

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT, PART TWO:

TEN THINGS I KNOW ABOUT RELIGION IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

In the last session I tried to “read the context” broadly. Now I’d like to focus in a bit and chart a few religious trends. How is the church doing in Australia? How are other religions going? Do Australians believe in God? Is there a massive spirituality movement taking the place of religious observance?

First I’d like to define my terms. “Religion” usually involves some form of commitment to a reality beyond us, as well as belonging to a group, following their practices, holding to their beliefs, finding their defining scriptures and stories helpful and following their guidance on what is right or wrong.¹ It’s a mistake, however, to think that religion is “just external observance”, as the spiritual or experiential dimension of religion is important to most followers.

“Spirituality” is used in many ways, but here I’ll use it the way Gary Bouma does, to refer to “an experiential journey of encounter or relationship with otherness, with powers, forces and beings beyond the scope of everyday life”.²

1. We’ve never been very religious

(I speak here of Australia since 1788. The indigenous people were, of course, very religious, though they themselves prefer the term “spirituality”.)

When a penal colony was set up in Sydney in 1788 the British masters tried to establish a state religion, the Church of England. Even though Christendom had crumbled in most of Europe, it had hung on in Britain.

Christendom is the marriage of church and state in a generally-accepted “Christian society”. To this day in England the Archbishop of Canterbury crowns the King or Queen, bishops sit in the House of Lords, and the Prime Minister officially appoints bishops.

In the early days of Australian settlement church attendance was compulsory for all. The government paid stipends to Anglican clergy, granted land for churches and church schools, paid for churches to be built, and required that births, deaths and

¹ Ninian Smart, *The world’s religions*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13-22.

² Gary Bouma, *Australian soul: Religion and spirituality in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12.

marriages be registered through the Church of England.³ It lasted until the 1830s, and after another seventy years of squabbling between the churches for government money, the Australian Constitution finally made clear in 1901 that there would be a separation of church and state.⁴

But we were never very religious. Within a few months after the arrival of the First Fleet, despite compulsory church attendance, as few as ten people — out of hundreds — attended the Sunday services led by the chaplain, Rev Richard Johnson.⁵ Hostility towards Christianity was obvious in the 1820s as secularist newspaper editors openly ridiculed the clergy, seeing them as gloomy and negative.⁶ From then on, the development of distinctively “Australian” culture, along with its gallery of Aussie heroes, has tended to ignore Christianity, except for a few practical Christian heroes such as John Flynn, who pioneered the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

One of the reasons for all this was that the main type of Protestant religion which arrived here in 1788 was a moralistic strand of evangelical Anglicanism. It was unsupported by the men of the Enlightenment who governed the colony.⁷ It was ignored by the military, who were notoriously irreligious.⁸ It was opposed by the Catholic Irish convicts. And the church had long been alienated from the English working class, from which the rest of the convicts came. The church was seen as part of the oppression of the criminal classes.⁹ It was a very bad start for God in post-1788 Australia!

God has remained European for most of the two hundred years since and has been confined mostly to churches. Despite the different climate, church buildings copied the European styles and clergy wore heavy, dark clerical garb. As Catholic historian Patrick O’Farrell has put it, this imported faith was seen as “somber, constricting [and] stifling in a land of colour, fun and freedom”.¹⁰

³ Ross Border, *Church and State in Australia, 1788-1872: A Constitutional Study of the Church of England in Australia* (London: SPCK, 1962), 16-18, 45, 47.

⁴ Ross Langmead, ‘Not quite established: The gospel and Australian culture’, *The Gospel and Our Culture* 14.3&4 (Sep/Dec 2002), available at <<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/11771.htm>>; Ross Langmead, ‘Introduction: Reimagining God and mission in Australia’, in *Reimagining God and mission: Perspectives from Australia*, ed. Ross Langmead (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), xii-xxiii.

⁵ David Millikan, *The Sunburnt Soul: Christianity in Search of an Australian Identity* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1981), 69-70.

⁶ Roger C Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

⁷ Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1987), 10-12.

⁸ Iain H Murray, *Australian Christian Life from 1788: An Introduction and an Anthology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 4.

⁹ Ian Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 13.

¹⁰ Patrick O’Farrell, ‘The Cultural Ambivalence of Australian Religion’, in *Australian Cultural History, Vol 1: Culture and the State in Australia*, edited by S L Goldberg and F B Smith (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities and the History of Ideas Unit, Research School of the Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1982), 4.

