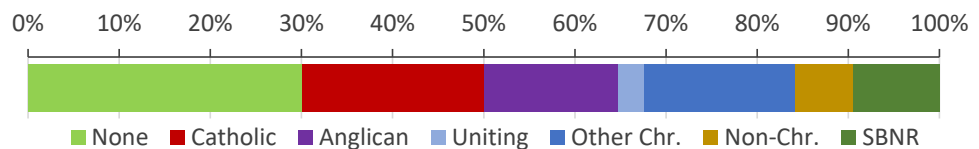




## Quasi- and non-religious world views

### SBNR: 'Spiritual but not religious'

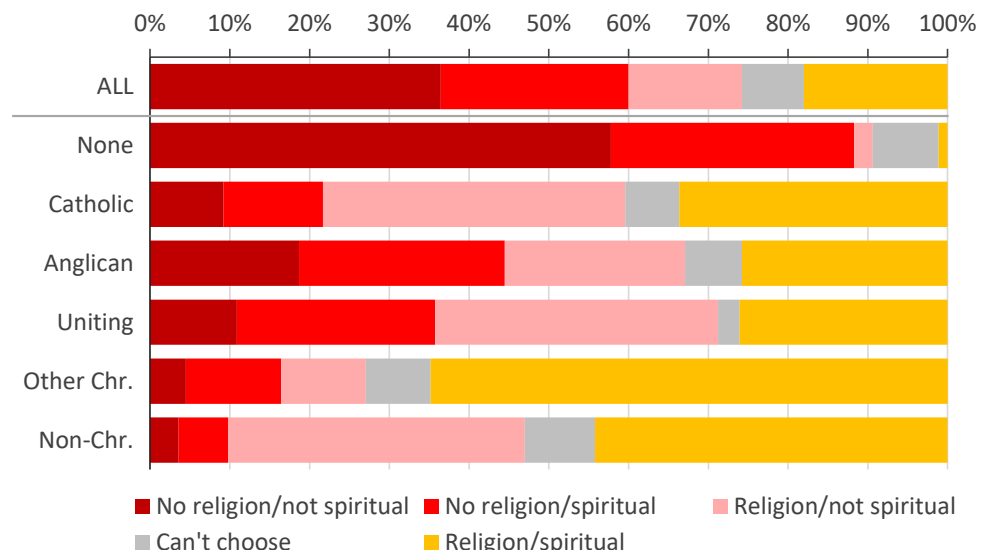
A 2012 Newspoll study which offered "Spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) as an express option in its religion question found 10% of Australians identified as SBNR (Newspoll Research 2012) (Figure 13).<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 13:** Denomination distribution in Australia with SBNR option 2012  
Source: Newspoll Research 2012. SBNR = Spiritual But Not Religious

This was a small rise from 8% in 2009 (Christian Research Association 2012). Several years later, SBNRs had grown slightly again to 13% (Pepper & Powell 2018) or 14% (McCrindle Research 2017) of the Australian population. This compares with USA studies around the turn of the 21st century which found SBNR rates between 14% and 20% (Marler & Hadaway 2002).

A more nuanced question about the nature of one's own personal spirituality from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA 2018) shows not only a more detailed picture, but a higher proportion (24%) of SBNRs (Figure 14).



**Figure 14:** Best description of own spirituality, by religion  
Source: AuSSA 2018. Note: Religionists said they "belong" to their religion.

<sup>21</sup> Disclosure: as CEO of the national alliance of VAD societies, I commissioned the study.

Those who said they were SBNRs included 30% of Nones, 12% of Catholics, 26% of Anglicans, 25% of Uniting/ Methodists, and 12% of minor Christian denominations. Those among the non-Christian faiths were least likely to be SBNRs (6%).

Overall, nearly half of Catholics (47%) did *not* say they were spiritual (whether religious or not), along with 41% of Anglicans, 46% of Uniting/ Methodists, 41% of non-Christian denominations, and 15% of minor Christian denominations.

