

Identity and Religion in Contemporary Australia

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This paper draws on data from two national surveys conducted by Edith Cowan University and NCLS Research to examine the nature of religious identification in Australia. It finds that the importance of religion to people's sense of identity is closely related to church attendance, religious beliefs, and the importance of ethnic identity. Some people describe themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', although most people opt to describe themselves using both terms or neither. The lower levels of importance of religion to identity among younger people are associated with lower levels of involvement in religious organizations. The importance attributed to spirituality has been largely retained through the generations, but is now expressed somewhat differently. For many younger people, spirituality is being explored quite apart from involvement in, or identification with, religious communities.

Results from the Australian Census of Population and Housing 2001 include people's responses to the question 'what is the person's religion?' Sixty-eight per cent of the Australian population described themselves in terms of one Christian denomination or another, with about 1.3 per cent of the population describing themselves simply as 'Christian'. Around 4.5 per cent identified themselves with another major world religion such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Judaism. A further 1 per cent described themselves in terms of the great variety of other religious and quasi-religious groups that can be found in Australia. Some of these have a long history such as Spiritualism, while others are relatively recent such as the Raelians and Eckankar. To take a further example, 70,000 people described themselves as Jedi knight or something similar. About 15.5 per cent of the population described themselves as having 'no religion', and another 10 per cent chose not to answer the question (Hughes, 2002).

Are these identifications important to the ways in which people see themselves? Does religion play an important role in people's sense of identity? The 1998 Australian Community Survey, details of which are given later in this paper, has revealed that of all those identifying with a religion, less than one third attend gatherings of a religious community monthly or more often, and only one half of them are present at major religious festivals. When they describe themselves as 'Anglican' or 'Catholic', 'Buddhist' or 'Orthodox' are they referring to an identity that is central to their self-definition or merely of peripheral significance?

Hans Mol (1976: 1) argues that religion involves the sacralization of identity. He defines sacralization as 'the process by means of which on the level of symbol-systems certain patterns acquire ... taken-for-granted, stable, eternal, quality ...'

(1976: 5). To this extent, religion involves the placing of oneself in an ordered reality. The process occurs, says Mol, through mechanisms of objectification, commitment, ritual and myth (1976: 15). When people state on the Census that they are 'Lutheran' or 'Hindu' are they referring in a short-hand way to this sacralizing process?

Some recent social theorists and philosophers have suggested that, for many people in contemporary Western society, there is no clear sense of an ordered sense of reality, and that various objectifications, commitments, rituals and myths of former times have now declined in significance, sometimes being abandoned altogether. Anthony Giddens (1991: 75-80), for example, speaks of self-identity as a narrative constructed by the individual. It is something that is for ever unfolding, constantly under revision as the individual reflects on where he or she is at and how to respond to present circumstances. Giddens argues that for many people there is a sense of ontological insecurity, in which there is little stability or eternal reference in one's sense of the self.

Methodology

The 1998 Australian Community Survey, conducted by Edith Cowan University and NCLS Research, provides an opportunity to explore the nature of people's sense of religious identity beyond the information provided by the national Census. There were eight versions of the survey, which was conducted by mail. Some questions were included in all versions, while other questions were included in only one or a few versions. In this way, information was gathered on a wide range of issues. The different versions were randomly distributed to a stratified random sample of adults whose names had been drawn from electoral rolls across Australia. A response rate close to 50 per cent was achieved.

The sample was obtained by placing all postcodes into eight categories: four metropolitan categories and four non-metropolitan categories. The four categories of metropolitan postcodes were based on socio-economic level, as measured by the socio-economic indexes for areas (SEIFA) scores developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The four categories of non-metropolitan postcodes were based on the size of the largest centre of population within the postcode. Within each of these eight areas, a random sample of a little over 2000 adult Australians was drawn from electoral rolls. Because the total numbers of people from which the sample was drawn were smaller in the non-metropolitan categories than in the metropolitan categories, it was necessary to apply a weighting system to the data to provide an accurate picture of the Australian population as a whole.