2. We're becoming even less religious now

Despite the lack of enthusiasm for Christian practice, in 1901 ninety-six per cent of Australians still identified as Christian. But that percentage has decreased steadily over the years. The percentage of Australians who identified as Christians in the 2006 Census dropped below 64%, fewer than two in three. And the rate of decline between 2001 and 2006 was the sharpest yet.¹¹

The news is even more sobering for mainline denominations such as the Uniting Church, which lost 13% of those who identify as belonging to the Uniting Church between 1996 and 2006, and can expect further numerical decline as nearly a quarter (22%) of those who identify as Uniting Church are over 65.¹²

While actual church attendance is declining at a slower rate, only about 10% of Australians go to church on any Sunday¹³ and about 20% say they go at least once a month, the lowest figures in about fifty years of counting.¹⁴

Some denominations, such as the Baptists, are just holding their own. Pentecostal churches are still growing, though nowhere near as fast as in the 1980s and 1990s. The modest 5% growth they showed from 1996 to 2006 can largely be accounted for by members having children who have become teenagers.¹⁵

Philip Hughes, in interpreting these trends, says that “denominational leaders should be concerned about the Census figures”.¹⁶ The decline in identifying as Christian is expected to continue for some time, because many members are ageing and younger people are identifying less with Christianity. Also there are fewer now who attend just occasionally; they're more likely to no longer say that they're Christian.¹⁷

Some people try to say that this decline is good, because nominal Christians are dropping off and those who are left really mean business. I believe this to be too optimistic. For lots of reasons Christianity is not attractive to Australians today. As many commentators have said, this is a very challenging time in which to engage in mission. But as Charles Dickens said at the beginning of *A tale of two cities*: “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times”.

I find myself full of hope, not because of how the churches are doing, but because tough times can lead to rethinking what we're on about and being open to the mysterious wind of the Spirit.

¹¹ Philip Hughes, 'What do the 2006 Census figures about religion mean?', *Pointers* 17.3 (September 2007), 1.

¹² Hughes, 'The 2006 Census figures', 4.

¹³ Peter Kaldor et al., *Build my church: Trends and possibilities for Australian churches* (Adelaide: Open Book, 1999), 15.

¹⁴ Ruth Powell, 'Why people don't go to church ... and what the churches can do about it', *Pointers* 12.2 (June 2002), 8.

¹⁵ Hughes, 'The 2006 Census figures', 6.

¹⁶ Hughes, 'The 2006 Census figures', 6.

¹⁷ Hughes, 'The 2006 Census figures', 3-4. A decline from 45% in 1983 to 28% in 2002.

3. Churches are learning to live on the margins

As part of Australia's turn from religion our society is becoming more secular. That is, the voice and perspective of the organised Christian church is less and less important in wider society. We are increasingly ignored in politics, economics, education, the law, the arts, the media (particularly television) and the intellectual life of the nation.

Sometimes religious issues surface. For example, there have been books about how John Howard's government was quite influenced by some Christian groups.¹⁸ But usually religious affairs are discussed only when we're fighting amongst ourselves, putting views which are highly unpopular or being disgraced. For example, this week we've had the Anglican communion virtually splitting over gay bishops, Cardinal George Pell under fire for allegedly covering up sexual abuse claims against a priest and ridicule of the New South Wales government for legislating to stifle any protest that may cause annoyance to the World Youth Day participants. Pretty bad press for one week!

Secularisation means that religion becomes just one among many choices. A recent Australian Community Survey showed that in Australia, "compared with most other factors, religion does not rate highly among Australians in their self description".¹⁹ Other factors are more important, such as being Australian, being male or female, the job we hold, our income, our education and our country of origin.

All of these trends mean that we are becoming more like the first-century church, which lived on the edges of society in a highly pluralistic context. In the period of Christendom in Europe from the 4th to the 16th century, the church grew used being near the centre of things. This was symbolised architecturally by the church spire in the centre of every town and the cathedral on the hill in every city.

In a post-Christendom world, we're learning to live with many changes. Some are very hard; others remind us of the way Jesus lived and the way the early church thrived. To use a list from Stuart Murray in his book, *Post-Christendom*, we've moved from the centre to the margins, from the majority to the minority, from being at home in our culture to being aliens in it, from privilege to plurality, from control to witness, from maintenance to mission, and from institution to movement.²⁰

4. We're becoming a multifaith society

At the same time as church numbers decline non-Christian religions are growing. Just under 6% of Australians said in the 2006 Census that they belong to a religion other than Christianity. Hinduism is growing the fastest, followed by Islam and Buddhism. We need to keep these figures in proportion, however. Most of the

¹⁸ Marion Maddox, *God under Howard: The rise of the religious right in Australian politics* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005)

¹⁹ Philip Hughes, 'Trends in Religious Identification: Details from 2001 Census', *Pointers* 12.3 (2002): 4.

