



## Perspectives on ‘religion’

Before we continue to discuss religion, it’s appropriate to attempt to scope what it is, or at least, what is meant in this series. Countless thousands of articles and books have been published on the matter, with clerics, philosophers, sociologists, and others offering long, complex dissertations.

Here, we’ll strive to balance breadth and depth with parsimony, since our primary aim is to furnish relevant contemporary foundations that enlighten and contextualise this series, rather than elaborate an exhaustive review of theory and practice.

### No simple matter

We might *think* we easily reach agreement about the nature of religion if we restrict our field of view to the three major Abrahamic monotheisms — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — that predominate in Australia.

We might *think*, for example, that ‘religion’ in its simplest form equates to ‘belief in God’. However, this would be to overlook eastern, polytheistic, non-theistic, ancestral, animistic and other kinds of religions (Hood, Hill & Spilka 2014, p 7). It would improperly favour describing *a* religion or *a class* of religions rather than religion in its broader sense.

At the other end of the spectrum is the common proposition that “*I know it when I see it*” (e.g. Richter 2017). That is to say nothing, at least nothing of consequence, that could be examined or critiqued. Paradoxically, it remains blind to the problem that religious thoughts can’t ordinarily be *seen*. It therefore limits religion to behavioural expression, that is, a functionalist approach.

Both the too-specific and too-vague perspectives invite *false consensus* bias: that is, thinking we’re talking about the same thing when we aren’t. That is to invite misunderstanding and confusion.

**Summary:** Both too-specific (own-neighbourhood) and too-vague (my definition but I can’t tell you what that is) notions of religion and religiosity can create a false consensus bias that we mean the same thing when we may not. They invite misunderstanding and confusion.



## Interactions between religion, culture, and politics

Separating religion from broader culture and politics is difficult, too. Cultures bring their own erosions and sedimentations to their extant religions, and vice versa. For example, setting aside contemporary scholarly debate about the historical existence of Jesus (e.g. Lataster 2016), in some cultures Jesus is depicted with African or Indian features (Swatwood House 2020), which no doubt confers natural appeal to their local communities. Equally, in many western cultures including Australia, the brown-skinned Middle Eastern Jew has morphed into an air-brushed white Anglo (Whitaker 2018b), leading to concerns about such depictions facilitating white supremacist ideology.

Interaction between religion and politics is equally complex. For example, a multi-national study found that religiosity correlated with political-right and conservative ideologies — right-wing authoritarianism and traditionalism — in all of 16 (mostly Western plus Japan) countries across five continents ... except Australia (Caprara et al. 2018). Unsurprisingly, it found religion's contribution to political ideology much greater in countries where religion plays a more prominent role in the public square. However, the study's sample size for Australia (n=285) was the smallest of all countries, adversely affecting its sensitivity. Analysis of robust Australian Election Study data (see Part 1 of this series, Figure 49 in Francis (2021)) reveals that Australia's most religious have, in recent years, somewhat moved to the political hard right.

Culture matters in the interaction between religion and politics, too: the above correlations are not universal. In the Philippines, for example, religiosity correlates positively with conformity, but *negatively* with power (authoritarianism) (Bernardo, Clemente & Nalipay 2016). In South Korea, Buddhists have high levels of political tolerance while Protestants have low levels (Kim & Zhong 2010). Thus, right-wing authoritarianism, in this example, may be a common, but certainly not an *essential*, feature of religiosity.

The tendency for immanent justice reasoning — that punishments are automatically due to those with perceived low moral status, regardless of mitigating circumstances — also differs by religiosity in different cultures. While only the religious in the USA tend towards immanent justice reasoning, in Japan the reasoning is overall even stronger, and occurs across the entire spectrum from the non-religious to the religious (Murayama & Miura 2021).

Another example is attitudes toward the centrality of work. In Germany and the Netherlands, the highly religious were significantly more likely to view work as central to a sense of obligation and self-reward, but in Israel, the opposite was true (Harpaz 1998). In an Israeli update some two decades later, no differences were found in work centrality between secular, traditional, and ultra-Orthodox men (Sharabi & Kay 2021), further supporting the notion that

the interaction of religiosity and cultural norms is complex, and can change over time.