One version of the survey contained some questions about respondents' sense of identity and about their religious practices and beliefs. That version, completed and returned by 1014 people, is the main source of empirical data for this paper.

The question about identity was worded as follows:

'How important are the following in describing who you are?'

Responses that could be chosen were:

Not important at all

Not very important
Fairly important
Extremely important
The most important single thing.

The various aspects of identity which respondents were asked to rate were:

- Being Australian
- Your religion
- Your gender - that you are a man or a woman
- Your political party
- Your education
- The country you or your ancestors came from
- Your job or occupation
- Your family's income
- Your social class
- Your character and personality

The Australian Community Survey also contained questions about the respondent's current religious denomination and the denomination in which he or she was raised. A further question directly probed the importance of denominational loyalty.

Additional information about religious and spiritual identity has been obtained from the Wellbeing and Security Survey conducted by Edith Cowan University, Deakin University, Anglicare (NSW) and NCLS Research in 2002. A single sample of Australian adults was randomly drawn from the electoral rolls for the whole of Australia. A 35 per cent response rate was obtained, yielding 1507 questionnaires for analysis.

The Wellbeing and Security Survey contained two questions relating to identity:

- To what extent do you see yourself as a religious person?
- To what extent do you see yourself as a spiritual person?

For each question, respondents were invited to indicate their response on a scale from 0 to 10 with the end points marked as 'Not spiritual / religious at all' and 'Very spiritual / very religious' respectively. The questions were placed in different parts of the questionnaire to minimise the possibility that the answer to one of these questions would directly influence the answer to the other.

It should be noted that people with low levels of formal education and people with a non-English speaking background were under-represented among the respondents to the Australian Community Survey and the Wellbeing and Security Survey. However, in terms of religious identification, the responses were similar to those obtained from the Australian Census, apart from a lower level of response from people identifying with other major religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. This suggests that the surveys fairly represent Australian people identifying as Christian and those professing no religion.

Results

1. The Importance of Religious Identity

As shown in Table 1, most Australians consider that religious identity makes little contribution in describing who they are. For just 10 per cent of the respondents, religion was 'the most important single thing', and for another 11 per cent it was extremely important. For 43 per cent of the respondents, religion rated as not important at all. Overall, character and personality, being Australian, gender, the person's job or occupation, income, education, and country of origin or ancestry were all rated as of greater importance than religion. Social class and political party affiliation each had less importance than religion.

More people chose 'character and personality' than any other facet as important in their sense of identity, suggesting an emphasis on their 'true self' or perhaps their uniqueness rather than characteristics they may happen to share with others. Next in frequency of choice was 'being Australian', a characteristic that people shared with many others. Although the data do not directly indicate this, many who placed importance on being Australian may have thought that this implied having a set of values such as 'mateship', 'giving a fair go', 'having a go' and similar characteristics.

Table 1.

Rating of Contributors to a Sense of Identity (Percent of Respondents)	Not Important	Not Very Important	Fairly Important	Extremely Important	The Most Important Single Thing
Character and personality	2.8	1.8	18.0	34.2	43.2
Being Australian	7.5	7.8	25.7	26.7	32.4
Gender	19.7	13.9	23.8	21.8	20.9
Job/occupation	14.0	10.2	30.7	29.1	16.1
Income	18.4	15.1	29.5	21.6	15.5
Education	12.0	10.5	33.2	29.7	14.7
Country of origin or ancestry	24.7	18.7	24.5	17.6	14.4
Religion	43.1	16.2	19.7	11.0	10.0
Social class	29.5	26.9	28.9	10.0	4.7
Political party	47.9	22.4	18.6	6.6	4.5

