AND SPIRITUAL CARE

Research also reveals that end-of-life care in Australia is largely dominated by Christian, and in particular Catholic, providers who have recently rebranded ‘palliative care’ as ‘spiritual care’.²⁴ Within this sector, spirituality is still largely associated with Christianity, but also multifaith models of care that better reflect Australia’s religious diversity. However, end-of-life care for SBNRs is not yet sufficiently catered for, and this gap is sometimes filled by ‘Buddhist’ end-of-life care,²⁵ offered by Buddhist or natural deathcare providers.

The ‘Dying “Buddhist” in Australia’ project found that many people turn to Buddhist texts, such as Pema Chödrön’s *When Things Fall Apart*,²⁶ to better understand suffering, identifying Buddhist teachers as holistic, compassionate death experts.²⁷ Buddhist symbols such as lotus flowers, bamboo, incense, candles, and Buddhas, and practices such as mindfulness, loving kindness, and deep relaxation were cited as associated with calm and peaceful states beneficial to the dying and their families. Sitting in gardens, having views of nature, and listening to the sounds of birds were also said to be things that people valued when approaching the time of death.

²¹ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, ‘Year 7 Citizenship, Diversity, and Identity: AC9HC7K04’ *Version 9 Australian Curriculum* (Web Page) <<https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/learning-areas/civics-and-citizenship-7-10/year-7/>>.

²² See Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Version 9 the Australian Curriculum* (Web Page) <<https://v9.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>>.

²³ See David Hastie, ‘The Changes to Australia’s History, Civics and Citizenship Curriculum Better Reflect the Role of Religion in our National Life’ *Religion & Ethics* (ABC online, 15 May 2022) <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/david-hastie-religion-in-australian-history-curriculum/13878360>>.

²⁴ See Hannah Gould and Anna Halaloff, ‘Dying “Buddhist” in Australia’ (Report, University of Melbourne, 2023) (‘Dying “Buddhist”’) <https://psychologicalsciences.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/4801634/Dying-Buddhist-in-Australia-Report.pdf>.

²⁵ See Hannah Gould and Anna Halaloff, ‘Dying Well: Why Australians are Turning to “Buddhist” Deaths’ *The Guardian* (8 February 2024) <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/08/dying-well-why-australians-are-turning-to-buddhist-deaths>>.

²⁶ Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart* (Pema Chödrön Foundation, 1996).

²⁷ See Gould & Halaloff, ‘Dying “Buddhist”’ (n 24).

Health and deathcare sectors, like the education sector, need to also be more aware of the changing worldview demographics of societies including the spiritual, religious, and non-religious. Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious persons will likely benefit from spiritual care that aligns with their traditions. This has been acknowledged by the Australian Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission which has a requirement within its Quality Standards for providers of residential aged care, that they offer services that ‘promote the emotional, spiritual and psychological well-being of consumers’.²⁸ Healthcare sectors are aware of this and do their best to provide a multifaith model of care, although religious minorities remain generally less well-resourced than Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

Australian census data shows that 39 per cent of Australians are not religious²⁹ and the AGZ study found that around a quarter of Australian Gen Z teens were strongly non-religious and non-spiritual. While strongly ‘this worldly’ people are likely to not want any form of spiritual care they may, as the ‘Dying “Buddhish”’ study indicates, want end-of-life care that is focused on nature connection, or other things that they hold ‘sacred’, from family to favourite music or football.

The significant numbers of SBNRs are likely to want spiritual care that is not Christian or religious at all. This may at times be Buddhish or more secular forms of calming practices, connected with nature, or again, with that which means the most to them. These practices may be eclectic, deeply personal, or social, and as one ‘Dying “Buddhish”’ participant declared, should certainly not involve ‘an enormous crucifix on the wall’.³⁰

SPIRITUAL COMPLEXITY

State actors, curriculum writers, and healthcare providers must be aware of Australia’s spiritual diversity and complexity to better inform their policies and practices. Not everyone is spiritual, but large numbers of people are, including SBNRs and also those who are religious *and* spiritual.

