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Christian Research Association
Charting the faith of Australians



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Volunteering and Change in Religious Involvement

Readers of Pointers may remember assisting us in the development of the survey for the Study of the Economic Impact of Religion on Society (SEIROS) in 2015. As part of the piloting of the survey, it was sent to readers of Pointers to ask for feedback. The survey was conducted in 2016. I did some initial analysis. Then the survey data was given to Deloitte Economics who prepared a report which was released in May. Deloitte Economics decided that they would focus only on those people who reported that they did not attend a religious group when growing up, but did attend when they were adults, that is, on religious converts. As a consequence of this focus, I have done more analysis on religious conversion and volunteering.

Measures of religious change

Theologically, conversion is understood as a change in one's status before God. That can never be measured empirically. Sociologically, conversion can be identified in a variety of ways.

1. Conversion can be measured in terms of subjective accounts of how one sees oneself. The SEIROS survey did not provide a question on this.

2. Conversion is often measured by a change in one's religious identity: how one used to identify oneself and how one now identifies oneself. Thus, a 'convert' could be a person who used to identify themselves as having 'no religion', but now identifies themselves with a particular religious group or religious identity. The SEIROS survey did not ask about identity, although there were questions in the survey that were treated as such by many people. The questions were:

- When you were growing up, what religion or denomination were the services you attended?
- If you attend now, what religion or denomination do you attend most frequently now?

In answer to these questions, quite a few respondents noted a religion or denomination but said they did not attend at all.

3. Conversion is often measured by changes in the practice of religious attendance. Thus, the 'convert' is the person who never attended religious services but who now attends (occasionally or frequently). This was measured in the SEIROS survey, but could be interpreted in a range of ways:

- people who never attended and now attend frequently;
- people who never attended and now attend occasionally or frequently;
- people who never attended or attended occasionally and now attend frequently.

It should be noted that occasional attendance is defined as 'less than monthly, but at least once or twice a year'. Frequent attendance is defined as attendance monthly or more often.

The extent of change of religious practices in the Australian population

To what extent have the Australian population changed the frequency of their attendance, and to what extent are patterns maintained over a person's lifetime? The SEIROS survey showed that approximately half the population (49%)

had not changed their level of attendance since childhood. This proportion can be divided into groups as follows. Note that the number of people counted in the weighted sample in the survey is given in brackets.

- 26.8% (1,701) never attended as children and do not attend as adults;
- 9.5% (602) attended occasionally as children and attend occasionally now;
- 12.4% (784) attended frequently as children and attend frequently now.

Secondly, these are the percentages for those who have increased their attendance.

- 3.5% (220) never attended as children, but now attend occasionally;
- 1.7% (110) never attended as children, but now attend frequently;
- 2.3% (146) attended occasionally as children, and now attend frequently.

Thus, a total of 7.5 per cent of the population had increased their levels attendance. A total 5.2 per cent of the population never attended as children, but at the time of the survey attended occasionally or frequently. This is certainly one definition of 'conversion', although two-thirds of these people only attended occasionally. I suspect that many of these people grew up not going to a religious group, but now go at times of special festivals, such as Christmas and/or Easter with their spouses or children.

Another definition of conversion is that it applies to those who grew up attending occasionally or never, and now attend frequently. These people constitute four per cent of the population.

Thirdly, there are also the people who had decreased their levels of attendance.

- 11% (700) attended frequently as children, but at the time of the survey attended occasionally;
- 22.4% (1,422) attended frequently as children, but at the time of the survey never attended;
- 10.4% (657) attended occasionally as children, but at the time of the survey never attended.

Hence, overall 44 per cent of the population had decreased their levels of attendance. Around one third of the population attended as children, either frequently or occasionally, but at the time of the survey never attended.

It should be noted that 20 per cent of the population did not answer the questions about attendance and were not included in the above percentages. It is likely that many of these never

attended and still do not attend. People who did attend or now attend were more likely to respond to the question because they had something specific to say in relation to it.

Religious attendance and change in religious attendance and volunteering

The focus of the SEIROS survey was what difference religion made to the levels of volunteering, and, in particular, the contribution through volunteering to the wider community. It has long been recognised that church attenders volunteer more hours than non-attenders. However, some commentators have argued that the additional hours in volunteering are done within their religious organisations for the sake of those organisations and the people in them (see for example, Lyons and Nivison-Smith, 2006). Hence, it has been argued, religious attenders do not contribute more to the wider society than do non-attenders.

We know, however, that many activities that volunteers do in religious organisations are done for the sake of the wider community. Religious groups run child-care centres and offer services in disability services. They provide material goods to the poor. They run men's sheds and counselling centres. In such ways they contribute to the wider society.

In order to explore this, the SEIROS survey asked people about the overall hours they volunteered, the hours they volunteered for religious organisations, and the proportion of those hours they did for the sake of the wider community compared with the proportion they did for the religious group, such as running services of worship or Bible studies.

The differences in formal volunteering between these different groups of people are shown in the following table.

Table 1 shows that those who attended a religious group frequently did more voluntary work than those who attend occasionally or not at all, but the additional voluntary work over and above what occasional attenders did, was undertaken primarily for the sake of the religious community rather than for the wider community. However, the patterns were different across the groups.

Maintain Attendance Patterns

Among those who maintained their patterns of attendance, both occasional and frequent attenders did more work for the community (average of 9.2 hours per month) compared with those who did not attend a religious group as a child and did not attend a religious group at the time of the survey as an adult (average of 5.4 hours).

Increased Frequency of Attendance (Converts)

Table 1 shows that those who never attended as children, but attended a religious group frequently as adults did more volunteering than those who grew up in their faith, although nearly half of their volunteering was done through the religious group. Overall, they gave their communities around 11 hours per month of volunteering, compared with the nine hours per month given by those who grew up in the church and attended frequently or occasionally.

Those who attended occasionally as children and attended a religious group frequently as adults gave even more time in volunteering: an average of 12 hours per month. Again, a large part of their volunteering occurred through the religious groups.

It is more common for attendance to be increased a little, from never to occasional. These people do little of their volunteering through their religious groups, and, overall, did a similar amount for the community as do people who have always attended occasionally (close to nine hours per month).

It should be noted, however, that these groups of 'converts' are quite small, with the largest of them just 3.5% of the total population. In other words, few people increased their levels of attendance over their childhood rates. Conversion is comparatively rare. This also means that the data about their volunteering is not highly reliable. Putting the two groups together, there were just 250 people altogether who have increased their attendance rates which means that the error rate is around seven per cent.