Studies such as these highlight the importance of avoiding over-reliance on an extensive and convenient corpus of research from Protestant-dominated societies — most notably the USA — about any supposed religious universality of right-wing authoritarianism, “work ethic”, social dominance orientation, or almost any other putative aspect of religiosity.

Overall, there are many characteristics of religion that vary significantly between east and west cultures (Clobert 2021). Given these complex interactions, religion has been argued to both make and unmake national identity (Schnabel & Hjerm 2014).

Identifying essentialist elements of religion and religiosity that are independent of cultural norms is difficult but crucial.

**Summary:** It’s important not to over-rely on a large corpus of studies from only Protestant-dominated societies (the USA in particular) as representative of religion in principle. Such reliance may drive a false impression of the universality of relationships between religion, culture and politics when those relationships are, in fact, not universal and therefore not *essentialist* features of religion.

## From within and without

On the anthropological front, viewpoints about religion from within religious groups (emic) can differ significantly from those external (etic). Emic viewpoints are often framed in concepts such as the sacred.<sup>1</sup> There have been academic attempts to define religion substantively but the sacred functionally (e.g. Demerath & Cotter 2012). However, this doesn't help, because "sacred" is itself defined in terms of religion: colourfully described by Quillen (2012) as the "yawning mouth of that swirling vortex" that is a circular argument.

Philosophical arguments about religion also differ by emic versus etic perspective. For example, Orthodox Christian apologetic Richard Swinburne (2010) argues in favour of the notion that religious experience justifies belief in God,<sup>2</sup> while others argue that *maybe* it does (e.g. Kwan 2006), or that it doesn't (e.g. Johnson 2020).

Attempts to frame religion in terms of social or psychological systems often fail because they are insufficiently distinct from the non-religious. For example, explanations regarding group coherence, faith, identity, roles, symbolism, and ritual may describe the religious, as well as members of (non-religious) sports clubs and political parties.

Other explanations might improperly attempt to define religion as a "sugary frosting" confectioned from a set of ingredients of different flavours such as Christian, Hindu or Buddhist. These are argued to be layered over an otherwise plain Enlightenment cake, and in which some enlightened — atheists, agnostics and other secularists — choose to forgo the frosting altogether (Hall, Koenig & Meador 2004).<sup>3</sup>

**Summary:** Unsurprisingly, many descriptions of religion are self-referential. The highly religious refer circularly to sacredness and the *content* of their religion as proof of its validity, while some secularists argue that religion is merely a frosting applied to an otherwise plain, non-religious cake. Both approaches oversimplify matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Sacred: dedicated to, connected with or embodying a religious purpose and thereby putatively deserving of great respect.

<sup>2</sup> Swinburne's monotheistic conclusion is consistent with his monotheistic religion.

<sup>3</sup> These conceptualisations are still common. For example, even contemporary survey research on religion often employs particular frosting flavours in question language, such as "How often do you attend *church*", "Do you believe in *God*".

## The Big Three religious orientation framework

Two dimensions of the “Big Three”<sup>4</sup> religious framework were first introduced to help explain differences in prejudice amongst American churchgoers (Allport & Ross 1967): Extrinsic and Intrinsic religious orientations. Most religious people are a mix of both, though lean towards one or the other.

Those of **Extrinsic** religious orientation tend to *use* religion for their own utilitarian or instrumental purposes — a “means” orientation. They “turn to God but without turning away from self”. Significantly more anxious than others (Baker & Gorsuch 1982), they find religion “provides security and solace, sociability and distraction, status and self-justification”.

Those with **Intrinsic** religious orientation, on the other hand, tend to be significantly *less* anxious than others (Baker & Gorsuch 1982), and higher in *Agreeableness*<sup>5</sup> (Robbins et al. 2010). They centrally *live* their religion, where worldly matters are of lesser significance and behaviour is shaped as much as possible to meet religious beliefs and values — an “ends” orientation.

In attitudes toward ethnic outgroups, Allport and Ross (1967) found Extrinsic more prejudiced, and Intrinsic less prejudiced, than others.

