

Religion & God not so important

The ABC, in concert with social science scholars at VoxPox Labs, conducted the *Australia Talks National Survey* in 2019. It asked Australians about what was important in their lives, including religion (Crabb 2019).

Of eight given major attributes that can contribute to a sense of self and personal identity, Australians said that political beliefs, nationality, gender and language were most central (Figure 27). One's job, sexual orientation and ethnicity were also somewhat important, but less so.

Religion was far behind in last place.

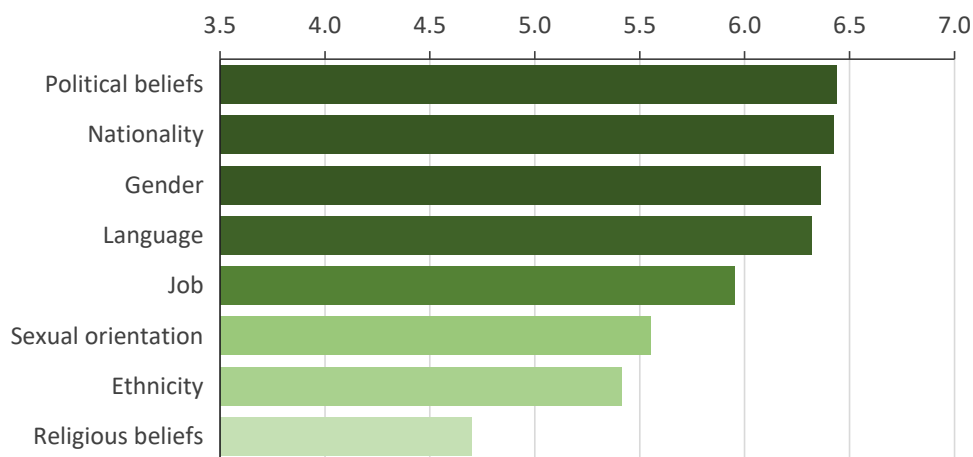


Figure 27: Centrality of attributes that define personal identity
Source: Australia Talks National Survey 2019

Other data confirms that not only is religion not a leading element of most Australians' sense of identity, but also that its relationship with daily life is not especially strong.

Across the denominations

God is **not** personally important amongst more than half (54%) of Australians, nearly a third (30%) of Catholics, a third (33%) of Anglicans, 1 in 5 (20%) of minor Christian denominations, and nearly half (48%) of non-Christian religions (Figure 28).

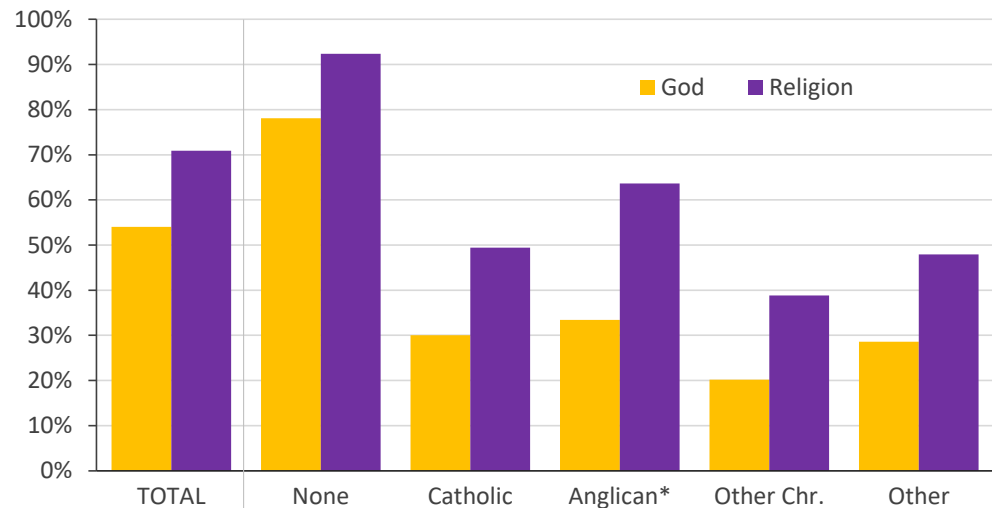


Figure 28: Religious denomination by **not** very/at all important in your life

Source: AVS 2018. * The survey methodology made identifying all Anglicans difficult. Some may be included in Other Christian.

The relationship is even weaker for *religion*, which is **not** personally important amongst seven in ten (71%) Australians, half (49%) of Catholics, nearly two thirds (64%) of Anglicans, over a third (39%) of minor Christian denominations, and nearly half (48%) of non-Christian religions.

This is consistent with the ARI6 denominational breakdown (Figure 10) that shows a weak relationship between a significant proportion of religionists and their religious institutions.

By religiosity

Amongst the ARI6 segments, God is **not** important to most Rejecters (86%), less than half of Socialisers (45%), more than half of Notionals (56%), a quarter of Occasionals (26%), and a small minority of Regulars (8%) and Devouts (2%) (Figure 29).

