Perceived benefits of religiosity

A range of benefits is said to be associated with religion and religiosity.

In Australia, involvement in church life[25] is associated with greater perceived *social* benefits, but not with increased purpose in life (Casidy & Tsarenko 2014). Sunday service attendance and fundraising participation are somewhat associated with benefits, while social activities and special events produce much greater positive effects.

Some associated benefits are reduction in anxiety, improved health and happiness, feelings of closeness, greater sense of life control, and greater morality. Some associations are well-established, while others show mixed results under scientific examination, with details still contentious.

Anxiolytic benefits

As discussed earlier, when personal control is threatened, people may resort to a range of strategies to restore it, such as seeing patterns in noise, subscribing to superstitions, defending the legitimacy of institutions that offer control, and believing in an interventionist God (Kay et al. 2009a; Kay et al. 2009b).

General Social Survey research from the USA confirms this general association, showing that religion can be a palliative resource for the structurally disadvantaged, including women, racial minorities, those on lower incomes, and in some cases, sexual minorities (Schnabel 2020, 2021).

At the level of nations, religiosity is associated with low average existential security, and it decreases in nations where safety and predictability have grown (Norenzayan & Gervais 2013a). However, more detailed analysis suggests that while perceived insecurity tends to increase general attachment to a religious identity, it *decreases* its importance as a source of personal identity, relative to other sources (Curtis & Olson 2019).

Many studies have found religion to provide comfort in times of trouble or sorrow, and Australian research confirms this association (Figure 20). Most Australians agree that religion provides comfort, showing a strong positive correlation with religiosity. Almost all Devouts agree, most of them strongly.

Intrinsic religiosity also improves personal meaning in life in the face of anxiety-inducing social disconnectedness (Reynolds, Smith & Conway 2020).

[25] Note the implicit Christian study bias.

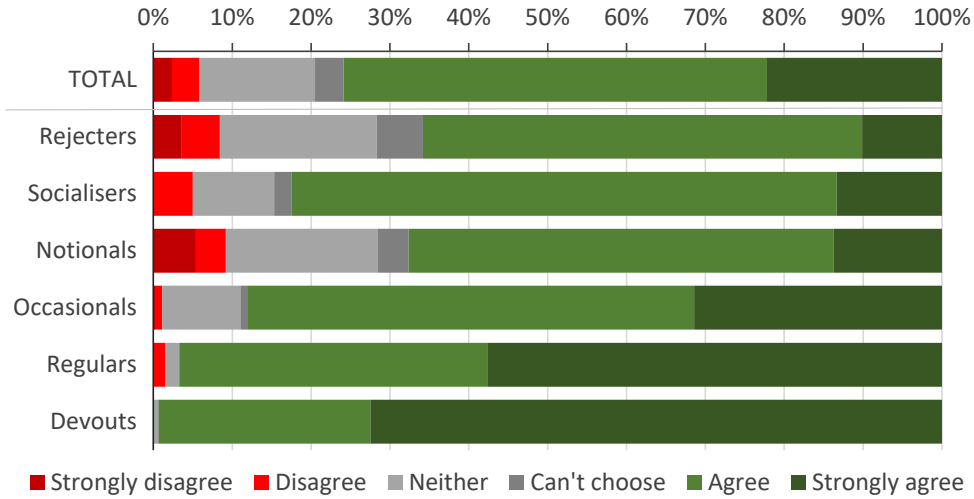

Figure 20: Religion gives comfort in times of trouble or sorrow, by ARI6
Source: AuSSA 2018

Rituals

While rituals can be non-religious, a central feature of religions is ritual, helping explain religion's power in reducing anxiety (Brooks et al. 2016; Lang, Kratky & Xygalatas 2020), in part through social bonding (Singh et al. 2020). Even extreme ritual practices with the possibility of personal harm can reduce anxiety (Xygalatas et al. 2019).

Group rituals are a form of signalling that indicates commitment to the group, cooperative intentions, and importance of group cohesion (Lang 2019; Legare & Nielsen 2020; Stein, Hobson & Schroeder 2020; Watson-Jones & Legare 2016).