Decreased Frequency of Attendance (Drop Outs)

Those who had decreased their attendance a little, from frequent to occasional, did a little less

Table 1. Maintaining or Changing Frequency of Religious Attendance and the Hours Per Month of Voluntary Work in Groups or Organisations for the Sake of the Community

	Group	Hours Volunteered	Hours Volunteered for Religion	Total Hours Outside Religion	Percentage of Religious Hours for Community	Total Hours for Community
Maintained attendance	Never attended as child and adult	5.4	0.1	5.3	76%	5.4
	Occasionally attended as child and adult	9.6	0.7	8.9	65%	9.4
	Frequently attended as child and adult	11.4	5.6	5.8	58%	9.0
Increased attendance	Attended never as child occasionally as adult	8.9	0.6	8.3	60%	8.7
	Attended never as child, now frequently	13.9	6.5	7.4	61%	11.0
	Attended occasionally as child, now frequently	14.6	5.7	8.9	62%	12.4
Decreased attendance	Attended frequently as child, now occasionally	8.1	0.3	7.8	58%	8.0
	Attended frequently as child, now never	6.4	0.2	6.2	77%	6.4
	Attended occasionally as child, now never	5.0	0.1	4.9	81%	5.0

Source: SEIROS Survey 2016.

volunteering for the wider community than those who have always and still attend occasionally: about eight hours per month compared with 9.4 hours of those always attending occasionally, with few of those hours in the religious organisations.

Those who attended frequently as a child and never attended as adults at the time of the survey did a little more volunteering than those who have never attended either as a child or adult: 6.4 hours compared with 5.4 hours per month. Hence, there is some evidence here that the values and patterns of practice absorbed in childhood have some influence into adulthood, even if people have ceased attending a religious group.

On the other hand, those who attended occasionally and were never attending as adults at the time of the survey, did less volunteering than those who had never attended either as children or adults: an average of five hours compared with 5.4 hours per month.

Conclusions

The SEIROS survey data shows that those who attended religious services more frequently had

higher rates of volunteering than those who attended less frequently or never. What it adds to other surveys is that a significant amount of that volunteering work is done by frequent religious attenders through organisations and groups associated with their religious groups. However, the SEIROS survey showed that a large proportion of this work in religious organisations was conducted for the sake of the wellbeing of the wider community rather than just for other members of their religious communities, or for the maintenance of those religious communities.

Occasional attenders did more volunteering than those who never attended religious groups, but did most of their volunteering outside their religious groups. Both frequent attenders and occasional attenders gave around nine hours per month in volunteering, compared with just over five hours among those who never attended.

‘Converts’, or those who had increased their attendance rates as adults, who did not attend, or only occasionally attended, a religious group when they were children, were a small group in the overall population (around four per cent). Thus, this data is less reliable than other data

considered. However, the data suggests that they volunteered more than people who had grown up frequently attending religious groups. They did much of their volunteering through religious groups, but, overall, contributed around 11 or 12 hours per month of volunteering for the benefit of the wider community.

Among those who used to attend a religious group frequently as children, but were not attending at all as adults at the time of the survey, the level of volunteering was a little more than those who had never attended a religious group (about 6.4 hours compared with 5.4 hours) which suggests that the motivational values of the religious group continued to have some influence after the person ceased to be involved in the religious group.

However, those who attended a religious group frequently as children, and now attend occasionally, the level of volunteering was a little below those who had always attended occasionally. Those who attended a religious group occasionally as children, and were not attending at all as adults at the time of the survey had the lowest levels of volunteering.

There is evidence here that religion provides some **motivation** for volunteering. That evidence is demonstrated in the higher levels of volunteering among those who attend a religious group occasionally but who have little other involvement in their religious groups. It is also evident in those who attended a religious group frequently as

children, but who did not attend at all at the time of the survey.

There is also evidence that religious groups provide an *opportunity for engagement* with voluntary groups and organisations among those who attend frequently, partly through the religious groups inviting people to be involved in the activities and programs those religious groups are organising. This is evident partly in the fact that a significant part of their volunteering occurs through their religious groups. Nevertheless, much of that work undertaken through those religious organisations (an average of about 60 per cent) is done for the sake of the wellbeing of the wider community.

Those who have converted either from occasional involvement or from no involvement in a religious group to frequent involvement contributed the most hours in voluntary work. Again, a significant part of it occurred through their religious groups. Thus, there is evidence here of both the engagement and the motivational factors operating in religious environments.

Philip Hughes

Reference:

Lyons, Mark, and Ian Nivison-Smith. "The Relationships between Religion and Volunteering in Australia." *Australian Journal on Volunteering* 11, no. 2 (2006): 25–37.

About CRA

The Christian Research Association was formed in 1985 to serve the churches of Australia. Its task is to provide up-to-date and reliable information about religious faith and church life in Australia.

Our Supporters

The CRA is directly supported by the following organisations which have members on its board:

Anglican Diocese of Melbourne
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Lutheran Church of Australia
The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)
Eastern College (Melbourne)
Seventh-day Adventist Church
Uniting Church in Vic/Tas
Stirling Theological College

About 200 organisations, churches, schools and individuals are Associate Members of the CRA. Individual Associate Members pay \$120 and Institutional Members pay \$150 per year. They receive *Pointers* and all other publications of the Christian Research Association. Subscription to *Pointers* alone is \$45 per annum within Australia or \$20 by e-mail.

Pointers

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Unpaid Work in Australia

Unpaid or voluntary work fulfils many important functions for individuals and society. Voluntary work can provide meaning for individuals, can open up opportunities for community participation, and can assist with general wellbeing and health of the contributor as well as the recipient. Unpaid work also contributes to the national economy in often unrecognised and unmeasured ways. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) analysed data from their 1997 Time Use Survey and estimated that the dollar value of unpaid work was the equivalent of almost half of Australia's Gross Domestic Product (ABS, 1997).

Similar questions used in the 1997 survey about unpaid work were inserted for the first time into the Census in 2006. Four questions sought to understand the extent to which Australians aged 15 years and older were involved with various forms of unpaid or voluntary work for their own families, households, organisations or groups. The following same questions, along with the measured time frame (in brackets), were repeated in the 2011 and 2016 Censuses:

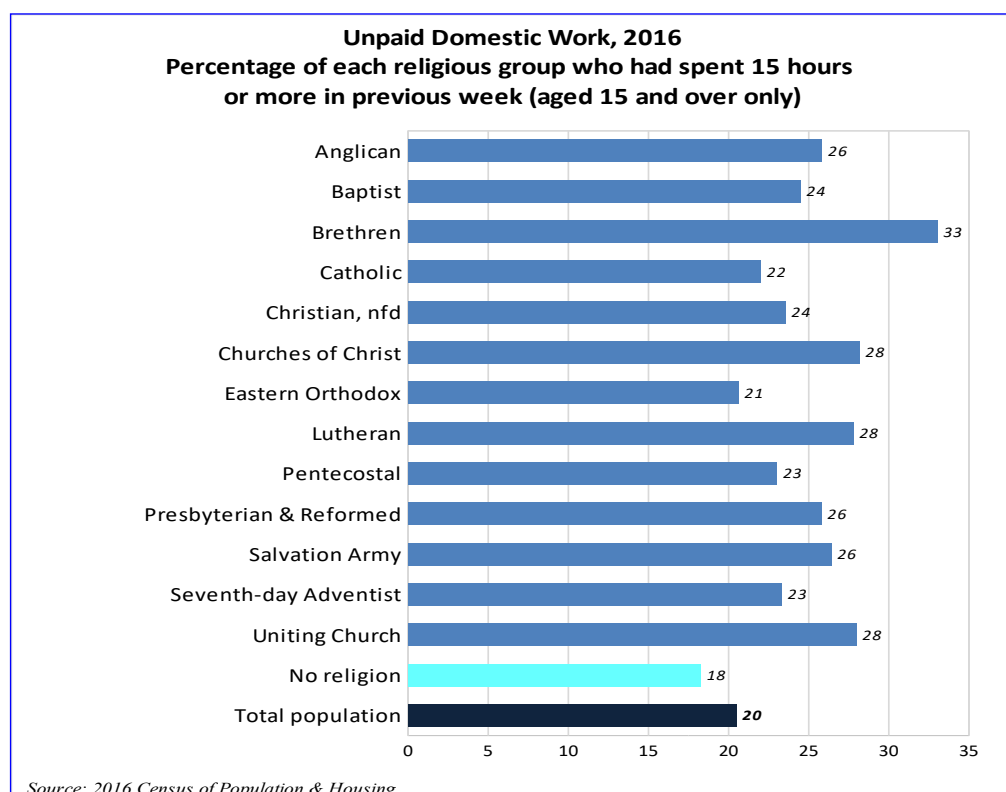
- Time spent on unpaid domestic work for their household (in the previous week),
- Time spent on providing unpaid care, help or assistance to persons with a disability, a long-term illness or problems related to old age (in the previous two weeks),
- Time spent on providing unpaid care to one's own or another person's child under 15 years (in the previous two weeks), and,
- Time spent on unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group (in the previous twelve months).

Unpaid domestic work

Overall, in the week prior to the 2016 Census, 69 per cent of all Australians aged 15 and over had done at least some unpaid domestic work in their household. Around 22 per cent of Australians aged 15 and over did not spend any time on unpaid domestic work, while a similar percentage (23%) spent less than five hours. Twenty-six per cent spent between five and 14 hours in the week, while 11.5 per cent spent between 15 and 29 hours. Nine per cent of the population spent 30 hours or more on unpaid domestic work.

Of all the religious groups, the Brethren spent the most time on unpaid domestic work for the household, with one-third undertaking 15 hours or more in the week prior to the 2016 Census. Other selected Christian groups with a high percentage spending 15 hours or more on unpaid household work were the Churches of Christ, the Lutherans and the Uniting Church (with 28 per cent each).

FIGURE 1. Unpaid domestic work by religious group, 2016



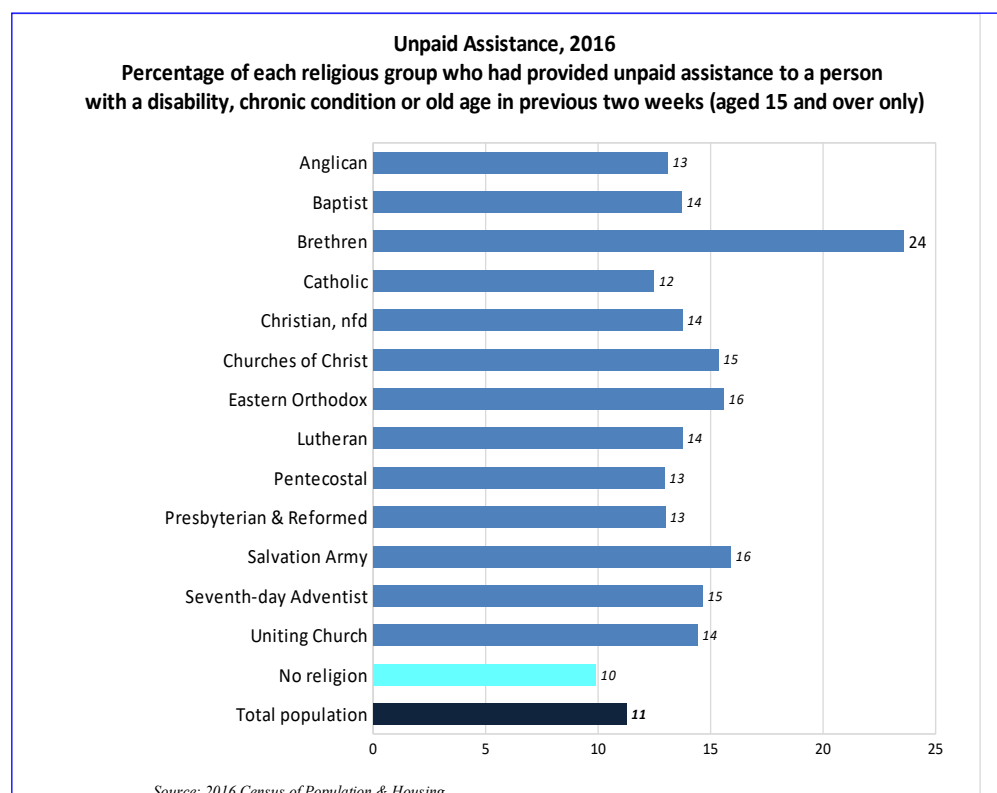
Source: 2016 Census of Population & Housing

Unpaid assistance to a person with a disability

The Brethren were also the religious group with the highest percentage who had provided assistance to a person with a disability, chronic condition or old age in the two weeks prior to the Census.

Almost one-quarter (24%) of all Brethren aged 15 years or older provided such unpaid assistance, while around 16 per cent of the Eastern Orthodox and the Salvation Army provided assistance. In contrast, around one in ten of those who did not identify with any religion provided such assistance. Overall, around eleven per cent of Australians (aged 15 or older) provided assistance. The time spent in providing unpaid assistance did not include work done through a voluntary organisation or group.