Table 2 indicates that the self-descriptions offered by older people differed somewhat from those offered by younger adults. Whilst the overwhelming majority of people in all age groups saw character and personality as a very important aspect of their identity, this was most heavily emphasised by young adults. Conversely, proportionately more of the older people than of young adults saw being Australian as a very important aspect of their identity. The importance attached to gender, educational attainment or social class as an aspect of identity did not vary significantly from one age group to another. (To be statistically significant, p must be less than .05.) Job and occupation was a more important aspect of identity for those under 60 years of age than for people older than this – not surprisingly, as many of the 60 plus age group would have retired from employment. Income level was more important for those in the 40 to 59 age bracket – those earning most – than for persons older or younger than this. Country of origin or ancestry, political party allegiance and religion were all of greater importance to older people than to those younger.

Table 2.

Factors Rated Extremely Important or Most Important in Identity (Percent of Respondents)	Under 40 Years of Age	40 to 59 Years of Age	60 Plus Years of Age	Significance of Difference by Age Group (p)
Character and personality	80.7	77.8	70.0	0.006
Being Australian	51.7	58.5	72.3	0.000
Gender	42.2	43.1	41.7	0.803
Job/occupation	48.2	48.0	32.7	0.000
Income	34.0	41.9	35.9	0.017
Education	44.3	44.7	43.9	0.604
Country of origin or ancestry	26.5	32.3	42.5	0.000
Religion	16.0	19.6	32.0	0.000
Social class	14.2	14.3	16.2	0.659
Political party	6.2	11.3	20.3	0.000

Table 3 gives further detail on the importance various age groups gave to religion as a contributor to identity. There was a difference of nearly 9 percentage points between people aged in their 40s compared to people aged in their 50s. In principle, this difference could be a life cycle effect or it may mark an historical shift in attitudes and behaviour. Ideally, longitudinal data would be needed to make a decisive test of these two possible explanations. If the latter explanation is correct, it may reflect a more general trend that Giddens (1991) sees as the on-

going replacement of traditional forms of society by post-traditional forms, with identity being constructed self-reflexively rather than given by the social groups with which a person is associated.

Table 3.

Percent Rating Religion Extremely Important or Most Important by Age	
20 to 29 years of age	15.0
30 to 39	17.2
40 to 49	16.0
50 to 59	24.6
60 to 69	28.7
70 plus	35.1

2. Evidence of Changing Identity

The Australian Community Survey asked about the religion or denomination in which respondents were raised and about their current religion or denomination at the time of the survey. Altogether, 30.2% of respondents nominated a different religious identity from that in which they had been raised. These figures exclude those who grew up as Congregationalist, Methodist or Presbyterian and who later identified with the Uniting Church formed in 1977 from the union of most Congregational, all Methodist and the majority of Presbyterian congregations.

Of people who were attending church at least once a month at the time of the survey, 33.3% had changed their religious identity. The grouping in which there was least change of identity was the Catholics, of whom only 10 per cent had changed their religious identity. Amongst non-Catholics, almost half (49.3 per cent) had changed their religious identity.

On the basis that older people would have had a longer period in which to change their religious identity, one might expect a higher percentage of older people to have done so. However, the survey found that

- 26.6% of people aged 60 or over had changed their religious identity, compared with
- 35.4% of those aged between 40 and 59, and
- 28.3% of those aged under 40.

By comparing those over 60 with those younger, it is clear that the likelihood of one's having switched denominations is not a direct function of the length of time one has had to make such a change. Although the difference in rates

of switching for those under 40 compared to those aged 40 to 59 may have been partly due to the shorter time period involved in the former case than the latter, it could also be accounted for by the younger age cohort's lower rate of active involvement in religious groups. When only those attending monthly or more often were examined:

- 24.3% of people aged 60 or over had changed their religious identity, compared with
- 35.6% of people aged between 40 and 59, and
- 35.8% of people aged under 40.