Results in subsequent studies have been mixed. Confounding factors such as political ideology, right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, and particularly conformity values versus prosocial values, have been found to influence prejudice (Brambilla et al. 2013). Improvements in research methodology has increased the reliability of findings, which show significant cognitive and affective differences between Intrinsic and Extrinsic (Donahue 1985) (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Mean correlations with religious orientation

Measure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Religious belief	0.39	0.16
Religious commitment	0.76	0.03
Prejudice (average)	-0.05	0.34
Fear of death	-0.06	0.27
Dogmatism	0.06	0.36

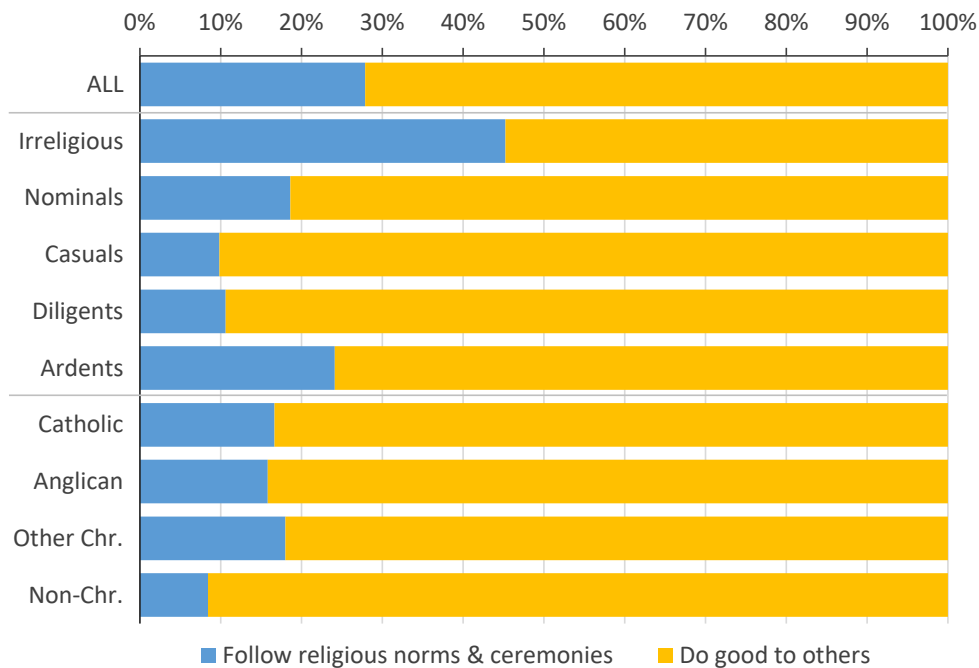
Source: Donahue 1985.

<sup>4</sup> A title of convenience I’ve created for this discussion.

<sup>5</sup> A “Big Five” personality trait: kind, sympathetic, cooperative, considerate, warm.

There are cultural as well as individual differences. Prosocial cultures — especially Jewish but also Catholic — emphasise collectivist aspects of religion, while individualistic cultures (mostly Protestant) emphasise one’s own personal relationship with God (Cohen & Hill 2007).

In Australia, the rate (72%) of a prosocial meaning of religion, at least in terms of “*doing good to others*”, is similar amongst Catholics and Protestants, but is significantly greater amongst non-Christian denominations (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Meaning of religion by ARI5, religious denomination  
Source: AVS 2018

In the ARI5<sup>6</sup> religiosity framework, Australia’s Irreligious overestimate the meaning of religion as merely “*following religious norms and ceremonies*” (45%), at three times the rate that Australia’s religionists think so (15% average). This reveals that the Irreligious underestimate religionists’ prosocial *meaning* (not necessarily actual practice) of religion.

Amongst Australia’s most religious, Ardents, one in four (24%) prioritise “*following religious norms and ceremonies*” over prosocial meaning, suggesting that a baseline of a quarter of Ardents are likely to be Extrinsic.

Worthy of note is that the AVS 2018 question wording was “do good *to* others”, a self-referential frame that grants the helper primacy to determine what help is needed, and to implement it. This is consistent with the social and legal presumption that religion is “good” for people. It also endorses

<sup>6</sup> See Part 1 for an explanation of the Australian Religious Identity (ARI5 and ARI6) scales.

evangelisation along with practical help. A more prosocial wording would have been to “do good *for* others”.