Significant proportions of Australia's religionists across the denominations said they follow a religion without being spiritual, that is, without adopting its sacred scaffolding. This suggests significant levels of religious affiliation for cultural or normative reasons rather than intrinsic religious ones.

Overall, fewer than one in five Australians (18%) described themselves as observing a religion in a spiritual way. That includes only a third (34%) of Catholics, a quarter (26%) of Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists, and 44% amongst non-Christian faiths. Only among minor Christian denominations was there a majority (65%) adoption of a religion *and* its sacred scaffolding.

Looking more closely at the characteristics of SBNRs, the title confirms that they're *not* religious. They don't qualify according to the definitions of religion described in this report. They fail at least the communal test of "accepted axioms of conduct", if not also the tests of structured "moral guidance" and particular "supernatural beliefs".

A fundamental problem with the expression "SBNR" is the lack of clarity about what it means: the absence of a clear and commonly understood conceptual framework (Streib 2008), especially in separating out theistic from non-theistic dimensions (Westerink 2012). Illustrating the extent of the problem, almost two thirds (63%) of US adults say that religion and spirituality are "different but interdependent concepts" (Marler & Hadaway 2002).

One study found SBNRs can express their spirituality in four different ways, via: links to personal deities; naturalistic forms of transcendence; everyday compassion; and cultural (not institutional) religiosity (Ammerman 2013).

Indeed, SNBRs stand out for their high levels and *anti-institutional* spirituality (Marshall & Olson 2018; Wixwat & Saucier 2021).

Describing spirituality more generally — for both the religious and non-religious — McClintock, Lau and Miller (2016) found five universal factors across countries:

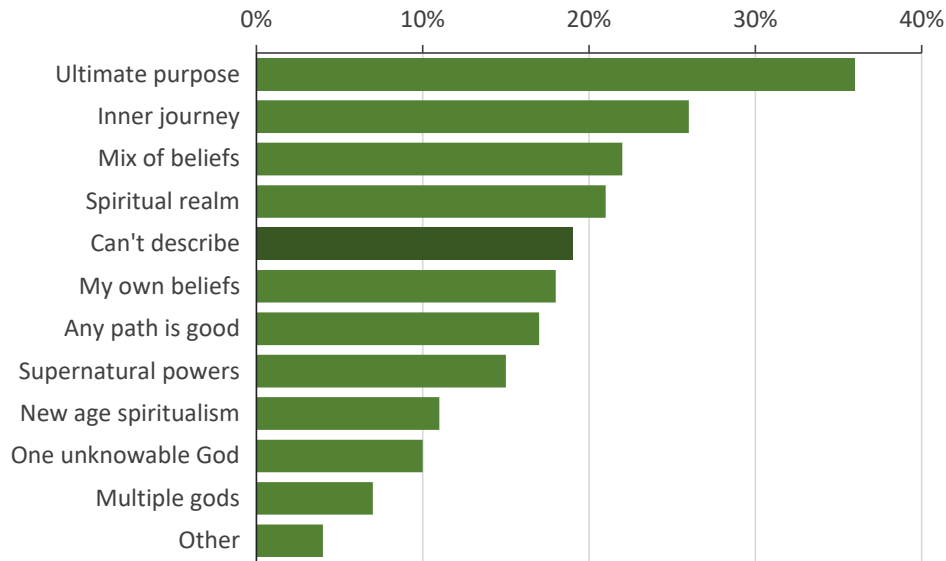
1. *Love*: in the fabric of relationships or as a sacred reality.
2. *Unifying interconnectedness*: a sense of energetic oneness with other beings in the universe.
3. *Altruism*: a commitment beyond the self with care and service.
4. *Contemplative practice*: for example, meditation, prayer, yoga or qigong.
5. *Reflection and commitment*: as a life well-examined.

In common practice though, “spirituality’s” vagueness is used to cover not only genuine spirituality, but a wide range of “new age drivel”, when more specific words like “inspiring”, “beautiful”, “awe-inspiring” or even “weird” would be more appropriate (Dudley 2017). Dudley argues that hidden motives for using the word should be declared, for example when conservative USA site Breitbart uses the term to describe what are in reality secular ideas.