While rituals may reduce cognitive load, it is the repetitive behaviour rather than cognitive load that mediates ritual performance and lower anxiety (Karl & Fischer 2018).

Rituals don't always have positive consequences, however. They can greatly increase antisociality and derogation towards outgroups, and hinder self-control (Hobson & Inzlicht 2016).

> **Summary:** Rituals reduce anxiety through repetitive action. They increase prosociality towards the ingroup, but can increase antisociality towards outgroups.

Health, happiness and wellbeing

It is commonly reported that religious commitment and spirituality are associated with higher subjective happiness and wellbeing (e.g. Price & Herringer 2005). Personality mediates emotions and religiosity (Hiebler-Ragger et al. 2018), and *positive* emotions such as awe, gratitude, love and peace — but not others like amusement or pride — mediate religiosity and well-being (Van Cappellen & Saroglou 2012; Van Cappellen et al. 2016).

Both the palliative function of system-justifying ideologies (Napier, Bettinsoli & Suppes 2020), and the social dimensions of religious association contribute significantly to greater wellbeing (Shor & Roelfs 2013).

However, a positive association is not guaranteed, and the association may sometimes be negative. For example, Orthodox Jewish families in Israel experience significant interpersonal religious struggles (Pirutinsky 2014).

In general, normative religion, that is, merely observing religious rules, engenders negative emotions, while transcendent communion engenders positive emotions (Martos, Sallay & Kézdy 2013) and life meaning (Martos, Thege & Steger 2010).

The association between religious service attendance and higher life satisfaction has been found in Australia, mediated by religious group social resources (Kortt, Dollery & Grant 2015).

Other studies (AuSSA and AVS) show a generally higher self-rating amongst frequent service attenders for overall happiness, family relationships, and overall health (Figure 21), seeming to confirm at least the social bonding factors.

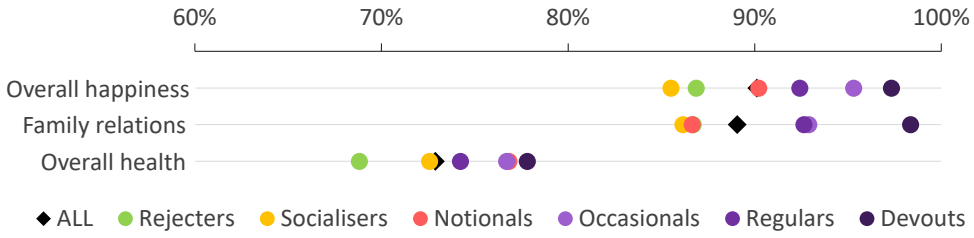

Figure 21: Overall happiness and health, by ARI6
Sources: Happiness and family relations, AuSSA 2018; health AVS 2018

These findings are consistent with the USA where religion correlates with greater happiness and family involvement (Pew Research Center 2016b).

Measurement methodology problems

However, the relationships between religion, health and happiness are much more complex than this. Non-religious health is not necessarily worse, but may appear so due to methodological problems in many studies (Farais & Coleman 2020).

For example, religion/well-being research may be confusing religious faith with personal virtues (Schuurmans-Stekhoven 2011). Spirituality (alone) appears to be negatively associated with well-being, while the character strengths of fortitude, wise-hope, loving-kindness and others contribute to well-being amongst both the religious and non-religious.

Research results also vary according to the dimensions of well-being studied, since religiosity correlates differently amongst well-being dimensions (Lam & Rotolo 2000).

Self-reported perceptions are unreliable

Another problem is that most studies use subjective *self-reports* rather than empirical assessments of health and happiness/well-being. Even though there appears to be an association between religion and more positive language overall (Yaden et al. 2017), studies with empirical measurement of health and happiness don't indicate a consistent association.

For example, while a religion-health association was found using health proxy measures, there were no real differences when measuring actual health outcomes (Speed 2021). Similarly, self-reports of religion and spirituality were associated with increased self-reports of well-being, but there was no significant association with psychological distress levels (Manoiu 2019).

Further illustrating the problem of self-reporting and the potential gap between perceptions and reality, political conservatives self-report, but progressives *act out*, greater happiness (Wojcik et al. 2015).