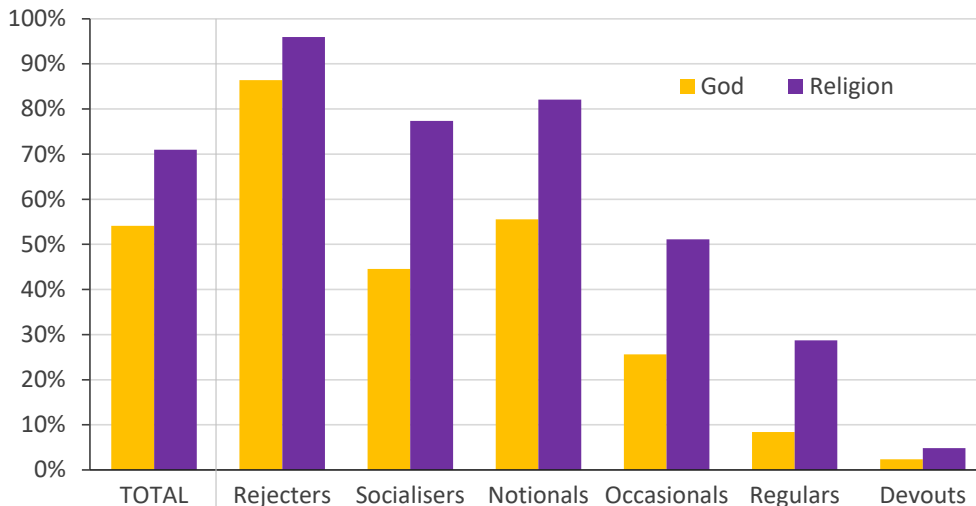


Figure 29: ARI6 by **not** very/at all important in your life

Source: AVS 2018

Equally, the importance of *religion* amongst the ARI6 segments is lower still: **not** important to most Rejecters (96%), more than three quarters (77%) of Socialisers, more than four out of five (82%) Notionals, half (51%) of Occasionals, more than a quarter (29%) of Regulars, and a small minority (5%) of Devouts.

Adding to the insights into the weak overall strength of Australian’s religious convictions, a 2017 national survey also found a quarter (25%) of Australians either passionately opposed to or with “issues” about Christianity (McCrinkle Research 2017). It also found that of those with no religion (now the largest “denomination”), half (49%) said they preferred science and evidence, almost 1 in 5 (18%) said religion is a crutch for the weak, and 1 in 7 (14%) said religion is outdated and traditional.

Weddings and funerals

Wedding celebrant statistics are also consistent with dropping levels of religiosity. For seven decades since federation, most Australian weddings were conducted by ministers of religion. Since 2000, however, a majority have been conducted by civil celebrants, with the rate at nearly four out of five (78%) in 2017 (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2018) (Figure 30). In 2018, the rate increased to 80% (Statista 2021).

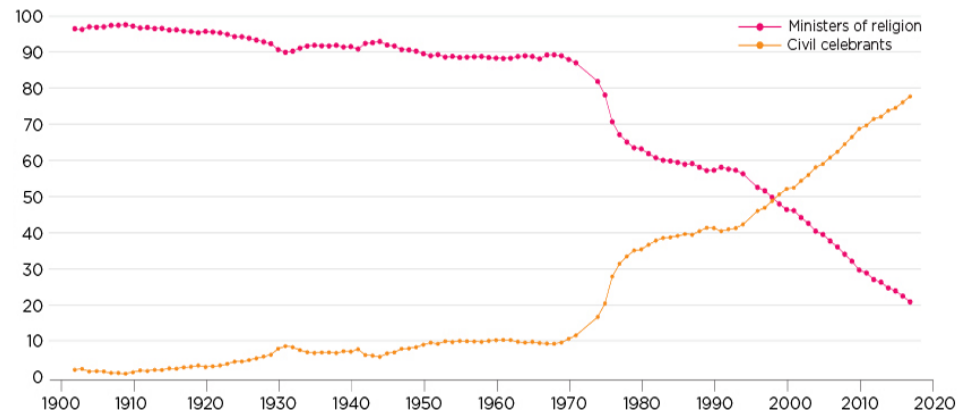


Figure 30: Percent religious versus civil marriage celebrants by year

Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies 2018

A 2014 survey also found that less than half (42%) of Australians would choose a religious minister or pastor to conduct their funeral ceremony, and only half of those (21%) would *definitely* choose a religious minister or pastor (McCrimble 2014).

Summary: God is not personally important to more than half (53%) of Australians, and religion not important to nearly three quarters (71%). Significant proportions of religious denomination members don't think God or religion important. Amongst religionists, only a majority of Regulars and Devouts think religion is personally important, and a majority of Occasionals, Regulars and Devouts think God is personally important.

