Executive summary

Like many western nations, religiosity in Australia has decreased substantially in recent decades, particularly among the major Christian denominations. The trend appears set to continue. At the same time, the nation's Pentecostal prime minister, Mr Scott Morrison, has made no secret of the extent of his religious convictions, Australia's most religious have attempted to take charge of political party branches, and the federal Coalition government seems intent on entrenching in law privileged rights for the religious to discriminate.

But **what is "religion"?** It can be very difficult to separate out from culture and politics. Particular personality types, such as those who favour authoritarianism or a social dominance orientation, may seem to be represented both in politics (much more, though not exclusively, on the right), and in religion. While these and other attributes might seem essential features of religion to some, research from around the world paints a much more complex picture. Characteristics associated with religion in one culture — especially in western monotheisms — can be *negatively* associated in others — especially in the east.

Not unexpectedly, **the way religionists experience their faith varies**. *Intrinsic* religionists live their faith as a central component of identity, demoting the importance of worldly matters. *Extrinsic* religionists employ faith for utilitarian purposes such as security and solace, status, and self-justification. *Quest* religionists search for the truth, with an emphasis on social interaction. When Intrinsics offer help to the needy, they are more likely to persistently provide misaligned services: help that they themselves, not those they help, deem appropriate. Questers, on the other hand, tend to offer more tentative and situationally-relevant assistance.

Australian religionists are far more likely to see faith as "doing good to others" (72%) than simply "following religious norms and ceremonies" (28%). The Irreligious (45%) are far more likely to say that religion is merely following norms and ceremonies, versus just 15% amongst religionists, suggesting that the Irreligious underestimate the prosocial meaning religion has to adherents. Amongst religionists, however, the most religious, Ardents, are the most likely to say religion is about following norms and ceremonies, indicating a significant proportion are merely *compliant* with their religion, or are Extrinsics employing religion for personal utilitarian purposes.

The Four Bs framework provides another perspective on the personal meaning of religion. *Beliefs* are transcendent cognitive content; *Belonging* relates to rituals and emotions; *Behaving* involves moral self-control; and *Bonding* focuses on ingroup identification and self-esteem.

Synthesising major streams of thought and discourse about religion helps reach **a practical definition**. Religion is *not*, as commonly stated in western countries, "belief in God". That is to wrongly commandeer the wider concept to a particular interpretation — in this case, monotheism. Rather, religion lies at the intersection of three concepts: (a) belief in supernatural entities, forces, or principles, (2) normative social acceptance (that is, agreement as to tenets and customs giving effect to beliefs), and (3) providing guidance for moral behaviour and in life meaning, or at the very least "a life well lived". This is the approach adopted by Australia's High Court. Neither good intentions nor any other dimension is necessary. Indeed, the High Court has expressly stated that sincerity and integrity are not necessary features, and that charlatan religions are as protected as others provided they meet the necessary criteria and don't offend ordinary laws.

A common misconception is that being religious means being "spiritual". Spirit is the seat of one's emotions and character (some say the "soul"), unrelated to physical things. Fewer than one in five Australians (18%) say they both have a religion *and* are spiritual. Only 35% of Catholics, 26% each of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists, and 44% of non-Christian denominations say they have a religion and are spiritual. Only amongst the minor Christian denominations is there a majority (65%).

Conversely, about 18%–24% of Australians (depending on the study) say they are spiritual but not religious (SBNRs). Religionists attempting to plump reports of Australia's religiosity both wrongly reckon that all religionists are "spiritual", and then add the SBNRs to the mix as a kind "spiritual" froth atop a carbonated religious beverage. This is misguided: SBNRs are very different in character from the religious. Pouring them into the same glass is like mixing oil and water.

Why is religion so prevalent across all cultures and throughout history? A host of predispositions of **the human mind** contribute. Up to half of an individual's disposition to be religious is inherited (nurture), but religious expression is also strongly built and moulded into a specific denomination through social forces (nurture). A host of general brain mechanisms favour religion. A key one is a partial seizure in the temporal lobes, which causes the sensation of "another self" or "sensed presence". Rationally-prone people experience this inside the mind as dreams of hallucinations, while fantasy-prone people experience it outside the mind as angels, demons, ghosts, or God.