FIGURE 2. Unpaid assistance by religious group, 2016



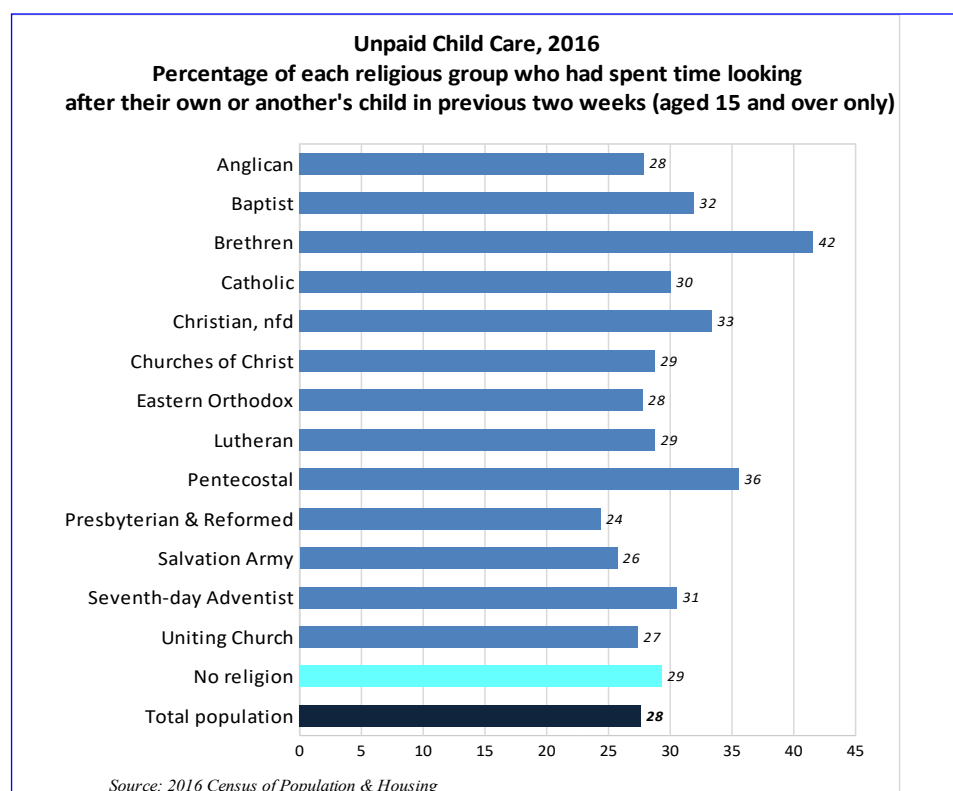
Unpaid child care

In 2017, almost half (49.3%) of all Australian children aged under 13 years usually attended formal (e.g. day care) and/or informal child care (e.g. grandparents). Overall, the proportion of

children in care changed little in the previous twenty years (ABS, 2018).

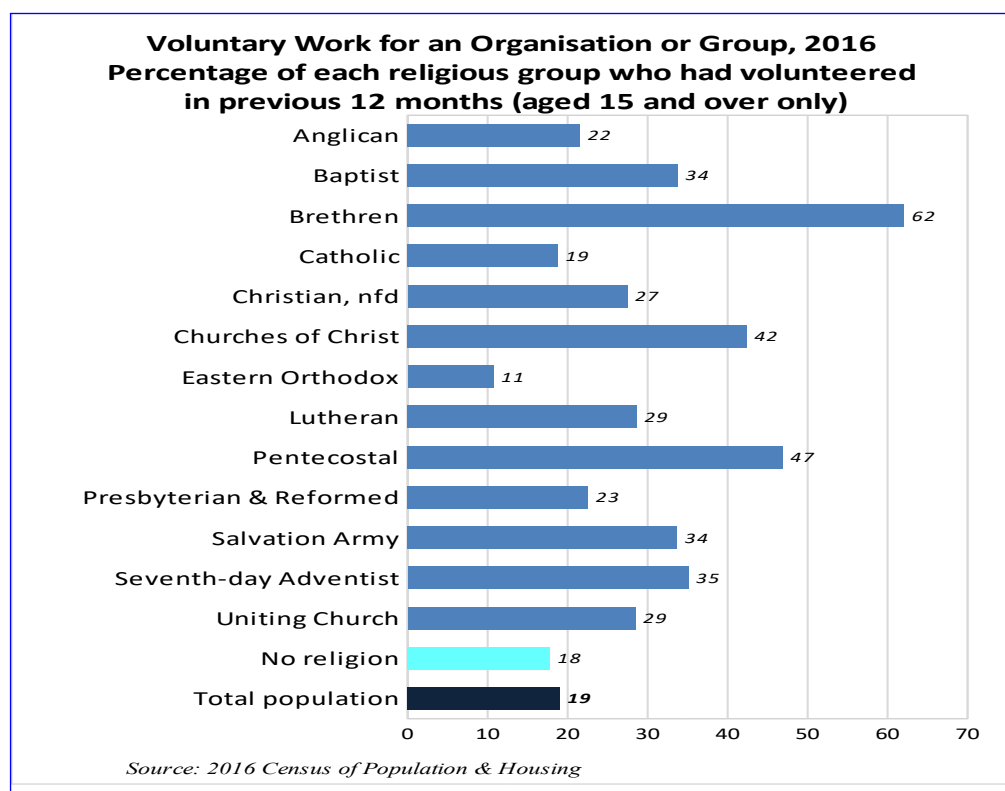
According to the 2016 Census, 28 per cent of Australians aged 15 and over looked after their own child or a child other than their own, without being paid, in the two weeks prior to the Census.

FIGURE 3. Unpaid child care by religious group, 2016



The two Christian groups with the youngest age profiles, perhaps not surprisingly, had the highest percentage providing unpaid child care of all the religious groups. Forty-two per cent of all Brethren aged 15 and over and 36 per cent of all Pentecostals aged 15 and over spent some time in the two weeks prior to the Census looking after a child without pay. Just under one third of 'Christian, not further defined' (nfd) and the Baptists, both with relatively young age profiles, provided unpaid child care.

FIGURE 4. Voluntary work for an organisation or group by religious group, 2016



Voluntary work for an organisation or group

The fourth question asked in the Census was about unpaid work : In the last twelve months did the person spend any time doing voluntary work through an organisation or group?

Respondents were asked to include all voluntary work they undertook for groups or organisations such as sporting teams, youth groups, schools or religious organisation, but to exclude work for a family business, work associated with obtaining a government benefit or work experience needed in order to obtain a qualification.

Overall, just under one in five (19%) Australians aged 15 or over, or 3.6 million people, had spent at least some time in the previous 12 months doing voluntary work through an organisation or group. Of all the religious groups, the Brethren had the highest proportion (62%) of its adherents undertaking voluntary work through an organisation or group. The Pentecostals (47%) and Churches of Christ (42%) also had a high percentage involved with volunteering, while the Eastern Orthodox (11%) and those of no religion (18%) had the lowest percentage involved.

Other research has shown that church attenders

are the most likely to do voluntary work, with 45 per cent of weekly attenders involved, compared with 18 per cent of those who never attend (Hughes & Fraser, 2014, 64).

Summary

While Census data provides a snapshot in time of the unpaid contribution Australians make to their own society, it provides a somewhat limited picture of the full contribution volunteering and unpaid work really does provide.