The normative meaning of religion as “doing good *to* others” prioritises help-givers’ opinions over the real needs of the helped. It also endorses evangelisation with help delivery.

### Quest orientation

A third orientation, **quest**, was later added to the extrinsic (means) and extrinsic (ends) orientations (Batson 1976). Questers see their religion as a search for truth, with a greater emphasis on social interaction. They score much higher in Big Five personality trait *Openness to experience*, are less certain of religious answers and are more likely to self-criticise (Jaume, Simkin & Etchezahar 2013; Nielsen & Fultz 1995).

Questers also offer more tentative, situationally-relevant help to those in need, whereas Intrinsic are more likely to persistently offer help that is less attuned to the specific needs of the helped (Donahue 1985).

**Summary:** The “Big Three” framework describes religiosity through Extrinsic, Intrinsic and Quest orientations. Extrinsic “use” religion for utilitarian purposes (“means”) such as security, solace and self-justification, and tend to be more prejudiced towards outgroups. Intrinsic try to live their religious beliefs and values (“ends”) and are typically high in *Agreeableness*.<sup>7</sup> Questers continually search for truth, are high on *Openness To Experience*,<sup>6</sup> are less certain of religious answers and are more likely to self-criticise.

Some 85% of religious Australians say religion means “doing good to others”, while 15% (including a quarter [24%] of Australia’s most religious, Ardents) say its meaning is to “follow religious norms and ceremonies”. Australia’s Irreligious underestimate religious Australians’ prosocial meaning of religion (“doing good to others”) by a factor of three.

<sup>7</sup> “Big Five” personality traits.



## The Big Four Bs framework

Religion is often categorised most simply as a belief system, but this does a disservice to the range of real, lived religionist experience. For example, religion can also serve as a source of personal identity. While on average, Australians rate religion as the lowest of eight given contributors to a sense of identity (Francis 2021, p 38), the sense of religious contribution to identity would obviously be much higher amongst the very religious than the non-religious. Indeed, individuals may experience powerful cognitive and affective value in identifying with an exclusive “eternal” club (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman 2010).

Another perspective of the scope of religion involves not only identity, but roles, practices, and relationships with others. These are known as the Big Four or Four Bs: **believing, belonging, behaviour, and bonding**.

**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 (Saroglou 2011). These factors are said to comprise universals that differentiate both one form of religiosity from another, and religion from non-religion.

Preferences for and characteristics of the four dimensions differ between western and eastern cultures (Saroglou et al. 2020). Believing and bonding, founded on spirituality, are preferred in western secular societies and in the east. In religious societies, behaving and bonding were preferred, linked to fundamentalism, authoritarianism, and low *Openness to experience*.

The believing dimension has a cross-level interaction with culture. In high-religion countries, believing is associated with fundamentalism, while in low-religion countries, it's associated with existential quest. The degree of prominence and privilege that religion holds in a culture can strongly affect how religion is experienced and expressed. As Gebauer et al (2014) put it, in high-religion cultures believers swim *with* the stream, but in low-religion cultures, they swim *against* the stream.

**Summary:** Preferences for and the expression of the Big Four components of religion — believing, belonging, behaviour, and bonding — differ significantly between cultures, especially evident in the differences between high- and low-religiosity cultures.

## Other frameworks

Other frameworks that try to scope and describe religion have also been proposed.

One is the **religious style typology**, which classifies people into one of four categories (Streib 2001). It further develops an earlier trilogy of 'general religiosity', 'mature spirituality' and 'religious fundamentalism'.

Rather than classifying people by the strength of belief, frequency of practice, or depth of knowledge of religious tenets, it focuses on differences in how the individual prefers to give effect to their religion: authoritative and exclusive; a conventions basis; critical and autonomous reflection; or pragmatism based on intellectual humility. As in many other frameworks, the Big Five personality trait *Openness to experience* provides a distinguishing dimension amongst the style (Streib, Zhuo Job & Hood 2020).

Another is the **Commitment-Reflectivity Circumplex**, which divides individual religious orientation into ten segments depending on the nature of a person's commitment to religion and their degree of reflectiveness (Isaak et al. 2017). It provides a more nuanced view of religious orientation than the "Big Three" framework (Intrinsic, Extrinsic and Quest orientations).