Similarly, those prone to intuitive thinking are more likely to infer patterns in completely random data. This illusory pattern perception is a compensatory mechanism against perceived threats to personal control. This can be exaggerated for people with weak understanding of physical and biological

phenomena, and seeing the controlling hand of deities offers advantages to minimise anxiety. Consistent with this factor, Australia's most religious are substantially more likely than others to say they feel strong control over their lives.

A similar effect applies in respect of magical thinking and paranormal beliefs. These are associated with intuitive thinking and perceived existential threats, though they don't have to be life-threatening. Religious responses can include mystical experiences and preferences for tradition, conformity, and security. In the modern world, financial insecurity correlates with experiencing religious miracles, and Australian evidence suggests this may be a key factor behind Protestant "prosperity gospel".

Another major contributor is the unique human capacity for *secondary* theory of mind, in which we can conceptualise that *another person's mind* can understand that other minds have thoughts, feelings and beliefs of their own. This predisposes us to over-mentalising — the religious tend to explain the world in terms of teleological *purpose* (the intent of supernatural minds, and the false detection of agency) rather than *causes*. It also encourages conjuring up supernatural minds that monitor our own for purity and compliance.

Other factors include attachment to God as a compensatory response to anxious or avoidant attachment to parents; or a corresponding attachment to God in relation to secure attachment to parents; and the experience of awe (feelings of "small self") which also decreases tolerance for uncertainty. Further factors may contribute, but are less important than sometimes assumed: terror management theory in which fear of being dead is compensated by membership of an 'eternal life' club; combatting boredom; and others not covered in this report.

A number of **collective factors** help boost the mind's disposition to religion and entrench it in society. An important one is state support for religion, whether official, preferred, or merely operationalised in practice. Another is that religious rituals convey "costly signalling" that promise predictable and prosocial behaviour, but are hard (or too costly) for fakes, frauds and freeloaders to replicate, thereby increasing cooperation. While small gods promote cooperation at the family and local level, big gods do so more universally. Cooperation is not the exclusive province of religion, of course: countless non-religious organisations promote cooperation around the world, too. At least at the personal level, a majority of Australians say that religion helps people make friends.

Other collective factors include higher fertility rates amongst the religious, though this is no longer true in Australia; the transmission of religion from parents to children; and evangelisation.

SBNRs are worthy of special mention in relation to religion. In Australia, they are rather different from religionists: they are generally anti-establishmentarian, are more likely than others to vote Greens, hold socially progressive views, far less likely to believe in a god or gods, are largely unable to articulate coherent specifics about their "spirituality" and indeed often relate it to mindfulness and yoga.

Like religion, **non-religionist worldviews** including atheism, agnosticism, rationalism, humanism, and others have similarly complex mixes of attributes, but are not discussed in detail in this report.

Personal benefits commonly associated with religion and religiosity include reduced anxiety, a sense of life control, and greater feelings of happiness and wellbeing. However, evidence for such effects are mixed. For example, while greater self-reported health is said to correlate with religiosity, Australia's most religious, Ardents, are the least likely to report good health. Indeed, on average Australian religionists' BMI is higher than others. Self-report measures can be quite inaccurate. For example, political conservatives *self-report*, but progressives *act out*, greater happiness.

Australia has seen large decreases in religion and religiosity over recent decades. While those 65 or older were almost all raised in a religion (Christianity), a large minority of Australians under 45 years have been raised in no religion, and very few as Anglicans or Uniting/Methodists. Given that non-religion is a "sticky denomination" (few so raised change their minds), the more recent non-transmission of religion through childrearing suggests further religious decline over time.

Amongst Australia's adults, 35% are still of the same religion and 23% of non-religion in which they were raised, 32% have left religion, 8% have changed from one religion to another, and 2% have converted from non-religion to a religion. Significant numbers of children raised Catholic (37%), Anglican (52%), Uniting/Methodists (58%), and minor Christian denominations (46%) have left their religion in adulthood. Factors associated with remaining in the same religion are believing that God is personally involved in all lives, and being raised in a common religion of both parents. A factor commonly associated with loss of religion in adulthood is being forced to attend religious services or instruction in childhood, *above* the rate of parental attendance (i.e. lack of "credibility-enhancing displays").

