



Summary

This report employs the peer-reviewed scholarly literature and high-quality academic and professional surveys to help reveal valuable insights about Australians' real relationships with religion.

Perspectives on religion

Many people approach the subject of religion from a particular viewpoint. Some say it's belief in God, though this overlooks non-theistic religions like Buddhism and animism. Others say only that they know it when they see it, which is to say little if anything, which reduces religion to only behaviour while overlooking identity, belief and other facets.

Distinguishing religion from culture can often be difficult. For example, the Christian Jesus might be portrayed as white or as a dark-skinned African, helping increase acceptance within specific regions. It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from politics, too, especially where a state officially supports or unofficially privileges one or other religion — or no religion.

Interactions can be complex, even in opposite directions depending on the country. Features that are deemed descriptive if not essential elements of religion in one culture, such as attitudes toward morality, justice, or work, can be contra-indicated in others. Similarly, the emic approach of religionists to “prove” sound foundations for their tenets is contradicted by the etic approach of some non-religionists to “disprove” them. Some religions (e.g. Judaism, Catholicism) culturally promote a collectivist approach, while others (e.g. Protestantism) emphasise individuality and one's own personal relationship with God.

Preconceived notions give rise to false consensus bias: we tend to believe that others see things the way we do. It's why real evidence about people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours is so important, as is the inclusion of studies from eastern cultures that provide broader insights than data only from western cultures.

Several frameworks attempt to explain different forms of religiosity (not specific religions). The Big Three⁴⁶ groups religionists in to extrinsics, intrinsics and questers. Extrinsics tend to *use* religion for utilitarian or instrumental purposes, that is, to facilitate worldly matters. Intrinsics more centrally *live* their religion, de-emphasising the importance of worldly matters. And Questers see their faith as a search for the truth with an

⁴⁶ A term I've coined for convenience.

emphasis on social interaction. The Big Four framework, on the other hand, prioritises religiosity into the main characteristics of believing, belonging, behaviour, and bonding. Preferences for these characteristics can vary considerably between east and west.

These various ways of considering religion and religiosity help enrich our understanding of the relationship people have with religious faith.

Definitions of religion

Definitions of religion abound. Many of them are misguided or inadequate, referencing gods (not all religions are theist) or employing circular arguments about sacredness. It's also important to distinguish religion from the intense spiritual experience that sometimes occurs under temporal lobe seizure, from spirituality that isn't really religion; and from shared values and experiences (like sports clubs and political parties) that aren't religion either.

A core (though not only) feature of religion is the belief in *supernatural* entities, forces, or principles. Another core feature is that there is shared belief and meaning.

For the purposes of this report, we define religion as "*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.*"

The High Court has defined religion as *belief in a supernatural being, thing or principle and the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief*. It further determined that such conduct may not offend ordinary laws, and that charlatanry is a necessary price of religious freedom.

Religion versus spirituality

A common misconception is that those who are religious are spiritual. In Australia, spiritual religion is in the minority amongst Catholics (35%), Anglicans and Uniting/Methodists (26% each) and non-Christian faiths (44%). Only amongst the minor Christian denominations do a majority, but still far from all (65%), say they are spiritually religious.

Some religionists attempt to bolster the rate of "religion" in Australia by adding "spiritual but not religious" (SBNRs) to the total religion figure. This not only overlooks that a significant proportion of religionists are not spiritual, but adds apples to pears: SBNRs are *not* at all religious in the way that religionists mean. Hint, the name says "... but *not* religious".

Why religion is so prevalent — individual factors

The question arises as to why religion is so prevalent. It is present in all societies throughout history, including amongst those that attempt to suppress it.

A longstanding debate has centred around relative contributions of nature versus nurture: the degree to which religiosity is inherited versus learned. One study suggested a fairly even split between the two, though other studies, with the significant effects of culture and politics, suggest rather more nature than nurture. In any case, the relationship is an *and* rather than an *or*: nurture bolsters the tendency of the naturally disposed to pursue religion, and the tendency of the non-disposed to accept it. Overall, nature provides something of a push, but nurture provides the details: the specific beliefs, attitudes, and rituals.

