Religion and non-religion both alive and well

Gary Bouma | 25 June 2012

Census figures on religion in Australia released last Thursday once again paint a picture of change in the religious composition of Australia.

The headline change of course is the rise in those declaring that they have 'no religion' from 18.7% to 22.3% of Australians. ‘No religion’ is the leading category of response in 5 of 8 capital cities – Perth, Adelaide, Canberra, Hobart and Darwin. It also leads in 5 out of 8 states and territories – WA, SA, TAS, ACT, and the NT.

However, remember that to declare 'no religion' is not to claim to be an atheist. There were 31,000 Atheists in 2006 and the number for 2011 has not been released yet.

This looks like a tale of the demise of religion, but wait there is more, much more.

Anglicans are now the third largest group in all states except Tasmania. Uniting identifiers have declined to 5.0% and Presbyterians/Reformed to 2.8%. Eastern Orthodox came in at 2.6% with strong showings in Sydney where they were 5th and Melbourne where they were 4th.

Buddhists have risen to 2.5% and Muslims to 2.2%. Muslims are the 4th largest group in Sydney. There are now more Buddhists and more Muslims than Baptists (1.6%) and more Hindus (1.3%) than Lutherans (1.2%). Hindu growth was outstanding at 86.5%, due to migration.

So while the continued rise of those declaring 'no religion' provides evidence for the demise of religion what evidence is there for religious vitality?

First, most religious groups other than Anglicans, Uniting and Presbyterian have increased in numbers even though they may have decreased in their percentage of the population due to the fact that they grew less than the population growth rate of 8.3%. For example, Catholics increased by about 300,000. This suggests that Catholic identity has survived the negative press and public reactions to clergy sexual abuses.

Second, the proportion of the population 'not responding' declined 17.3% from 11.2% in 2006 to 8.6%. To me this indicates that religious identity including declaring that one has 'no religion' has become more interesting to Australians in recent years. Religion has certainly been in the news in ways it was not before.

Third, Anglican and Uniting/Presbyterian/Reformed declines have slowed substantially. Anglicans had declined 4.2% between 2001 and 2006, but only 1% between 2006 and 2011. Perhaps they stopped dying. Further analysis of the age distribution of religious groups is needed to see what is happening. By the way, Anglicans in Sydney declined at the same rate as Anglicans in Melbourne.

Fourth, the rise of increasingly substantial newer religious communities continues in Australia as Buddhists near Presbyterians in numbers and Buddhists and Muslims each outnumber Baptists and Lutherans. We will certainly see more of Hindus now that they have become 1.3% and more numerous than Pentecostals (1.1%).
Fifth, the growth zone for Christians is in a category called ‘other Christians’. Pentecostals grew at the same rate as the nation to maintain 1.1% where they have been since 1996, but the ‘other Christian’ category includes some mega-churches and other evangelical or charismatic groups.

So while non-religion is growing, religion is certainly not dying out. There may indeed be more of a polarisation between those who do and those who do not identify with a religion. There is certainly greater and more substantial religious diversity. This in turn will have an impact on social policy.

While Presbyterians have long been seen as a normal part of the religious landscape the fact that they are about as numerous as Buddhists must shift the perception of Buddhism. The fact that Hindus are more numerous than Lutherans, and Muslims more numerous than Baptists must shift the way these groups are viewed, included, and taken seriously. Australia has been comparatively good at devising ways to attend to diverse religious groups.

This census is a wakeup call to keep up the process and to accelerate it as diversity moves from a variety of very small groups at the margins to substantial communities with a legitimate claim to being part of the core.

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Comments

Comments should be short, respectful and on topic. Email is requested for identification purposes only.

Submitted comments

Thanks Gary for a drilling down into the data and making the observations you have. The growth in religious diversity will be a major challenge for our rapidly developing multi-faith society. One question still remains: When The Bureau of Stats records a person’s self-nomination, do we have any idea of what the label "Catholic" or Buddhist" means? In what sense is this a measure of a person’s religious faith? In what sense might it be just an identifier for social reasons and not an indicator of active commitment to the underlying beliefs and practices of a specific religion? If you don't know where you are going, will any road do?