²⁰ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 20.

increase is caused by immigration and the rest from migrants having families. Very few Australians convert to these religions.²¹

Still, we only have to walk in a shopping centre to see people wearing the hijab, the Muslim head covering for women. We see Sikh turbans on taxi drivers and, in Yarraville near where I live, Buddhist monks going shopping in their saffron robes.

We see mosques and temples on our skyline. I take students to a Hindu temple down near Frankston, and it's always striking to see a completely Indian temple rising out of the paddocks at the back of Carrum Downs.

It's my impression that in two or three municipalities, such as Dandenong and Preston, there are lively interfaith networks, well-supported by the local council, but that in most parts of most of Australia, those who follow different religions pretty well pass like ships in the night.

I'm not looking for a show of hands, but I wonder how many of us have visited the place of worship of another religion? How many of us have friends who are Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu or Muslim? How many churches have taken time to hold seminars where we learn what others think and practise?

The value of dialogue in a multifaith society can't be overestimated. Dialogue doesn't mean compromise or throwing away our own beliefs. It means respectful conversation, open to learning as well as sharing. It can mean working together on common projects. It can mean building community, healing divisions, enhancing mutual respect. It can be an opportunity for us to grow as people, as we encounter "the other", a person who is so different from us that we have to grow to even cope with that difference. It can be holy ground, on which God encounters us through the faith of another.

It was a shame that it took the events of "9/11" in 2001 to get Christians and Muslims meeting together in dialogue and understanding. The momentum has eased off again, and I suggest that the best time to start talking and listening is when there is no urgent need to do so.

5. Australians still want to believe: spirituality rather than religion

The secularisation of Australian society doesn't mean that we're a nation of atheists. Most of us believe in God or a higher power, even if we're a bit vague about what that means.

This is particularly true of younger people. A recent study of youth spirituality found that young people are still interested in the spiritual dimension. but they find church services boring. They seek an experiential faith. They like their experiences to be multi-sensory and stimulating. They pick and choose what works. They respect elders who have integrity but are not likely to join churches just because they're invited to.²²

²¹ Hughes, 'The 2006 Census figures', 1-2.

²² Philip Hughes, 'Implications of the study of youth spirituality', *Pointers* 16.3 (September 2006), 7-9.

David Tacey has argued that there is a quiet spirituality revolution going on in Australian society, as people realise that our society is running on empty and that we need to tap into the springs of the spiritual dimension.²³ He says that religion hasn't responded very well to the yearnings for spirituality. This is particularly true of fundamentalist religion, which squashes the mysterious spirit. But he says that young people and the church need to listen to each other:

Western religion is correct in its conviction that evil is a reality and we need to be redeemed from it. Youth spirituality is also correct in its perception that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, and that we need to align ourselves more fully with the divinity that can be found within it. Both religion and youth spirituality are possessed of valuable truths, and each can learn something important from the other.²⁴

It may be that young people need to express their spirituality in ways that don't suit the week-by-week local gathering of the church. Gary Bouma sees hope in the way young people gather for large gatherings from time to time. We see it in the mega-churches or in events such as New Age festivals or an event such as the World Youth Day – for all their limitations these capture the imagination of young people and give them an intensity of experience that the local worship can't give.²⁵

Philip Hughes has made the interesting observation recently that for all the talk about the spirituality revolution, it tends to be over-estimated. Fewer than 2.5% of people can be labelled “highly spiritual” (that is, doing something intentional about it) and at the same “not religious”.²⁶

Focusing more widely than on young people, I've found Tony Kelly's description of the typical Australian approach to the divine very helpful. He suggests that, for whatever reasons, we tend to resort to silence when it comes to spiritual questions. We are inarticulate. We are reticent and reserved. Some of this is due to repression, or being distracted by the sun and the beach. But some of it is in the best tradition of Christian mystics in the face of ineffable mystery. As St Ignatius of Antioch said, “Those who hear the word of God also hear his silence”.²⁷

There is a challenge here for us to relate the presence of God to the Australian desert, to the Australian man of few words but deep reflection, and to the Australian reluctance to put words too easily to things we can't understand.

²³ David Tacey, *The spirituality revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003).

²⁴ Tacey, *The spirituality revolution*, 85.

²⁵ Bouma, *Australian soul*, 208-209.

