Our faith today

December 19, 2009

God is not dead in Australia. Rumours of his failing powers are exaggerated. Disbelief is growing, but God thrives. The default setting of this country is faith. We are not the rational country we thought we were. More Australians believe in miracles, angels, heaven and ESP than in Darwin’s theory of evolution. David Marr sorts through the numbers.

Next weekend the churches of the nation will be filled to overflowing. But Christmas and Easter are the exceptions to the great Australian indifference to worship. Belief for most Australians is about values far more than devotion. It’s belief without belonging.

But those beliefs are strong. They challenge old assumptions that Australia is an essentially secular country. When 1000 of us were quizzed by Nielsen last week for this special poll on faith, we identified ourselves strongly as believers and strongly Christian. Half of us say religion is important or very important in our lives. And even many non-believers still identify themselves as Christian by background.

We aren’t dogmatic. We doubt the Bible is the actual word of God. And most of those who do believe the Good Book is divinely inspired don’t regard it, word for word, as literally true. Only a hard core of the faithful believes there is one and only one way to interpret the teachings of their own brand of religion. But that core of dedicated Christians makes up about 20 per cent of all Australians.

What you make of these figures depends very much on where you stand. The view from both sides is disappointing. Christians might despair that 7 million or so Australians seem headed for hell – not that most of us believe it exists. But the anti-God brigade can look at the same figures and despair that roughly 10 million Australians are still caught in the toils of superstition.

Belief is shrinking and disbelief is growing. But slowly. Like the Greens, atheism is always about to break through but never does. Those sceptics who believe time will, of its own accord, wipe Christianity out in this country are fooling themselves. The more religious Baby Boomers are heading for the grave – confident, by the way, in life after death – but Christians keep rolling off the production lines.

Sceptics can take this comfort: they now make up the biggest denomination, followed by Catholics and then Anglicans. But this puts Australia only about midway in lists of the top 50 non-believing nations. The great deniers of God are the Scandinavians and Japanese. The great believers of the Western world are Americans. The US remains religion central.

Immigration has changed the mix of races more than the mix of religions in Australia. We remain what the Howard government so often trumpeted us as being: a Judeo-Christian nation. After a decade of drum beating about the impact of Islam on Australia, Muslims amount to less than 2 per cent of the population. Those committed to faiths other than Christianity make up only about 6 per cent of Australians.

Geography has not much impact on faith, although the figures suggest Victoria may be little more religious than NSW. But there are dramatic differences between the unbelieving young and the faithful old, between secular men and religious women. Australian men are sceptics. Women are the true believers.

Four women believe in God for every three men. They have far more faith than men in angels (63 per cent to 37 per cent), miracles (74 per cent to 52 per cent), heaven (67 per cent to 45 per cent), ESP (59 per cent to 39 per cent), and life after death (62 per cent to 44 per cent). But they are less convinced about
UFOs (30 per cent to 38 per cent).

Women are more certain that God created the world (27 per cent to 18 per cent) and wrote the Bible (40 per cent to 28 per cent) but aren’t so sure every word of the Good Book has to be taken to be literally true (25 per cent to 30 per cent). The least Christian community in Australia is young men; the most Christian are women of a certain age. There are lots of them.

BELIEF IN A GOD:
68 per cent

This figure fell slowly for a long time. Essentially all of us called ourselves believers at the time of Federation but the number slipped a little at nearly every census that followed. By the turn of this century we reached where we seem stuck today – in the high 60s.

Nielsen polled not only Christians. There were also Muslims, Buddhists and Jews (6 per cent of the population in all) plus tiny numbers of obscure faiths, all the way down, perhaps, to Jedi (another 6 per cent in all). Another 5 per cent declared faith not in a personal God but a universal spirit or life force.

Some of those count themselves Christian and are scattered through all denominations. Their number is probably growing. The more conventional Christians, those who believe in – and occasionally worship – a personal God make up a neat 50 per cent of the nation.

They are convinced (94 per cent) that Christ was a historical figure; fairly confident (91 per cent) that He was the Son of God; increasingly sceptical (72 per cent) about the Virgin Birth; and oddly – considering its key importance to the faith – uncertain that He rose from the dead (85 per cent). These beliefs are held very confidently. The Nielsen poll found almost nine out of 10 Australian Christians were absolutely or fairly certain of their beliefs.

By the standards of other countries, Australians are middling devout. We track with Britain. Over and again, the results of this special Nielsen poll suggest Australia remains in its patterns of belief – as in so much else under our Ocker disguise – an offshoot of Britain. In 2004, the BBC's *What the World Thinks of God* poll put Britain’s “belief in God or a higher power” in exactly the same territory as ours: the high 60 per cents.

