

Varieties of Religious Commitment in Great Britain and Australia

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Introduction

The United Kingdom is a composite state, made up of Great Britain (which includes England, Wales and Scotland) and Northern Ireland (not included in this survey). The constituent nations are religiously distinctive. England is predominantly Anglican (the Church of England is officially established, with the Queen as Supreme Governor); Scotland is mainly Presbyterian, and while in Wales the leading tradition is congregational Protestantism. The Catholic Church is the second largest denomination in both England and Scotland. As a result of immigration since the Second World War – especially from the Indian subcontinent – about 6 percent of the British population identifies with non-Christian religions.

The Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901 by the union of six British colonies. Britain had supplied most settlers in Australia during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but after the Second World War there was large-scale immigration from southern Europe, substantially increasing the Catholic population. More recent immigration from Asia (in particular China, Vietnam and India) has added a non-Christian dimension to the religious landscape.

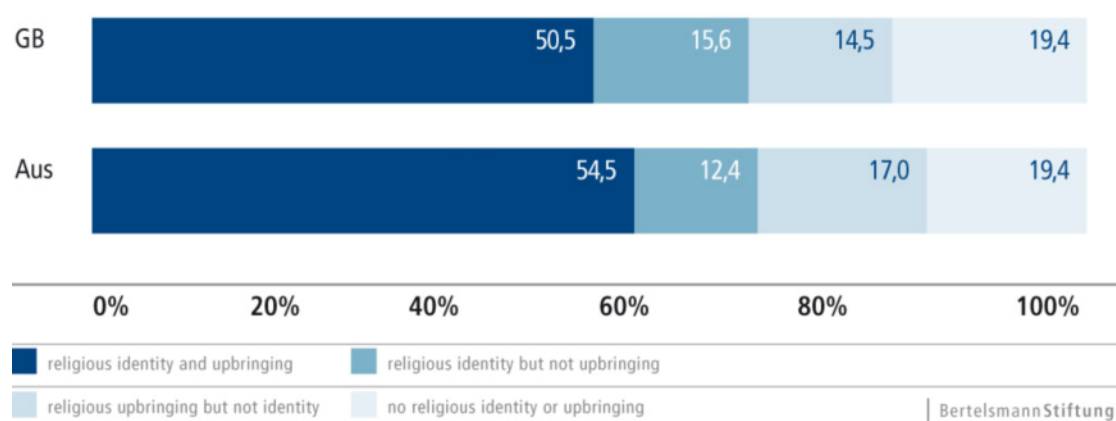
The historical, cultural and linguistic ties between Britain and Australia make it appropriate to examine the two countries together. Although in some respects Australia is arguably more similar to other countries of colonial settlement (e.g., the United States, Canada or even Argentina), and its self-definition is often hostile to things British, the two countries are linked at both public and private levels. The Queen is monarch in both places, but perhaps more importantly, Australian society was grafted from British stock. The fact that many of the people who emigrated rejected, or were rejected by, Great Britain, simply makes the comparison more interesting.

We will look first at what the Religion Monitor tells us about religious commitment in the two countries. Summary statistics on religious belief and practice are a good starting point, but it is important to look beyond them. What ordinary people think and do may not always be what their religious leaders would wish. Ultimately the key question is how much religion matters: it is one thing to identify with a religious heritage or to accept the existence of God, and another to find religion important in everyday life. Finally, the survey enables us to look at religious tolerance and curiosity about religion.

Religious identity

Let us start with religious identity. Two thirds of people in both Britain and Australia described themselves as belonging to a religion such as Christianity or Islam. The same proportion in Britain and somewhat more in Australia said that religion had been part of their upbringing. The overlap was far from complete, however: about 30 percent either had a religious upbringing but did not now identify with a religion or vice versa. Whether people understood these questions (about current identity and religious upbringing) in comparable ways is far from certain: there are many different kinds of belonging.

