



## Summary

While religion remains a feature of life for some Australians, the extent and general nature of religion and religiosity across the nation is widely misperceived.

### **Overestimation of the prevalence of religion**

The most common headline measurement of religion, denominational affiliation, is poorly measured and significantly overestimates religion in Australia. The wording for the religion question on the ABS census form is biased in favour of religion. Along with non-confidential administration of the census form to most Australians, it has produced an inflated headline figure of religious affiliation.

The most recent census, 2016, pegged “religion” at 70% of the population. If this figure is adjusted to the proportion of Australians who say they are either active or inactive members of their religious organisation, the “religion” figure drops to just 51%. Restricted to only those who say they are *active* members, it drops to around a quarter (27%).

### **Religion in long-term, and recent steep, decline**

Religious affiliation is in decline, with significant growth in the number of NR Australians and abandonment of “mainstream” Christianity: the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting/Methodist churches. Religious attendance is in decline even amongst those who remain affiliated.

In 2019, just 15% of Australians were Committeds (Regulars or Devouts). A majority of all affiliated Australians are either Notionals who *never* attend services, or Occasionals who rarely attend. Committeds have the oldest age profile, while Australia’s youngest adults have the highest proportions of NRs.

Multiple indicators suggest Australia’s steep decline in religion will continue, and that even some major churches may struggle to thrive, even to survive.

### **Australia’s most religious are typically more, not less, educated**

Contrary to the opinion of some, Australia’s Devouts are not lesser-educated. In fact, they have the highest rate of bachelor’s degree after Socialisers, and the highest rate of all post-school qualifications.

Regulars are the most likely to work in the professions, while Devouts also have a significant proportion of professionals but also are the most likely to include technicians, frontline workers and administrators, with post-school but not bachelor’s degree qualifications.

Despite this, Devouts are the least likely to be working in leadership roles despite a slightly older age profile than others, suggesting that they are either uninterested in such roles, or judged by their superiors not to hold the necessary attributes for promotion.

### **Religion of limited importance to Australians overall**

Amongst a range of factors contributing to personal identity, Australians say religion is a distant last. Only a quarter say that religion is as important now as in the past. Seven in ten say that religion is not personally important, and more than half say God is not important in their lives.

Most Australians (85%) now say that they are *not* active members of a religious organisation, and even amongst the most religious, Devouts, active membership is not universal (88%).

Now, most weddings are now conducted by civil celebrants rather than ministers of religion, and a majority of Australians would *not* have their funeral conducted by a religious celebrant.

### **Declining belief**

Contrary to claims of some clerics, Australians are not just abandoning institutional religion: they are also abandoning religious belief. The proportion of Australians *not* believing in a specific God or even an undefined “higher power” has grown over decades and is now four in ten.

Certainty of belief in God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death is in a minority — around one in five Australians. That includes just a third of Catholics and a quarter of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists. Only amongst minor Christian denominations, Regulars and Devouts, is certainty of such beliefs in the majority.

Only majorities of Regulars and Devouts feel certain that God exists, that God is personally involved in all lives, and that only God makes life meaningful. This may help explain their propensity to inappropriately proclaim their own moral judgements to hold over all others, including those who reject their religious beliefs.

### **Talking about religion**

About half of Australians are comfortable talking about religion with others. On the other hand, NRs especially, would prefer Australians to keep their religion to themselves.

### **Socially left and right**

Between 2007 and 2019, Australians moved somewhat to the left (more progressive) in *social* identity, at least in regard to attitudes toward gender equality and sexual behaviour. That included members of the major Christian denominations. *No* Australians weakly affiliated with religion (Notionals and Occasionals) in the study data classed themselves as social conservatives. This may help explain why Occasionals in particular have abandoned religion in droves over recent years: disagreement with conservative social stances proclaimed by their (now former) clerics.

### **Politically left and right**

While not-Committed Australians have moved very slightly from the centre to the near left and right, Committeds (Regulars and Devouts) have significantly polarised to the hard left and hard right: with more to the hard right.

Rejecters and Socialisers tend to identify more with Labor, while the religiously affiliated tend to associate with the Coalition, and Devouts with minor parties. But of those mostly favouring minor parties, the great majority were Notionals: affiliated with the weakest religious commitment, suggesting that much of the recent move towards minor party first preferences (which ebbed at the 2019 election) was not based on religious preferences.

### **Election attitudes and voting**

From 2007 to 2019, the proportion of political party-aligned Australians declined significantly, with drops in Rusted-ons, Loyals and Habituals, and increases in Differentiators, Evaluators and especially Volatiles. Volatiles now comprise 14% of adult Australians, making the reliable prediction of election outcomes a fraught pursuit.

First preferences given to the Coalition increased significantly amongst religionists (not Rejecters and Socialisers), particularly in the 2019 election. *There are other significant factors, not religion, that underpin this change.*

### **Economic identity**

Firstly, Australia's Christians, especially Catholics, are more economically conservative than NRs (and non-Christian denominations). Since the Coalition holds overall favourable public preference on economic management (though expert analysis suggests no overall difference with Labor), this naturally creates a Coalition appeal.