Not only have large numbers of Australians left religion, but those who remain are on average much lower in religiosity than either their parents or themselves in childhood. While just 7% of adult Australians are now *more* religious than in childhood, 27% are now less religious, and a further 31% have left religion altogether.

Apart from parental indoctrination of their children in religion, the most common reasons for Australians to convert are seeing others' genuine faith, experiencing a life trauma, and hearing the testimonies of the religious. Conversely, Australians are repelled from religion by church abuse and scandals, perceived hypocrisy, judgementalism, hearing statements of public figures who are examples of that faith, hearing miracle stories, questioning religious teachings, disagreement with opposed religious stances about social issues like abortion, voluntary assisted dying and marriage equality, and non-belief in God.

A spurt of rejection of religion in recent years is associated with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, in which religious organisations were found to be major offenders, and in response to religious opposition to marriage equality in the 2017 national plebiscite for law reform.

But not only do individuals change their religious beliefs, so do religious organisations. For example, the Anglican church has changed its "tradition" on the ordination of women, and the Catholic church has in the past changed its position on the marriage of priests, and more recently on limbo. At the same time, not only laity but clerics disagree on doctrine. For example, most Australian Catholics support abortion and voluntary assisted dying choice, both banned by the church. This seriously calls into question claims by religious conservatives that a religion's "tradition" must require, or prohibit, particular courses of action and ought to be binding on all.

This disconnect is particularly evident in the recent increase in religious institutional activism against public freedoms. For example, clerics are promoting "**institutional conscientious objection**" to prohibit certain healthcare services to the public. But conscience is the interaction of emotions and thoughts in the mind of a natural person. Institutions are confections of law, not natural persons, and their codes of conduct that prohibit certain choices are not conscience: they are *rules* that *suppress* real conscience and *extinguish* agency. Such prohibitions are particularly egregious when services are being provided to the public, on the public purse.

Most Australians are fairly sceptical about religious organisations. While Australia's most religious, Diligents and Ardents (12% of the population) rate the churches at number 3 out of 25 institutions in terms of their trust, the other 88% place the churches at number 22, below banks (then under royal commission investigation) and unions. Trust in religious leaders themselves is similarly low. This suggests that highly religious Australians lack an appreciation of how their organisations are viewed by most — the religious are more prone than others to *false consensus* bias.

More Australians say that religious institutions have too much power than say they don't. Even amongst Devouts, less than a third (30%) say they don't. Religious interference in politics is unwelcome: most Australians (80%) say that clerics shouldn't try to interfere in parliamentary elections. This disconnect relates most strongly to religion in the sphere of politics: opinions about whether religions should be able to evangelise without interference are almost evenly split.

Australian religious conservatives have recently ramped up their political voice, lobbying the federal government to introduce legislation that would grant special privileges to religious individuals and especially religious organisations. Those privileges would legally require offended chins to withdraw themselves from the path of freely-swinging religious arms; while legally requiring others' swinging arms to restrain themselves wherever a religious chin may be present. The Australian Human Rights Commission has labelled the second exposure draft as "*a dangerous precedent*" that would significantly restrict others' rights. These are not *shields*, they are *swords*.

The religious ructions are driven by the 2017 legalisation of marriage equality, by the possible loss of a sympathetic government at the federal election due by May next year, but also by the release mid next year of the headline result of this year's national census. That headline is very likely to say that for the first time since Federation, Christianity is in the minority. To try and urgently cement religious privilege in federal law, Australia's religious conservatives have imported a range of tactics from the USA religious right: claiming to be the victim while acting as the aggressor, presenting the recently invented "Judeo-Christian" meme as historical accuracy, and wrongly plumping the headline religious affiliation figure with SBNRs to give the appearance of greater religious devotion.

But the truth about Australians' relationship with religion is clear. When the notional religious affiliation headline of 60% is adjusted to those who say they *belong* to a religion, it drops to just 38%; to those who say they are religious, 32%; to those who say religion is important in their lives, 29%; to those who say their religion is spiritual, just 18%; and to those who attend monthly or more often (16%) or say they are an active member of their religious organisation (15%).

These real and practical measures of Australians' religiosity are reflected in practice. In 2017, then Senator Cori Bernardi quit the Coalition government and founded his Australian Conservatives party. Other parties and individuals joined up. The experiment failed. Over two years, not only was a parliamentary seat lost, but not one was gained across multiple elections. In 2019, Mr Bernardi deregistered the party.