Valence, strength, and typology of beliefs

The valence[26] of religious beliefs can cause conflicting effects (Vitorino, Low & Vianna 2016). Negative religious valence such as belief in an authoritarian or punitive God, as well as negative coping strategies, correlate with worse life satisfaction (Johnson 2021; Szczesniak & Timoszyk-Tomczak 2020), as does negative self-esteem like shame and guilt (Murray & Ciarroacchi 2007).

Strength of belief can also contribute to perceptions of health and wellbeing. Those who are more certain of their religious or non-religious beliefs report

[26] The "polarity" of experience, as positive (e.g. joy) or negative (e.g. fear).

greater happiness than those who doubt (González-Rivera et al. 2019; Villani et al. 2019). Indeed, SBNRs "in the middle" tend to struggle with spirituality (Mercadante 2020) and be more neurotic and less agreeable than the religious (Schnell 2012).

A major Canadian study found the self-reported wellbeing of secularists similar to that of the highly religious, despite their significant deficits in factors that are supposed to mediate religion and wellbeing (Dilmaghani 2018). This suggests substitution factors for secularists. When properly separated out by research methodology, atheists were found to have the best mental health, other seculars and affiliated religionists next, while non-affiliated theists had significantly worse mental health (Baker, Stroope & Walker 2018). A potential explanation is that atheists experience less demonic, divine, and moral struggles than religionists, although similar levels of interpersonal and ultimate meaning struggles (Sedlar et al. 2018).

Belief affirmation can have significant effects, too. Religious people whose belief in the effectiveness of prayer was affirmed by a fictional story of heart attack survival after prayer, were vastly happier than all others (Riggio, Uhalt & Matthies 2014). Conversely, if the heart attack subject died after prayer, religionists avoided religious explanations altogether, demonstrating a strong trait for confirmation bias.

Wellbeing certainly varies by the religious Big Four (see *The Big Four Bs framework* on page 20). Belonging and bonding are uniquely associated with greater life satisfaction, while believing is uniquely related to decreased life satisfaction (Saroglou et al. 2020).

> When separated out, atheists had the best mental health, seculars and affiliated religionists next, and non-affiliated theists last.

Socialisation effects

Consistent with other studies comparing spirituality with socialisation, those who attended religious services more often were found to have lower rates of serious health problems than those who attended less but prayed more often (Ahrenfeldt et al. 2019).

In any case, social bonding is not the exclusive domain of religion. Secular rituals create similar bonding through positive emotions (Charles et al. 2021). Further research is needed to understand the social resources and bonding of secular groups and their association with life satisfaction.

Nor is religious socialisation always positive. Young Australian churchgoers are significantly happier when greater social behaviour (church attendance) is aligned with greater positive religious emotion (intrinsic religiosity) (Francis, Powell & McKenna 2020). However, for young churchgoers *without* positive religious emotion, greater church attendance is associated with significantly less happiness.

Even the context of filling out a study questionnaire may play a part in happiness and well-being results — for example completing it alone versus in a group setting such as at church. At least amongst conservative Protestants, mood deteriorates when they are alone (Storm & Wilson 2009).

Direction of causality

In addition to spillover effects of life satisfaction between religionists and non-religionists (Clark & Lelkes 2009), a potential relationship between religious socialisation and greater feelings of wellbeing may be negated by those with poor health *adopting* religion as a coping strategy (Hvidt et al. 2017). Equally, those who are in better health may be in a better position to participate in religious social activities and be counted as more frequent service attenders. That is, there are competing mechanisms — and their directions of causality — which may increase or decrease any potential association.

> Religion may help people reduce anxiety and improve health and wellbeing, thereby increasing these measured outcomes, but those with poor health and wellbeing may be attracted to religion, reducing the measured outcomes. This complex interaction can make separating out benefits and drawbacks difficult.

Existential and social support systems

In developing countries with widespread hunger and low life expectancy, people are much more likely to be highly religious, which confers greater social support and subjective wellbeing (Diener, Tay & Myers 2011). In societies with better support systems, religiosity is significantly less prevalent, and the religious and non-religious are likely to experience similar levels of subjective wellbeing.