Another common misperception is that there is a “God spot” in the brain, which activates or facilitates religion. This explanation reveals an exclusive religious bias for monotheism. In reality, the experience of supernatural “presence” — in the absence of an overt physical seizure — is caused by minor seizures of the brain’s temporal lobes. The neural processing of the left and right lobes getting out of sync can cause unusual experiences. The rationally-prone experience the mismatch as *inside* the mind, such as dreams or hallucinations, while the fantasy-prone experience it as *outside* the mind, such as angels, demons, ghosts, or God.

This effect aside, neuroscience makes clear that there is no special machinery in the brain dedicated to religion. Religion occurs as a result of a busy cluster of regular mechanisms. One is a preference for intuitive rather than analytic thinking. It comes with a significant bias attached, especially when religion is highly institutionalised or organised: a tendency to overconfidence in one’s beliefs, and to dismiss counter-evidence as *even relevant* to holding the belief. It also comes with a tendency to prefer deontological (rules-based) solutions to moral problems: that is, a reliance on “duty ethics”.

Another important feature of the human mind is its power for pattern recognition. This power is of course vital for life. For survival of the species we must be good at recognising food, predators and potential mates at the very least. But some are prone to not only seeing patterns in truly random data, but to *suggestions* of such patterns. This illusory pattern perception is a compensatory mechanism against perceived threats to personal control. The illusory patterns serve as convenient explanations of natural phenomena that are otherwise unexplained, and they give rise to preferences for interventionist gods and institutions that offer preferred certainties. Consistent with this phenomenon, Australia’s most religious — *especially*

Christians — are significantly more likely than others to say they feel strongly in control of their lives. It also helps explain the current push by Australian religious conservatives for religious “freedoms”, a reaction to the loss of religious control occasioned by significant drops in religious affiliation.

Another feature of the religious mind is a tendency for magical thinking and paranormal beliefs: a blend of intuition, mystical experience and acceptance of the supernatural, which arise largely in response to existential threats. Threats don’t have to be life-threatening. They may be symbolic, or threats to *coping* mechanisms. In modern western civilisation, financial insecurity is an important existential threat, and it correlates strongly with belief in religious miracles. This may help account for Protestantism’s prosperity gospel, including in Australia where Protestants are on average the most religious, and where belief in religious miracles is associated very strongly with high religiosity.

Human’s advanced capacity for theory of mind (ToM)— the appreciation that others have preferences, beliefs, mental states, and motives that are different from one’s own — adds to the mix. While other creatures such as crows, dogs and especially apes have this capacity, humans alone exhibit *secondary* ToM. That’s the capacity to appreciate that others have the capacity to appreciate that others have their own preferences and beliefs. It endows humans with excess imagination to conceive that inanimate objects have minds, and to conjure up deities whose minds can monitor our own for potential transgressions of *thought*, not just behaviour. This helps account for mankind’s wide disposition to generate teleological explanations for natural phenomena, that is, to explain them in terms of their *purpose* (which comes from a mind) rather than in terms of their *cause*.

Mankind’s ability to create and *structure* cognitive content, in the form of pre-set explanations of the supernatural and how they are to be enlivened through ritual, contributes significantly to the persistence of religion throughout history, even if the content itself is revised over time.

Additionally, awe, the human experience of “small self” in response to perceived vast, difficult-to-explain phenomena, decreases tolerance for uncertainty, which increases illusory pattern perception, false detection of agency, spiritual feelings and supernatural belief.

Attachment style, the broad manner in which we tend to bond with others (secure, anxious or avoidant), can promote religiosity. People with a history of anxious or avoidant attachment towards others may *compensate* by relying on God as a substitute attachment figure. This is especially so for those with negative perceptions of self and positive perceptions of others, and is more common amongst women than men. There is also a potential *correspondence*

path, in which those brought up to feel secure in religion (but also non-religion) are more likely to stay on that path through life.

Terror management theory focuses on the salience of death, whether as mere reminders of mortality or as real existential threat. Appeals to the supernatural can offer both literal and symbolic immortality. This is not a particularly strong effect, though, as studies show that people mostly *think* the fear of death drives *others* but not themselves to religion. Nevertheless, in Australia there is a significant but not large correlation between religiosity and believing that the point of religion is to make sense of life after death.