Religious conservatives face an uphill battle to entrench privileges in federal law, but they might also take care what they wish for. A major international study recently published shows a *causal* relationship between state protection of religious privileges, and significant decreases in religion; that is, a drop in religious vitality. It turns out that religion thrives best when it is left to stand on its own two feet.

That gives legislators a great deal to contemplate as the federal government introduces its Religious Discrimination Bills into parliament. Not only would waving them through cause long-term pain by actively contributing to the waning of religion in Australia, but cause short-term electoral pain as a majority of Australians react negatively to religious privilege at the political level.

Introduction

Australia, like many other western nations, is coming to terms with major changes in religiosity, what that means for religionist and non-religionist citizens alike, and how these changes might inform public policy.

Recently, the nation's most publicly religious prime minister, Pentecostal Mr Scott Morrison, revealed that when giving disaster-affected Australians a hug, he's really "laying on of hands" for the purpose of divine healing via the Holy Spirit (Maddox 2021). No doubt many of Australia's now largest religious "denomination", No Religion (NR), also known as the Nones, would find his presumptuous and secret purpose creepy. Indeed, even other Australian religionists may, like former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2021), while the nation's ethicists ponder the morality of this previously undisclosed intent.

In Australia's religious landscape there have been major increases in Nones. A small but significant rise in Pentecostals and non-Christian religions is countered by major decreases in Catholic and Protestant numbers (Bouma & Halafoff 2017; Francis 2021).

In recent decades, Australia's population has grown 40% by natural increase and 60% by net overseas migration, making our nation more culturally diverse than many (McCrindle 2014). That includes religious diversity. But what does it mean to be "religious"? What is religion, how is it experienced by Australians, and what do they think of it?

Part 1 of this series covered the headline rates of faith amongst Australians, according to census and high-quality polling data (Francis 2021). It revealed considerably lower rates of real belonging to religious denominations, and beliefs in major supernatural tenets (e.g. god, heaven, hell, afterlife) than is often assumed or claimed.

In this Part 2, the nature of religion itself is explored from individual, group and evolutionary perspectives. It aims to inform a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the nature of religion beyond "I'm Anglican" or "our family is Sikh".

Rather than cover the specific tenets of various religions — for which there is ample material elsewhere — this report explores frameworks of understanding about why religious belief is such a common human trait, various ways religion is experienced by individuals, and how things change when religious expression becomes communal and entrenched in institutional settings.

Findings from numerous peer-reviewed scholarly studies about religion are integrated with high-quality Australian data to provide useful insights and comparisons. In addition, citizens' actual attitudes, particularly their now largely sceptical views towards institutional religion and its place in society, are discussed.

> **Adults only:** Except for ABS Census data, the discussion and statistics in this report are about *adult* Australians. Parental claims about the religiosity of minors are not otherwise covered.

> **Respect:** This report does *not* seek to disrespect or argue against religion or faith. Rather, it aims to report relevant facts *about* the breadth and depth of religion and faith amongst adult Australians, and to dispel misinformation.

Methodology

This report integrates findings from Australian census data, high-quality academic survey and qualitative research published in peer-reviewed journals, results from professional studies, and reports in major media outlets.

Abbreviations

ABS — Australian Bureau of Statistics

AES — Australian Election Study (ANU)

AHRC — Australian Human Rights Commission

ANU — Australian National University

AuSSA — Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (ANU)

AVS — Australian Values Study (ANU)

BMI — body mass index

Chr. — Christian (in charts, tables)

CIS — The Centre for Independent Studies

CO — conscientious objection

CSR — cognitive science of religion

IP — intercessory prayer

NCLS — National Church Life Survey

NR — No Religion: the "Nones"

SBNR — spiritual but not religious

ToM — theory of mind

VAD — voluntary assisted dying

ANU data analysis

All analyses of ANU study (AES, AuSSA, AVS) raw data were conducted by Neil Francis, not the ANU. The ANU is not responsible for results from its studies appearing in this report.

Non-respondents excluded

Unless otherwise noted, all survey analysis results are net of non-respondents.

Religiosity scales

The ARI5 and ARI6 religiosity scales are explained in Part 1 of this series (Francis 2021).