



Personal changes in religion

An individual's religiosity can vary substantially across the lifespan, usually beginning with indoctrination in childhood followed by significant loss of religiosity between adolescence and young adulthood (Chan, Tsai & Fuligni 2015; Stoppa & Lefkowitz 2010).

Reliable measures of religion and religiosity are important, but can be hard to come by even in government data. For example, on census forms, Australian parents tend to list the religion of young children at the same rate as their own religion, even though youngsters may not have had a chance to decide for themselves, or even developed theory of mind to contemplate God and other religious issues (Figure 29, Parents / young Children comparison).

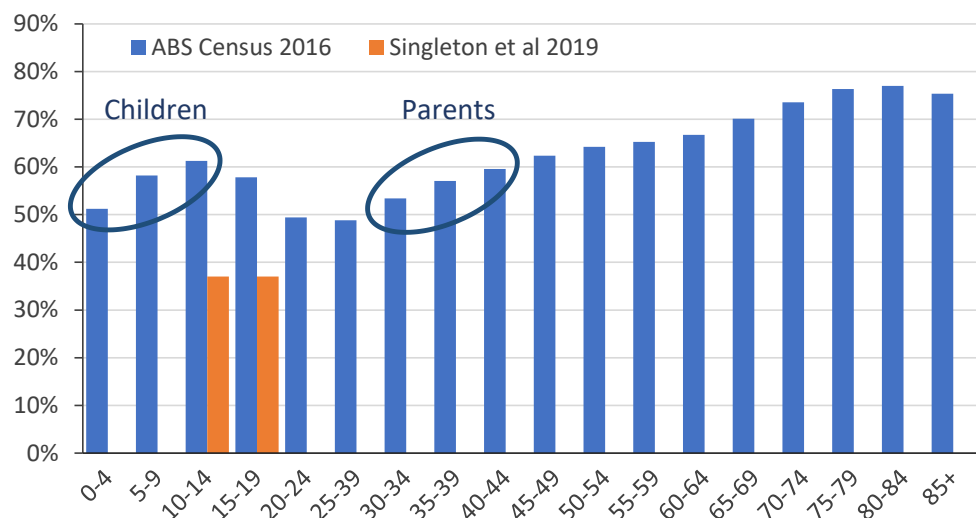


Figure 29: Has a religious denomination

Sources: ABS Census 2016; Singleton et al. (2019). Note: Singleton data a single result for 13-18 year-olds.

However, when youngsters are asked about their religion without parental monitoring, they are far less likely to say they have a religion. For example, Singleton et al. (2019) found 13-18 year-olds stated their own religion at around 20 percentage points lower than suggested by the 2016 census data completed either by parents or with parental involvement.

Why are Australia's non-religious, non-religious?

When Australia's non-religious were asked for their top thought or position about religions, nearly half (49%) said that they prefer a scientific and rational 'evidence-based' approach to life (Figure 30) (McCrindle Research 2017). This is consistent with significant numbers of adolescents and young adults abandoning religion. It is during senior high school and university that many

develop critical thinking skills, an appreciation for the scientific process, and for high quality evidence.

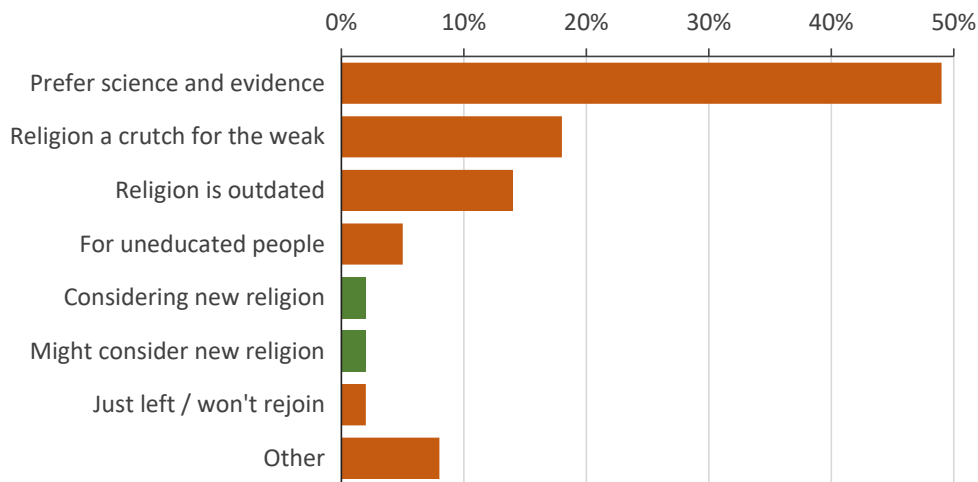


Figure 30: Australians' reasons for being non-religious

Source: McCrindle Research (2017)

Negative religious attributes were next-most common, with religion seen as a crutch for the weak (18%), an outdated approach to life (14%), and religions for uneducated people because there is no spiritual realm (5%). Around 4% said they were either considering adopting a new religion or might consider one in the future, indicating that most of Australia's non-religious are likely to stay that way.

Summary: Accurate and meaningful data about religion is critical to informed public debate. The real rate of religion amongst Australian adolescents is around 20 percentage points lower than the latest (2016) Census reports. By far the most common reason for being secular was a preference for science and evidence. Few non-religionists indicated they might re-join religion, suggesting that most secularists are likely to stay that way.

Raising children in a religion

Before we consider changes in Australians' religion since childhood, we should understand the generational trends in the religious denominations in which children have been raised (Figure 31).

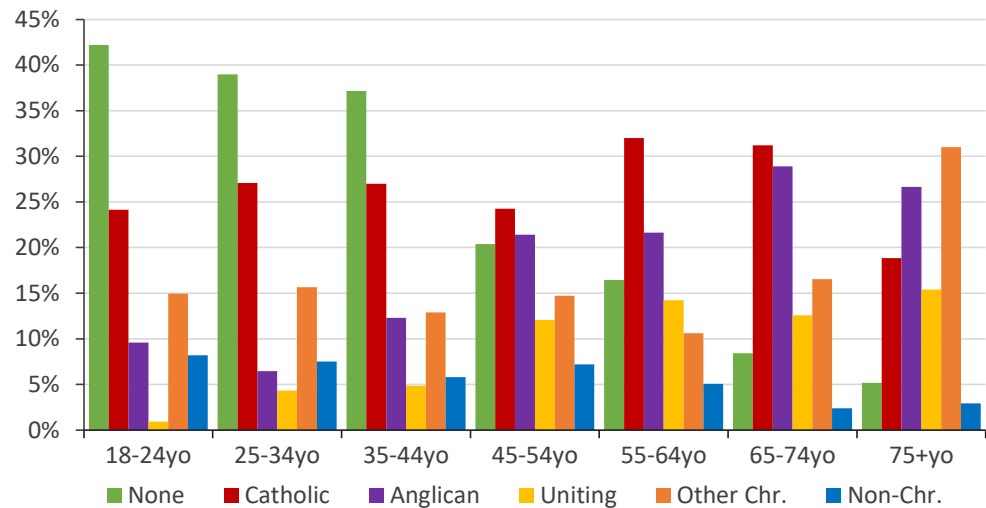


Figure 31: Religion that now-adult Australians were raised in, by age group
Source: AuSSA 2018

The most striking trend in childhood religious denominations over some 60 years is the immense increase in No religion (None), from just 5% of children around 1950 (75+ yo), to 42% around 2010 (18–24 yo).