By contrast, the greatest power on Earth is extremely devout. That BBC poll put the figure for belief in the US in the low 90s. That is in the upper stratosphere of belief, along with India, Indonesia and Nigeria, nudging 100 per cent. Figures for Western Europe are almost half that. The huge International Social Survey Program (ISSP) poll conducted in 1998 found only 46 per cent of Swedes believed in God.

In a nutshell: we are a nation with a Christian past and Christian traditions where half the population calls itself Christians and holds fairly conventional Christian beliefs. Half the Australian population also rated faith as "very or somewhat important" in their lives according to the Nielsen poll. Christianity may not reign supreme as it did at Federation, but it is by no means a spent force in today’s Australia.

BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH:
53 per cent

This figure wanders over the years. The Nielsen finding suggests hope in an afterlife is making a modest comeback in Australia. It seems not directly linked to Christian faith: the sceptical Swedes are with us on this issue in the ISSP poll. The British are more confident than us that there is a destination after this. US polls show a thundering 80 per cent or more believe they are heading for the hereafter. Where might that be?

BELIEF IN HEAVEN:
Humans appear to be, on balance, an optimistic species. Rather more of us believe in heaven than the alternative. The ISSP poll of a decade ago shows Britons a little more upbeat than Australians about the possibility of eternal bliss, but not nearly as assured as Americans. They, by some odd quirk, turn out to be even more positive about heaven in particular (86 per cent) than the afterlife in general (80 per cent).

**BELIEF IN HELL:**
38 per cent

Again we track with Britain while, according to the ISSP poll, nearly twice as many Americans (74 per cent) as us are tortured by the prospect of spending eternity trapped in the barbecue of damnation. Perhaps what awaits Americans in the next life may account for their willingness to punish in this. Despite threats of damnation powering so many of Ingmar Bergman's films, hell is dismissed as nonsense by all but 14 per cent of Swedes.

**BELIEF IN THE DEVIL:**
37 per cent

This has drifted down over the past 25 years. A McNair Anderson poll in 1983 found 45 per cent of us believed in the existence of Lucifer, the fallen angel. The figure is a little higher still in the US, where a Harris poll late last year found 59 per cent of Americans believed the cloven-hoofed one was not a figment of the imagination.

**BELIEF IN ANGELS:**
51 per cent

Once again, we lag behind America. The Pew Forum's massive US Religious Landscape Survey last year found "nearly seven in 10 Americans (68 per cent) believe that angels and demons are active in the world". A 1996 Gallup poll showed half the population of the US believed they had their own guardian angel.

**BELIEF IN WITCHES:**
22 per cent

Committed Christians are even more likely to believe in witches (35 per cent). This may surprise many, but not Pastor Daniel Nalliah of Catch the Fire Ministries, who in October this year organised a prayer offensive on Mount Ainslie after the discovery, it seems, of an altar for black masses. It was, said Nalliah, "the work of dark forces wanting to cast spells on Australia and Federal Parliament [which Mount Ainslie overlooks] – witches have been at work to tear down the fabric of the robust democratic system of Australia through spells". The offensive appears to have worked.

**BELIEF IN UFOs:**
34 per cent

Keen Christians are marginally (32 per cent) more sceptical of flying saucers. Here Australia can modestly claim parity with the US where a Harris Poll last year concluded 36 per cent of Americans believed in Unidentified Flying Objects.

**BELIEF IN ASTROLOGY:**
41 per cent

Christians seem hardly more likely (44 per cent) than the rest of us to put their faith in the stars. Here is one enthusiasm of ours that far outstrips American beliefs. Pew found last year only 25 per cent of the US population believes in horoscopes. Christians there (23 per cent) are yet more sceptical.
BELIEF IN PSYCHIC POWERS SUCH AS ESP:
49 per cent

The Christians in our midst are markedly more likely (52 per cent) to put their faith in telepathy, clairvoyance, psychic healing etc. Where Australia stands in relation to the rest of the world is hard to fathom. Research may be unnecessary as fresh figures come to mind.

BELIEF IN MIRACLES:
63 per cent

The consensus on miracles may account for the very Australian belief that something will always come along to rescue us. Why bother planning? She’ll be right.

Polling over the past decade suggests faith in miracles is intensifying. This may be the work of the late Pope John Paul II, who created armies of fresh saints credited with medical miracles. As we go to press, Australia is beside itself at the prospect of a crucial second miracle being put down to the intervention of former nun Mary MacKillop.