In Australia, the term is used to describe a wide range of practices including yoga and mindfulness (above, 4. *contemplative practice*) as though they’re spiritual in a *religious* kind of way, when they aren’t (Debien & Calderwood 2016). “Spirituality” can even be used to describe aromatherapy, or the supposed healing powers of crystals (Shashkevich 2018) despite the fact they don’t work (Barry 2021).

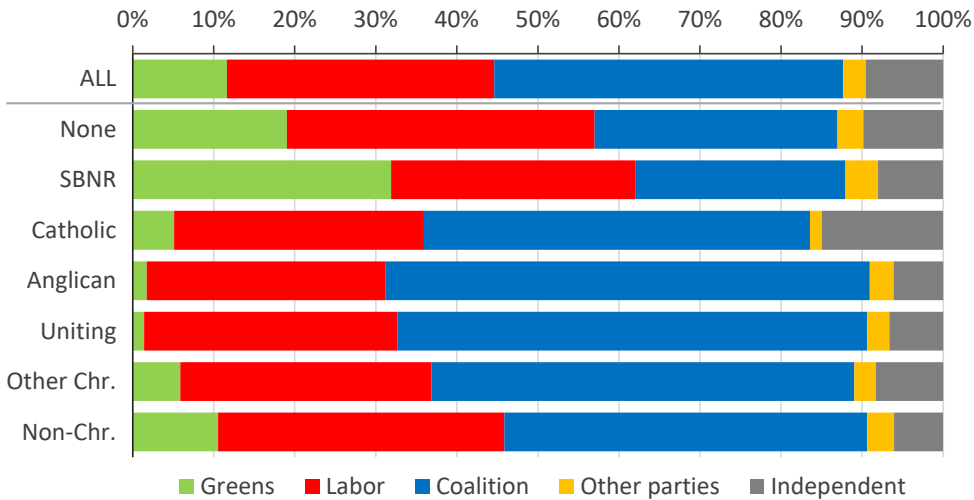
Consistent with their anti-establishmentarianism — at least of the religious kind — SBNRs tend to hold alternative, non-standard beliefs (Wixwat & Saucier 2021), and Australian SBNRs entertain a potpourri of ambiguous notions (McCrinkle Research 2017) (Figure 15).

Just 17% of SBNRs make reference to a conceptual god (10%) or gods (7%), and nearly 1 in 5 can’t describe in any way what their “spirituality” is about. This isn’t because Australian SBNRs are uneducated: they are on average at least as educated as others (Newspoll Research 2012, AuSSA 2018).



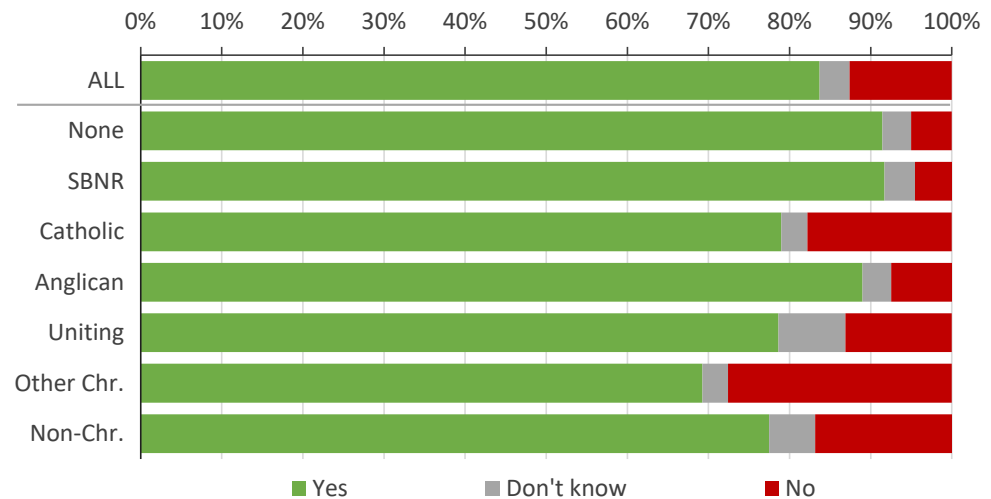
**Figure 15:** How Australian SBNRs describe their "spirituality"  
 Source: McCrindle Research 2017

SBNRs tend to be highly engaged in social policy matters, and are by far the most likely to vote Greens and least likely to vote for the Coalition (Newspoll Research 2012) (Figure 16).