The proportion of civil weddings has risen to 4 in 5 (80%), and a majority of Australians (58%) would now not choose a religious celebrant for their funeral.

Waning general relevance

Australians' belief in the general (versus personal) relevance of religion compared with the past is also relatively weak. A little more than a quarter (28%) agree that religion is now just as relevant in Australia as in the past, but nearly half (47%) disagree (AuSSA 2018) (Figure 31).

Significantly, fewer than half of Catholics (43%) and Anglicans (38%) say that religion is as relevant as ever. Amongst the non-affiliated, nearly two thirds (61%) say that religion has lost relevance.

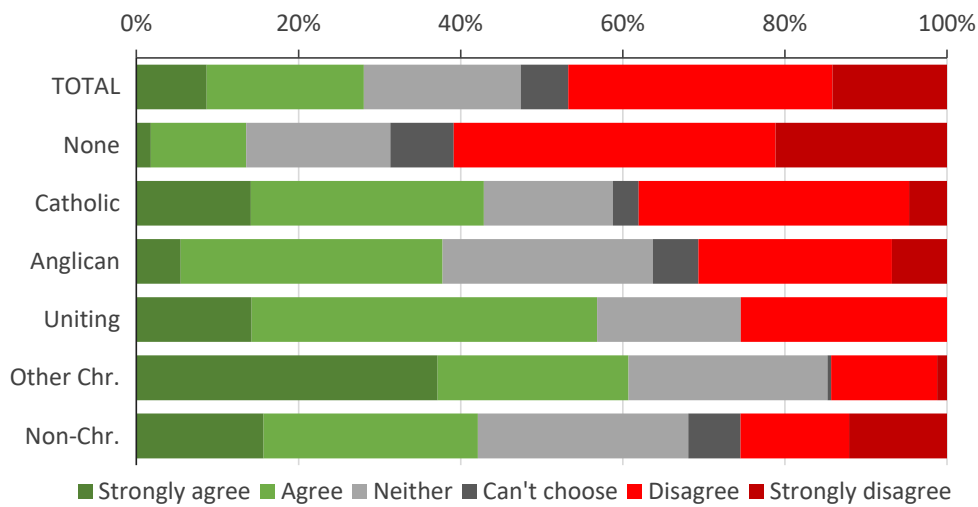


Figure 31: Religion just as relevant as in past, by denomination

Source: AuSSA 2018

A majority of those with no religion or who never attend religious services — Rejecters (60%), Socialisers (64%) and Notionals (52%) — say that religion has lost relevance (Figure 32).

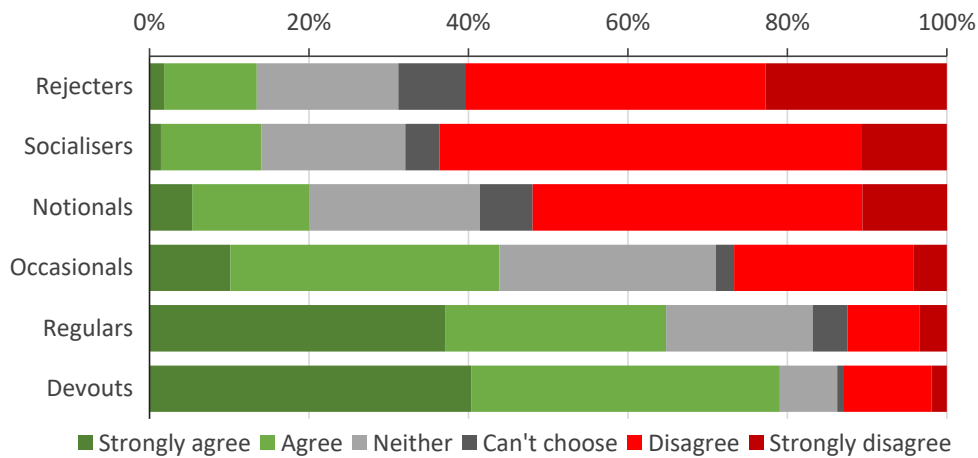


Figure 32: Religion just as relevant as in past, by ARI6

Source: AuSSA 2018

Only amongst Committeds — Regulars (65%) and Devouts (79%) — did a majority say that religion is as relevant today as in the past.

In addition, a minority of one in three Australians (33%) say that Jesus is personally important in their lives (McCrindle Research 2017). Even amongst *Christian* Committeds — who attend church at least monthly if not weekly or more often — one in ten (11%) *don't* say that Jesus is personally important.

Summary: Slightly more than a quarter of Australians (28%) think religion is as relevant as in the past, while nearly half (47%) say it has lost relevance. Only a majority of Regulars (65%) and Devouts (79%) say religion in Australia is as relevant as ever. A minority one in three Australians (33%) say that Jesus is personally important in their lives.