Finally (but not exhaustively), religion acts as a resource against boredom, providing meaning while performing repetitive or tedious tasks.

Why religion is so prevalent — collective factors

Back to nature versus nurture again, the prevalence of religion is in part explained by official and unofficial support. A global study found that while just 5% of nations actively suppress religion, 20% favour a religion and a further 22% have an official state religion.

Religion is also said to improve cooperation. It does this through “costly signalling”, displays that are hard for fakes, frauds and freeloaders to copy. These displays convey *predictability* of intent and its positive valence, and importantly can also be read by both non-religionists and those of other religions. While non-God costly signalling increases prosocial behaviour at the family and local level, Big God religions are associated with more global prosocial behaviour. In terms of prosocial effects, a majority of Australians agree, and the highly religious in particular, that religion helps people make friends.

There are caveats, however. Firstly, scientific studies do not consistently find associations between religiosity and cooperative behaviour, and when they do, the associations are often not strong. Secondly, the increase in prosocial behaviour may be only towards ingroups, but increase antisocial behaviour towards outgroups. Thirdly, prosocial behaviour can be coerced coordination rather than voluntary cooperation. And fourthly, cooperation is of course not the exclusive province of religion. Countless non-religious organisations around the world serve to bring people together in peace and prosperity.

Religion is also argued to promote fertility and population growth. While this may be true in regions with low resources or high rates of religiosity, in Australia it is no longer true. While older religious Australians (Diligents and Ardents) had significantly more children on average, younger Diligents and Ardents are having *fewer* children than religious Casuals and Nominals.

But perhaps the greatest contribution to religion, especially in terms of denominations, is the transmission of a specific religion from parents to their children. Child-rearing religious transmission is much higher amongst religious conservatives than progressives. As expected, Australia's most religious (Diligents and Ardents) prioritise teaching children religious faith, of limited priority to Casuals and of little interest to others.

Quasi- and non-religious worldviews

Studies indicate that a significant minority of Australians, between 14% and 24%, are "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). Some religious conservatives attempt to add SBNRs to a headline religious affiliation figure to imply that a very significant majority of Australians are "religious/spiritual". This is misguided.

Firstly, not all Australians who are affiliated with a religion are "spiritual". Indeed, of those who say they *belong* to a denomination, 47% of Catholics, 41% of Anglicans, 46% of Uniting/ Methodists, 41% of non-Christian denominations, and 15% of minor Christian denominations did *not* describe themselves as spiritual. That is, significant proportions of Australians are aligned with a religion for family and cultural reasons, rather than spiritual ones. Furthermore, significant proportions of those who said they belong to a religion described themselves as *No religion*.

Secondly, adding SBNRs to the "religion" figure is to add apples to oranges. Australia's SBNRs are very different from the "religious". They tend to be highly anti-establishmentarian, hold progressive views about social matters such as abortion and VAD, and are more likely to vote for left-wing political parties. Their beliefs tend to be vague and more aligned with secular notions of mindfulness, or paranormal beliefs in the healing powers of crystals or aromatherapy. Only a small minority believe in a god or gods. These characteristics make them non-starters as bedfellows to bolster presumed support for conservative, institutional religious doctrines.

Counting the non-religious, for example atheists, agnostics and others ("secularists" in general), in a meaningful way is conceptually difficult. Like religionists, they exhibit more a continuous spectrum of beliefs and values rather than a few neat clusters, and scholarly frameworks remain largely undeveloped.

Popular assumptions about secularists are not borne out by research. For example, secularists are assumed by many religionists to lack a sense of purpose or meaning, and to generally not experience larger-than-self inspiration. This may be due to the negative framing in their group names,

especially “atheists” (*without* a god or gods, and “non-religious” (*without* religion).

However, secularists amply demonstrate sense of purpose, though they are drawn from real-world rather than supernatural sources. While both secularists and religionists derive a great deal of meaning from family and close relationships, religionists are much more likely to have a *need* for meaning. Secularists enjoy wonder and awe, too, but in the natural realm rather than layering supernatural explanations over phenomena and events.