Secondary behaviours

Around the world, religious people tend to smoke and drink less than non-religionists (Pew Research Center 2019c). However, they don't tend to

exercise more or have lower rates of obesity. In fact, in Australia, the religious have a somewhat higher average BMI than others (Kortt & Dollery 2014).

Thus, secondary behaviours rather than supernatural beliefs themselves potentially contribute to differences or similarities in subjective health ratings.

Ingroups versus outgroups (normative comfort versus prejudice)

Religious people experience higher subjective wellbeing in religious societies, but not in non-religious ones (Diener, Tay & Myers 2011). At the other extreme in officially atheist China, the religiously committed experience significantly greater levels of stress (McClintock, Lau & Miller 2016).

The Netherlands furnishes a useful religion-specific example too, where Muslims, who tend to be highly religious, have significantly lower subjective wellbeing than most in the secularised nation (Ten Kate, de Koster & van der Waal 2017). Conversely, Dutch Catholics — historically the Netherlands' most common religion — experience significantly higher than average subjective wellbeing.

These studies indicate significant effects conferred through the normative "comfort" for larger ingroups, against a backdrop of prejudice towards and stress within smaller outgroups. Experience of prejudice can also occur amongst non-religionists in nations with high populations of religious (Sedlar et al. 2018).

> The positive effects of normative ingroup comfort versus the negative effects of experienced outgroup prejudice, can have profound effects on happiness and wellbeing for either religious or non-religious groups.

Net health and wellbeing effects

Given this complex array of issues, it's no surprise then that the latest research shows little correlation between religiosity and life satisfaction (Pöhls 2021). At best, a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies found, there seems to be a significant but very small positive net effect of religion on wellbeing, via socialisation (participation in public religious activities) and perceived importance of religion (Garssen, Visser & Pool 2021).

Despite this, in Australia, high religiosity correlates with lower health when controlling for a wide range of confounding factors (Bernardelli, Kortt &

Ednaldo 2020). This is consistent with ARI5 religiosity segments, which indicate high levels of happiness amongst the more religious (Casuals, Diligents and Ardents), while Ardents report significantly lower overall health despite their happiness (Figure 22).

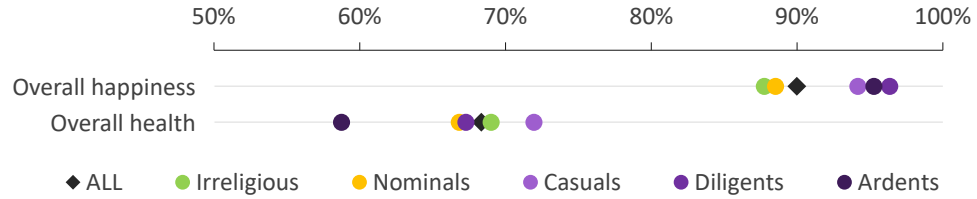

Figure 22: Rates of overall happiness and health, by ARI5
Source: AVS 2018

No major associations were found in the ANU data sets between religiosity type (religious, spiritual, both or neither) or strength of dis/belief in God, and the quality of health or family relations.

The combination of observations suggests that in Australia at least, religion does assist subjective wellbeing for some (and happy people may be more likely to attend religious meetings), and that some have turned to religion specifically in trying to cope with poorer health.

Summary: Evidence that religion is associated with greater happiness and health is mixed, though somewhat positive. There is a complex range of important factors influencing health and happiness, many of which are uncontrolled in most studies. Religious belief, behaviour and identity can either improve or degrade health and happiness depending on its typology, valence, or whether the person is a member of a comfortable ingroup or a rejected outgroup. When separated out from other non-religionists, atheists appear to have the highest wellbeing of all.

In Australia, the most religious, Ardents, report high average wellbeing but the lowest average health, suggesting that religion may both attract and retain those in poor health, and provide comfort that increases mental wellbeing

Feelings of closeness

A core proposition of mainstream religions is their tendency to promote prosocial behaviour, particularly towards ingroups (Norenzayan, Henrich & Slingerland 2013). For example, religious service attendance promotes churchgoer prosociality via its social aspects, mediated by gratitude, peace and love (Van Cappellen et al. 2016). These might be interpreted as positive feelings of closeness towards others, whether a general trait for such feelings, or driven more by practical relationships.