Small minority of real “belonging”

Remember that the AVS 2018 study measured “religion” by asking about “belonging” to a religious denomination. This results in significantly lower rates of self-identified religious affiliation than simply asking “what is your religion?” However, even self-identified belonging to a denomination doesn’t specifically mean practical membership of its religious group.

Only a small minority of Australians (15%) say they are active members of a religious organisation (Figure 33). Fewer than one third (31%) of all affiliated — those who say they “belong” to a religious denomination — see themselves as active members of their religious organisation, including just 19% of Anglicans, 29% of Catholics, 25% of non-Christian denominations, and 38% of minor Christian denominations.

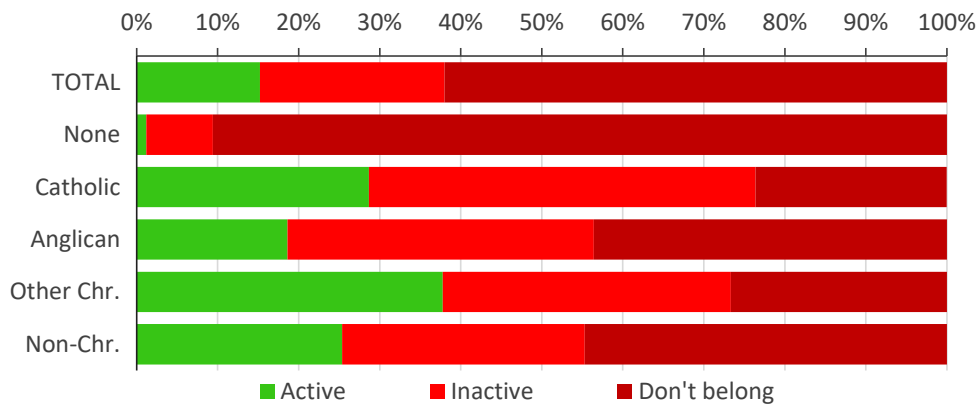


Figure 33: Self-stated membership by religion

Source: AVS 2018

Indeed, nearly two thirds of Australians (62%) expressly say they *don't* belong to a religious organisation, including 24% of Catholics, 44% of Anglicans, 27% of minor Christian denominations, and 45% of non-Christian denominations. The “inactive member” remainder includes 48% of Catholics, 38% of Anglicans, 36% of minor Christian denominations, and 30% of non-Christian denominations.

By religiosity, just 1% of Notionals, 12% of Occasionals, less than half of Regulars (41%), and most but not all Devouts (85%) say they are active members of their religious organisation (Figure 34).

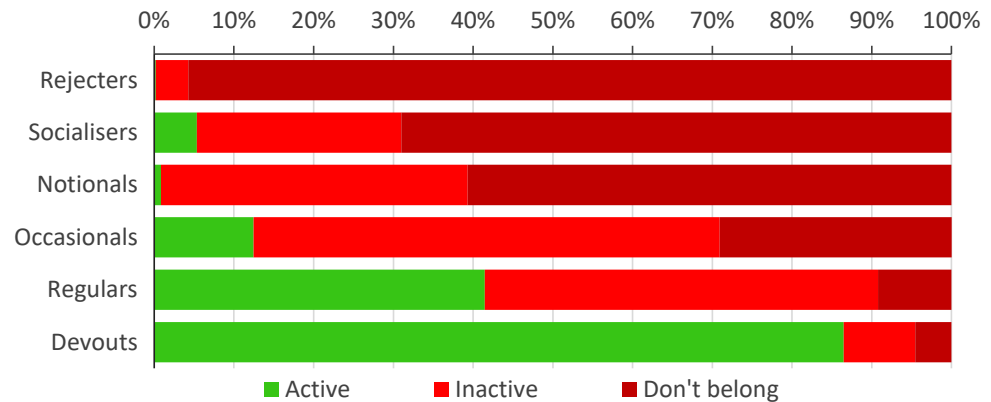


Figure 34: Self-stated membership by ARI6
Source: AVS 2018

That is, when 14% of Devouts, 59% of Regulars and 88% of Occasionals attend religious services, they do not attend as active members of the religious institution. Further, 5% of Devouts, 9% of Regulars and 29% of Occasionals don't see themselves as members *at all*. This suggests a significant level of service attendance for private reasons of faith rather than endorsement of the institution's religious doctrines.

Amongst Notionals (who never attend religious services) nearly two thirds (61%) see themselves as *not* belonging to their religious organisation at all, and most of the remainder (38%) see themselves as inactive members.

This confirms that in Australia, the relationship between “ticking a religious denomination box” and meaningful membership is indeed quite weak.

Adjusting the original 2016 census religious affiliation data by the proportion of Australians who identify as a *member* of their religious organisation (whether active or inactive), the 30% NR figure becomes almost half, 49% (Figure 35).

Adjusting further for only those who are *active* in their religion, the NR figure becomes nearly three quarters (73%). Therefore, only a small minority (27%) of Australians are active in and specifically endorse their religious organisation — but even then not all its religious edicts as explored later.