²⁶ Philip J Hughes, 'Religious trends in Australia', in *Reimagining God and mission: Perspectives from Australia*, ed. Ross Langmead (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), 36.

²⁷ Tony Kelly, *A new imagining: Towards an Australian spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990), 8-15.

6. Christian belief still inspires welfare and education

In all the changes occurring in our society and church it would be easy to forget two areas of society where the church is still making a clear and costly commitment, welfare and education.

The Uniting Church, for example, is the largest non-government provider of welfare in Australia. If we add its advocacy for justice, its commitment to global causes and the engagement of its individual members across the leadership of society, we have a massive contribution to the Australian community.

When the poor turn for help, they still turn to the church. Speaking only as an individual, I know that my family supports our next door neighbour through drug and alcohol and parenting issues. We support a mentally ill friend with friendship, paying him to mow our lawns, and providing meals when he's broke and hungry. We take refugees to hospital visits, clean up when disadvantaged families move house, and on it goes. I don't think we're unusual, as I know other people in our church who do the same as a matter of course.

This is not to say how good we are, but to note that the church has learned, by and large, how to serve. Challenges remain, however. If we engage in welfare without tackling the root causes of disadvantage we will continue to be overwhelmed by homelessness, drug abuse, abused children and family violence. So justice-seeking, often not popular with governments, is essential. The second thing, noted by Philip Hughes, is that there are fewer and fewer committed church people to do this work, and our capacity to continue it is decreasing.²⁸

Church schools are another avenue where the church is active in shaping the leaders of the future. Their enrolments have increased in recent decades as parents have fled the state system, sometimes looking for higher educational standards, but often looking for moral guidance. The challenges facing church schools are many. Will they inoculate students against religion? How do you teach faith to young people who don't really want to be in chapel? Do schools with high standards and high fees actually send messages contrary to the gospel, as they become bastions of privilege, ambition and materialism instead of places where the values of Jesus are practised? But as in all of the trends I've been noting, both danger and opportunity are to be found.

7. Some churches are healthy while others die

The differences between churches in Australia is a wonder to behold. Attending Hillsong is like attending a rock concert. Attending some cathedrals is like walking back in time a good way, connecting with beautiful music and rhythms of worship tested over time and conducive to an experience of God. Some services can feel as dead as a dodo. Some migrant ethnic churches worship for hours on end, including long sermons, dancing and lots of singing, and of course eating.

²⁸ Hughes, 'The 2006 Census figures', 7.

Australians respond differently to these different options. Some will respond to the ancient rhythms and others want the contemporary songs. It is my opinion that fewer Australians are prepared to make the effort to understand rituals and language that belongs to another era, but there is certainly a market for what is called “ancient-future” church, where a contemporary version of ancient liturgies is used, with accessible language.

I don’t want to focus on some churches growing and others getting smaller, because numerical growth is only one measure of a church. Also, there are many social factors operating in the exodus from the church, not just whether its worship is attractive. I’d like to ask what it is that makes some churches healthy and others toxic or just plain boring.

If we all knew what the answers were, we’d all be putting them into practice. I suspect that the clues lie in several areas.

- A sense of community is central, as John Fuellenbach points out in his book *Church: Community for the kingdom*.²⁹ A sense of connection to the wider community, through service or engagement is vital.
- Good leadership, a clear vision and opportunities for lay participation are obviously important.
- Philip Hughes suggests that evidence that Christian faith actually makes a difference to people’s lives, particularly those who struggle, matters too.
- And I would want to add that a strong missional purpose, a gearing of the whole church towards engaging with the world outside, is also central.

If a community genuinely wrestles with life’s questions, sustained by God’s presence as experienced in worship and service together, then it will be a life-giving community.

8. There are new ways of being Christian and ‘doing church’

One of the trends within the Christian church in Australia is that of the “emerging church”, or, as it’s called in the Church of England in the UK, “fresh expressions” of church. It began with younger, radical Australian evangelicals such as Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, whose writings are currently widely read across the US.³⁰ They started the Forge Missional Training Network, which gives twelve months of training in an internship punctuated by three intensive courses.³¹ Graduates go out and start new churches with a strong missional emphasis, experimenting with meeting in places where other Australians meet, pubs, cafes, skateboard rinks, community centres and schools. They emphasise incarnational mission, meaning moving in alongside ordinary people and engaging with their lives, as Jesus did,

²⁹ John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

³⁰ Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living missionally in a post-Christian culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006); Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The shaping of things to come: Innovation and mission for the 21st-century church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); Alan Hirsch, *The forgotten ways: Reactivating the missional church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007)

³¹ See www.forge.org.au.

rather than setting up a group that will extract new believers from their old networks and make isolated Christians from them.