**Figure 16:** Federal voting intentions by denomination 2012  
 Source: Newspoll Research 2012. SBNR = Spiritual But Not Religious

SBNRs typically hold progressive views. For example, they approve of voluntary assisted dying (VAD) at a higher rate than any religionists, around the same rate as Nones (Newspoll Research 2012) (Figure 17).



**Figure 17:** Approval of voluntary assisted dying (VAD) by religion 2012

Source: Newspoll Research 2012. SBNR = Spiritual But Not Religious.

They also tend to attribute personal poverty to external causes (e.g. structural/social environmental) via the ‘universal’ construct of spirituality (Bergmann & Todd 2019). This contrasts strongly with religious conservatives who tend to attribute a person’s poverty to internal causes — the person’s own failures — such as laziness.

SBNRs tend to be higher in “Big Five” personality traits Openness to experience, Extraversion and Neuroticism, but lower in Agreeableness (Schnell 2012; Wixwat & Saucier 2021). They are somewhat more likely to be female and low income (AuSSA 2018), and have higher rates of schizotypy<sup>22</sup> than both the religious and non-religious (Willard & Norenzayan 2017).

Three quarters (74%) of Australians who are now SBNRs were raised in a religion (AuSSA 2018), around half in Catholic and Anglican households (23% each). That is, only a quarter (26%) were raised in no religion. Given SBNRs’ characteristics, it’s unlikely that SBNRs who left formal religion were ever more than notional denominational affiliates. Even if they were formally religious in the past, they certainly aren’t now.

### Misguided appropriation of SBNRs by religionists

Religious leaders such as the former Anglican Dean of Sydney, Philip Jensen (2020), and religious organisations like Christian survey firm McCrindle Research (Renton 2017), publicly attempt to “appropriate” SBNRs to the “religious side of the national equation” by vaguely implying they’re really just religious people who are a bit lost.

<sup>22</sup> Disorganised or unusual patterns of thinking or mental experiences such as illusions. Interpersonal difficulties are not uncommon.

Indeed, Clare Bruce (2017) of Christian radio station *Hope 103.2* attempted to marry the 2016 Census result of 60% religious affiliation as representing “spiritual” Australians, with another 14% — SBNRs from the McCrindle study — to claim that the total “spiritual” result was “much stronger than atheists had hoped”.<sup>23</sup>

### Misleading statement

*“More than two in three Australians (68%) follow a religion or have spiritual beliefs.”*

— Renton (2017)

As discussed in *Religion doesn't mean 'spiritual'* on page 28, these efforts are seriously misguided. Not only are a significant portion of religious affiliates *not* “spiritual”, but SBNR spirituality has little to do with religion.

Overall, SBNR's anti-establishmentarianism, internally derived beliefs, political and social progressiveness, and differences in attitudes suggest that they are very unlikely to have ever been *authentic* members, if past members at all, of organised religion. By definition they are *not* religious. While technically a majority of SBNRs could be called the “unchurched” or said to be “people lost from organised religion”, their underlying traits demonstrate that at least now, they are not of a religious bent in the institutional sense, and indeed are largely hostile towards it.

**Summary:** Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) Australians tend to be highly anti-establishmentarian (at least, towards religious establishments), hold a range of ambiguous spiritual beliefs many of which are of a secular nature and of internal rather than external footing, are socially and politically very progressive, and hold more compassionate views towards those who are struggling.

These factors call into question implications by some conservative religious commentators that SBNRs are “unchurched” and should somehow be counted in “religion” statistics.