Australian research supports these general associations. Those who attend religious services most often (ARI6 Devouts) maintain relatively high rates of closeness across the spectrum from the local community to the world in general (Figure 23).

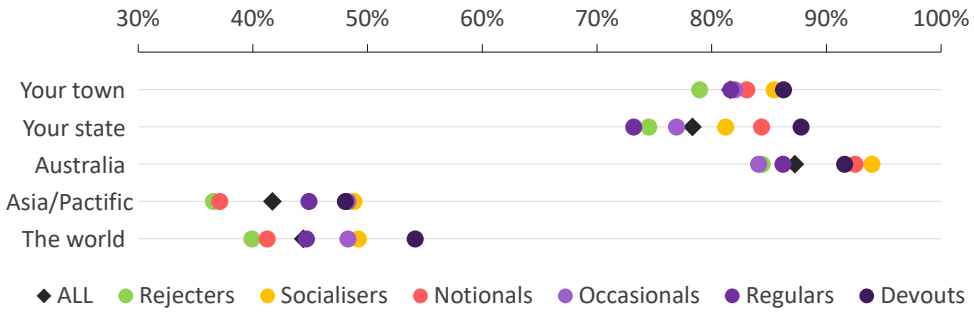

Figure 23: How close you feel to..., by ARI6
Source: AVS 2018

The direction of causality is unclear though: does social behaviour engender general feelings of closeness, or do general feelings of closeness engender social behaviour? The effects are probably bidirectional.

By ARI5 religiosity — which takes the *personal importance* of religion into account — the most religious (Ardents and Diligents) appear to exhibit *trait* closeness,[27] since their feelings of closeness are relatively higher for the more general and abstract Asia/Pacific region, and the world, than for more nearby groups (Figure 24).

However, Ardents rated their closeness to their own local district, and to Australia nationally, the lowest. The exact nature of these associations is unclear, though they are almost certainly driven by multiple factors.

[27] That is, feelings of closeness are a personal characteristic, not just a situational expression.

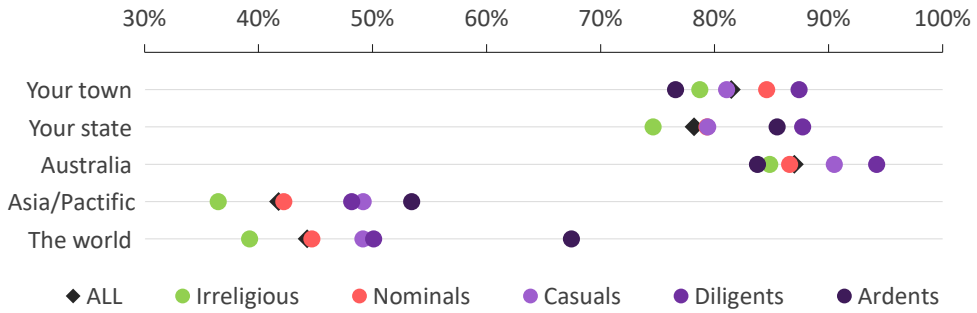

Figure 24: How close you feel to..., by ARI5
Source: AVS 2018

For example, Ardents may be unhappy with the number of non-religious (or at least non-agreeing) people they meet in person in their local district, challenging their propensity to false consensus bias.

In regard to Australia as a nation, the AVS 2018 study was conducted the year after the federal parliament legalised marriage equality, a reform opposed most strongly by Ardents (though some approved). Thus, the negative national association may be due to feelings of loss of control or betrayal.

Summary: Australian research is consistent with the association of religiosity and the trait to feeling close to others, even if the others are abstractions living elsewhere. Feeling close to others is also strongly associated with frequency of attending religious services, though causes could be bidirectional. However, to those for whom religion is most important (Ardents), locals, and Australia as a nation, feel less close than they do to others. Possible reasons are suggested, though direct evidence remains unavailable.

Sense of life control

While most Australians say they feel a sense of control over their own lives, the most religious, ARI5 Diligents and especially Ardents, are significantly more likely than others to say so (Figure 25).