Minor Christian denominations were dominant in the 1950s, but have been substantially reduced but relatively stable since the 1960s.

A significant drop in children being raised Anglican occurred in the 1970s, possibly as a result of the election of prime minister Gough Whitlam and the end of decades of conservative federal governments. Another substantial drop occurred in the 1990s, alongside a substantial drop in Uniting/Methodist households.

The proportion of children being raised Catholic has varied somewhat with an obvious peak in the 1960s and 70s, but no obvious long-term rise or fall.

There has been a small but significant rise in children being raised in non-Christian faiths, largely as a consequence of immigration.

Australia's youngest adults (18–24 yo) were raised mostly in No religion (42%) and Catholicism (24%), with other denominations in smaller minorities: minor Christian denominations (15%), Anglican (10%) and non-Christian denominations (8%), with Uniting/Methodist (1%) almost entirely absent.

Summary: Australians are increasingly being raised in No religion, with substantial falls in children being raised Anglican or Uniting/Methodist. Overall, the rates of children being raised Catholic or in minor Christian denominations is relatively stable, while non-Christian religions are a small minority but increasing mostly as a result of immigration.

Large minority have changed religion

Just over a third of adult Australians (35%) are still of the same religion of their childhood (11-12 years old) (Figure 32). Nearly a third of adults (32%) have left religion since childhood, and nearly a quarter (23%) are still of no religion. A small minority (8%) have changed to a different religion, and a tiny 2% have converted from No religion to a religion. Overall, a large minority (42%) of adult Australians have changed their religion (or non-religion) since childhood.

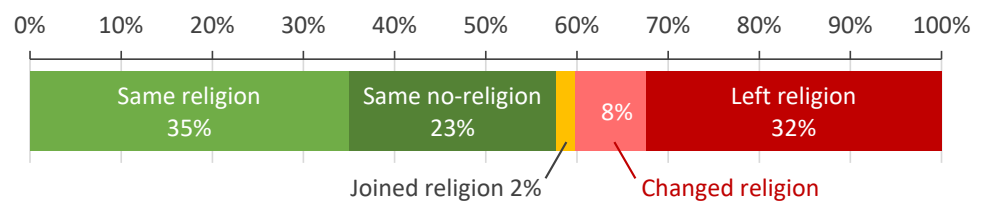


Figure 32: Current religious affiliation compared to late childhood religion
Source: AuSSA 2018

There is no significant difference in these rates between males and females, except for conversion from No religion to a religion, which is much higher amongst females by a factor of three to one.

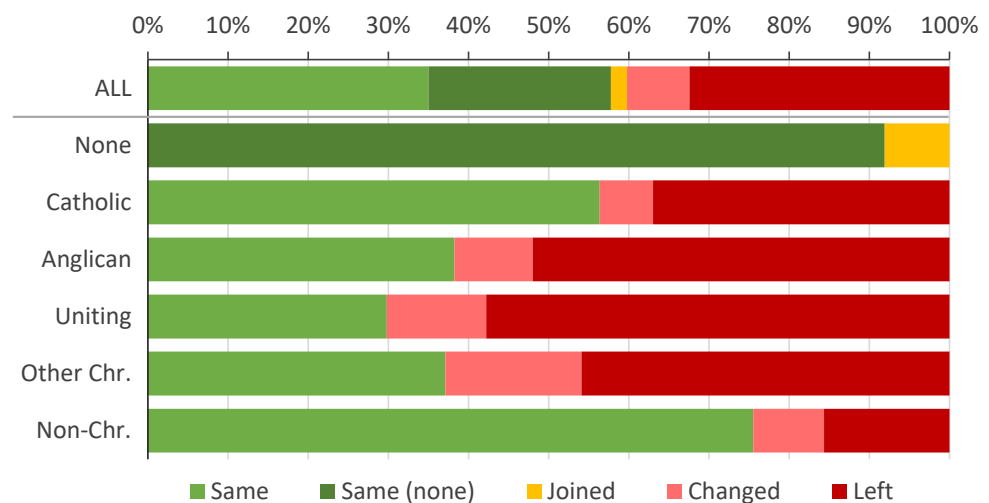


Figure 33: Changes from childhood religion
Source: AuSSA 2018. Note: Religion is denomination in late childhood.

By religious denomination, No religion has the highest ‘stickiness’ with 92% not changing, followed by 80% of non-Christian denominations (Figure 33).²⁸ Christian denominations exhibit much lower stickiness.

²⁸ These two groups also have the youngest age profiles, meaning less lifetime in which a change may have occurred.

Those **converting** to another religion include 7% of former Catholics, 10% of Anglicans, 12% of Uniting/Methodists and 11% of minor Christian denominations and 4% of non-Christian denominations.

Rates of **leaving** religion are much higher, at over a third (37%) of former Catholics, more than half of Anglicans (52%) and Uniting/Methodists (58%), nearly half (46%) of minor Christian denominations, and 16% of non-Christian denominations.

These figures are consistent with the drops in religious affiliation reported in the ABS national Census data over recent decades, confirming that the Christian denominations are losing affiliates at much higher rates than other religions.

Although the sample sizes for some religious denominations were too small to draw conclusions, the data suggested that those especially raised as Pentecostal, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or Jewish were far more likely than mainstream Christians to have retained the same religion in adulthood.

Changes in religion by childhood religiosity

By religiosity, two thirds (66%) of childhood Notionals, nearly half (47%) of Occasionals, and more than a third of Regulars (35%) and Devouts (38%) have left religion altogether in adulthood. Smaller numbers (5%, 9%, 14% and 11% respectively) have changed to a different religion (Figure 34).

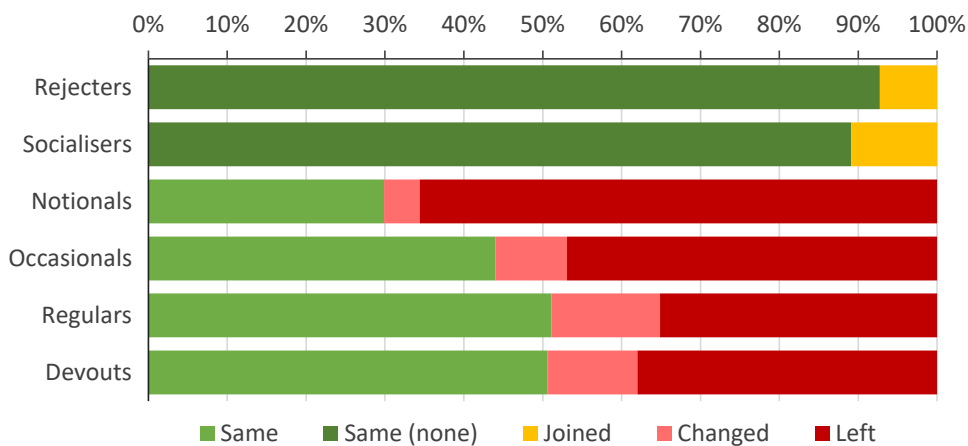


Figure 34: Changes from childhood religion, by childhood religiosity

Source: AuSSA 2018. Note: Religiosity is ARI6 in late childhood.