<sup>23</sup> Note that while the McCrindle analysis (Renton 2017) married 14% SBNRs with its own measure of religionists from the same study (52%) for a marriage total of 68%, Christian radio's Bruce (2017) married McCrindle's SBNR figure with a *different* study (2016 Census) religion result, to achieve a much higher “total religious/spiritual” marriage (74%).

## Non-religious world views

A range of non-religious world views has been enumerated and widely discussed elsewhere. For the purposes of this report, brief definitions of selected non-religious world views are provided as a rudimentary framework.

### Selected non-religious world views

Selected non-religious world views.

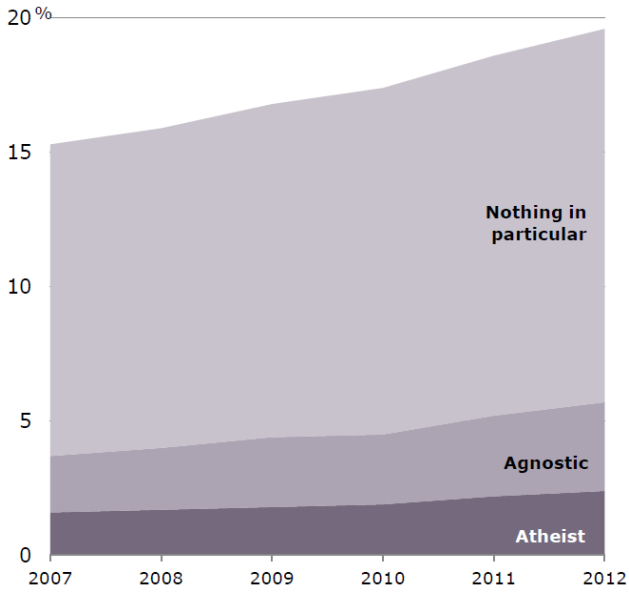
- **Atheism:** Non-belief in the existence of a god or gods.
- **Agnosticism:** Neither belief nor disbelief in the existence of a god or gods, or in religious doctrine.
- **Humanism:** Emphasises human agency for the greater good, without supernatural beliefs.
- **Rationalism:** Regards reason (intellectual and deductive methods) as the major source and test of knowledge, without supernatural beliefs.
- **Empiricism:** Regards sense experience, including experiments, as the source and test of knowledge, without supernatural beliefs.
- **Unchurched:** Those with spiritual (possibly supernatural) worldviews but not affiliated with or beholden to any religious denomination.

There is little accurate evidence revealing the proportions of Australians who hold these non-religious world views; even for the two main ones, atheism and agnosticism. However, other proxy measures give an estimate at least of non-religious belief.

Firstly, in 2018, 40% of Australians said they didn't believe either in a specific God or even a higher power (Francis 2021, p 49). No further reliable breakdown was found, though USA data suggests that most non-religionists are "nothing in particular" rather than specifically atheist or agnostic (Funk & Smith 2012) (Figure 18).

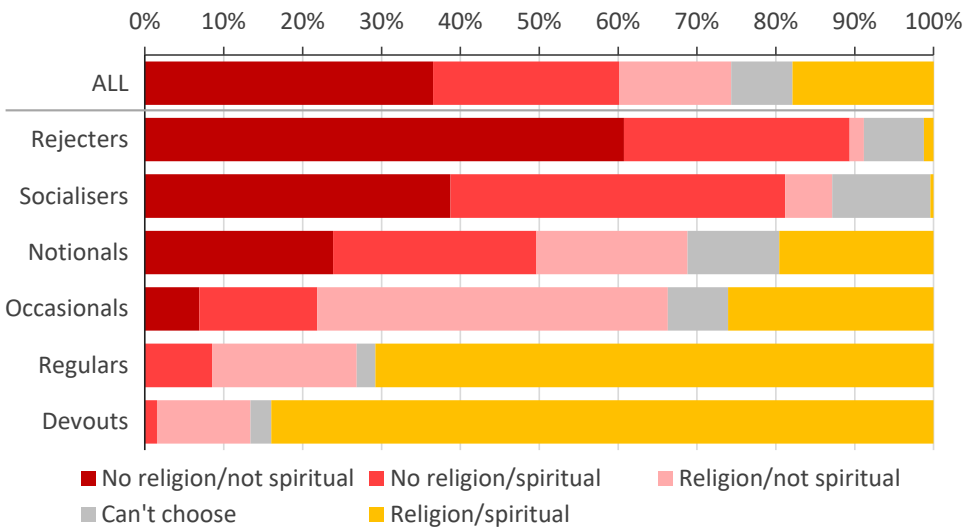
Secondly, more than 4 in 5 Australians (82%) *don't* say they belong a religion for spiritual reasons (Figure 19). Around 1 in 7 say they follow a religion but not for spiritual reasons. That is, they affiliate with a religion for family or cultural reasons, rather than personally spiritual reasons.