Respondents to the survey were asked whether they held the opinion that people should be loyal to one religious denomination throughout their adult lives. Fifteen per cent of the sample agreed that people should be loyal, 26 per cent were neutral or unsure, and 59 per cent disagreed that people should be loyal to one religious denomination throughout their adult lives. Among people over the age of 60, 27 per cent thought such loyalty was desirable, whereas only 12 per cent of those under 60 thought likewise. Thus, change in religious identity is more acceptable, as well more likely to have occurred since the beginning of adulthood, to people now under 60 years of age than to those older.

3. Religious Identity and Ethnicity

Religious denomination tends to be a relatively minor aspect of identity for most Australians and a part of identity that is subject to change. However, the question remains as to what is the meaning of religious identity and what are the factors that lead to its being ascribed some importance?

The Australian Community Survey found that there was a moderate correlation ($r=.242$) between the importance attached to religion as a source of identity and the importance attached to country of origin or ancestry as a source of identity. Historically, many religious groups have been associated with particular ethnicities and cultures. Presbyterianism, for example, has been associated with Scottish culture, Catholicism with Irish, Italian, Polish and some other European cultures, Lutheranism with Scandinavian cultures, and Orthodoxy with Greek, Russian and Serbian cultures. Religion has provided such cultures with a framework for understanding the world, a common set of values, celebrations for annual events, and rituals for marking the stages of life.

Because of its links with ethnicity, religious identity often assumes great importance among immigrants. It becomes a means by which they maintain aspects of their cultural heritage and assert their distinctive identity in a new land. Also, religious organizations frequently provide practical support for new migrants in the process of integration into the wider society (Bouma, 1997: section III). Thus, it might be expected that religious identity would be stronger among immigrants than among people born in Australia. The Australian Community Survey found this to be the case. Among people born overseas, 27 per cent said religion was an extremely or most important part of their identity, compared with just 19 per cent of those born in Australia.

4. Religious Identity and Attendance at Religious Services

While the relationship between ethnicity and religion explains some of the importance attached to religious identity, it does not explain it all. In the Australian Community Survey, frequency of attendance at religious services was the variable that had the strongest association with the importance people attribute to religion as an element of their identity. Of those who attended religious services monthly or more often, 69 per cent said that religion was an extremely or most important part of their identity, compared with 5 per cent of those who never attended.

It was noted above that the importance of religious identity varies with age. Older people are much more likely to affirm the importance of religion to their identity. However, such differences were not apparent among those who attended church monthly or more often, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Percent of Attenders (Monthly or More Often) Rating Religion Extremely Important or Most Important by Age	
20 to 29 years of age	69.3
30 to 39	66.7
40 to 49	73.6
50 to 59	59.2
60 to 69	72.7
70 plus	69.2

On the other hand, among those who did not attend, the importance of religion in identity was higher among older people than younger people. Thus:

- 8.6% of people aged 60 or more who never attended services of worship said religion was an extremely or most important to their identity, compared with
- 4.6% of people aged between 40 and 59;
- 4.7% of people under 40 years old.

To summarise, in all age categories, the majority of those who frequently attend religious services regard religion as a very important part of their identity. For most people, attendance relates more strongly to religious identity than does age, suggesting that involvement in a religious organisation may reinforce the importance of religious identity.

5. Religious Identity, Denomination and Belief

The importance of religion in identity varied by the denomination with which people identified, as shown in Table 5. Religion was of much greater importance to identity for Pentecostals and Baptists than for people identifying with any of the other listed denominations.

Table 5.