Even amongst childhood’s most religious, Regulars and Devouts, only around half (51% each) are of the same religion they grew up in.

Looking back

Looking backwards from current religion to childhood religion (rather than forwards from childhood religion), somewhat more than half (58%) of adult Australians are now of the same religion they were raised in (Figure 35). Those who are now Notionals (87%) and Occasionals (83%) are by far the most likely to be the same religion, but most having reduced their religiosity from Regulars and Devouts.

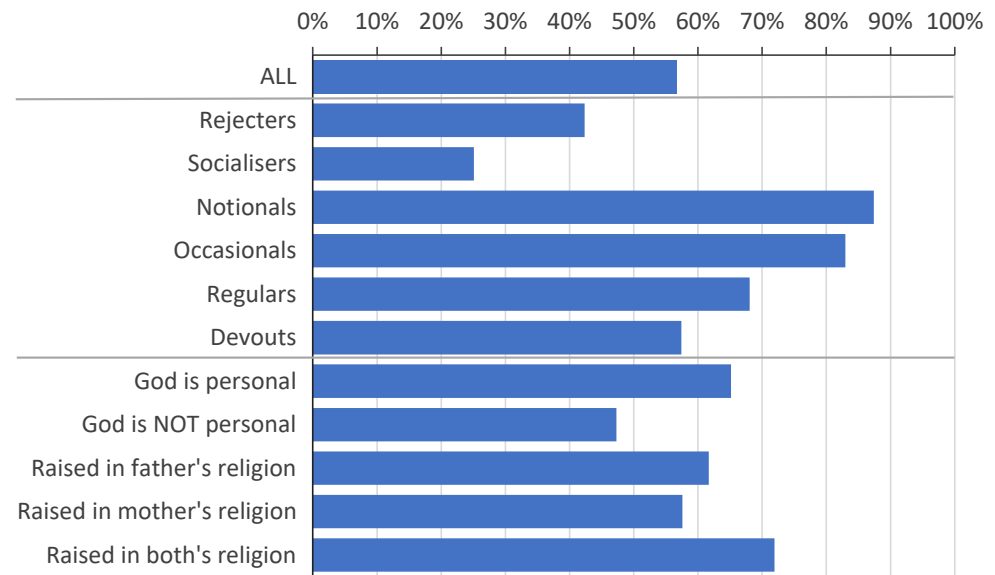


Figure 35: Adults now in the same religion as in childhood

Source: AuSSA 2018. Note: Religiosity is ARI6 now in adulthood.

Being raised in the religion of both parents (compared with only one), and believing in a personal rather than impersonal God, are also associated with higher rates of staying in the same religion in adulthood.

Summary: A large minority (42%) of Australian adults have changed religion since childhood; comprising 32% who left religion, 8% who changed religion, and 2% who converted to religion. Significant changes, especially leaving religion altogether, have occurred mostly across the Christian denominations. Factors most associated with staying in the same religion are being raised in the (same) religion of both parents, and believing in a personally-involved God.

By religiosity, significant numbers of childhood religionists across the board have abandoned religion, from two thirds of then-Notionals to more than a third of then-Regulars and Devouts (35% and 38% respectively).

Nature versus nurture — again

These changes in religion and religiosity raise the question of the transmission of religion between generations: how much is nature and how much is nurture? A deep dive into the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018) furnishes helpful insights (Figure 36).

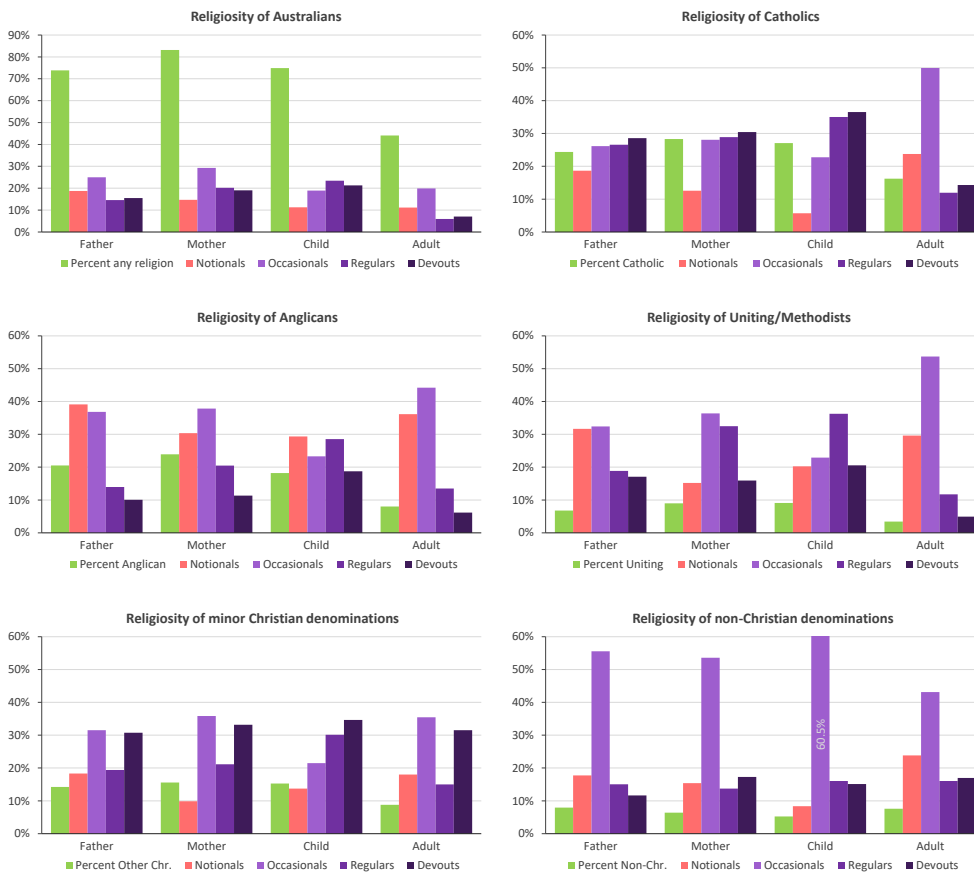


Figure 36: Religiosity of the respondent’s father; mother; self as child & adult
Source: AuSSA 2018

Overall, our mums have been a little more religious than our dads, and our child selves seemingly a little more religious than our mums. There is a radical difference, however, between Christian and non-Christian denominations. Children raised as Christian were significantly more religious (attended religious services more often) than either of their parents, of which Sunday School is the obvious feature.

Non-Christian denomination children, however, attended at about the same rate as their parents, suggesting that minority groups transmit meaning in a credibility-enhancing manner rather than sending children off to their own extra indoctrination sessions as Christian parents do. This approach, coupled with an interest in preserving minority culture identity, has resulted in

maintenance, even a slight increase, of the modest rate of Committeds among non-Christian denominations (Figure 37).