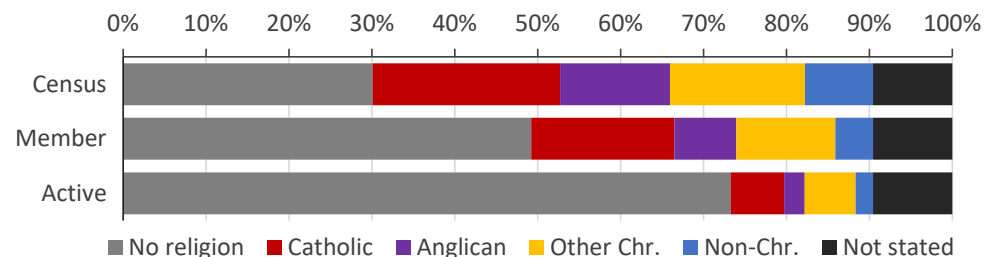


Figure 35: Census 2016 religion, adjusted by membership and activeness
Sources: Census 2016, AVS 2018

The “actual member” rate of the 2016 census religion data produces an NR rate of 49%, much closer to the 54% found in ANU’s AVS study two years later in 2018 (in the context of increasing NR). The discrepancy indicates that almost 1 in 5 Australians (19%) indicate a religious affiliation for cultural heritage, rather than active religious, reasons.

The AVS study asked for meaningful membership of a religious denomination, rather than mere cultural heritage. See *Wording of the religion prompt* on page 13.

Summary: Across the religious spectrum, more than two thirds (69%) of those who self-report a religious affiliation do *not* see themselves as active members of their religious institution, including 71% of Catholics, 81% of Anglicans, 62% of minor Christian denominations, and 75% of non-Christian denominations. Active membership is only in the majority amongst Devouts (86%), but even then is not universal, revealing 15% inactive and non-members.

The 2016 census reported less than a third (30%) of Australians as NR. However, the figure is nearly half (49%) when excluding those who do not think themselves *members* of their religious organisation, and nearly three quarters (73%) when including only those who are specifically *active* in their religious organisation. This indicates that only a minority of Australians (27%) actively endorse their religious organisation.



Little enduring religious certainty

Clergy often make public statements as though with congregational authority and certainty. Such narratives create the impression that many tenets and positions of their faith are beyond doubt or challenge — that they are universal and eternal — and that their denominational flocks either do or ought to agree with them. That confidence is misplaced regarding even the most fundamental tenets of many faiths.

Trend data from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) (Powell & Pepper 2017) and the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2018 show that the rate of **no** belief in either a specific God or an abstract ‘higher power’ has nearly doubled from 1993 (22%) to 2018 (40%) (Figure 36).

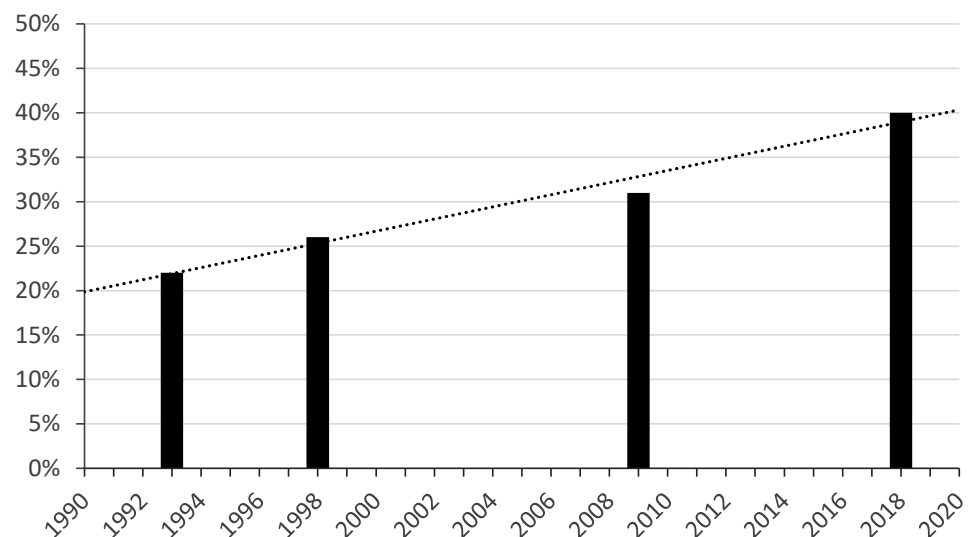


Figure 36: Percent of Australians with no god or ‘higher power’ belief
Sources: 1993–2009 Powell and Pepper 2017; 2018 AuSSA 2018.