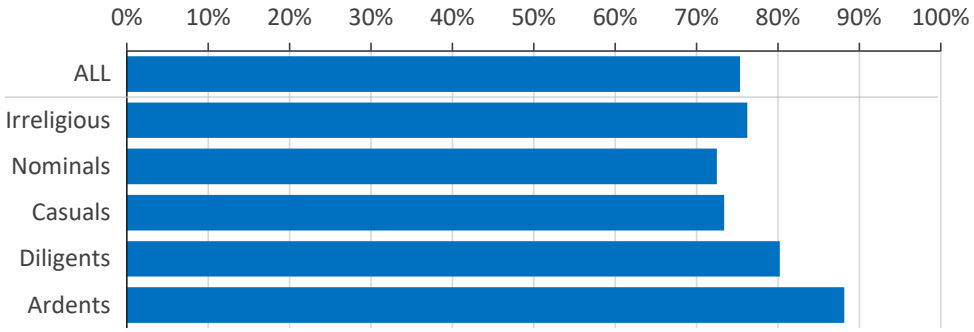

Figure 25: Feeling strong control over one's own life, by ARI5
Source: AVS 2018

These effects are also consistent with the interaction between religion and culture, particularly ingroups versus outgroups. While religiosity correlates with feelings of control, it's Christians who dominate, with almost all Christian Ardents (92%) feeling a strong sense of control of their lives (Figure 26).

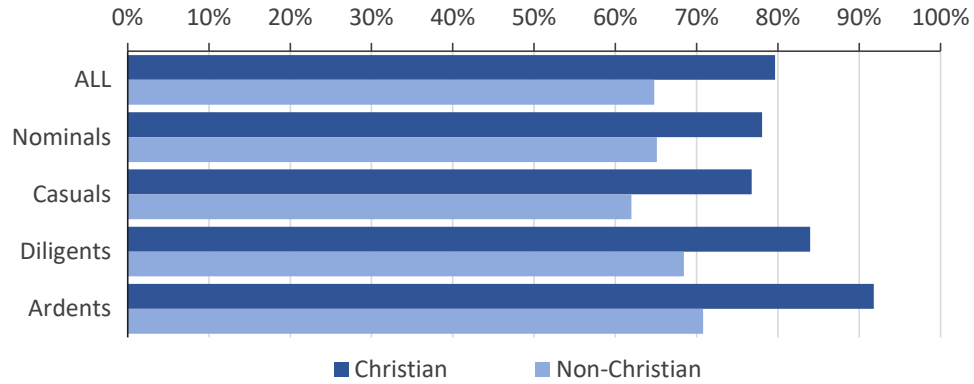

Figure 26: Feeling strong control over one's own life, by major faith groups
Source AVS 2018

Across the religiosity spectrum, significantly fewer amongst non-Christian denominations feel in strong control of their lives than do Christians, even though such feelings are still in the majority. Compared with Christian Ardents, a significantly smaller majority (71%) of non-Christian Ardents feel a strong sense of control over their lives.

In addition to feelings of general control over one's life, exposure to religious institutions including schools, and rituals such as prayer, can help increase practical self-control (Marcus & McCullough 2021). This imparting of self-control — and not so much the desire to instil specific religious tenets —

appears to be a significant factor in Australian parents' choice of religious schools, since "discipline" is mentioned more often than "religious values" (Beamish & Morey 2013; Beavis 2004; Warren 2015).

Summary: Religiosity is associated with higher levels of a sense of personal control over one's life, though there are additional positive effects for normative ingroups and negative effects for outgroups. Australian parents prioritise religious schools more for their ability to impart discipline on youngsters than for religious indoctrination.

Getting ahead in life

Few Australians think that one's religion is essential or very important to getting ahead in life. Just 4% of Rejecters and 8% of Notionals and Regulars, and no Socialisers at all (0%) think it's important (Figure 27).