Importance of Religion in Identity by Denomination for All who Identify and for Frequent Attenders			
Denomination	Percentage of All Identifying Saying Religion was Most or Very Important in Identity	Percentage of All who Attend Monthly or More Often Saying Religion was Most or Very Important in Identity	Percentage Rejecting 'Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own ways'.
Anglican	14.1	63.3	9.9
Baptist	68.4	100.0	45.4
Catholic	32.3	67.6	9.0
Lutheran	25.1	66.7	18.0
Orthodox	22.3	50.0	11.4
Pentecostal	71.4	100.0	67.4
Presbyterian	21.4	66.6	19.1
Uniting	18.3	65.0	9.0

Patterns of attendance in the various denominations explain a lot of this variation but not all of it. The third column in Table 5 indicates the importance of religion for identity among those who attend monthly or more often. Among attenders, Pentecostals and Baptists placed greater emphasis on religion as part of their identity than did frequent attenders of the other listed denominations. In fact, 85 per cent of Pentecostal attenders said religion was the *most* important single thing in their identity, a response made by only 50 per cent or less of other denominations.

To understand the high level of importance of religion in identity among Pentecostals and Baptists, one must examine how these denominations are different from others. The extent of sect-type attitudes in which those involved see their religious group as having exclusive possession of truth provides a clue. Mol suggests that sects may function as 'protective shields against the powerlessness, anomy, and victimization of individuals' in some societies (1976: 170). He contends that coping with deprivations and anxiety is not the *goal* of the development of a sect-type identity; rather it is a *by-product* of that identity (1976: 182). Yet, for Mol, the identity formation that occurs in closely knit groups is 'an astute response to the erosion of social, and the anomie of personal, identity' (1976: 183).

In other words, at least some forms of religion purport to offer a sense of certainty in the context of social changes that threaten to undermine traditional forms of social and personal identity. One would expect, then, that religious identity would be important for those who are part of a religious collectivity that takes its group identity from its opposition to the rest of the world and which sees itself as having exclusive access to 'the truth'.

The closest that the Australian Community Survey came to measuring such attitudes was by asking for responses to the statement 'different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own ways'. As shown in Table 5, 67 per cent of Pentecostals rejected that statement, compared with 45 per cent of Baptists, 10 per cent of Anglicans, and 14 per cent of the overall population. As Table 6 indicates, people who strongly disagreed with the statement were much more likely than others to regard religion as most or extremely important in their sense of identity.

Table 6.

For Attitudes to the Statement 'Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own ways', Percent of Persons who Regard Religion as Most or Extremely Important in Their Sense of Identity	
Strongly agree	26.7
Agree	17.4
Neutral or unsure	17.2
Disagree	26.2
Strongly disagree	44.8

Another question which throws light on the same issue concerned different approaches to the Bible. Respondents were asked which one of the following statements best expressed their view:

- The Bible is God's Word and all it says is true.
- The Bible was written by people inspired by God, but it contains some human errors.
- The Bible is a good book because it was written by wise people, but God had nothing to do with it.
- The Bible was written by people who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today.

Here again, Pentecostals and Baptists tended to be very different from persons identifying with other major denominations. Overall, 85 per cent of Pentecostals chose the first option, compared with 67 per cent of Baptists, 25 per cent of Catholics and 14 per cent of Anglicans. As Table 7 indicates, people who took a stronger view of the truth and divine origin of the Bible were much more

likely than others to regard religion as most or extremely important in their sense of identity.

Table 7.

For Various Attitudes to the Bible, Percent of Persons who Regard Religion as Most or Extremely Important in Their Sense of Identity	
The Bible is God's Word and all it says is true	54
The Bible was written by people inspired by God, but it contains some human errors	18
The Bible is a good book because it was written by wise people, but God had nothing to do with it	7
The Bible was written by people who lived so long ago that it is worth very little today	3

In summary, these results confirm that those who saw their religion as providing a completely reliable account of 'truth', even an exclusive view of truth, were more likely than others to regard religion as fundamental to their sense of identity.

6. Relative Significance of Various Factors Related to the Importance of Religious Identity

Multiple regression analysis provides an indication of the relative contribution of the various factors in explaining or predicting the importance people attached to religious identity. The results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8.

