An unprecedented 22% of Australians have declared themselves to be of “no religion”. Jetuma

Recently the Prime Minister called upon the Labor Party to “repent” of its introduction of the carbon tax. His comments were ridiculed by some critics, not for the substance of what he said, but for the language he used.

Concepts such as “repentance”, “sin”, even “forgiveness”, are seen as being at odds with objective, scientific analysis, and out of step with 21st-century Australia.

Like much of the developed world, in the last 50 years Australia has seen an extraordinary decline in the proportion of the population that claims religious affiliation. Historians have questioned the extent to which Australians have ever been particularly religious.

Nevertheless, religious language, religious culture and religious issues permeate contemporary Australian life.

A Royal Commission is underway investigating institutional responses to child sexual abuse, with a major focus on sexual abuse in the churches. The debate about same-sex marriage is frequently portrayed in the media as a contest between conservative Christian and enlightened liberal values.

Hundreds of thousands of Australian children attend schools run by religious organisations. Australian religious leaders are frequently in the news, attempting to hold governments to public account, or being criticised themselves for failing to meet their own standards.

So what is religion? How does it manifest in contemporary Australia? And why does anyone bother with it any more?

According to the 2011 census, 68.3% of Australia’s population identified a religious affiliation, while an unprecedented 22% –
4,800,000 people – declared themselves to be of “no religion”.

The Christian Research Association argues that the 2011 data shows the surprising durability of religious identity in a secular context: although religious affiliation dropped by 1.2 percentage points between 2006 and 2011, this was slower than the decline of 3.3 percentage points between 2001 and 2006.

The rate of decline in religious belief has slowed.

Leonard John Matthews

As religious demographers note, the declaration of affiliation on the census does not translate into visible participation in religious rituals such as church attendance. There is no straightforward way to measure how many people attend religious services weekly, monthly or annually. And, as Elizabeth I would have said, it is impossible to make “windows into men’s souls”.

But it is possible to measure religious activity in ways other than church attendance or census affiliation.

Easter Sunday service at St Mary’s Cathedral, Sydney. AAP Image/Paul Miller

Sociologists and anthropologists have used analysis of believing, behaving and belonging to detect religious practices in human societies. These categories – the “three Bs” – stem from the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who attempted to define religion a century ago.
Leonard John Matthews

Durkheim's major work, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), was based on early ethnographic accounts of Australian Aboriginal culture, specifically the Arrernte people. Durkheim's thesis has been contested and modified, not least because of his flawed, second-hand approach to understanding Arrernte country and language.

It is nevertheless striking that Indigenous Australians stand at the heart of the study of religion as a social phenomena despite historic marginalisation in what has been seen as one of the most secular nations on Earth.

Moreover, Indigenous Australian cultures continue to challenge the modern European tendency to separate the sacred from the secular, the supernatural from the social, the physical from the spiritual.

**Belonging**

It seems clear that Australians still believe. Two-thirds of us tick a religious identity box on the census. Australians are also well imbued with non-institutional beliefs: the fair-go, mateship, the dream of owning home and land, the belief that "our golden soil has wealth for toil". Australians engage in a wide range of ritual behaviours.

Some of us go to church, mosque, synagogue, temple. But what about daily visits to the gym, weekly football matches, Saturday morning grocery shopping, marathons and bike rides, the annual ANZAC commemoration, the sacred opportunity for pilgrimage to the Somme, Kokoda, Gallipoli? It is rare for a death to go entirely unmarked by even the most basic of funeral rituals.

It is the category of belonging that is most difficult to assess in Australia. The membership of many churches has declined, and where power and influence is overtly exerted, it is viewed with suspicion. Yet community clubs and workers’ unions have also lost members, perhaps at a faster rate than the churches.

Do we live, then, in a secular society?

Yes, in the sense religious beliefs are able to be as critically interrogated and assessed as any other viewpoint. No, in that Australia is host to a bewildering variety of religious identities and ritual behaviours,
now firmly including “no-religionism”.

A more useful concept than secularisation is detraditionalisation, as developed by Belgian theologian Lieven Boeve in a western-European context. Detraditionalisation describes the loss of connection, a break in transmission, the fracturing of identity throughout western society, whereby tradition is interrupted.

This phenomenon applies not only to religion but also to a whole range of cultural and artistic arenas – music, literature, fine arts, philosophy.

The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra plays an outdoor concert. AAP Image/David Crosling

A loss of institutional attachment to what were the dominant religious groups a century ago, the growth of “no religion”, and the pluralisation of religious participation across a wide range of faiths can therefore be seen as parallel to the decline in political-party membership, the rise of minor parties, and the alienation of many voters from politics.

It is the stress of detraditionalisation that helps to provoke culture wars, such as those fought out over the shape of a national history curriculum. For traditions help us to answer the ultimate questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? Are we alone?

The loss of tradition, of an elite canon of key truths, documents, rituals, can separate us from each other, leaving us bereft of identity, or it can allow new traditions and truths to emerge. The experience of loss, however, is traumatic, as the ultimate questions still remain.

The Gallipoli Mosque in Auburn, Sydney. Threthny/Flickr

It is part of the nature of humanity to strive to answer these questions. This is a mission that religion shares with the sciences. Although different tools may be used where religion is predicated on faith and science on doubt, both require imagination.

It is a mission religion also shares with politics. It’s no wonder politicians elicit support from voters through the appeal to values, for it is an appeal to beliefs that can change behaviours.
It is a mission religion shares with the arts, including sport. All represent the attempt to give expression to our beliefs through beauty, performance, physical achievement.

Whether based on dogma and superstition, irrational fears and dreams, bonds of affection and hatred, located in institutional frameworks or private piety, religion is part of the ways in which humans try to answer our biggest questions.

Religion undoubtedly has a place in Australia’s future. It is nothing more and nothing less than a body of beliefs, behaviours, and identities through which we attempt to answer, or even just live with, our deepest questions.

This is a foundation essay for The Conversation’s Arts + Culture section. If you are an academic or researcher with relevant expertise and would like to respond to this article, please use our pitch facility.