But rather than exhaustively summarise perspectives on religion, the purpose here has been to illustrate the wide range and variety of ways of considering religion and religiosity, beyond simple measures of denominational affiliation, belief and service attendance, or the specific *content* of one religion versus another.

**Summary:** Various frameworks of religion and religiosity illustrate a rich variety of ways that religion might be considered, expressed, and experienced in the real world.

## A simple definition of 'religion'

Having identified a range of perspectives about religion, let's try to define what it actually is. We should be careful to emphasise that we are aiming for a broad, inclusive but distinguishing definition of "religion" in general: not of "a religion" or even a cluster of similar (e.g. Abrahamic) "religions", or even "religiosity". There have been countless attempts, including whole books (e.g. Jensen 2018) dedicated to the subject.

Most, though not all attempts, refer to a religious "class of belief", for example:

"The belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader."

— (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries 2021)

Like many western definitions, this one's presumptive theism is problematic. Many religions are non-theistic, that is, they have no specific god or gods. While Buddhism, for example, may in practice entertain a court of supernatural spirits, it is ultimately non-theistic.

The second part of the Oxford definition, "*...or the teachings of a spiritual leader*" does, however, entertain non-theistic religions. But its premise is circular: the dictionary's own definition of "*spiritual*" is "*connected with religion*". Thus, this statement says that religion is the belief in the teachings of a religious leader. Such tautologies are common, but unhelpful.

Another definition attempts to grapple with the underlying drivers of religious belief: cognitive and emotional representations.

*"The cognitive and emotional representations that underlie beliefs in supernatural powers, often regarded as sacred or inviolable."*

— (Grafman et al. 2020)

Grafman and colleagues' definition helpfully broadens the scope to supernatural powers in general, which accommodates Buddhist, animistic, ancestral, and other non-theistic beliefs. They also nod to the suggestions of believers that their beliefs ought not be challenged. They also commit the

same tautological offense (Jensen 2018, Chapter 3) as the Oxford definition, by defining religion in terms of “sacred” (i.e. religious) belief.

This definition, however, fails to sufficiently delineate what would usually be accepted as “religion” from, for example, the unique and radical religious claims about a supposed supernatural force made by an individual in the throes of a psychotic episode. This problem is addressed in the following definitions:

*“The communicated acceptance of supernatural claims.”*  
— (Ellsworth 2009)

*“Any shared set of beliefs, activities and institutions premised upon faith in supernatural forces.”*  
— (Iannaccone 1998)

Thus, Ellsworth and Iannaccone employ a *collective* or *normative* approach to sorting out “real” religions from faux ones (as well as Iannaccone introducing ritualistic aspects). This definitional approach is also common.

But it’s still problematic. Does belief in the supernatural powers of crystals or in astrology count as religion, especially if groups and societies of members adhere to the same beliefs and rituals? Does belief in an angel who protects a group of people’s interests (for example, a favourite sports club) count as religion? Do “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) people exhibit religion?

Most argue that they don’t. But why? What is a useful distinguishing feature? Let’s aim for a definition that’s more explanatory than merely descriptive.

While the above supernatural examples may have in common that they might offer significance to their adherents, the beliefs are not central to a personal sense of life meaning, nor offer specific moral tenets that are said to be critical to the conduct of one’s life. That’s what religion provides.

It would help at the same time to delineate the nature of “belief”, since otherwise it might seem as elusive as “religion”. For our purposes, belief is a *propositional attitude* that a certain thing is true (Jensen 2018).



Thus, we might define religion as:

**“Religion:** *Shared propositional attitudes that particular supernatural entities, forces or principles are true, thereby offering organised guidance in life meaning and for moral thought and behaviour.*”

This definition accommodates a full range of religions while excluding individual psychotic pseudo-religious episodes, supernatural but not moral frameworks, and moral frameworks that are not organisational or are not premised on the supernatural.

Of course, there remain unaccommodated matters such as the boundary between cults and religion,<sup>8</sup> but for our purposes, this will suffice.