Factors Relating to Importance of Religious Identity	Standardised Regression Coefficient (Beta)	Significance (p)
Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services	.614	.000
Importance Attributed to Country of Birth or Ancestry in Identity	.189	.000
Seeing the Bible as completely true	.155	.000

Adjusted r squared = 0.528.

Together, the three factors listed in Table 8 account for 53 per cent of the variance in the importance people attach to their religious identity. By far the strongest factor is frequency of attendance at religious services. Such attendance is not the weekly practice of the majority of the Australian population. Nevertheless over two-thirds of the population still identify with some form of religion, most frequently with a segment of one of the major world religions. For some this identification is more central to their identity than for others. Not surprisingly, the more frequent the attendance the more important religion tends to be in the person's sense of identity. It is quite likely that this is a reciprocal relationship (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 159-165; Berger, 1971: 50-55).

Secondly, there is a significant though weaker relationship between the importance individuals attach to country of birth or ancestry (ethnicity) and the importance they attach to religion in their identity.

Thirdly, there is a still weaker yet significant relationship between people's views on the Bible and their views on the importance of religion in their identity. Even after controlling for rates of church attendance and importance attached to ethnicity, those who hold a literalist perspective on the Bible are more likely than others to regard religion as of great importance in their sense of identity.

In the regression model, age was found not to be a significant explanatory or predictive factor after account is taken of the above three factors.

7. Religion and Spirituality

If the strength of religious identity is most closely related to attendance at religious services, is religious identity replaced with 'spiritual identity' among those who do not attend church? In other words, is weakness in the importance of religious identity and involvement indicative of less interest in everything religious and spiritual, or is it indicative of different ways of exploring spirituality apart from involvement in religious organizations? Do people prefer to identify themselves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' in a way which is parallel to the preference noted earlier for people to describe their identity primarily in terms of personal characteristics which reflect their uniqueness rather than in those characteristics which identify them with particular social groups?

In an article in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Penny Marler and Kirk Hadaway (2002) ask the question whether 'being religious' or 'being spiritual' is a zero-sum proposition. Many other sociologists have suggested that 'spirituality' has replaced 'religion' as the term more appropriate to the contemporary engagement with the religious sphere, an engagement that may take more of the form of a quest in a spiritual market-place than a life-long association with a specific religious community. Wade Clark Roof (1999), for example, notes that in interviews he has conducted the theme of spirituality as 'a self-authored search, of looking inward, of wanting to grow' is common. He links this to Giddens' notion of self-reflexivity (p.82). In a similar vein, Robert Wuthnow (1998) contrasts the 'dwelling' spirituality which he says was characteristic of Americans in the 1950s with the 'seeking' spirituality more characteristic of later decades.

Marler and Hadaway (2002) argue, however, that spirituality is not simply replacing religion. They note that most people who see themselves as 'religious' also see themselves as 'spiritual' and vice versa. While Marler and Hadaway recognise that there are differences in the ways those terms are used and understood, they suggest that one of the important trends is a growth in the numbers of people who see themselves as neither religious nor spiritual. Such trends are evident in the data from a United States survey of Protestants that Marler and Hadaway conducted in 1991, summarised in Table 9. The net effect, they say, is that the 'Baby Buster' cohort is less spiritual as well as less religious than any of the previous age cohort included in the survey (Marler and Hadaway, 2002: 293).

Table 9.

Being Religious and Being Spiritual by Age Cohort in the United States, 1991 (Percentage in Each Age Cohort)				
	Oldest	Born 1927-1945	Baby Boomers	Baby Busters
Religious and spiritual	66.8	67.1	64.9	54.9
Spiritual only	14.5	16.7	19.8	22.6
Religious only	11.0	8.9	8.0	8.3
Neither	7.7	7.3	7.2	14.2
<i>N</i>	310	496	761	288

Source: Marler and Hadaway (2002: 293).