While secularists may not be familiar with the nuances of specific religious tenets and practices, they are not ignorant of religion in general. They can do better than the religious in religious general knowledge surveys.

Perceived benefits of religiosity

Religion is perceived to convey a range of benefits to adherents. One is its anxiolytic effects, that is, reduction of anxiety. This particularly holds in developing countries severely lacking in resources, though less so in developed countries. Nevertheless, in Australia, most agree that religion provides comfort in times of trouble or sorrow. Almost all Regulars and Devouts agree, indicating its personal importance. An important aspect of religion, rituals, help reduce anxiety. While rituals are not exclusive to religion, they reduce anxiety through their repetitive motions rather than through reducing cognitive load. They can also have negative outcomes, through increasing antisociality towards outgroups.

In Australia, frequent religious service attendance correlates strongly with greater self-reported wellbeing. Amongst Ardents, however, it correlates negatively with overall health (yet simultaneous high mental wellbeing). This is because the relationships between religion and health are complex and bidirectional. While religion may provide benefits in perceived wellbeing, it may also *attract* those in ill-health. Indeed, in Australia’s religious have higher average BMI than others.

The social aspects of frequent religious service attendance give rise to general feelings of closeness to others, amongst Australia’s religious. When adjusted by the importance of religion, however, the most religious report the lowest closeness to their local community and to Australia nationally, and the highest towards more abstract people in other parts of the world. The causes of these differences are unknown, though locals could directly challenge religionists’ false consensus bias, and the study with these results was conducted shortly after Australia, nationally, legalised marriage equality, a reform most opposed by the highly religious.

As described earlier, religion also helps believers perceive a stronger sense of control over their own lives. This is especially so amongst Christians, who have been in normative majority since federation.

Most Australians regard religion as quite unimportant to generally getting ahead in life. The exception is Devouts, a quarter (24%) of whom think religion important to getting ahead. This is most likely to relate to getting ahead within religious organisations.

Religion is also commonly argued to impart greater morality. This will be discussed in Part 3.

Personal changes in religion

A large minority of adult Australians (42%) have changed religion since childhood (around 12 years old). While 35% are still of the same religion and 23% still the same non-religion, 32% have **left** religion, 8% have **changed** religion, and 2% have **converted** to religion.

Whereas most older Australians (55+ years) were raised in a religion, a large minority of younger Australians (18–44 years) have been raised in no religion. Given the “stickiness” of no religion, the rate of religion in Australia is likely to drop significantly further over the coming years.

Not only have many Australians left religion since childhood, but the religiosity of those still affiliated has dropped very substantially compared to their childhood selves and their parents at the time.

Protective factors against these drops include belief in a personal God, being raised in a common religion of both parents, and credibility-enhancing displays — parents attending religious services at the same rate as their children, rather than sending children off for additional indoctrination.

Thus, while recent drops in religion are significantly fuelled by transmission of religion but subsequent abandonment, future drops in religion will be fuelled significantly by lack of religious transmission.

Factors that people say most attract them to religion include seeing others' genuine religious faith, and experiencing life trauma. Factors that most repel people from religion include religious statements by public figures, unbelievable miracle stories, questioning religious teachings, religious hypocrisy, abuse, scandals and judgementalism, and non-belief in God.

In Australia, decreases in religious affiliation were particularly associated with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which found much greater abuse amongst religious than secular institutions.

It was also associated with conservative religious organisations actively opposing the legalisation of marriage equality.

Institutional changes in religion

Not only can personal minds change religion, but so can institutions. The Anglican church, for example, has changed its institutional mind about the ordination of women, formerly strictly opposed, and now generally but not universally supported. The Catholic church changed its stance on the marriage of clergy and the existence of limbo, to name just two.

Even as a religious institution advertises a doctrinal position about a particular matter, members of the institution, including some clerics, may hold different or even opposing views, for example on abortion, voluntary assisted dying, or marriage equality. This calls into significant question the notion of religious “tradition”. When a cleric (or member of the devout laity) insists that their religion’s “tradition” is exactly so, the claim is deaf to the wide and real range of beliefs and practices across that denomination, and blind to the change of views over time.