Spirituality can have similar benefits to religion.³¹ Spirituality can provide meaning, community, wellbeing, right livelihood, and ethics for how to live and die well together. Spirituality is not only deeply personal, it can be political,³² arising from a strong ethical commitment to, at best, peacebuilding, social justice, and relational care for people and their more-than-human kin.

Spirituality is not benign,³³ however: it involves similar risks as religion. Spiritual leaders have misled and abused spiritual individuals and communities, and many people are sceptical about products and practices that are not scientifically proven and potentially monetised for personal

²⁸ Australian Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, ‘Quality Standards: Standard 4’ (Web Page) <<https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/providers/quality-standards/services-and-supports-daily-living>>.

²⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Religious Affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the Changes in Reported Religion in the 2021 Census’ (Article, 4 July 2022) <<https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia>>.

³⁰ Gould and Halafoff, ‘Dying “Buddhish”’ (n 24).

³¹ See Halafoff et al, ‘Spiritual Complexity’ (n 2).

³² See *ibid.*

³³ See *ibid.*

gain. ‘Conspiritoriality’ — conspiracy theories circulating within spiritual communities — can lead to vaccine and cancer treatment hesitancy or resistance.³⁴ At worst, ‘spiritual warriors’,³⁵ can conceive of themselves as fighting ‘cosmic wars’³⁶ for their freedom and sovereignty against elites and mainstream society. They see themselves as bastions of sacred knowledge, ushering in a New Age of peace and prosperity. Such spiritual warriors can be on the Far Right or the Far Left, S&R or SBNR, as evidenced by those who protested against lockdowns, vaccines, and mask wearing at the height of the Covid pandemic.

Spirituality can also cause conflict and division related to religious freedom debates. Driven by the Christian Right in response to increasingly robust anti-discrimination protections for LBGT+ people and the legalisation of marriage equality, religious freedom has become a wicked problem for successive Australian governments.³⁷ Despite election promises to improve protections for spiritual and religious freedoms, both conservative and more progressive governments have failed to do so, with all attempts to ‘balance’ the rights to religious freedom and freedom from discrimination on religious grounds achieving nothing more than heightening the constructed polarisation between these rights and increasing community concern. It is important to note here that the spiritual and religious freedom of First Peoples rarely figure in these public policy debates.³⁸

Australia is not only a secular and multifaith society, but also a spiritual one, where connection with nature is among the things that Indigenous Australians and around three-quarters of young people hold dear. This needs to be acknowledged and better reflected in curricula, healthcare, and policies, including those related to wellbeing and end-of-life. But spirituality also needs to be approached critically, given its association with risks, purity discourses, monetisation, and potentially violence. Spiritual and religious freedoms can entail spiritual harms, from which vulnerable groups within society should be protected.

This complexity needs to be acknowledged in a secular society that defines secular as the condition of no one religion having privilege over others. Australia is comprised of diverse worldviews — spiritual, religious, and/or non-religious — and all need to be both respected and regulated.

³⁴ See Charlotte Ward and David Voas, ‘The Emergence of Conspiritoriality’ (2011) 26(1) *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 103.

³⁵ Anna Halafoff et al, ‘Selling (Con)spirituality and COVID-19 in Australia: Convictions, Complexity and Countering Dis/misinformation’ (2022) 35(2) *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 141.

³⁶ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (University of California Press, 4th edition, 2017).

³⁷ See Elenie Poulos, ‘Three Discourses of Religious Freedom: How and Why Political Talk about Religious Freedom in Australia has Changed’ (2023) 14(5) *Religions* 669.

³⁸ See Katja Mikhailovich and Alexandra Pavli, *Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Indigenous Spirituality, Practice and Cultural Rights* (Discussion Paper, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2011) <[https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/frb/papers/Indigenous Spirituality FINAL May 2011.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/frb/papers/Indigenous_Spirituality_FINAL_May_2011.pdf)>.