Thus, at the same time bishops, rabbi and mufti proclaim their God’s apparent position on one or other matter, now not only do at least 40% of Australians not believe in *that* specific version of God, they don’t believe in a generic deity or metaphysical superpower of any kind.^d

^d Many religious beliefs research questions in western countries presume monotheism (God: singular). This may make it difficult in some contexts for polytheists (e.g. Hindu) and non-theist (e.g. Buddhist) religionists to answer some questions exactly. However, since polytheistic and nontheistic religionists comprise a small minority of Australia’s population — around 5% at the 2016 census — this has only a minor effect on overall research clarity.

Across the denominations

Even the support of fundamental religious tenets is limited. On average, just 1 in 5 Australians (20%) are certain that God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death are real (Figure 37). That includes on average just 1 in 3 Catholics (32%), and around 1 in 4 Anglicans (23%) and Uniting/Methodists (23%).

Only amongst non-Christian religions (average 50%) does it reach equality, and a majority amongst minor Christian denominations (average 63%).

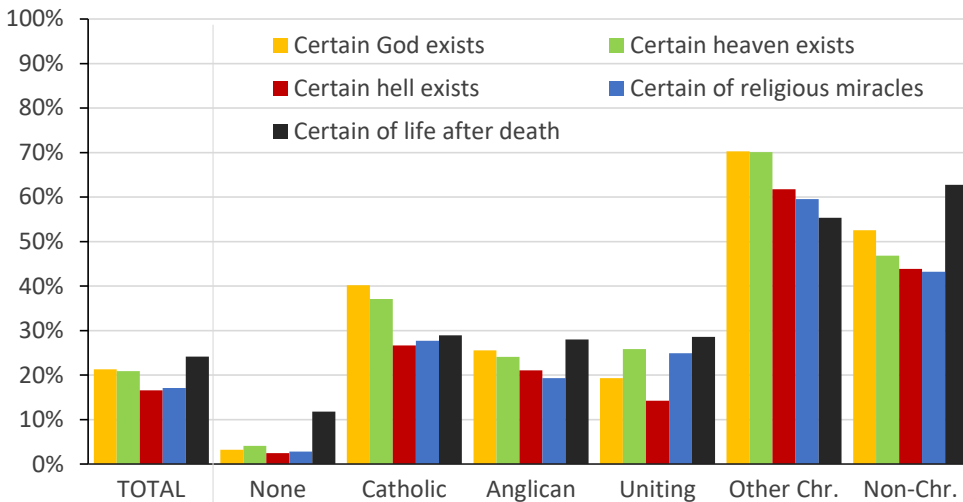


Figure 37: Religion by certainty of beliefs

Source: AuSSA 2018

Regarding other religious tenets the figures are similar (Figure 38). Around 1 in 5 Australians (26%) say that God is personally involved in all lives, including fewer than half of Catholics (47%) and around a third of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists (33% each). Only amongst non-Christian faiths does agreement reach equality (50%), and for most among the minor Christian denominations (88%).^e

On the question of life having meaning only because of God, a small minority of Australians (17%) agree. That includes around a third of non-Christian faiths (35%), around a quarter of Catholics (28%) and Anglicans (24%), and just over a fifth of Uniting/Methodists (22%). Only amongst minor Christian denominations does it reach a majority (58%).

^e Some of these figures are higher than the *Certain in God* figures because these figures include people who somewhat believe (harbour *doubts*) that God exists.

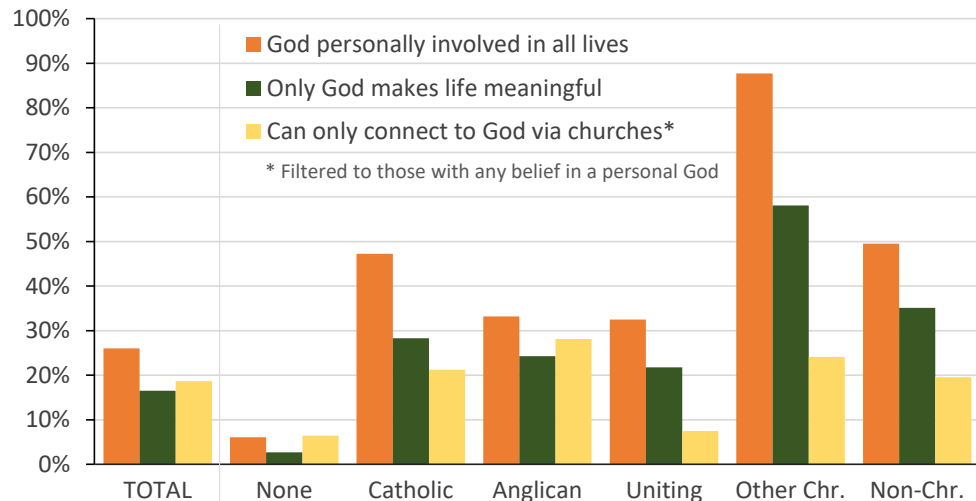


Figure 38: Religion by overall beliefs

Source: AuSSA 2018. Base: Total agree

On the question of whether it is possible to connect with God only via churches, Australians’ agreement was low across all denominations.^{fg} Slightly more than 1 in 4 God-believing Anglicans (28%) agreed, as did a quarter of minor Christian denominations (25%), a fifth of Catholics (21%) and non-Christian faiths, and just 1 in 13 Uniting/Methodists (8%).