In terms of ecclesiology, their doctrine of the church, these emerging churches are very “low church”. They are often from a congregational tradition, where ordained leadership, geographical parishes and submission to wider accountability structures isn’t very important to them. But interestingly, they’ve stayed connected with their denominations, such as the Baptists, the Churches of Christ and the Salvation Army, who have given active support.

And even more interestingly, the Church of England in the UK has recently approved a modification to the parish system to allow the springing up of fresh expressions of church alongside more traditional expressions, in order not to stifle this new energy, and in order to try to connect better with younger people and various sub-cultures.

It’s early days yet, and I think that emerging churches are yet to show that they connect any better than more traditional churches. Sometimes the “cool” factor overwhelms the cost factor. Often the whole enterprise lacks so much structure that it’s hardly visible (though that’s me, a Baby Boomer, talking!).

But I have found myself encouraging these experiments wholeheartedly because I believe that in a rapidly changing society where many of the old ways are not working, we need to try new ways, a hundred new ways, in case any of them connect more naturally to those around us, as long as we don’t throw out the gospel in the process, of course.

9. The gospel still addresses Australia’s social issues

In his recent book, *Australian soul: Religion and spirituality in the twenty-first century*, Gary Bouma turns a sociologist’s eye toward religion in Australia and argues that hope is a universal human need. The need for hope is why we search for meaning and purpose in life and reach for the spiritual. He says that in the twenty-first century, although many Australians are turning to an individualised, do-it-yourself spirituality rather than to organised religion the need is the same.³²

While I basically share his perspective, I come to it from a more confessional perspective. That is, I am convinced that the Good News of Jesus Christ can still meet the needs of Australians and provide hope through God the creator, the risen Christ and the power of the Spirit at work in the world today. Whether these needs are for reconciliation, justice, peace, overcoming alienation within ourselves, finding hope for the future or providing sustenance for the human journey, I believe that the church still has a relevant message. It is unfashionable to say so, but I believe the gospel has universal relevance and truth. I admit that we don’t grasp it in its entirety, so our understanding is partial and flawed. But I’m confident that if we explore what shape the gospel takes in Australian society and learn to listen and then to express the gospel in terms that are relevant to those around us, “scratching where it itches”, it will still be heard.

³² Bouma, *Australian soul*, 30.

10. There are many signs of hope

I'd like to finish with four signs of hope for the church in Australia.

There is a deep *desire for genuine community* among those around us. True, we sometimes want instant community, or community without commitment. But if the church can rediscover what it means to share our lives in support of each other, as the New Community, as a sign of the kingdom of God, I'm certain that we will have something real to offer Australians. I must say that I experience this in my local church on a day-to-day basis, and it's what keeps me going, fresh and full of hope.

Second, there is also a welling up in our younger generations of a *desire to connect*, to be in relationship. People learn from relationship. People spend most of their days in relationship. As Martin Buber once said, we can either treat others as an object or as a "holy other", in an "I-Thou" relationship.³³ What could be more central to the Good News than this reality and possibility? It is a challenge for churches which have become institutions to recover their relational roots, but that is the core of the Christian message.

Third, Australians have always respected practical Christianity, *faith with its sleeves rolled up*. Take the reputation of the Salvation Army, or the Brotherhood of St Laurence, for example. The strong tradition within the church to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and visit those in prison is a powerful witness that is not lost in our society. The habits of welcoming the stranger and caring for the widow and the orphan are noticed. Although they are sometimes taken for granted, these practices are deeply respected. Wouldn't it be good if we took further risks and became known for our extreme generosity and kindness?

Fourth and finally, we are in the middle of a *totally unpredictable* religious and cultural swing, and we have no idea what this country will be like in twenty years' time. Twenty years ago we thought that secularism was going to lead us to widespread atheism, but instead we have seen the growth of alternative spiritualities, Pentecostalism, megachurches, green spirituality and paganism. Thirty years ago the winds of hostility towards Christian faith were hostile in the universities; now we are one accepted viewpoint among many. Will there be a spiritual revival? Will Christian faith take surprising new shapes in churches around the place? Will the Spirit move in mysterious ways as we explore what it means to be Christian in Australia?

Because so much is changing, we simply can't tell. We can only listen, learn and then engage in the best ways we know how.

³³ Martin Buber, *I and thou*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1970).