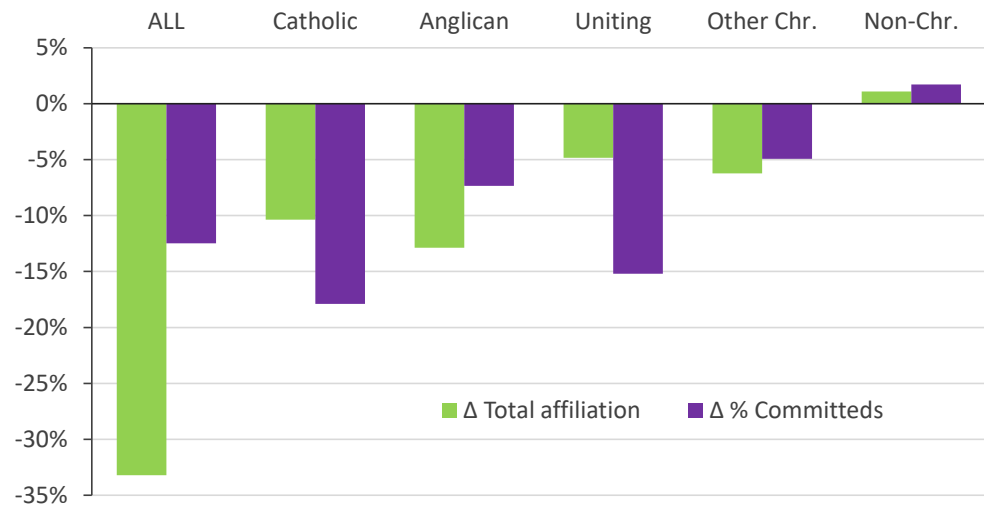


Figure 37: Current adult religious affiliation, and percent Committeds, versus average of father, mother, and self during childhood

Source: AuSSA 2018

Across all Christian denominations, not only has there been a significant loss of affiliation since childhood days, but significant shrinkage of Committeds (Regulars and Devouts) among those remaining affiliated. This suggests that the downward trends in Christian affiliation will continue in years to come.

The Catholic and Uniting churches have experienced the largest drops of Committeds, meaning that these faiths are likely to see greater drops in affiliation in coming years. The rate of Committeds amongst Anglicans was already low, accounting for its highest rate of affiliation loss already.

These figures suggest that both the Anglican and Uniting churches will struggle in coming years. It is possible the Uniting church could cease to exist in a decade, that the Anglican church would dwindle to a mere shell of its former self, and that even the Catholic church could struggle to maintain its status.

Significant drops in both affiliation *and* in the proportion of Committeds across the Christian spectrum suggest that the Uniting church could cease to exist in a decade, that the Anglican church could dwindle to a mere shell of its former self, and that even the Catholic church could struggle to maintain its status.

Religion transmitted, and then sidelined or rejected

The substantial decreases in religion and religiosity are not, as yet, the result of a loss of attempt at transmission from parents to children. Children mostly had similar affiliation levels and higher proportions of Committeds than their parents. But as those children have grown through adulthood, great numbers have either de-emphasised religion or discarded it altogether.

Since these emerged adults are the next generation's parents, religious affiliation and religiosity are likely to continue their decline. Children being raised in no religion is likely within a generation to contribute more to the Nones than are children being raised in a religion and subsequently disaffiliating (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme 2017).

Summary: Australia's current adults were in childhood as religious, and even slightly more religious, than their parents. The substantial growth in Nones evident over recent generations is mostly a result of disaffiliation in adulthood. However, being raised in no religion is likely within a generation to become the most common reason accounting for adult Nones.

Religiosity now versus in childhood

In more detail, personal change in religiosity between childhood and current adulthood shows increases in religiosity amongst a tiny minority of Australians (7% overall), at the same time as major decreases in religiosity across the board: with 31% leaving religion altogether,²⁹ and a further 27% retaining a religion but becoming less religious (total 58%) (Figure 38).

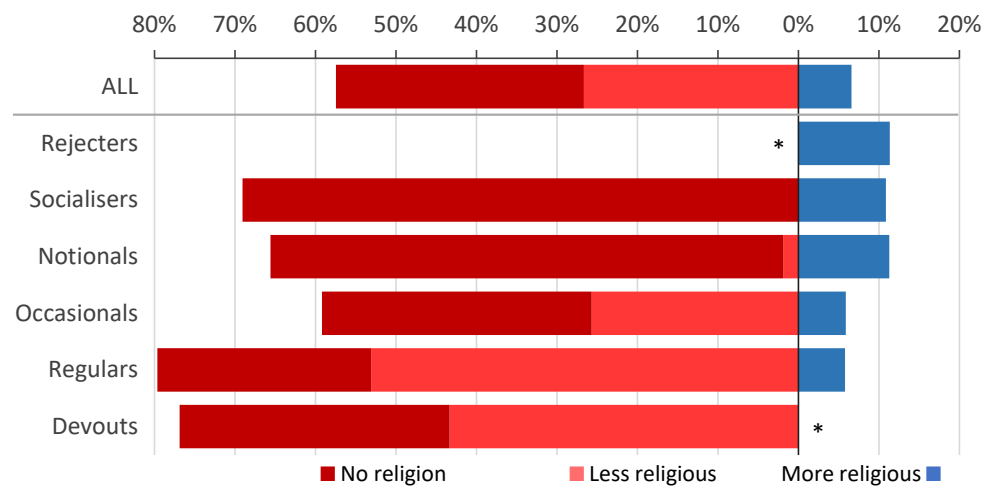


Figure 38: Own religiosity now compared to childhood ARI6

Source: AuSSA 2018. * Note: Rejecters cannot by ARI6 segment become less religious, nor Devouts more religious. ARI6 labels apply to childhood, not adult, religiosity.

Amongst those who were childhood Devouts, 43% have reduced their religiosity, while another 34% have abandoned religion altogether. Amongst childhood Regulars, the figures are 53% and 27% respectively. These are by far the largest total drops in religiosity across the spectrum. Just 6% of childhood Regulars became *more* religious, that is, Devouts.

Of former Occasionals who decreased their religiosity, slightly more than half abandoned religion altogether. And amongst former Notionals and Socialisers, nearly all or all who decreased their religiosity abandoned religion altogether.

Summary: Australian religion has decreased not only by religious disaffiliation, but also by substantial decreases in religiosity even amongst those still affiliating with a religious denomination.

²⁹ The disaffiliation figure of 31% here differs slightly from the disaffiliation figure of 34% for religious denomination analysis because a smaller proportion of respondents answered the *religiosity* (versus religion) question for both childhood and adulthood.

I'm rational, you're emotional

A complex range of reasons prompts individuals to adopt, retain or divest religion in their lives. Understanding why can be difficult, especially under the heavy-handed influence of *self-enhancement bias*. It affects us all and avoiding it takes deliberative mental effort. It's a cognitive bias in which we grant ourselves more favourable ratings than a perceived normative standard would predict (Krueger 1998), that is, better ratings than we grant others.