Summary: Certainty about the existence of God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, life after death, whether God is personally involved in people’s lives and only God giving life meaning — core tenets of major faiths — is far from universal. Indeed, such certainty is mostly in the minority, except amongst minor Christian denominations.

Belief that it is possible to connect to God only via church is the weakest belief amongst God-believers, with just 8%–28% agreeing. This adds to doubts about the continued relevance and survival of institutional religion in Australia.

^f It was apparent that non-religionists had answered this question *conceptually* in respect of their *perceptions* of religionists. Therefore, the answer to this question was filtered to only people with any belief in God (including with doubts).

^g The question was specifically worded as “church”. It is unclear to what extent people of non-Christian faiths interpreted this question literally, resulting in a likely negative answer, or generically (synagogues, mosques, temples, etc as equivalents), giving a balanced answer.

By religiosity

Unsurprisingly, certainty about the existence of God, heaven, hell, religious miracles and life after death correlates strongly and positively with religiosity.

Only amongst Committeds (Regulars and Devouts, a combined total of 15% of the population), is certainty of these beliefs in the majority (60%–89%) (Figure 39). Amongst the other 85% of the population, certainty was in a small minority: from 2% to 35%.

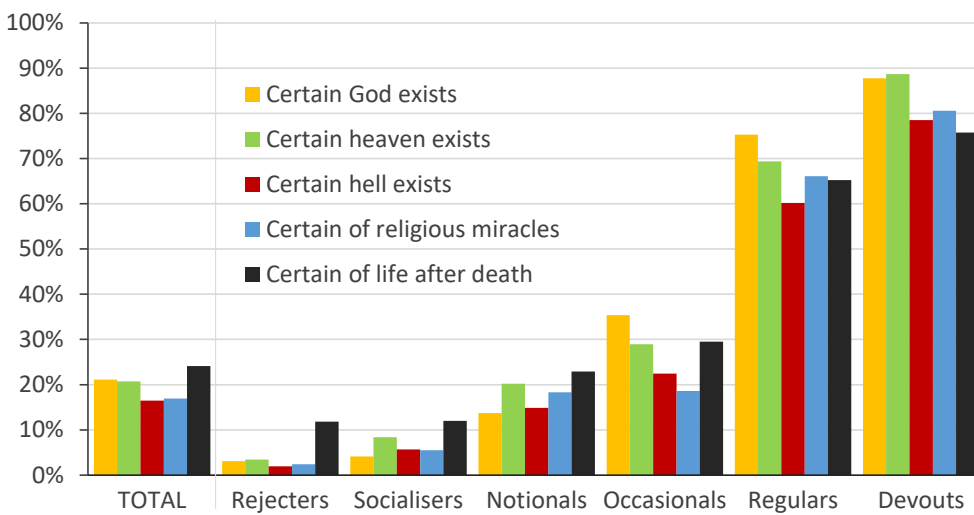


Figure 39: ARI6 by certainty of beliefs

Source: AuSSA 2018

Even amongst Committeds, roughly one in three Regulars and one in five Devouts were not certain of such beliefs.

Equally, on the questions of God’s personal involvement in all lives and only God making life meaningful, Committeds agreement was in the majority (57%–95%) and all others in the minority (3% to 43%) (Figure 40).

Of significance is that exclusive of Australia’s 15% Committeds, the highest rate of belief in only God making life meaningful was less than a quarter (23%) amongst Occasionals, with other segments well below 10%. This indicates that most Australians (77%) find meaning in life beyond a deity.

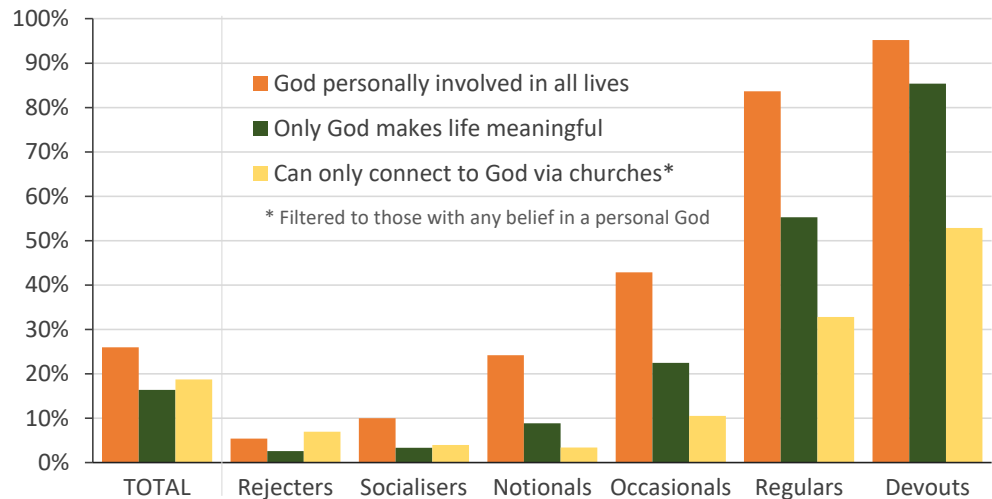


Figure 40: ARI6 by overall beliefs (total agree) in 2018

Source: AuSSA 2018.