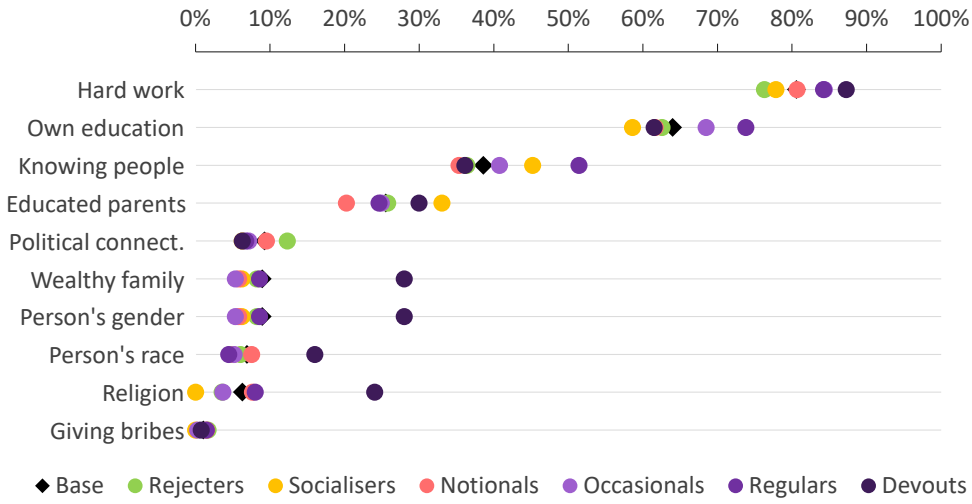

Figure 27: Essential or very important to getting ahead, by ARI6
Source: AuSSA 2019

However, a quarter of Devouts (24%) believe that religion is essential or very important to getting ahead. This suggests a much greater likelihood of Devouts wanting to get ahead *within* a religionist context, such as religious charity services, or within their religion's organisation. This correlates with most Devouts (86%) saying they are active in their religious organisation (Francis 2021, p 45).

Cultural prejudice against non-Christian faith outgroups

Members of non-Christian faiths are the most likely to say that a person's race and religion are important to getting ahead (Figure 28). This is likely to be in the negative: they have on average the highest levels of education (and are the most likely to say it's important to getting ahead), but the highest levels of unemployment.

They are also by far the most likely to say that knowing the right people and having political connections are important to getting ahead — yet they aren't getting ahead as much as others. This is consistent with culturally-embedded inequality: prejudice against non-Christian religionists as an outgroup.

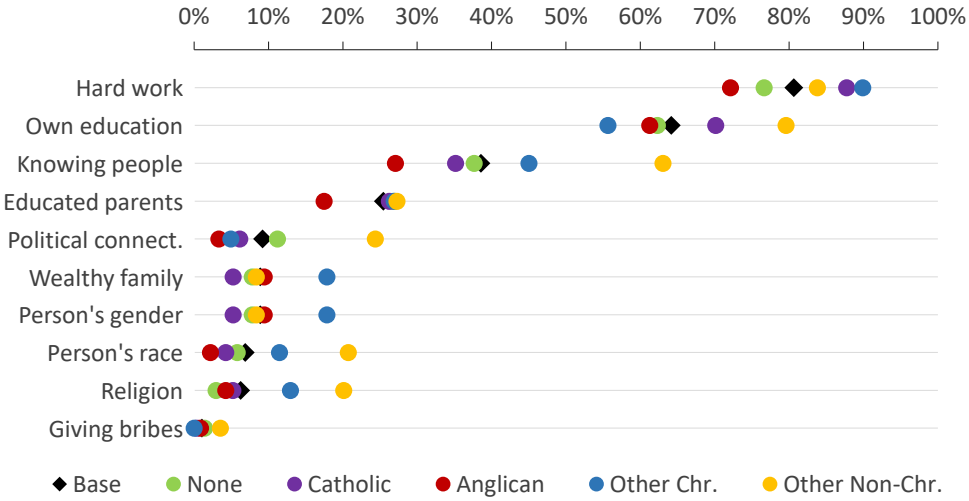

Figure 28: Essential or very important to getting ahead, by religion
Source: AuSSA 2019

Summary: One in four Devouts believe that religion is essential or very important to "getting ahead", but hardly any other Australians agree. These Devouts may believe that "getting ahead" is relevant mostly within their religious milieu. Non-Christian denominations exhibit a unique profile for "getting ahead", consistent with experiencing prejudice as an outgroup.

Greater morality

The complex relationship between religion, religiosity and morality will be discussed in Part 3.