The bias is evident in explanations for holding a religion and can cloud our judgements as to why people identify with one. For example, a metacognitive³⁰ study of a random sample of USA adults found significant differences in explanations of one's own reasons to believe in God, versus other people's reasons (Shermer 1999) (Figure 39). Keep in mind the Christian monotheistic bias inherent in the study, and that most respondents would have been raised in a Christian household.

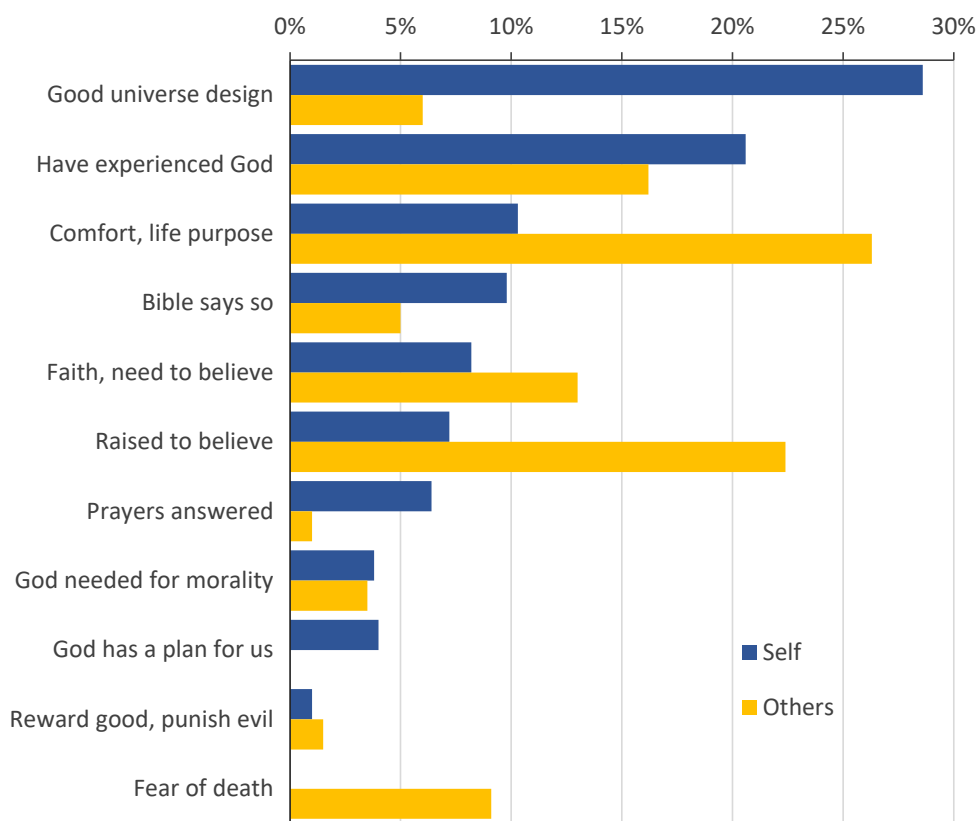


Figure 39: Belief in God — own reasons versus reasons attributed to others
Source: Shermer 1999

Immediately obvious is that reasons that could be rational and sensible are much more commonly attributed to the self: good design of the universe,

³⁰ Metacognitive: thinking about thinking, in this case thinking about someone else's thinking.

having directly experienced God, because the Bible says so, and because prayers are answered.

And reasons that would be emotional, or docile and compliant, are much more commonly attributed to others: for comfort and purpose in life, a need to believe, fear of death, and because their parents told them so (raised to believe).

Thus, religionists are inclined to say that their own belief in God is a reasoned and sensible choice, but that other people are pawns to their foolish emotions and the suggestions of others. This self-affirming trait is a form of *attribution bias*.

Significantly, on average between self and other attributions, *morality* (reward good and punish evil) was the *least* nominated reason for believing in God.

The study illustrates the crucial importance of high-quality, empirical evidence to properly illuminate our understanding of religious beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and to avoid intuitive claims however attractive they may seem or how widely they may be held.

The study also provides a major challenge to the notion that a central purpose of religion is *morality*. The reason to believe in God “to reward good and punish evil” received by far the *lowest* combined rating for self and others, of all the reasons. This suggests that while morality is of central concern to clerics, it’s of little practical concern to the laity.

Summary: Attribution bias influences the religious to over-assign rational reasons for their own beliefs, but emotional reasons for others. Of major reasons to be religious, the laity rate *morality* the least important.

Conversion

We've already discussed a rich cluster of reasons as to why religion is so prevalent. Much of the conversion (to religion) process occurs through raising children in a religion, that is, from not capable of relevant discernment, to religion. Unsurprisingly, a majority of Australians (57%) say that parents and family have the greatest influence on their perceptions and opinions of Christianity (McGrindle Research 2017).³¹

Upbringing, and the gradual conversion of adolescents and adults, involves progressive emotional-cognitive processing over time, to develop a new sense of agency, meaning and social integration. It is estimated that around 80% of non-upbringing conversions are a response to personal stress or crisis (Snook, Williams & Horgan 2019).

“Conversion is seen as a process that varies in speed, motivations, context, and direction including deconversion. Psychological processes include step models, attachment, psychodynamics, group pressures, and cognitive manipulations.”

— Paloutzian (2014).

The other major mechanism of conversion is the religious epiphany or intense 'spiritual' experience, resulting from seizure-like activity in the brain's temporal lobes (Meyer 2013).

Epiphanies aside, beliefs in afterlife and miracles, belief in God, importance of God, and religious involvement are important keys to religious conversion³² (Lemos, Gore & Shults 2017). These are bolstered by exposure to actions — credibility-enhancing religious displays — that attest to religious claims (Lanman 2012).

Religiosity correlates strongly with valuing *social* conservation (Pepper, Jackson & Uzzell 2010), that is, scoring low on the Big Five personality trait *Openness to Experience*. In addition, religious beliefs are stronger when conceptualisations of God are consistent with a person's specific values, attitudes, and beliefs, offering inducements to convert and remain. Obviously in the converse, religiosity is weaker when a religion's God conceptualisations are *inconsistent* with the affiliate's specific values, attitudes, and beliefs.

³¹ Note the Christian focus of this Christian research firm.

³² At least, with reference to God, conversion to one of the monotheisms.

This is reflected in Australians' explanations of the top attractors to and repellents from overall spirituality and religion (Figure 40) (McCrindle Research 2017). The top strong attractors to religion and spirituality were seeing people live out a genuine faith (16%), experiencing a personal trauma (13%), and faith-change testimonies (12%).

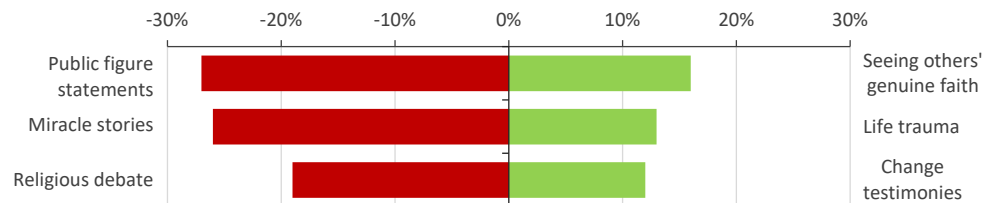


Figure 40: Top three strong repellents & attractors for spirituality and religion
Source: McCrindle 2017

Conversely, the top strong repellents against religion and spirituality were hearing from public figures and celebrities who are examples of that faith (27%), miraculous stories of people being healed or supernatural occurrences (26%), and philosophical ideas and debate about religion (19%).