Domestic work, unpaid care of those who are vulnerable, including children, and voluntary work for organisations have often not been given full recognition, neither has the role the churches play in providing the structures for involvement in such activities. Further analysis of other data sources (such as that provided by Philip Hughes in this edition of Pointers) will provide a more nuanced and complete picture of the contribution volunteering makes to Australian life and to the economy as a whole.

Stephen Reid

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997), *Unpaid Work and the Australian Economy, 1997*, Cat. No. 5240.0, Canberra.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018), *Childhood Education and Care, Australia*, June 2017, Cat. No. 4402.0, Canberra.
- Hughes, P. and L. Fraser (2014), *Life, Ethics and Faith in Australian Society: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association: Nunawading.

Changes to the CRA Board

At the Annual General Meeting of the Christian Research Association in November, there were some significant changes in personnel. Two long-serving members of the executive, Rob Steed and Bob Dixon, stood down after more than 46 years of service between them. Tom Edwards became chair, Nick White deputy-chair, and Brendan Pratt, secretary. Several new members from the Uniting church (Prof John Flett), Salvation Army (Carolyn Russell) and Stirling College (Sarah Bacaller) joined the Board. As we acknowledge the long service of Bob Dixon and Rob Steed, we look forward to the contribution of those who have risen to take positions on the executive and all those who serve on the Board.

Tribute to Associate Professor Bob Dixon

Bob Dixon served on the CRA board longer than anyone else: a total of 26 years. He has shown tremendous loyalty to the CRA as board member, secretary / public officer, and as chair of both the research and literature committees. He has played a major role in the CRA in shaping its activities and identifying its agenda. Through the board and through the research committee, he led the discussion of options, working through challenges and finding solutions. Throughout my time in the Christian Research Association, I deeply appreciated Bob's friendship and wise counsel.

He has been a very important link to the Catholic community, which has contributed generously to the work of the CRA over many years. He has recommended the CRA to Catholic institutions to undertake projects for them, and has invited us to collaborate in projects of the Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Research Office (now the National Centre for Pastoral Research). Bob has also helped to ensure that the CRA has served the Catholic community well. He has been an interpreter, ensuring that what CRA staff have written in reports and articles would be understood within the Catholic world. While Protestants and Catholics collaborate extensively today, the language and concepts are sometimes quite different.

Bob Dixon helped the CRA greatly with staffing. The Pastoral Research Office and the Christian Research Association shared several employees. Together, we were able to offer full-time positions in research to Sharon Bond, Audra Kunciuinas and Stephen Reid. Bob was always flexible with working arrangements, so that if the CRA needed extra time, he found ways of giving it to us. The CRA reciprocated. Both organisations contributed to the professional development of its shared

staff, and both benefitted from what they experienced in each other's organisations.

I have admired Bob for his careful scholarship. The projects that Bob has done have been done well. He has been very careful with his methodology, and conservative, in the best sense, with the data he has gathered. He has not jumped to conclusions, but carefully worked through what the data was telling him.

He is an excellent communicator. I have listened to a number of papers Bob has presented, and have read chapters of books and reports that he has prepared. They are all carefully done and make their points poignantly. Even more importantly, he gives other people a voice. He has organised numerous conferences and sessions at conferences, including at the conferences of the International Society of the Sociology of Religion. Bob has ensured that the right people have a voice on those occasions. This goes to the heart of another of Bob's great strengths. He is an excellent networker. He has made connections with people working in the sociology of religion all around the world and has hosted many of those people in Australia and has demonstrated the great gift of hospitality. The CRA in general, and myself



L to R: Bob Dixon, Tom Edwards, Rob Steed

in particular, have benefitted greatly from his networking and hospitality over many years.

Most of all, I have admired and appreciated Bob's work as a proof-reader. Bob must have spent many months if not years of his working time, going carefully through what I and other staff members of CRA have written. He misses little. He makes many corrections, finding all the places where I have used the wrong word, or where a sentence has not been completed. But Bob does much more than that. Commas are put into other parts of sentences. Words are changed around so that it reads better. For the last 20 years, he has been improved my writing. Every time I think I have written something well, he has found ways of improving it. He has proof-read, not just for grammar, but also for the appropriate communication of research. He has read with a great understanding of the content, of the significance of the figures. He has sometimes (and always appropriately) questioned the interpretation of the data, and helped me to be wise and careful in drawing conclusions.

Much of what Bob has contributed to the Christian Research Association has been invisible to the public. Yet, he has helped shape the organisation and contributed extensively to the projects it has done, to its staffing and to the quality of its research and its communication. I am personally deeply grateful for all that he has done for CRA over the years. There is no way words can fully express my gratitude.

Tribute to Pastor Rob Steed

Rob Steed began representing the Seventh-day Adventists on the board of the Christian Research Association in 1998. He continued in that role until 2005, when his position as representative was taken by Roger Govender. However, Rob agreed to be personally co-opted onto the board in 2005 and continued serving on the board until 2018. He became deputy chair of the board in 2005 and then in 2008, accepted election as chair. He served in that capacity until November 2018.

He has been a wise chair of the board, giving leadership through easy and more difficult times. He led the CRA through the period of 2016 to 2018 which saw substantial re-structuring of the CRA's activities. He has helped the board to focus on the nub of the issues confronting it and has helped it identify the ways forward.

He has been present as a spokesman for the Christian Research Association in its major conferences and public presentations and has

always performed that role with appropriate grace and dignity. While ready to contribute as requested, Rob empowered the staff to take leadership.

Rob Steed has been a steady link to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He encouraged pastors to read the work that we were doing and to use it in their planning for their churches. He provided opportunities for CRA staff to speak at conferences and on other occasions to Seventh-day Adventist pastors and executive leaders. He encouraged the leaders of the denomination to commission the Christian Research Association to undertake projects for them.

For many years, Rob also served on the marketing committee. He had great insights as to how the CRA could better communicate its findings and become better known amongst pastors and church leaders. While these have been areas which have been challenging for the CRA staff, Rob has continued to advise and to counsel.

One of the particular gifts that Rob has is a great sensitivity to people and insight into how to use people's gifts well. On a number of occasions Rob sat with me when interviewing people for employment with the Christian Research Association. He advised as to the questions to ask, and helped in the interpretation of the answers. I respected greatly his insights as to how potential employees might fit into the organisation.

That same sensitivity was very helpful when I was thinking through roles of those employed. On more than one occasion he showed me how I could make better use of an employee's gifts and abilities, rather than channelling them into areas which they found difficult. Rob has always been affirming of the staff, board members and those who have come to CRA's conferences and activities.

Rob Steed's own particular gift is as a coach. He has coached many pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist churches. He also used those gifts with great effect within the Christian Research Association, both as chair of the board and as a personal coach for me as the senior member of the staff. I have greatly appreciated his wise counsel and his loyal support of the Christian Research Association over twenty years.