It’s worth expressly noting three major matters arising from the definition. Firstly, the existence of *supernatural* entities, powers or forces by definition can’t be directly validated or invalidated by *natural* experiment, though indirect experiments about putative supernatural *effects* might provide evidence to support inductive reasoning. Therefore, these propositional attitudes can’t be directly and conclusively tested in practice.

Secondly, the definition is silent on both the strength and sincerity of the propositional attitudes. For example, on average only one in five Australians (around 20%) are certain of the supernatural propositional attitudes that god, heaven, hell, religious miracles, and life after death, exist. Even amongst the most religious such beliefs are not universal (60%–89%) (Francis 2021, p 52). In addition, a religion might be founded for negative rather than positive purposes, such as leader aggrandisement or power, or tax concessions and other financial gain. There’s no guarantee that religion is either genuinely held, or for good.

And thirdly, it’s unclear what degree of “sharing” is necessary to qualify as religion, or who might hold the authority to decide the amount. Cults, anyone?

**Summary:** Religion lies at the intersection of supernatural beliefs and organised guidance on life meaning as well as moral thought and behaviour.

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<sup>8</sup> Largely depending on how “cult” is defined, and beyond the scope of this discussion.

## A legal definition of ‘religion’

Another highly relevant definition of religion, for our purposes, is one determined by the High Court of Australia. In a case testing the status of the Church of Scientology<sup>9</sup> as a religion for tax purposes, the court decided in favour of Scientology, resolving that (High Court of Australia 1983):

*“Religious belief is more than a cosmology ... it relates a view of the ultimate nature of reality to a set of ideas of how man is well advised, even obligated, to live. Thus religion encompasses conduct, no less than belief.*

*For the purposes of the law, the criteria of religion are twofold: first, belief in a Supernatural Being, Thing or Principle; and second, the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief, though canons of conduct which offend against the ordinary laws are outside the area of any immunity, privilege or right conferred on the grounds of religion.”<sup>10</sup>*

— High Court of Australia (1983)

This sets the fundamental *legal* standard now in force in Australia, including the express reference to the limitation that ‘religion’ grants no immunity for transgression of Australia’s ordinary laws (for example, regarding polygamy or cruelty towards animals).

Abundantly clear from this definition is that religion’s legal status is based jointly on both *supernatural beliefs*, and on *normative* — “accepted” and therefore necessarily shared or communal — *rules of thought and/or behaviour* (“conduct”), without any other essential elements.

<sup>9</sup> At the time named “Church of the New Faith”, perhaps to avoid the notion of “scientology” as diminishing its claim to supernatural foundations. Additionally, “Church” is a specific term of Christian community, signifying the acceptance of Jesus Christ as mankind’s saviour through his death on the cross to atone for mankind’s sins. Scientology, however, does not accept this, and classifies Christ as a “middle-tier” religious figure who supposedly forms part of its “religious heritage” along with Buddhism and others, including putative spiritual beings called Thetans. This suggests that the word “Church” in the religion’s name may be aimed at slipstreaming increased legitimacy in Christian-majority cultures.

<sup>10</sup> The High Court’s use of the term “canons of conduct” may seem potentially biased towards the language of the three main monotheisms: this form of expression is used mostly by them. Perhaps a more inclusive expression would have been “axioms of conduct” or “standards of conduct”.

Thus, the High Court's determination excludes the personal supernatural delusions of an individual experiencing a mental health crisis. In such cases the person may hold supernatural beliefs, but those beliefs haven't given rise to communal or normative and therefore *accepted* standards of conduct, to qualify as religious.

The determination is, however, less clear on the matter of "acceptance" itself. For example, how many followers must a putative religious leader have in order for "acceptance" to be so deemed? Does a new cult of two people — one leader and one follower — based on supernatural ideas and common conduct, constitute a religion? Ten people? A hundred? A thousand?

Additionally, it supplies no legal standard or test, objective or subjective, as to how genuinely beliefs or "canons of conduct" must be, other than stipulating that conduct must have a practical *connection* to the person's belief in the supernatural. The court expressly notes the likelihood of variations:

*"...there may be a different intensity of belief or of acceptance of canons of conduct among religions or among the adherents to a religion."*  
— High Court of Australia (1983)

...and that the chief function of the legal definition of religion ...