Summary: Parents and family, especially with credibility-enhancing displays, are the most common sources of conversion to religion. Most conversions happen cognitively over time. A small proportion of conversions are by spiritual epiphany, when there is partial seizure activity in the brain's temporal lobes. Religious commitment is higher when the God conceptualisations of the person's religion are consistent with the person's own values, attitudes and beliefs.

Deconversion

By deconversion we mean the discarding or rejection of an existing affiliation with a religion. While strictly speaking deconversion includes changing to another religion (deconversion with conversion), for simplicity in this report we will consider only deconversion from religion altogether.

A popular social explanation for rising deconversion rates — at least amongst western countries — is that “making peace with God” is no longer as compelling a motive for religion, given modern healthcare standards and much longer life expectancies (Papyrakis & Selvaretnam 2011). On the other side of the coin, credibility enhancing displays — that is, parents demonstrating rather than merely stating positive religious values — delays the average age that children leave religion (Langston, Speed & Coleman 2018).

Major pathways to deconversion include the intellectual (doubt or denial); moral criticism of religionist tenets or behaviour; and negative personal religious experiences leading to emotional suffering which is healed by abandoning religion (Streib 2014). Exits may be to non-organisational spiritual existence, or to secularism. In general, contributing factors include personality, values, attachment style, and socialisation (Streib 2021).

Age profile

Although many people in Western nations decide to leave religion in early adulthood, this shouldn't be interpreted to mean static disposition in later life. Even people in late adulthood not uncommonly change religious denomination, or leave religion altogether (Hayward & Krause 2014). In the unusual case of Austria, those in *middle* adulthood tend to disaffiliate more due to their increasing personal wealth and a desire not to pay church tax, set at 1.1% for Austrian Catholics since 1939 (McClendon & Hackett 2014).

Education and social factors

The association between education and secularisation continues to be a source of scholarly debate (Bertrand 2015). Nevertheless, in the USA at least, religious decline in young adults has been found to be modestly associated with increased (college) education (Downey 2014). The general picture is complicated by the fact that religious-service attenders tend to self-select into higher education, with more religious youth choosing non-elite colleges and less religious youth choosing elite colleges (Schwadel 2016).³³

³³ This association is consistent with a general personality trait to favour *commitment*, whatever form that may take in whichever sphere of life.

In addition, evangelical Protestantism is a significant risk factor for failure to complete high school education — at least in the USA where it is the largest Christian custom (Masci & Smith 2018) — while the opposite is true for mainline Protestants (Heimlich 2008).

General increases in social and political equality over recent decades have also led to a decline in religiosity (Power 2012).

More direct factors

But there are more direct recent deconversion associations, with cohabitation, non-marital sex, and drug and alcohol use decreasing religiosity, though conversely, with marriage reducing religious decline (Uecker, Regnerus & Vaaler 2007).

In Australia, marriage statistics suggest further religious decline may be on the cards: the marriage rate has been decreasing since at least the turn of the 21st century (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Indeed, since 2017, the rate would have dropped further if it had not been bolstered by the legalisation of same-sex marriage. In 2019, nearly 5% of all marriages were of same-sex couples. The median age at marriage has increased as well, meaning more young adults will likely have disaffiliated from religion prior to contemplating matrimony.

There are stronger deconversion associations still with internet use, which is associated with lower rates of prayer, reading sacred texts, attending religious services, or considering religion personally important (Downey 2014; McClure 2020).

Longitudinal analysis has found a causative association between raised education and lower religiosity (Becker, Nagler & Woessmann 2017). Learning to inquire — the employment of critical thinking — increases secularisation more than does mere knowledge of the natural sciences, or even the application of knowledge (Becker, Nagler & Woessmann 2017; Evans 2021). This too is consistent with exposure to an expanded range of perspectives via the internet, which can prompt more critical thinking.

The religious mind

Given the human mind's preference for certainty, and experience of anxiety in states of uncertainty, an unexpected research finding is that uncertainty can be experienced as a positive rather than negative amongst the nonreligious

(Frost 2019). It is unclear, however, to what degree if any personal *changes* in accepting uncertainty actually contribute to religious disaffiliation.

Other research has found that cognitive intelligence has a negative effect on religiosity (Meisenberg et al. 2012), and that the negative effect increases with age (Ganzach & Gotlibovski 2013).³⁴ This contributes to rates of disaffiliation after religious socialisation in childhood, and is consistent with an increased ability for critical thinking.

It's not me, it's you

Multiple studies indicate that religious disaffiliation is significantly related to the laity's disapproval of conservative religious stances, such as opposition to marriage equality — “*a narrow focus on certain moral prescriptions*”³⁵ (McLaughlin et al. 2020; Packard & Ferguson 2018). Detailed analysis in the USA confirms that conservative ideological Christian political activity is a major driver of religious disaffiliation (Djupe, Neiheisel & Conger 2018). Indeed, concentration of evangelicals in USA counties is strongly associated with the presence and number of non-believer organisations (Garcia & Blankholm 2016).

Nevertheless, only about half of the affiliated who were opposed to conservative religious positions had gone on to actually disaffiliate (Vargas 2012). Those who consider disaffiliation but don't disaffiliate tend to experience higher levels of mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (McLaughlin et al. 2020).

There is robust evidence from the USA that religious disaffiliation is strongly associated with disapproval of conservative religious prescriptions. Those who consider disaffiliating, but don't go on to disaffiliate, experience higher levels of anxiety and depression.

Globally, increasingly liberal beliefs of the religiously affiliated are strongly associated with disaffiliation (Brañas-Garza, García-Muñoz & Neuman 2013). Along with growing scepticism towards religious tenets (McLaughlin et al. 2020), religious Nones can be expected to continue to increase.

³⁴ Secularists should be sure not to smugly interpret such findings to imply that religionists are necessarily unintelligent. These are *average* levels of intelligence, and both secularists and religionists include individuals of higher or lower intelligence.

³⁵ Note the nod to deontological solutions to moral questions amongst the religious, as discussed earlier.

Deconversion experiences of ministers and laity

The spectrum of deconversion factors is not exclusive to the laity. They also apply in the deconversion of religious ministers and missionaries: loss of confidence in sacred texts, dissent from institutional teachings and values, and disappointment with the religious experience and God (Lee 2015).

Understandably, pastor and missionary deconverters face substantial struggles of identity, social networks and employment, yet many say they are better off in the end. When a pastor disaffiliates from religion (becoming atheist), the remaining flock's disapproval towards the disaffiliate is strongly associated with religious fundamentalism (Larson 2015).

Equally, laity leaving fundamentalist religion also face major challenges — especially when there is forced social isolation of the apostate — but can realise significant improvements in wellbeing (Nica 2020). Acknowledging former negative impacts of religion can become an important part of the deconvert's new identity (Fazzino 2014).

The greatest contributors to improved wellbeing seem to be increased sense of personal control (i.e. less fatalism), greater value in novelty, excitement and new life challenges,³⁶ and decreased axiomatic religiosity (Hui et al. 2018).