New Chair for the Christian Research Association: Dr Tom Edwards

Tom Edwards is the new chair of the board of the Christian Research Association. He has

been a member of the CRA board since 2012, representing what was Tabor College (Victoria) and is now Eastern College Australia. Tom has been deputy-chair since 2017. Tom also serves on the Ethics Committee of the Christian Research Association.

Tom has a PhD in Behavioural Neuroscience and on completion of his studies he co-ordinated the first year psychology programme at Monash University, while also actively researching the biochemistry of memory. In order to apply his research and make a difference in the lives of people, Tom gained a Master's degree in Counselling and shifted his research interests. Over the past few years he has been teaching at Eastern College while continuing research, and currently holds the position of Director of Research on a part-time basis. He is also the Senior Counsellor at LifeCare, the outreach arm of Crossway Baptist Church.

Tom is particularly interested in the virtues and what a focus on them can contribute to the lives of people. Tom has also published a number of peer reviewed papers in respected international journals and spoken at multiple national and international conferences. More recently, Tom and his co-author Cosimo Chiera have set-up Natural Intelligence Pty. Ltd. (www.naturalintelligence.com.au) as a way to teach professionals how to use virtue-based insights to optimise individual and corporate outcomes. Tom and Cosimo are currently completing a book which will be launched early in 2019: *The Freedom of Virtue: Navigating excellence in the art of living amongst a world of instant gratification*.

The Christian Research Association looks forward to the leadership Tom will give to the organisation.

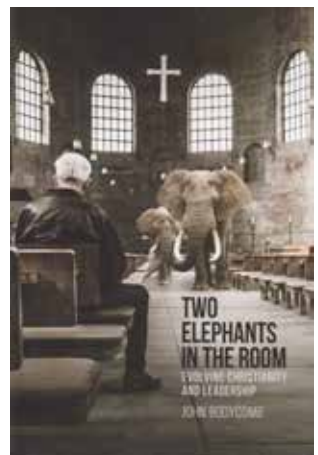
*Philip Hughes,
Former Senior Research Officer.*

A Review and Reflection of

Two Elephants in the Room: Evolving Christianity and Leadership

by Rev Dr John Bodycomb

John Bodycomb has been a minister in the Uniting Church for more than fifty years. He developed Christian Education programs in South Australia, taught in the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne, was chaplain at The University of Melbourne, and has ministered in many Uniting Churches. One of the fathers of the application of sociological thinking to ministry, he has never been one to shy away from challenging questions. His latest book is no exception and addresses very important questions for all those involved in Christian ministry: is there a future for organised Christianity, and for professional leadership within it?



Is there a future for organised Christian religion?

John Bodycomb begins by acknowledging that the whole idea of G-O-D is challenged by our new understanding of a universe which is nearly 14 billion years old. The idea of G-O-D can only denote an ineffable Mystery which imagines, intends, initiates, informs, influences and inspires this universe, he argues.

Bodycomb notes that Australians are increasingly indifferent, and sometimes hostile, to religion. He notes that, according to the 2016 Census, more than 30 per cent of Australians described

themselves as having 'no religion', compared with just one per cent in 1966 (p.9). He states that just seven per cent of Australians are church attenders and that figure is probably inflated by immigrants born in non-Caucasian countries (p.10). While one may quibble about the exact figures of attendance, it is apparent that a much smaller proportion of the Australian population attend a church compared to twenty, let alone fifty years, ago. Bodycomb notes that similar declines are occurring in other countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States (p.11). He notes that some people describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious', a phenomenon that Diana Butler-Bass, an American commentator, sees as

the basis of a 'Great Awakening', but Bodycomb sees little evidence of it as the start of a major new movement (p.13).

Why is this decline occurring? Bodycomb argues that most people simply feel no need for organised religion. He suggests that many people see little benefit from religion (p.26). He thinks that theologians have developed a large body of doctrine, but most of it means very little to people who are often sceptical about whether G-O-D has any meaning at all (p.40).

Bodycomb clarifies his expectations in the next chapter of the book: 'churchy religion', as he describes it, will probably expire sometime in the future (particularly in its mainstream varieties). However 'religion' will not expire, because the great questions of life and death, of good and evil, and of transcendence remain (p.45).

Taking as his starting point, the work of Karen Armstrong on the 'axial age' of religion which took place between 800 and 400 BCE, Bodycomb suggests that we are in a new axial age which began with the Reformation and Renaissance and is continuing today. In this new axial age, there is a 'steady and relentless de-sacralizing or de-mystifying of life, the de-legitimizing of authorities religious and secular, and the dignifying and secularizing of humanity' (pp.57-58, author's italics). While 'pentogelical' religion (Pentecostal and Evangelical religion) appears to be alive and well, Bodycomb suggests it is a short-term 'stop gap' and limited response to the changing cultural environment (p.58).

Identifying some of the factors external to the churches which are causing the decline of 'churchy religion', Bodycomb points to recent developments in the social milieu. He cites contemporary consumeristic attitudes and the competition with the churches provided by the self-improvement industry, the great variety of support agencies, special interest groups, service organisations and civil celebrants. He notes the distrust of institutions and the awareness of the plurality of religious options. He argues that there is a huge cultural gap in attitudes, music, and many other aspects of life, between contemporary youth culture and the churches. Bodycomb suggests that the Pentogelicals have tried to bridge this gap through their music and theatre-style worship but infers that these efforts are not altogether successful (p.70), although he does not expand on this.

The other response to the changing culture is that of 'progressive or evolving Christianity'.

Bodycomb suggests that such a Christianity will affirm the Mystery which is referred to as God and the centrality of Jesus. It will encourage pro-social behaviour and provide criteria for social critique. It will affirm humanity's role in caring for the planet, fully appreciate the human body, strive for integration of all intellectual disciplines and promote and inform a 'journey inward' (pp.79-80).

How effective are current responses?

It is not clear from his book, how confident Bodycomb is of these responses. The 'Pentogelical' response appears to be most vibrant in many places around the world. In Australia, it is attracting about four per cent of the population (according to the 2016 Census) who are mostly highly engaged and committed. While just 23 per cent of all church attenders were associated with what Bodycomb describes as 'Pentogelical' denominations in 1997, the SEIROS (Study for the Economic Impact of Religion on Society), a national survey of Australian adults conducted in 2016 found that it had risen to 41 per cent of all attenders. The remaining church attenders are mostly people associated with immigrant churches (many of which are using languages other than English) and older people, the remnants of the mainstream denominations. Thus, while 'Pentogelical' churches are showing much more vitality than the mainstream denominations, Bodycomb is correct in suggesting that they are peripheral to the lives of the majority of Australians.