Religious upbringing and identity



Indeed, responses to questions about religious affiliation are highly variable, depending on the exact wording of the question and the context in which it is asked. In Britain the proportions claiming a religion range from about one half (for example

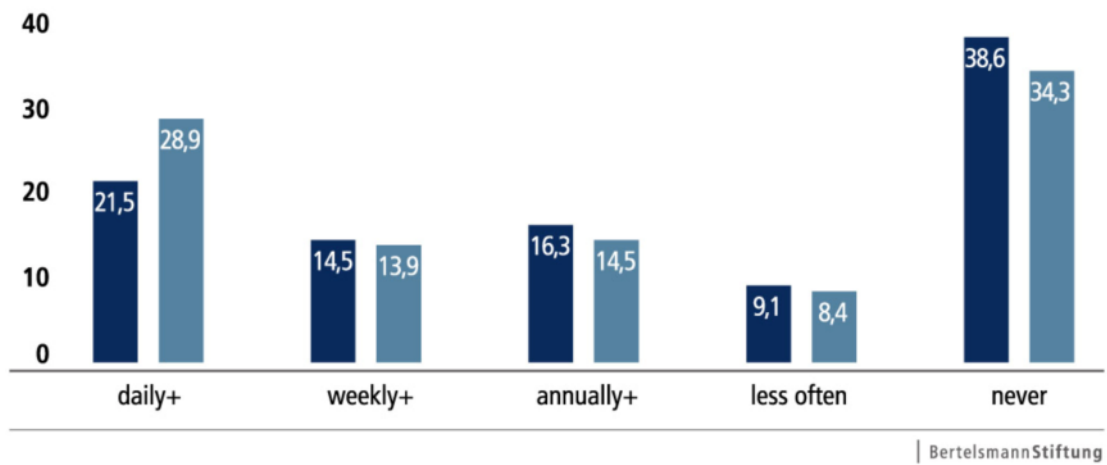
on the British Social Attitudes survey) to nearly three quarters (on the census of population). These survey results are therefore in the expected range, though tending toward the higher end.

The Catholic proportion is higher in Australia than in Britain; in this survey, 23 versus 13 percent. These figures are broadly consistent with other sources; the 2006 Australian census recorded 26 percent of the population as Catholics (but with fewer people claiming no religion), while the 2005 British Social Attitudes Survey found 9 percent (with more people giving no religion). Non-Christians make up 6 percent of both samples, which corresponds well with the 2001 census in Britain but is fractionally too high for Australia (where the 2006 census puts the figure at about 3.5 percent).

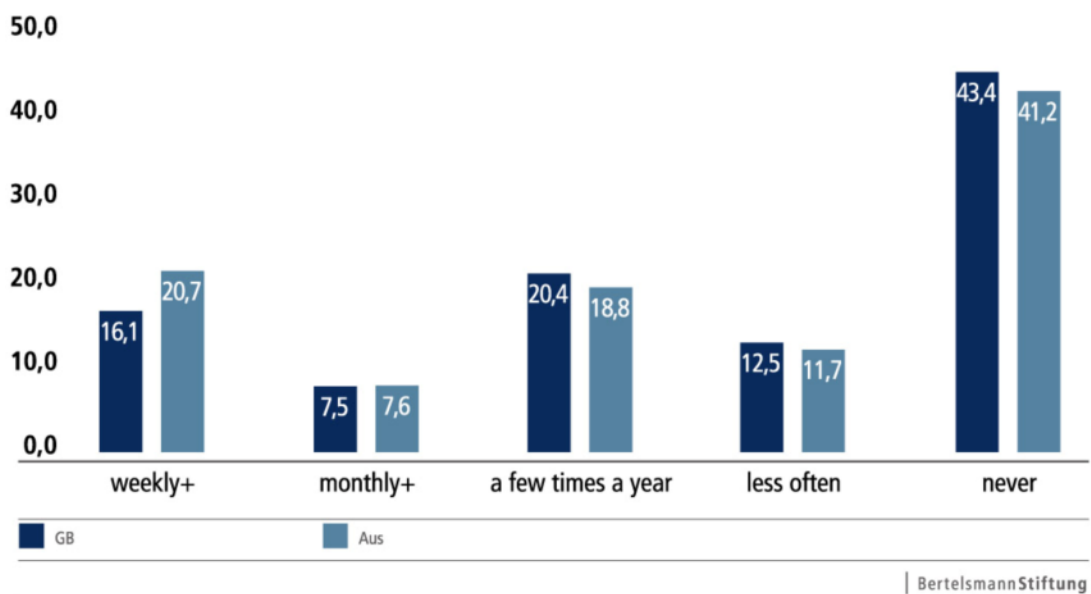
Religious practice

The survey gives us two main pieces of information about religious practice: attendance at services and private prayer. The distribution of both forms of observance is rather bimodal, with people tending to be involved fairly regularly or not at all. In Britain, for example, 36 percent claim to pray weekly or more often, while 39 percent say that they never pray; in Australia the corresponding figures are 43 and 34 percent. It is thus the case in both countries that no more than a quarter of people pray only occasionally. The polarization is somewhat less pronounced for attendance at religious services; here the contrast between monthly (or more frequent) participation and never attending is 24 vs. 43 percent for Britain and 28 vs. 41 percent for Australia.