*"...is to mark out an area within which a person subject to the law is free to believe and to act in accordance with his belief without legal restraint."*  
— High Court of Australia (1983)

To the contrary of any standards of belief or conduct, the court expressly stated that:

*"Charlatanism is a necessary price of religious freedom, and if a self-proclaimed teacher persuades others to believe in a religion which he propounds, lack of sincerity or integrity on his part is not incompatible with the religious character of the beliefs, practices and observances accepted by his followers."*  
— High Court of Australia (1983)

Thus, no matter how preposterous a faith's tenets, how exhaustive a religion's tithes may be upon its members, how aggressively it requires families to excommunicate kin who question some aspect of leadership authority, how cynical the tax advantages or protection of conduct sought may be, how lavish the lifestyles of leaders are, that provided the followers conduct themselves through the supernatural beliefs and codes of conduct expounded by the leadership, the whole outfit is deemed a religion in law.

The High Court of Australia has determined that "*charlatanism is a necessary price of religious freedom*". But as we shall see later, charlatanism, at least in the dimension of *hypocrisy*, is a leading cause of religious disaffiliation in western nations, including Australia. The legal protection of religious charlatanism deserves greater debate in the public square.

The High Court's parsimonious provisions mean that a very wide range of "faiths" of good or ill will, high or questionable morals, sincere, cynical, or even satirical intentions, might be legally recognised as religions and thereby granted special rights and protections.

For example, provided that the self-described Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster<sup>11</sup> — whose members wittily refer to themselves as Pastafarians — can convince a court its members do indeed hold supernatural beliefs (an omnipotent monster), and have canons of conduct (e.g. wearing a colander on the head), it could potentially be registered as a religion in Australia (Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster Australia 2021). Not so in the USA, where the Federal Court ruled the group "*a work of satire, meant to entertain while making a pointed political statement*" (Americans United for Separation of Church and State 2016).

**Summary:** Australia's High Court has determined that religion is the acceptance of axioms of conduct that give effect to beliefs in the supernatural, regarding how one ought to live. It expressly ruled that charlatanism is acceptable and was silent on the matter of religious harms except that any harms must not offend ordinary laws.

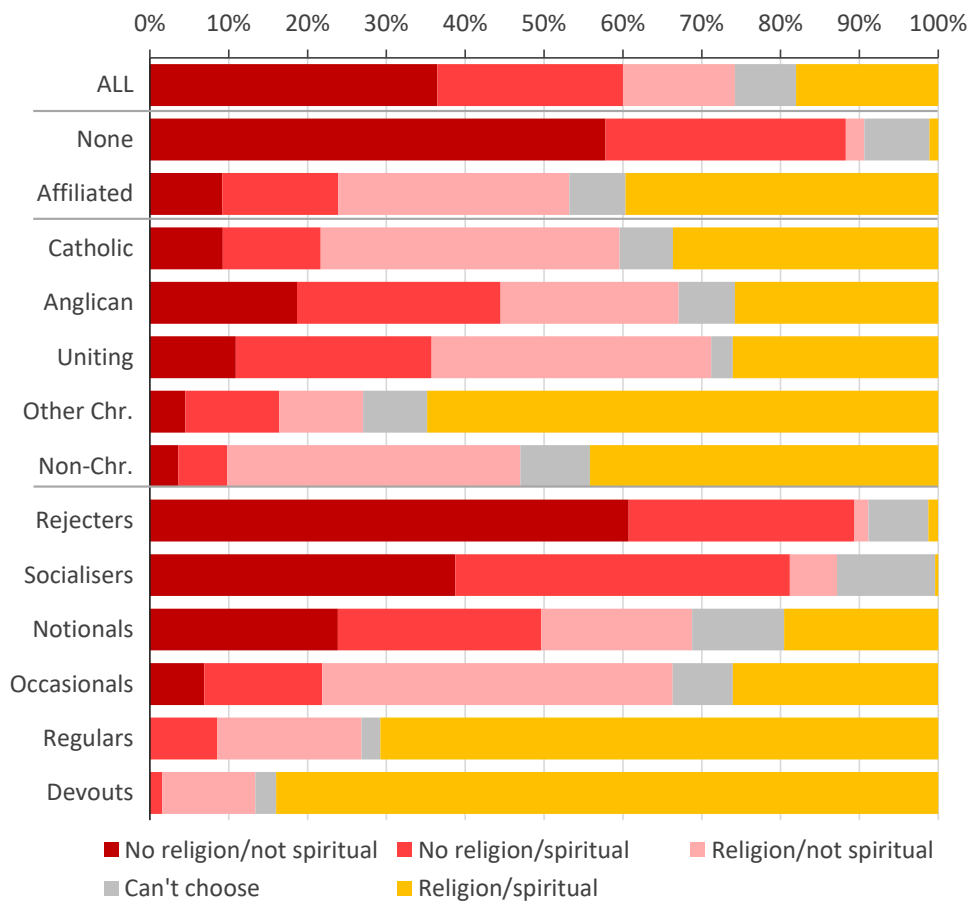
<sup>11</sup> By mere juxtaposition with a discussion of "charlatanism", no character inference is being made regarding the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster or its followers, nor should any be drawn. The case serves merely as a contentious example of a putative religion.