The strength of Progressive or Evolving Christianity is very hard to measure as there is no specific denominational loyalty which surveys can count. Most of the people who attend progressive Christian groups and meetings are older people who have been members of churches for most of their lives but are dissatisfied with the teaching those churches are providing. There is little evidence that Progressive or Evolving Christian groups are attracting young people or that there is a strengthening sense of identity among those who are committed to the movement.

What is evident from surveys is that there is a substantial group in the population who describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. They have dropped institutional religion altogether, including Christianity, even though many of them would affirm the sort of values and attitudes which Bodycomb identifies with evolving Christianity. Many of these people see Christianity as one of many great sources of

vision for humanity and of resources for dealing with life. Again, however, this movement is amorphous. Some sociologists, such as David Voas, see it as a step in the movement towards a secularity which has no place for religion nor spirituality (Voas and Bruce, 2007). Others, such as Paul Heelas, see it as a major movement replacing religion (Heelas, 2007). To see it as the basis of a 'Great Awakening' is probably wishful thinking.

Religious professionals

If religion is in sharp decline, then it would seem that there is little future for those who would be leaders of religious communities. There are many disincentives for training for ministry in a mainstream denomination today. However, Bodycomb does see a potential role for 'chaplains'. He sees such people as those who 'care for the reminders of the sublime' (p.92-93), listening and telling stories that point to the holy. Perhaps, he says, there is a place for men and women who will command respect for their scholarly competence and inspire experiment and risk, as they work with communities of faith (p.101). Perhaps people will be challenged to share their faith, take on the challenge of refashioning faith-talk, perhaps drawn by their love of people (pp.107-109). If people are willing to take on the challenge, Bodycomb suggests that the model of education should be more like an apprenticeship than the current academic study. But then, it is possible that such people may be a dying breed, he ponders (p.101).

Some further reflections

Based on current trends and the age profile of attenders, some Australian denominations, such as the Uniting Church and, in many parts of Australia, the Anglican Church, are likely to become very small within the next twenty or thirty years. The numbers attending Catholic churches will continue to diminish. However, a remnant will remain for at least another generation in these mainstream denominations, of people and their children who have come from overseas from traditional cultures who remain loyal to the churches. Attendances at the 'Pentogelical' churches are continuing to climb in number, although remaining close to four per cent of the Australian population. Those churches will not disappear in the near future as many attenders are young and deeply committed. Putting these two groups together, it seems likely

that attendance at churches will drop over the next twenty or thirty years to perhaps ten per cent of the population from 14 per cent. (Bodycomb's figure of seven per cent may be close to the proportion of attenders in church on a typical Sunday, but the proportion of the population engaged in any one month is closer to 14 per cent.) It is noteworthy that there has actually been very little decline over the past ten years in the percentage of the population attending a church according to the surveys, which means there has been a substantial increase in actual numbers as the population has increased. The major factor in the increase in attendance is migration, because twice as many migrants as Australian-born attend a church. Future patterns of immigration will have a big impact, and it is likely that, if immigration is curtailed, then attendances at churches will decline more quickly (Hughes, 2017).

Nevertheless, what Bodycomb says about church decline is true for the vast majority of long-term residents of Australia. In the last 50 years, the churches have become largely irrelevant to the majority of Australians. The Christian faith is marginal to people's thinking about life, despite the fact that around 40 per cent of all school children attend, at least for part of their schooling, a church-connected school. It provides only a few people with resources to nurture their lives. Some Australians feel some antagonism towards the Christian churches as institutions they see as intolerant and out of touch with contemporary values such as gender equality. Large sections of the church continue to oppose equality in leadership by males and females. Most churches oppose same-sex marriage which is affirmed by two-thirds of Australians. The multitude and severity of the cases of sexual abuse and cover-up in religious institutions led many Australians to be angry about what has occurred and to see the churches as hypocritical in their claim to give moral leadership. The SEIROS survey in 2016 found that almost half of all Australian adults (48%) indicated they had no or little confidence in the churches, while just 17 per cent of the population have a great deal or complete confidence in them.

This lack of confidence has led to a widespread sense that the Christian faith itself has little, if anything, to offer. Bodycomb is correct that the questions of life and death, or good and evil, or the good life and the well-functioning society, continue. But there is no one place where these questions are considered and no

one set of professionals who have a privileged place in providing answers. People turn to the self-help industry and counsellors. Educators and academics have some role, including some of the info-entertainers who have made a name for themselves in television series. Many journalists, radio announcers and opinion producers have a role. Politicians are in the mix. The questions of life are debated in families and among friends, across the Internet and in film and literature. There are bad prophets, even evil prophets and opinion-leaders, such as some of the radio shock-jocks. While some opinion-leaders are people of integrity, others are self-opinionated bigots, ignorant on most subjects, but loved by some radio and television stations and newspapers because they say outrageous things.

On many of the major moral issues, however, the churches are silent and its professionals have failed to apply the great moral principles in the Christian faith to our contemporary context, to the contemporary issues such as equality of people of different sexual orientations, domestic violence, and global warming. The theological colleges could have a role in seeking engagement between the contemporary world and the wisdom that has been gathered through the centuries. Largely, they are failing to do that.

Religious professionalism

Using Bodycomb's thoughts as a starting point, I would outline three types of religious training that are needed in the future.

1. Church-workers. There will be a continuing need to train religious professionals who will work in the churches. Increasingly these will be mega-churches and many of them will be multicultural in nature. Some will be boutique churches serving a specialised community such as a single-language group. Many of these professionals will need the opportunity for specialised training for specific roles within teams, such as developing educational groups, music roles, counselling. Others will work in rural areas, perhaps overseeing local teams of lay leaders. What are fading are the local community churches with a single minister serving a wide range of people from the local community.

2. Mission-workers. If the churches are going to engage the 90 per cent of people outside of them, they will need to train a different set of 'religious professionals': people with the ability to enter the spiritual market-place and to engage the community through offering a range of services

in that competitive environment. Some may do that through chaplaincy and counselling. Others may do it through educational or media-oriented activities. Some may do it through Christian meditation courses. These people will need to be trained to develop expressions of faith that are relevant to the 90 per cent of Australians who are not currently engaged in the churches. They will need to seek new ways of fulfilling spiritual interests and needs in competition with other people in the spiritual and wellbeing marketplace.

3. Spiritual professionalism. As I have noted, there are a great range of people who contribute to how people in Western societies think about life. While most of these people have their own specific training, in education, journalism, counselling or whatever it may be, if theology was added to that training, these people would be better equipped to engage the big questions of life within their specific professions. Many people who come to theological colleges do not expect to serve in churches, nor work specifically as religious mission-workers. Rather, they are adding theology to their repertoire of expertise so that they can contribute more capably in their own professional fields. If theological colleges are to serve such people, the colleges too must develop some expertise in these areas, and be able to integrate the traditions of faith with knowledge from the physical and human sciences. However, it may be in this area that there is the greatest potential for Christian influence on leadership in our contemporary culture.