**Figure 18:** Trends in the USA 'Nones' segment  
Source: Funk & Smith (2012)

Unsurprisingly, most Rejecters (89%) and Socialisers (81%) say they have no religion. Yet even amongst those who affiliate with a religion, half of Notionals (50%), 22% of Occasionals, 9% of Regulars and 2% of Devouts say they have no religion.



**Figure 19:** Best description of own religiosity by ARI6  
Source: AuSSA 2018. Note: Religionists "belong" to a religion.

Only amongst the most religious, Regulars and Devouts, do a majority, though still not all, say that they belong to a religion for spiritual reasons (71% and 84% respectively).

### Counting the non-religious

Counting the non-religious in a meaningful way is not easy because there are many conceptual and methodological issues (Francis 2021, p 13 ff; Zurlo & Johnson 2016). Studies to date have largely defined non-religionists in terms of *absence*: absence of belief in gods or other supernatural notions. But non-religionists have as wide a variety of worldviews — a plurality of characteristics — as do the religious (Coleman & Jong 2019).

### Some characteristics of the non-religious

Just as the religious are more likely to claim religion when their parents and peer groups are more religious, the non-religious are more likely to claim no religion when parents are religiously unaffiliated or attend religious services less, or when a spouse or peer group are non-religious (Baker & Smith 2009b).

On average, atheists display the greatest antagonism towards religion, with agnostics and unchurched believers less opposed (Baker & Smith 2009a). At least in the USA, the unchurched are as opposed as atheists to religion *in the public square*, indicating fundamental policy differences with religionists.

At least in the USA, the “unchurched” are as opposed as atheists to religion *in the public square*, indicating fundamental policy differences with religionists.

### A sense of purpose, but different foundations

Contrary to common belief amongst religionists, atheists don't exhibit greater rates of fatalism or nihilism (Speed, Coleman & Langston 2018). Studies that find differences usually have limited conceptualisations of 'life meaning', confusing it as a *marker* of well-being. However, there isn't necessarily such an association for non-religionists. Life meaning can comprise life purpose or goals and their justification, and values, along with senses of self-worth and control, and can be measured according to dozens of different sources ranging from the global to situational.

Both believers and non-believers generate a significant portion of a sense of meaning through family and close relationships, and through hobbies, travel and leisure (Pew Research Center 2019a), though believers have a higher *need* for meaning (Nelson, Abeyta & Routledge 2021).

A key difference is that atheists' source of meaning is endogenous (self-produced) rather than the exogenous as for religionists (Speed, Coleman &

Langston 2018). Both groups use culturally normative approaches to define their worldviews; but affirmed secularists do so through biographical experience and narrative, and intellectual rumination (Smith & Halligan 2021).

### **Negative framing (“without religion”) conceals positive beliefs**

The terms non-religion and atheism are defined by their negative relation to a religious groundwork, creating a misperception of “absence”. That can “conceal a wide range of positive beliefs, values, behaviours, and worldviews” as well as increased self-mastery (Coleman, Hood & Streib 2018); using more open-minded and less dogmatic humanist thinking styles (Uzarevic & Coleman 2021; Uzarevic, Saroglou & Clobert 2017) and naturalistic explanations — rather than appeals to supernatural authorities — to act positively in society consistent with secularist principles (Shults et al. 2018a).