Quantifying immediate and practical reasons

Pew Research Center (2018) quantified specific, practical and salient reasons why Americans are not religious. Most of the non-religious (84%) question religious teachings, don't like church positions on social matters (75%) or even the organisations (72%) and religious leaders themselves (69%) (Figure 41).

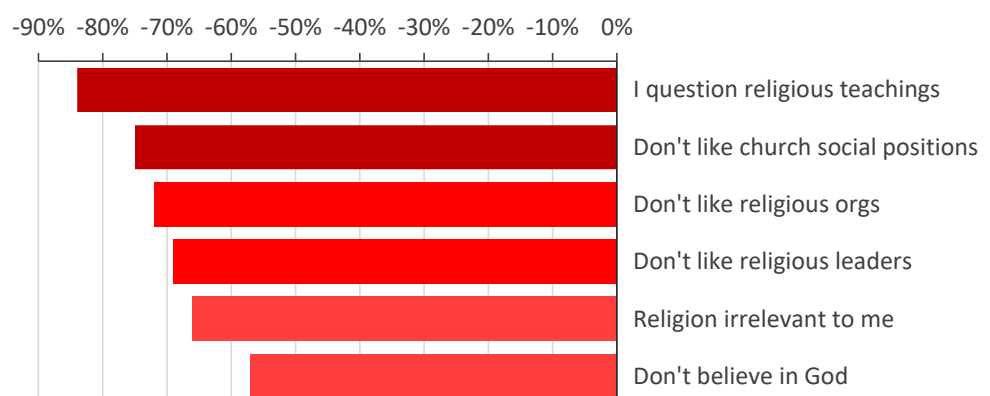


Figure 41: Why USA 'nones' don't identify with a religion

Source: Pew Research Center (2018)

³⁶ Consistent with an increase in the expression of the Big Five personality trait *Openness to experience*.

The rise in questioning religious teachings seems to be a recent phenomenon: disaffiliation in at least the USA in the 1990s was largely a symbolic statement against the conservatism of the religious right (Hout & Fischer 2002): that is, people disaffiliated but kept believing non-offending religious tenets, whereas now people are now increasingly disbelieving.

While still important, religion being irrelevant (66%) and non-belief in God (57%) were less frequent reasons to be non-religious, though the frequency of these attitudes has been increasing (Pew Research Center 2016a).

In Australia, amongst those who are more frosty towards religion, church opposition to homosexuality, and questioning of religious teachings (“the validity of the Bible”) were equal top reasons to avoid religion (75% each), followed by a loving God allowing people to go to hell (72%) (McCrimdle Research 2017).

“The Anglicanism I grew up with was such high-quality mumbo-jumbo, such exquisite tripe, that nothing else can compare with it and replace it.”

— Ian Warden (2017), lapsed Anglican and now atheist

Amongst Australia’s wider non-religious, the then Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was obviously top of mind, with 73% saying church abuse and scandal was an important reason to be non-religious (Figure 42). Hypocrisy of the religious (65%), religious wars and violence (64%), religious judgementalism (63%) and asking for money (62%) were also important reasons.

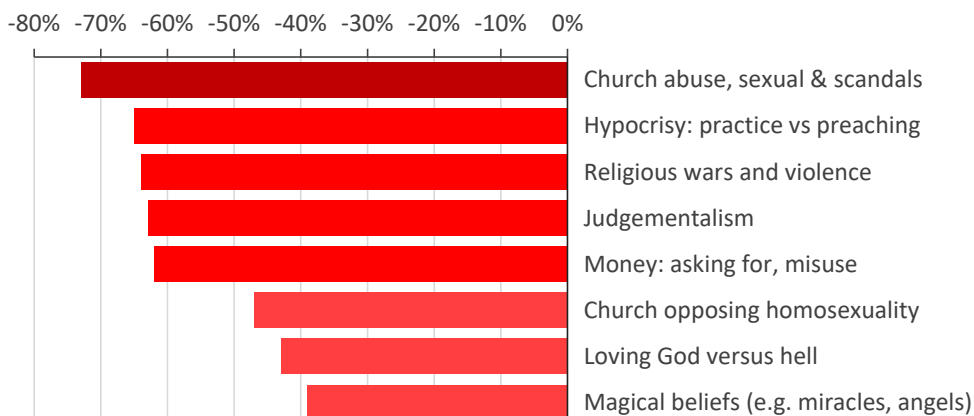


Figure 42: Top blockers of engagement in Christianity in Australia

Source: McCrimdle 2017

Other issues indicated by Australian non-religionists included why there would be a need for suffering, the subordinate role of women, science, and evolution.

In Australia, it is the behaviour of conservative or vocal religionists themselves — abuse, hypocrisy, violence, judgementalism and hostility towards minority outgroups — that largely drives religious disaffiliation and increases secularism. The federal Coalition government's ambition to confer additional protected rights for religionists regarding some of these behaviours is likely to accelerate loss of religion across the nation.

Summary: Deconversion from religion can occur at any time throughout life, though is most common in young adulthood. Education — and its stimulation of critical thinking — is a key driver, though cohabitation, non-marital sex, drug and alcohol use, and especially Internet use contribute as well. Specifically, questioning of religious teachings (critical thinking), and opposition to conservative religious prescriptions about social matters, top the list of reasons people give for not being religious.

Two major Australian political factors

Between the 2016 and 2019 elections there were two major events in Australia with heightened relevance regarding religion.

Firstly, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse published its major reports, showing that much of the abuse had occurred within religious settings (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017). This brought major, ongoing headlines and considerable public discussion. The head of the commission, Justice Peter McClellan, condemned the leaders of the Catholic church, in which 60% of all abuse in religious settings occurred (Perkins 2019).

Secondly, marriage was legalised for couples other than heterosexual male/female pairs. While many religionists supported the reform (Cockburn 2017), the nation saw conservative clerics devote considerable effort and resources to oppose the reform.

Religious opponents included the Sydney Anglican Diocese which contributed \$1m to oppose the legalisation of marriage equality, but only \$5,000 to help combat domestic violence (Gleeson & Baird 2017), thus framing loving matrimony between two non-heterosexual people as 200 times more dangerous than violence in the home.

These are specific instances of major “abuse” and “hypocrisy” contributors to Australians abandoning religion between 2016 and 2019 (Figure 43).