Philip Hughes

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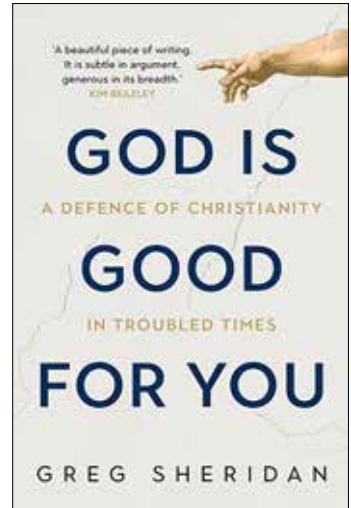
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Book review

Greg Sheridan, *God Is Good For You: A Defence of Christianity in Troubled Times*

God is good for you, argues Greg Sheridan, and his book with that title is good for you, too. The author is the Foreign Editor of The Australian newspaper, and all his journalistic skill and experience is on display in this easy-to-read but insightful and challenging book. After a wide-ranging introduction, Sheridan presents his material in two halves – Part 1: Christianity and Part 2: Christians. What struck me, however, was that the title and sub-title could also have served as two themes forming a framework for the book.



Under the theme of 'God is good for you', the author presents some of the features of Christian faith and history that have contributed so much to Western civilisation and which have so much to offer us in living life today. He also devotes much space to Christians of many varieties who have clearly experienced God as being good for them. The stories of his encounters with all these people or communities are often inspiring. They range from Melbourne's Planetshakers church, to a newly established Catholic Benedictine community of monks in Tasmania, and the Cistercian community at Tarrawarra in Victoria's Yarra Valley. He finds signs of new life in the Focolare movement, in two contemporary, bible-based congregations in Perth, and in Campion College, Australia's only liberal arts college, located in the Sydney suburb of Old Toongabbie. He gives an account of serious health issues experienced by Sydney's Catholic archbishop, Anthony Fisher, and by members of the family of Anglican vicar Rod McArdle, and of the part that their faith played in the way they handled their situation.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapters of Sheridan's book that come under the theme of 'God is good for you' are his accounts of his discussions with a number of Australian and NSW politicians, including some former Prime Ministers – John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull. The other politicians with whom he discusses matters of faith and religion are Mary Easson, Kim Beazley, Peter Costello, Bill Shorten, Andrew Hastie, Michael Tate, Peter Khalil, Penny Wong, Mike Baird and Kristina Keneally. There is much variety within this group, not only of political outlook, but also in terms of their upbringing and religious background. Sheridan knows

them all, and in each case he draws out of them reflections on what their Christian faith means for them today, those who are active churchgoers and those who are not, and the extent to which it influences their political views and behaviour.

You can read the opening chapter, written with a sense of urgency and passion, as Sheridan's engaging introduction to the other theme of the book, the defence of Christianity in troubled times. Using a mix of personal reminiscences, anecdotal evidence and statistical reports about religious identity, practice and knowledge in Australia and, to a lesser extent, the UK and the US, he argues convincingly that not only is Christianity experiencing decline in the West but that the West is in the process of rejecting Christianity 'out of hand without having any idea of what it is actually saying' (p. 11) and that we are thereby 'cutting ourselves off from the roots of our civilisation' (p. 13), from society's 'source of values and meanings' (p. 2). In fact, he says, 'there is a perfect storm of factors militating against Christianity, in Australia and in the West generally' (p. 13). His stated purpose in writing this book is to consider what we stand to lose and whether there is any way that we might recover some of the Christian foundations of our society.

In subsequent chapters, he argues that belief in God is rational, criticises the new atheists, and outlines Christian beliefs, before going on to consider Christianity's major problems, such as the question of evil and suffering, and the self-inflicted devastation caused by the sexual abuse crisis. He observes, correctly, that the damage caused by the crisis to 'the standing of Christian organisations, and to some extent even to the Christian message itself, is vast' (p. 146).

The weakest part of the book, in my view, is the final chapter, where Sheridan lays out a sort of plan of action. Many elements of the plan are simplistic, although not necessarily bad in themselves, as for example, the idea that all Catholic schools should spend two terms teaching the Apostles' Creed to Year 9 students – he clearly has never tried teaching Year 9s! Other parts reveal a hankering for the past, such as using Latin and Gregorian chant in the liturgy, accompanied by general disdain for contemporary church music other than the vibrant beat of the music in Pentecostal and some other congregations.

Despite its limitations, the final chapter still contains many worthwhile observations, one of which is that the majority of current Church leaders lack what he calls 'situational awareness' (p. 318), or the ability to understand complex environments characterised by vast amounts of newly generated information. It's a pity that he never refers to the fact that Australian Christian churches have at their disposal three world-leading social research centres in NCLS Research, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference's National Centre for Pastoral Research, and the Christian Research Association (although he does make a brief reference to one of Philip Hughes' many books). These are three bodies with the capacity to address this very issue. Not all church leaders, however, take advantage of what they offer.

Another example of the simplistic nature of many of his solutions is his call for the Catholic Church in Australia to have a single spokesperson as part of a more professional approach to media. It's certainly true that the Church needs to be highly professional in all aspects of media, but a single spokesperson would be an impossible job, given the size and complexity of the Catholic Church. There are already national spokespersons for some matters, such as the President and the General Secretary of the Bishops Conference, and the heads of Conference agencies such as Catholic Social Services, Caritas, the National Catholic Education Commission and Catholic Health Australia. One very public spokesperson of recent times was Francis Sullivan, the Executive Officer of what was the Truth Justice and Healing Council, known for being articulate, well-informed and forthright in matters relating to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. But none

of these people can speak with authority on behalf of all Catholic organisations in Australia, of which there are more than 3,500. The very size of the Catholic Church in Australia, with its 1,745 schools, 87 hospitals, 332 aged care facilities and 220,000 employees militates against Sheridan's view that the churches should 'conceive of themselves as a bold minority' (p. 322). Readers might also find that too much attention is given to Catholic examples, but that's where the author's experience is, and he can be forgiven, I think, for drawing on that.

It would be wrong to criticise Sheridan too strongly for the limitations of his plans for the future of Christianity in Australia; he is to be congratulated, and thanked, for having a go. If he has not actually come up with a workable and potentially successful plan for the restoration of the Christian foundations of Australian society, neither has anyone else. I enjoyed the book very much, and found it informative, entertaining, in some places inspirational, and very worthwhile. Read it; it will be good for you!

Greg Sheridan, *God Is Good For You: A Defence of Christianity in Troubled Times* (Allen and Unwin 2018, 358 pages).

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