On the question of being able to connect to God only through churches, agreement was in a slight majority (53%) only amongst Devouts. Even amongst Regulars, agreement was in the minority (33%), and at 10% or less amongst the other ARI6 segments.

Summary: Only amongst Australia’s 15% of Committeds is certainty of belief in God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, life after death, a personally-involved God, and only God making life meaningful, in the majority, but even then, not universal (55%–95%). Amongst all other segments, those beliefs were in the minority (2%–43%).

Only amongst Devouts was the belief that one can only connect to God via churches in the slight majority (53%). Only 1 in 3 Regulars (33%) and 1 in 10 or fewer of others agreed. Belief in the necessity and relevance of institutional religion is low amongst Australians.

For true believers, it's personal

Most “true believers” — the one-in-five Australians (21%) who believe without doubt that God exists — say that God is concerned with everyone personally (89%), including a majority (63%) who *strongly* agree (Figure 41).

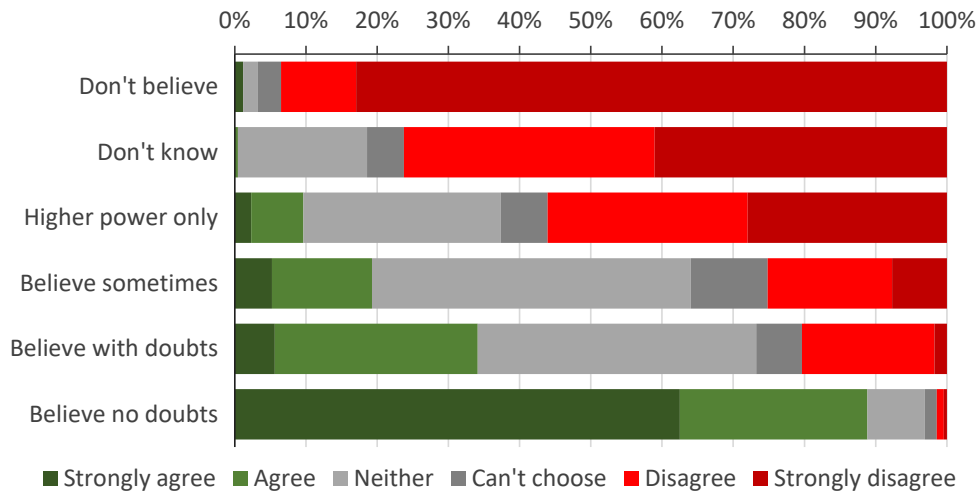


Figure 41: Belief in God, by God is concerned with everyone personally
Source: AuSSA 2018

However, only small to negligible minorities amongst all others agree. Just a third (34%) of those who believe in God but with doubts say that God is concerned with everyone personally, and just 6% or fewer of all those who doubt or disbelieve *strongly* agree.

This indicates that for those with no doubt that God exists, it's a matter of personal relevance for everyone, believer or not. This may account for the degree of moral intrusiveness that Australian devouts often express in presuming that their views ought to prevail over the private lives of everyone, even those who actively disagree with those devout views.

Summary: For those who believe in God without doubt, most say that God is concerned with everyone personally. This may account for their moral intrusiveness into the personal lives of others, even those who actively disagree with such beliefs.

Talking about religion

A slight majority of Australians (55%) talk about religion and spirituality with friends (McCrinkle Research 2017). This includes often (25%) or occasionally (18%) discussing spirituality, and less often other subjects such as church or Jesus. The remainder (45%) never discuss religion or spirituality with friends.

Younger generations are slightly more comfortable talking, though given young adult Australians are the least religious, their conversations may not be as positive towards institutional religion as amongst older generations.

Nevertheless, the higher inclination amongst younger Australians to openly discuss issues of religion and faith bodes well for the frankness and scope of public square debates in future years.

Meanwhile, care is warranted. ABC's *Australia Talks National Survey* found that a broad majority of Australians (60%), even more (73%) amongst NRs, and a majority of Catholics (53%), would prefer that people keep their religious views to themselves (Crabb 2019).

Summary: Depending on the survey, around half of Australians are happy to talk about religion and spirituality. The other half prefer not to talk about it and to just keep it a private matter.