Religion and conscientious objection

Conscience is the exercise of moral judgement via the interaction of a person’s emotions and thoughts on matters of right and wrong. Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. *Not just “religion”*.

Conscientious objection (CO) is the refusal of a person to participate in a course of action for moral (often but certainly not always religious) reasons. Especially in the field of healthcare, this can create significant moral dilemmas. Doctors, who have exclusive permission to provide certain services a patient may want, might object to the service. Objection to fertility planning and control, abortion, VAD, and other services are not uncommon.

While some argue that medical CO should be completely protected, or completely denied, a nuanced approach which allows a provider to not participate, but refer the patient for a consultation with another provider who doesn’t object, is argued to be the appropriate balance. In the USA, most doctors think a doctor’s CO should be respected, and a significant majority (71%) believe the objecting doctor is morally obliged to refer the patient to a non-objecting doctor.

A key feature of CO is that it is a shield, not a sword: its intention is to protect the conscience of its holder, not to extinguish the conscience of others.

Institutions, however, are confections of personhood in law. They don't have consciences (thoughts and feelings). Rather, where they seek to control behaviour, their mission statements or Codes of Ethics or Conduct act like law, not conscience. Indeed, they act to *repress* conscience. For example, a patient may seek, and a doctor may agree to provide, family planning services. However, if the institution bans such practices, the real conscience of both doctor and patient are struck out. This is ideological *regulation*, not conscience.

If the institution is the only place in a district where such a service might be practically provided to patients, the institution's objection becomes a blanket prohibition in the *region*, not just with the institution's walls. This is particularly egregious where the public are footing the institution's bills through government funding.

Institutional arguments for prohibiting certain services are misguided: they conflate *agency*, the ability to act, with *conscience*, the ability to reach a moral decision. Unilateral prohibition actively severs agency from conscience. Thus, "institutional conscientious objection" would more correctly be called "institutional agency prohibition".

The federal government's exposure drafts of Religious Discrimination bills have been labelled by the Australian Human Rights Commission as "*a dangerous precedent*" that would significantly restrict others' rights.

Religion and authority

Most Australians disagree strongly with the idea that "religious authorities" should be the ultimate interpreters of law. Even a clear majority of the most religious, Ardents, disagree.

On the question of whether democracy means the people should obey their rulers, the meaning is somewhat ambiguous: whether people think this *is* the nature of our current democracy, or whether this is a *principle* of democracy. Given this ambiguity, responses of Australians are mixed, though the most religious, Ardents, are more inclined than others to agree. This is consistent with the known association of authoritarianism with religiosity, although the effect is modest.

Highly religious Australians, Devouts, are also the most likely to say that the government controlling both houses of the federal parliament is good for democracy. Their approval of authority is not without bounds, however. They are slightly more likely to say that a leader unbothered by parliamentary process or elections is a bad idea.

Confirming their positive attitudes toward representatives “getting on with it”, Australia’s most religious are by far the least likely to say that citizens should participate in important policy decisions. Coupled with higher rates of disapproval of marriage equality, it becomes clear why religious conservatives were opposed to, and dismayed by, the 2017 national plebiscite regarding marriage equality law reform.

Attitudes toward religious institutions

For 25 different institution types from the armed forces and police to unions and political parties, religious and secular Australians report similar trust towards almost all of them. There is one exception, with religious and secular Australians holding almost polar opposite opinions: the churches. The most religious, Devoteds (Diligents and Ardents combined at 12% of the population), rate the churches as their number 3 trusted organisation. The other 88% of the population rate the churches at number 22 of 25, below banks (then under the investigation of a royal commission for wrongful behaviour), unions and the government; and only better than the press, TV and political parties.

Given the susceptibility of the very religious to false consensus bias, it’s unclear whether Australia’s most devout truly understand how poorly the rest of Australia views their organisations. Similarly, Australians’ overall trust in religious *leaders* is very low, again less than union leaders and exceeding only corporate executives, politicians and celebrities.

The churches and their clerics have a severe reputation problem. Do they know? Are they aware of the degree of scepticism of most of the population still hearing religious conservatives’ public demands for prescriptive dogma regarding “moral behaviour” in their own private lives?