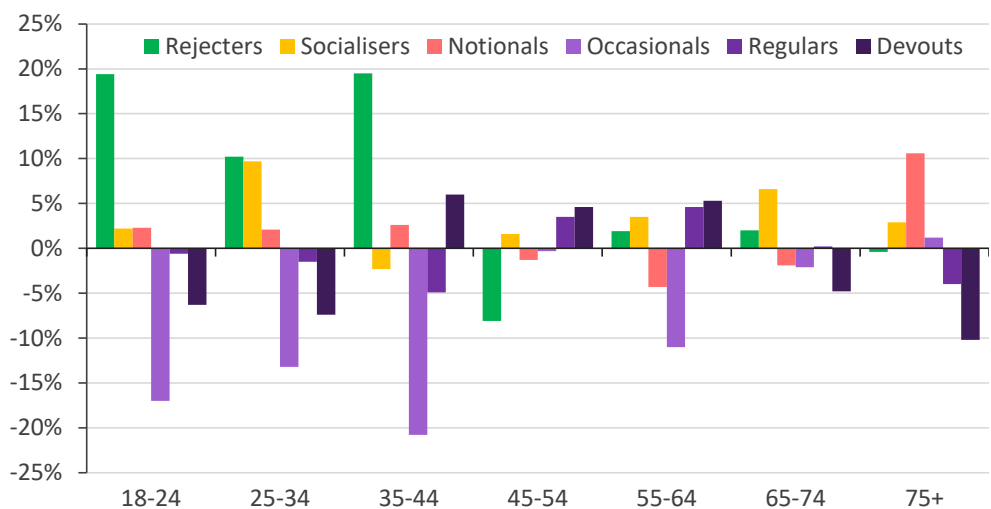


Figure 43: Changes in Australians’ religiosity between 2016-19

Source: AES

Amongst **younger** Australians, 18–44 year old, there was a significant net movement from Occasionals to Rejecters. Amongst the even younger 18–34, there was also a significant loss of Devouts, and in the 25–34 group, those had most become Socialisers.

Amongst **older** Australians, 65+ year old, there was a modest loss of Devouts and Regulars. In the 65–74 group, with a net movement of Devouts to Socialisers, while in the oldest group, 75+, most of the change was to Notionals (no longer attending services but still stating affiliation).

However, amongst **middle** Australians, 45–64 year old, there was a modest increase in religiosity, with net increases in Regulars and Devouts.

Summary: Younger (18–44 year old) and older (65+ year old) Australians significantly declined in religiosity between 2016 and 2019. The younger change was mostly to reject religion altogether, while the older changed mostly to reject either denominational affiliation (65–74 year old) or service attendance (75+ year old).

In contrast, religiosity increased modestly amongst middle Australians (45–64 year old), with small but notable increases in both Regulars and Devouts.

Institutional changes in religion

Not only do individual people change their minds about religion, but so do religious institutions — the various denominations. Of course, they don't disaffiliate in the way that individuals do, or the denomination would cease to exist. However, they do periodically change their minds in regard to doctrines and teachings.

For example, before the 1970s, Anglican religious tradition held — on the basis that Jesus appointed only male disciples and that St Paul instructed women to be silent in church and to submit to their husbands — that women could not be ordained deacons, priests or bishops (Sherlock 2012).

Fast forward through several decades of soul-searching and internal debate, and Anglican women are now ordained deacons, priests, and bishops, though they are still not universally accepted (Lewis 2019). Some, but not all, of the church, has clearly changed its mind in relation to the role of women, not just generally, but theologically. What then, is the church's "religious tradition" in relation to women, and who gets to say so? Does a statement by a supporter or opponent represent a definitive answer accepted by all? Obviously not.

Similarly, the Catholic church prohibits its priests from marrying, and the very small number of already-married men granted permission to join its priesthood must formally renounce sexual relations with their wives. It equally discourages homosexual men from joining the priesthood and prohibits homosexual acts, describing them as 'disordered'. But this was not always so. A thousand years ago, the church wasn't nearly so fussed about homosexuality (McClain 2019). And it was only a thousand years into its history that the church formally forbade priests to marry, in 1123, confirmed in 1139 (Parish 2020).

Further, Parish (2020) suggests that in the not too distant future, the Catholic church is likely to allow priests to marry, starting in South America where there is an acute shortage of men who wish to be celibate for the remainder of their lives. Internal resistance to the reform is strong, and it is unlikely to occur any time soon. With an estimated 30%–40% of Catholic priests being gay (and up to 75% according to some priests) (Dias 2019), priests marrying men would not only challenge the doctrine of celibacy, but the church's modern passions against homosexuality.

That's not to say the Catholic church can't change. In the fourth century CE, St Augustine determined that unbaptised babies must go to hell, though only for mild punishment (Tsai 2007). In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas determined that, theologically, babies could not go to heaven, but didn't go to

hell either. This stance evolved into the tradition of limbo, the place — neither heaven nor hell — where children’s souls are said to go if a child dies before being baptised.

In 2007 the church changed its tradition on limbo again: by scrapping it. While never part of official doctrine but taught for centuries to countless generations of Catholics as tradition at least well into the 20th century, it was deemed an “unduly restrictive view of salvation” and buried (Pullella 2007). The church now deems that babies who die unbaptised will go to heaven, though it is unclear whether the church has “manually moved” souls already in limbo to heaven.

On the matter of VAD, “tradition” varies, too. Australian Catholic bishops have vigorously opposed its legalisation and threaten that last rites and other Catholic rituals are likely to be denied to those choosing it. However, the President of the Pontifical Academy for Life in Rome, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, says priests can be present at a VAD death because “*the Lord never abandons anyone*” (Brockhaus 2019).

“To accompany, to hold the hand of someone who is dying, is, I think a great duty every believer should promote ... even if we are against assisted suicide.”

— Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia in Brockhaus (2019)

And on the matter of death, the Catholic church often publicises its strong views against intentionally ending life. But it was only 120 years ago, in 1901, that then Pope Leo XIII said it was not only OK, but desirable and expedient, to murder clergy who question any aspect of church doctrine or authority:

“The death sentence is a necessary and efficacious means for the Church to attain its end when rebels act against it and disturbers of ecclesiastical unity, especially obstinate heretics ... cannot be restrained by any other penalty ... [the Church] is effectively bound to remove [the heretic] ... it can and must put these wicked men to death.”

— Pope Leo XIII re Preface to Volume 2 of the book of Canon Law in Missett (2008), p 125

It’s difficult to imagine Pope Francis endorsing such a view, and he may well oppose it. If he does, how would the Catholic dogma of Papal infallibility —

part of the church's "magisterium" — reconcile one Pope suggesting murder, and another opposing it?

Regardless, irreconcilable religious "traditions" about hastening of death remain: of promoting it, opposing it, and spiritually punishing it... or not.

The point is that not only do institutions change their minds on fundamental matters from time to time, but that at any one time, a range of views is held by members of a religion, including amongst its clergy.

Thus, assertive and absolutist pronouncements by clerics that a religion's "tradition" supports or opposes a matter under public debate is to wrongly pretend both that the position is held or agreed to by all members of the religion, and that the position is robustly impervious to time and culture.

Given that real tradition is based on actual beliefs and practices that are passed on from generation to generation — not on textbook theory — clerics alone don't hold the keys to the kingdom of religious tradition. Indeed they may barely recognise real traditions amongst their flocks, like widespread support for abortion, marriage equality, VAD for the terminally ill, and opposition to religious schools discriminating against LGBTI staff or students.

Summary: Religious institutions can and do change their minds about their "traditions" from time to time. For example, the Anglican church in Australia has changed its tradition about the ordination of women.

In addition, at any one time, there will be some clerics, and a multitude of laity, who disagree with one particular tradition or other, just as there still is about women's ordination in the Anglican church.

There is therefore good reason for scepticism when a cleric insists that their religion's tradition on a specific matter is exactly and only what that cleric says it is.