## Religion doesn't mean 'spiritual'

A common misconception is that having a religion means a person is spiritual. While it's understandable that the career religious might want to draw this parallel (e.g. Ng 2020), even the nation's official statistician has incorrectly drawn the equivalence (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Being "spiritual" means attending to the seat of one's emotions and character (described by some as the "soul"), rather than to physical things.

In fact, fewer than one in five (18%) Australians have a religion *and* say their faith is spiritual. Nearly as many (14%) say they have a religion but are *not* spiritual (Figure 2), that is, they identify with a religion for historical family, cultural, or other reasons.



**Figure 2:** Religion versus spirituality in Australia

Source: AuSSA 2018

In fact, the figures reveal an even weaker religiosity in Australia than they might at first seem. This is because the relevant study (AuSSA 2018) measured religion by asking respondents whether they *belonged* to a religion, and if so, which one. Some 48% of respondents said they did *not* belong to a religion.

Therefore, of those who said they *belonged* to a religious denomination, 22% of Catholics, 44% of Anglicans, 36% of Uniting/Methodists, 16% of minor Christian denominations, and 10% of non-Christian denominations said they did *not* personally have a religion. Overall, a quarter (24%) of Australians who said they *belong* to a denomination said they *didn't* personally have a religion.

Back to spirituality: only a third (35%) of Catholics, a quarter of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists (26% each), and less than half (44%) of non-Christian religionists have a religion for spiritual reasons. Only amongst minor Christian denominations do a majority, but still only around two thirds (65%), say that they have a religion for spiritual reasons.

Some religionists (e.g. Stobbe 2021) attempt to add Australia's spiritual but not religious (SBNRs)<sup>12</sup> to the total religious affiliation figure to say that a majority of Australians are spiritual — and by implication, that SBNRs are to be counted amongst the 'religious'.<sup>13</sup>

This, however, is seriously misguided. Firstly, adjusting the total religion count upwards for SBNRs (+18%) would have to also be corrected downwards for the religionists who *don't* say they're spiritual (-23%). That's a net -5%.

Secondly, counting SBNRs as somehow "religious" is to project onto them religious characteristics they *don't* have. This will be discussed further in the section *SBNR: 'Spiritual but not religious'* on page 63.

**Summary:** While religion appears to be common in Australia, only 18% of Australians say they hold a religion for *spiritual* reasons (AuSSA 2018). A quarter (24%) of Australians who say they *belong* to a religious denomination also say they *don't personally* have a religion. Amongst the religious denominations, minorities of Catholics (35%), Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists (26% each), and non-Christian denominations (44%) have a religion for spiritual reasons. Only amongst the minor Christian denominations is spiritual religion in the majority, but still far from universal (65%).

Attempts to add SBNRs to the religious affiliation statistics are misguided. It results in a false, grossly inflated measure of "religion", but is like mixing oil and water.

<sup>12</sup> In the AuSSA 2018 study, "No religion/Spiritual".

<sup>13</sup> The inverted commas emphasise the deliberately vague nature of 'religion' in this scenario.