A majority (51%) of Australians say that the churches have too much power. Just 6% disagree. Unsurprisingly, disagreement correlates strongly with religiosity, yet even amongst the most religious, Devouts, less than a third (33%) disagree that the churches have too much power, while most Rejecters (71%) agree.

Moreover, a massive majority of Australians (80%) say that religious leaders shouldn’t attempt to interfere in how people vote in parliamentary elections. Just 12% think that clerics *should*. Opposition to clerical interference runs across the religious denominations and is in the majority by religiosity as well — even amongst Devouts (59%).

In the sphere of political influence, continuing to assume that religious votes count, but secular votes don’t, is foolhardy. It’s a daring government that would choose to grant the churches increased power.

In the sphere of personal influence, opinions are more mixed. Around a third (34%) of Australians say that governments shouldn't interfere in religions' efforts to spread their faith — that is, to evangelise. Slightly more Australians (38%) say governments *should* be able to interfere. As would be expected, opposition to interference is highest amongst the most religious, Regulars (57%) and Devouts (79%).

Religious conservatives to the battle stations

Recently, Australia's most religious have been pressing the federal government to pursue legislation that would increase the rights of the religious. Rather than propose *human rights* legislation to balance the rights of all Australians, the government has tellingly titled its proposed legislation the "Religious Discrimination Bill".

Religious conservatives are arguing for greater rights to be able to swing their arms of faith freely, with *legal protection* of those arms' right to remove any chin with which they might inconveniently come into contact.

At the same time, protection from secular swinging arms (or even religious swinging arms that disagree) are to be *legally prevented* from contacting conservative religious chins, which can stay exactly where they wish.

This is to argue not for a religious shield, but a religious sword. It is to argue for religious *privileges* over others.

Why are religious conservatives suddenly so politically active? Obviously, they were disappointed at the legalisation of marriage equality in 2017. But there are other significant reasons, too. Firstly, the current federal Coalition government, headed by devout Pentecostal Scott Morrison, has shown itself to be sympathetic to religious privilege. Reform is now more urgent as insurance against the possible election of a Labor government in 2022 — a party that has shown itself to be somewhat less enthusiastic.

Secondly, by mid 2022, the Australian Bureau of Statistics will publish the headline results of the 2021 national Census. That announcement is almost certain to declare that Christianity is, for the first time since federation, in the minority. Even religion in total may be in the minority, though that's unlikely. And the Nones may well be within 10% of total Christianity, more than halving the current gap.

The truth about religiosity in Australia

Religious conservatives in Australia are well organised, and vocal. Busy politicians could be forgiven for thinking they represent the views of Australians at large. But they don't. The 2016 headline Census statistic of 60%

religious affiliation is profoundly misleading. Significant numbers of Australians tick a religious denomination for habitual family or cultural reasons, rather than reasons of real faith or spirituality.

If the 60% affiliation figure is adjusted to the affiliated who say they *belong* to their religious organisation, religion drops to 38%. Adjusted to those who say they are religious, it drops to 32%. Adjusted to those who say religion is personally important in their lives, it drops to 29%. Adjusted to those who attend religious services more than once a year, it drops to 23%. Adjusted to those who are certain God exists, it drops to 21%. Adjusted to those whose religion is *spiritual*, it drops to just 18%. Adjusted to those who attend religious services regularly (at least once a month), it sinks to 16%. And adjusted to those who say they are *active* members of their religious organisation, it drops to a mere 15%. These are individual, not combined adjustments.

These, not some notional headline figure, are the real and concrete representations of religiosity in Australia. They provide a realistic appraisal of our national selfhood. They matter to parliamentary representation and legislative reform. They matter to government policy and to funding of religious and secular institutions alike.

Indeed, conservative Christian MPs' experiment with a new purpose-built political party, the Australian Conservatives, was a political failure and folded after two years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, those pushing for increased religious rights would be wise to take care in what they wish for. International research shows a *causative* relationship between state-sponsored protection of religion, and *religion's decline*. Religion does best when it stands on its own two feet. A pluralistic society thrives when no group is afforded special privileges over others.

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