Frequency of prayer (%)



Frequency of attendance at religious services (%)

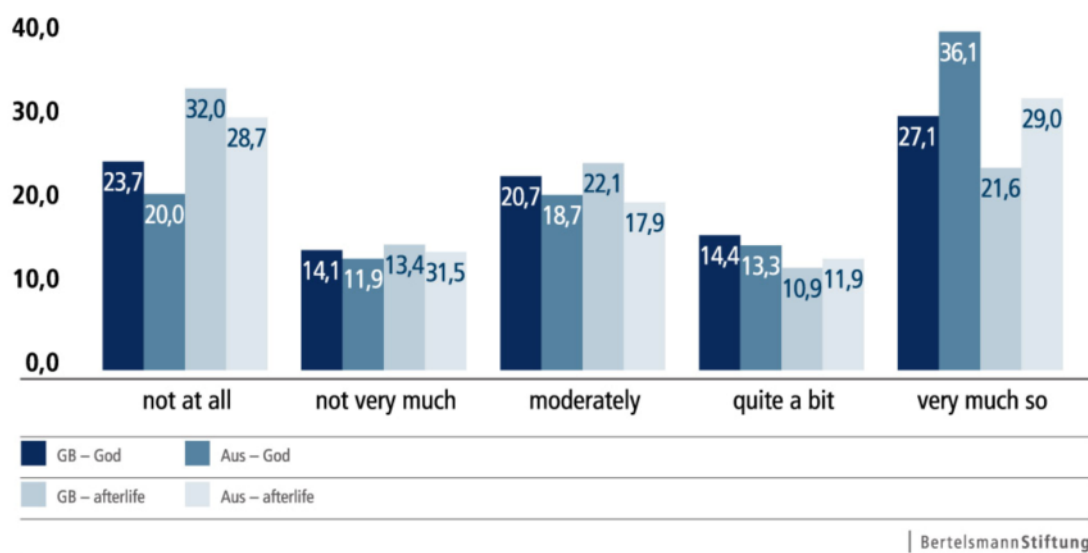


It is worth noting that survey respondents tend to exaggerate the frequency with which they attend services. Extensive research in the United States puts actual weekly attendance there at about 22 percent, rather than the 40 percent consistently claimed in opinion polls. Similarly the 2005 English Church Census, based on actual counts in half of the churches in the country supplemented by denominational statistics, puts churchgoing in a typical week at 6.3 percent of the population – not the 16 percent claiming in the survey that they attend weekly.

Belief

In contrast to countries where the overwhelming majority of people express strong belief in God and an afterlife, religious belief in Australia and especially Britain is interestingly diverse. The British are distributed fairly uniformly over the range, though one might again observe a degree of polarization. Half the population answers either “very much so” or “not at all” when asked if they believe in God and in an afterlife. Perhaps, though, what is interesting is not that 50 percent of people are confident about what they believe but that the other 50 percent are not.