The recent Wellbeing and Security Survey provides an opportunity to examine comparative figures for Australians. Table 10 is based on those people who scored 5 or higher on the scale of 0 to 10 in terms of 'being a religious person' or 'being a spiritual person'. The age cohorts used by Marler and Hadaway have not been used here as the historical factors creating distinctive cohorts did not necessarily occur at the same time in Australia as in the United States.

Table 10.

Being Religious and Being Spiritual by Age Group in Australia, 2002 (Percentage in Each Age Group)						
	70 plus	60 to 69	50 to 59	40 to 49	30 to 39	18 to 29
'Religious' and 'spiritual'	40.5	50.6	36.2	41.3	34.3	34.0
Spiritual only	2.6	3.8	11.4	9.1	9.1	11.5
Religious only	19.8	11.4	13.4	8.4	8.8	5.3
Neither	37.1	34.2	39.0	41.3	47.9	49.2
<i>N</i>	116	158	254	383	353	191

The trends demonstrated in Table 10 are similar to those identified by Marler and Hadaway (2002), although the questions were asked in different ways. Most Australians had low scores both on 'being religious' and 'being spiritual', or high scores on both. The overall trend was that a higher proportion of younger people than older people rated themselves low on both 'being religious' and 'being spiritual'. Similarly, there is a substantial variation by age in those who score high on 'being religious': from 60 per cent of those in their 70s to less than 40 per cent of those in their 20s.

However, while Marler and Hadaway argue that the Baby Buster age cohort is less spiritual in self-description than the other cohorts, the same cannot be said in Australia. In both cases, the changes from the oldest to the youngest age cohort are relatively small. In the American data, there is a decline from 81.3 per cent to 77.5 per cent. In the Australian data, there is a small rise: a total of 43.1 per cent of people in their 70s described themselves as 'spiritual' compared with 45.5 per cent of people between 18 and 29.

The notion of spirituality may be a little different between age groups in Australia. Fifty-four per cent of people over 60 who described themselves as spiritual went to church, compared with only 26 per cent of those under 40. However, the differences may not be as stark as these figures would suggest. Thirty-two per cent of people over 60 compared with 37 per cent of people under 40 who described themselves as spiritual affirmed that 'the best way to develop spirituality these days is to take on board whatever is helpful from different spiritualities or religions'.

Conclusions

For many people in Australia, their own religious identification as stated in the Census is not very important. But there are some other people in Australia for whom it is. For most of these people, the importance of their religious identity as contributing to their sense of self is related to their involvement in a religious

group. Those people who see their religious group as having some exclusive claims to truth and access to authoritative religious texts often attach greater importance to that sense of religious identity. For some others, their religious identity is allied to their ethnic identity and their sense of the importance of that identity is related to the history of their immigration and cultural differentiation.

The lower levels of importance of religion to identity among younger people are closely associated with lower levels of involvement in religious organizations. The importance attributed to spirituality has been largely retained through the generations, but is expressed differently. Only one quarter of younger people who say that they are spiritual express that through regular attendance at the services of religious organizations, compared with more than half of those aged 60 years and over.

Marler and Hadaway (2002) suggest that longer term analysis may find that the years between World War I and World War II were unusual in history, in terms of an unprecedented institutionalisation of religion as of other aspects of community life, a trend which dissipated soon after World War II. The 1960s forward, they say, 'may not be so much an instance of America becoming "more spiritual" as a process of becoming "less religious" ' (Marler and Hadaway, 2002: 298).

That may be true, to some extent, of Australia also, although the time of real strength of religious institutions was in the decade following World War II, rather than between the wars. As shown in Table 10, Australians born in the 1950s or later affirm less the idea of being 'religious people' than do those born in earlier decades. At the same time, there is little difference between the various generations in their affirmation of being 'spiritual people'. The interest in 'spirituality' is similar through the generations although its expressions are different. Younger people are more likely than others to explore spirituality apart from involvement in, or identification with, religious communities.

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