Like the religious, the non-religious can be deeply moved by wonder, awe and beauty — most often about humanity and nature (Coleman, Hood & Streib 2018). They can also experience transcendence (Farias et al. 2019) and a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being (Pew Research Center 2019a).

The negative framing of secularists as “no religion” conceals a rich scaffolding of positive self-images, sense of purpose, self-mastery, open-minded and humanistic thinking, and the experience of wonder, awe, and beauty.

### **A rich secular ecosystem**

It has been argued that atheism isn’t a continuous spectrum like religiosity, instead existing more as discrete groups (Galen 2020). Consistent with some of the individual factors we discussed regarding the prevalence of religion, Norenzayan and Gervais (2013b) identified four distinct forms of atheism:

1. *Mindblind atheism*: lower mentalising, rendering personified supernatural entities unintuitive.
2. *Apathism*: little need to invoke supernatural powers because levels of order, comfort and meaning are satisfactory.
3. *inCREDulous atheism*: lack of CREDibility enhancing displays that would encourage belief that gods are potent, relevant, or even real.
4. *Analytic atheism*: subtle or overt prods towards analytical thinking that counter intuitive biases for supernatural explanations.

Some studies have found ambiguous or conflicting evidence about such classifications (e.g. Gervais et al. 2018; Langston 2019), though their methodologies may raise further questions. The topic remains fertile ground for scholars.

### **Secularists generally not ignorant about religion**

Secularists are not ignorant about religion generally. Even though religionists may hold greater levels of knowledge about practical details of their own denomination's particular tenets and practices, in the USA at least, atheists and agnostics hold a wider knowledge base about religion than do the religious (Pew Research Center 2019b).

Atheists and agnostics may even sometimes attend religious (devotional, not only wedding or funeral) services. Reasons include attempts to reduce friction with religious family members, and to "bridge the worlds of belief and nonbelief" (Mrdjenovich 2019).

### **Is secularism or atheism a religion?**

Social scientists and others, in casting non-religious world views in the negative — as an empty and deficient *lack* of religion or as that's opposite: implicitly religious — engage in "card tricks" (Coleman & Messick 2019). Indeed, according to both social and legal definitions of religion discussed earlier, secularism and atheism are not religions in Australia. They lack belief in supernatural entities or forces.

However, a district court in the USA deemed atheism the *equivalent* of religion for First Amendment purposes: the right to freedom of non-religious as well as religious expression (Davis 2005). Prior Supreme Court rulings had determined that organised 'ways of life' inspired by philosophical and secular concerns should enjoy such rights (David 2001). In 2005, an appeals court upheld the district court's ruling (United States Court of Appeals 2005), and held the ruling for a second time in 2013 (Wilson 2014).

While the USA legal system offers some hope that religionists and non-religionists are generally to be treated equally, the same cannot be said for Australia. Australian laws produce anomalies such that preferential treatment may be afforded to people whose beliefs are founded on untestable<sup>24</sup> supernatural claims, over other Australians whose claims are based on secular and evidential foundations. The degree of conscientiousness or cynicism with

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<sup>24</sup> Both in the sense that supernatural claims cannot be proven or disproven; and in the sense of whether the belief is held genuinely or not.

which either religious or secular beliefs are held is of no effective consequence.

Respecting the views of all Australians while avoiding undue privilege for beliefs based on supernatural claims, is a matter of national importance. It deserves specific debate in the public square.

**Summary:** There is a rich diversity of secular or non-religious world views in Australia. While some secular Australians say they are spiritual, more religious Australians say they aren't. Some secularists are hostile to religion, while many aren't. Secularists have a sense of purpose though it usually stems from internal rather than external foundations. They also have a rich scaffolding of positive beliefs and attitudes such as self-mastery and open-minded humanistic thinking. They experience wonder, awe, and beauty, though the subject is natural rather than supernatural.