Secondly, Australia's religious households (especially Notionals, Occasionals and Regulars) have higher rates of low household annual gross income than NRs, another preference for the Coalition economic brand value.

Thirdly, Regulars and Devouts have far higher rates of unemployment than do all other religiosity segments, another factor creating favour for the Coalition.

Fourthly, Regulars have the highest rates of investment property ownership, and Regulars, Devouts and Occasionals the highest rates of company share ownership. Both these asset classes were the subject of taxation-relief reduction policies by Labor at the 2019 election.

These factors naturally led religionists, Devouts in particular, to think the Coalition closer to themselves on economic management. Regulars and Devouts were the only segments to have two of their three top policy priority areas focused on financial matters. All the other segments mentioned only one financial item in their top three.

Faith that the Coalition in office would improve the economy — more than it had in its previous term of office — correlated strongly and positively with faith that God exists.

Devouts in particular are the most likely to decide who to vote for on the basis of the party leader alone, and religious signalling appeals to them. Dislike of the lesser religious leader is proportional to their like of the more religious leader. However, since the NR segment is growing rapidly and NRs disfavour religious candidates, political parties will need to tread carefully in selecting their leaders and religion policies.

### **Democratic governance**

Australia's Christians are by and large more satisfied with Australia's democratic governance than are NRs, suggesting a bias in favour of religion to the detriment of other Australians.

Most Australians, including Devouts, reject religious authorities as the ultimate interpreters of law.

Devouts are by far the most likely to say that fighting rising prices is their top national priority, adding to the financial underpinnings of their increased Coalition votes. They are also the least likely to prioritise having more say in important government decisions, but the most likely to argue for freedom of their own "truth" speech. This suggests a self-directed normativity in their attitudes.

### **Attitudes toward major social issues**

**Abortion:** Contrary to the claim of some clerics, Australia's support for abortion services is increasing, not decreasing. Most Australians (93%) are now pro-choice, with 70% supporting ready access on demand, and majorities

in favour across the religious spectrum. Opposing clerics are well out of touch with their flocks on this issue.

**VAD:** Most Australians (75%–80%) have supported VAD since the mid 1990s. Current opposition is just 11%. Between 2016 and 2019, overall support remained the same, but *strong* underlying support increased, including amongst Australia's most religious: Regulars and Devouts. Claims by opposed clerics that their flocks are opposed, are very significantly uninformed.

**Marriage equality:** Attitudes toward marriage equality for LGBTI+ Australians warmed considerably between 2005 and 2015. In 2013, only a majority of Devouts opposed marriage equality. Marriage equality was legalised in 2017.

Since then, opposition to marriage equality has dropped significantly amongst all religiosity segments including Devouts, although a majority of Devouts still oppose it.

**Casting out homosexuals:** Most Australians (74%–82%) are opposed to religious schools having the right to expel LGBTI+ students or to sack LGBTI+ staff and contractors. Significant majorities of school child parents — and especially mothers who are more involved in school selection — across the religious denominations view the morality of homosexuality positively rather than negatively. Schools moving to actively discriminate may face subsequent enrolment challenges.

**Smoking marijuana:** In 2019, just over half of Australians (54%) approved of the legalisation of small amounts of marijuana for personal use. Across the religiosity spectrum, all segments but Devouts had a net positive attitude towards legalisation.

**Global warming:** Most Australians (81%) said at the 2019 election that global warming was an important policy domain to inform their vote. Regulars and Devouts were the least likely to say so. This correlated strongly with their lower rate of saying that global warming would negatively affect their own way of life.

### **Two final considerations**

Firstly, this detailed and comprehensive review of Australian religion by the numbers reveals that religion in Australia is considerably less prevalent than indicated by the census and as claimed by clerics. The incidence of religion has dropped considerably in recent years and the indications are that the drop will continue, if not accelerate.

Furthermore, even those who say they are affiliated with one or other denomination mostly disagree with their clerics on a range of social issues such as abortion, VAD, and marriage equality, and few are even certain about fundamental tenets of their religion, such as the existence of God, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death.

So when Sydney's Catholic Archbishop says Christian parents expect "Christian values" to be taught at religious schools (Bolt 2019), he would be referring rhetorically to the Vatican's canonical dictates rather than the views of the majority of actual Australian Christians.

Secondly, it's worth emphasising that it is the minor Christian denominations — not for the most part Catholic and Anglican laity — who hold the most devout beliefs, harsher attitudes towards their fellow Australians, most strongly oppose social reforms, express the greatest interest in money matters, and are most likely to say that God is concerned with everyone personally, even those who reject God.

Thus, it's important to distinguish between the views of the religious hierarchy, especially of the Catholic church, from its lay flock. It is mostly bishops, rabbi and mufti who espouse highly conservative views, while the views of their flocks are significantly more progressive and clearly disagree with organisational doctrine.

These are matters of great significance as legislators and governments develop and refine policy regarding religious matters, especially the balance between religious and non-religious rights and freedoms.