Garry 26 June 2012

Terrific and helpful article. Thanks. Just one small comment. You say: "Fifth, the growth zone for Christians is in a category called ‘other Christians’." "Other Christians’ does contain and could well contain many ‘invisibles’ difficult to enumerate and classify as well as adherents to other ‘visibles’ you describe. Maybe some disaffected Christians hung out in "Other Christians" on census night? e.g. those with a faith commitment and personal practice who no longer find parish life a meaningful worship and faith feeding locus? And those who have opted out of specific adherence because of stated attitudes and behaviours of inclusion and exclusion which hurt personally or have opted out on 'justice' grounds on behalf of those so excluded? There’s more...
Whilst the Catholic identity has survived; "survived" may be an interesting description. The commitment to the Church and its dogma is nowhere near what it was 50 years ago. The Church has lost much authority and respect.

Rob Colquhoun 26 June 2012

Garry, I guess you want an answer to what is the ultimate question - the meaning of life and certainty that our religious faith has a valuable outcome. If you can measure faith through a census or some monitoring gadget, what does that say about what faith means to us? Is it membership, bums on seats, donations, following the rules - or something deeper?

AURELIUS 26 June 2012

< Catholics increased by about 300,000> My immediate thought is that this increase is explained by immigration, rather than a shift in the existing population.

SK 26 June 2012

Despite the census figures it is obvious that attendances at Christian churches in Australia have substantially declined in recent decades but the ethical principles that were emphasised have had a 'momentum' that has continued. Unfortunately, some of these values now seem to be fading away. In particular, and of topical significance, the gaining of enormous wealth and the power that goes with it bring almost no criticism, even from church leaders. This is surely passive acceptance, if not approval, of Greed - once condemned as one of the 'even deadly sins'. It is also undemocratic and grossly unfair.

Bob Corcoran 26 June 2012

...What we need is a great big melting pot Big enough, big enough, big enough To take the world and all it's got Keep it stirring for a hundred years or more...

Myra 26 June 2012

You make some good points Gary, especially about the increasing growth in the proportions of non-Christian believers and in non-believers. I'd be interested in what you make of a comparison of the religious affiliation of children 0-14 with those of the population as a whole. The figures seem to me to be as follows - Christian - children 61%, total 64% Other believers - children 4%, total 6% Nonbelievers and not stated - children 35%, total 30%
I am a bit sceptical of these statistics and wonder if they mean anything other than we are a more diverse society. What did Mark Twain say: 'lies, damned lies and statistics'? I suspect identification with either 'no religion' or 'atheism' is often nothing more than a fashion statement. I also suspect most people who identify as Catholics are not practicing. Also where do the pentecostals and evangelicals fit in? I suspect that the majority of Australian people who tick some religion or no-religion or atheist box on a census form are actually secular materialists whose spiritual wellbeing is determined by their ability to consume the latest clothing fashion or electronic gadget.

Mark Doyle 26 June 2012

Aurelius, I am not sure of the point you are making. My point is that simply calling oneself Catholic or Hindu on a Census form, tells us almost nothing about "religion". I know many people who describe themselves as Catholic on various forms, but they have long stopped participating in any meaningful way in what we might call "the Catholic Faith or Church".

We should be careful about making claims about the biggest religious group based on the Census. We could claim that the largest % of respondents claim to be Catholic. That would probably be more accurate and intelligible as a claim.

Garry 26 June 2012

My point is that it doesn't matter what the numbers are and who really decides when "participation" really starts and ends. I would regard a homeless beggar who's too badly dressed and dishevelled to get to Mass as just as much a Catholic if she decided that was her faith.

AURELIUS 27 June 2012

In response to Mark Doyle (whose remarks i find offensive) I said i was an atheist in the census as that is what i am; & it is a thoughtful & long held belief. It is anything but a fashion statement. Nor am I a 'secular materialist. I have fewer possessions than most & have no interest in consumer goods. However i am thoughtful & i think caring & find the behaviour & beliefs of many religious people alienating, an example being what i perceive as the arrogance of Mark Doyle's remarks.