Australia's current enthusiasm stands in contrast to the ISSP finding in the late 1990s: that only 36 per cent of Australians and 59 per cent of Americans believed in miracles. Both figures have shot through the roof. Last year the Pew survey found: "Nearly eight in 10 American adults (79 per cent) . . . agree that miracles still occur today as in ancient times."

THE HOLY BOOK IS THE WORD OF GOD:
34 per cent

Nielsen asked everyone – Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Christians, non-believers etc – who wrote the scriptures. Across all faiths and no faith 34 per cent of the population thought these texts were the word of God. A clear majority (61 per cent) thought they were written by man. Christians showed far greater confidence in the Bible (58 per cent) than other religions showed in their texts (35 per cent).

The ISSP survey, which asked not quite the same questions, put the general populations of Australia and Britain again on much the same footing with a little over 40 per cent faith in the Bible as God's Word. The figure for the US was 80 per cent.

THE HOLY BOOK IS LITERALLY TRUE:
27 per cent

Again, this is the figure across all faiths and texts. The Nielsen poll shows Christians (25 per cent) are far less committed to the literal truth of their text than other religions (50 per cent). Non-believers had a touching – though perhaps ironic – commitment (34 per cent) to the literal truth of texts they believe carry no divine imprimatur. Their message is, perhaps, that believers get what they deserve.

THE TEACHINGS OF MY RELIGION HAVE ONLY ONE INTERPRETATION:
21 per cent

A sense of give and take in religious teaching appears to cross the faith divide in Australia with Christians slightly more dogmatic (23 per cent believing in one true teaching) than other religions (15 per cent). Old believers, who have had longer to think about these things, are the most dogmatic of all (29 per cent).

EVOLUTION:
42 per cent

Creation is a slippery topic. Even scientifically committed Christians feel honour-bound sometimes to grant God a role in the origins of life. That was not Darwin's view. The Nielsen poll untangled this confusion by
asking respondents to choose between Darwin, Genesis and Design – the notion that humans developed over millions of years in a process guided by God.

Most Australians believe God played a part in the process. That He created all life at a stroke about 10,000 years ago is believed by 23 per cent of us. That He guided a long process over time is believed by another 32 per cent. The beliefs of Australian Christians are even more dramatic, with 38 per cent supporting Genesis and another 47 per cent favouring the God of Design.

In the year in which the 200th anniversary of Darwin’s birth was celebrated around the world, only 12 per cent of Australian Christians believe his theory of natural selection. For all the talk of Darwin’s preeminence in modern science, attitudes to evolution remain the litmus test of belief and disbelief in Australia. Christians offer the most meager support, while 89 per cent of those who deny God’s existence back Darwin.

The figures for the US are more dramatic. Nielsen modelled its questions on a Gallup poll taken in America last year which revealed levels of hostility to Darwin in the general population that mimic the attitudes of committed Christians in Australia. Only 14 per cent of the US population preferred Darwin to God.

THERE IS – OR SEEMS TO BE – NO GOD:

30 per cent

Though a minority, Australia’s disbelievers are confident in their disbelief. Those merely unsure of the existence of God (6 per cent of the population) are far outnumbered by those who have no doubt the biggest question of all must be answered in the negative (24 per cent).

Again we are tracking here with Britain. Again the US offers a dramatic contrast. Last year’s Pew survey found 92 per cent of Americans “believe in the existence of God or a universal spirit”. God is fundamental to the American imagination. But even in the most sceptical country on earth – Sweden – surveys find only half the population willing to deny the existence of a deity. The human race is deeply preoccupied with notions of God.

Doubt in Australia is a matter of age and sex. Men outnumber women by two to one in the ranks of the deniers. They are joined by nearly half (42 per cent) of Australians under 25. But only a quarter of those over 55 are as sure that no God awaits them as their end approaches.

Denying God does not necessarily mean denying the importance of religion in our lives. So 11 per cent of Australians are deniers who nevertheless see themselves as culturally Christian. Another 1 per cent still identify as Jews, Muslims, Hindus etc even though they have no sure faith in any deity. Only about half the nation’s deniers believe they have turned their backs entirely on religion.

Denial isn’t a sure ticket to a rational existence. Heaven, hell, angels, witches and the devil get a tick from about 10 per cent of those who doubt or disbelieve the existence of God. A quarter support miracles; 27 per cent put their faith in astrology and UFOs; and a mighty 34 per cent believe in ESP. So a third of the nation’s atheists, agnostics and doubters have turned their back on God, but not on magic.