Degree of belief in God or something divine and the afterlife

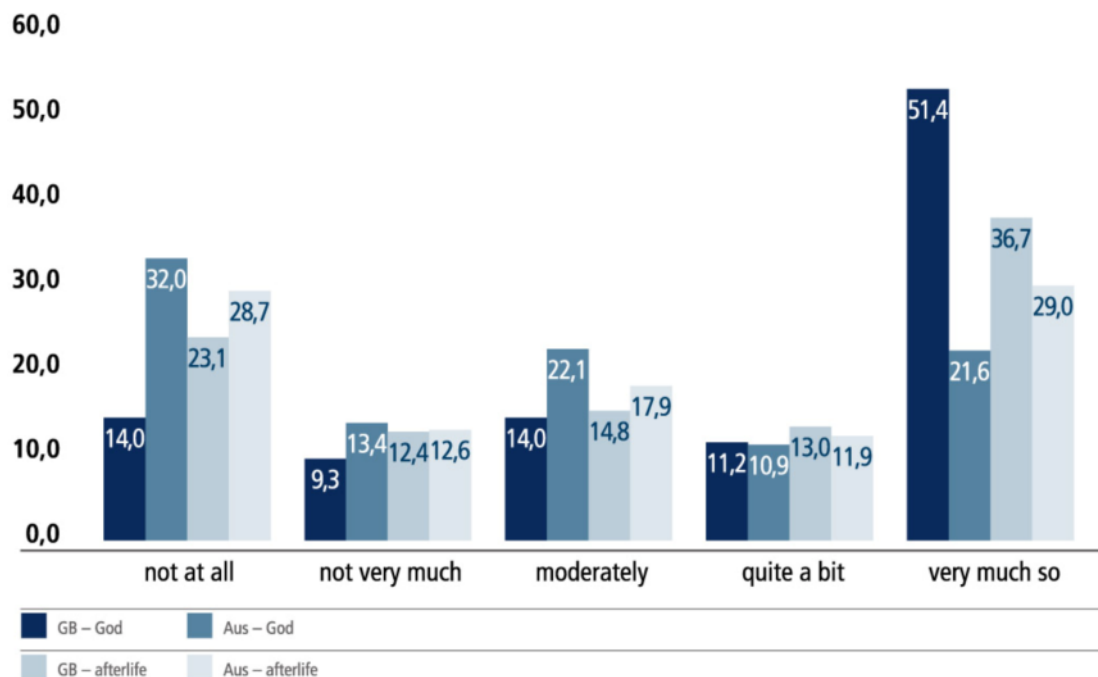


The survey questions about demons and angels were oddly worded: “To what extent do you believe in the efficacy of demons?” “Efficacy” is not a word most people use and is typically applied to treatments of some sort rather than supernatural beings. Nevertheless nearly everyone answered the question, so perhaps they had a sense of what was intended (or simply interpreted “efficacy” as “existence”). Just as people are more likely to believe in heaven than hell, they are more likely to accept that angels are at work than are demons. Close to two thirds in both countries answered the question on demons with “not at all,” while only 45 and 41 percent did so for angels in Britain and Australia respectively. This form of belief seems rather half-hearted, though, with just 21 and 29 percent saying that they believe “quite a bit” or “very much so” in the efficacy of angels.

Unsurprisingly, agreement or disagreement with the statement that “life has significance because there is something after death” is closely associated with belief in an afterlife. Among people in Britain and Australia who do not at all believe in an afterlife, only 7 and 10 percent respectively accept that view. By contrast, three quarters of those in both countries who believe strongly see life as significant in consequence.

Belief that the end of the world is near is somewhat higher in Australia (18%) than in Britain (11%). In Britain the association with belief in an afterlife is clear, with more than half of the pessimists (or do they think of themselves as optimists?) believing strongly in an afterlife. By contrast, the connection is rather weak in Australia: the 37 percent of those anticipating an apocalypse who believe very much in an afterlife are matched by almost the same number who believe not at all or not very much. Likewise those in Britain who see the end of the world coming are substantially more religious (in their self-perception) than the population, whereas in Australia the religiosity profile of this group is not very distinctive.

Degree of belief in an afterlife for those who agree that the end of the world is near (compared to the general population)



Any particular belief is only a partial and potentially unreliable indicator of an individual's religious belief in general, just as belief is only one component of overall religiosity. An example of the problem can be found in comparing the responses to the queries "To what extent do you believe in God or something divine?" and "There is a God who cares about every human being personally." On the face of it, agreement that there is a caring God should simply be a subset of belief in divinity. Oddly, though, only 72 percent of Britons and 74 percent of Australians who "totally agreed" that there is a personal God answered "very much so" to the broader question about belief. Even more alarmingly, 7 percent of Australians (though only half as many Britons) who *totally* agreed that there is a personal God said that they *didn't* believe (very much or at all) in God. Such inconsistencies and discrepancies are inevitable, but they highlight the need for more robust measures.

Religiosity

The basic rationale for creating a scale is the idea that some underlying characteristic (for example individual religiosity) gives rise to, but is only imperfectly represented by, observed variables such as declared belief, religious identity, church attendance, and so on. To put it another way, a good deal of error is produced (because of random or idiosyncratic factors) in using these particular variables on their own to measure the feature of interest, but in combination the errors balance out and the scale is reliable.

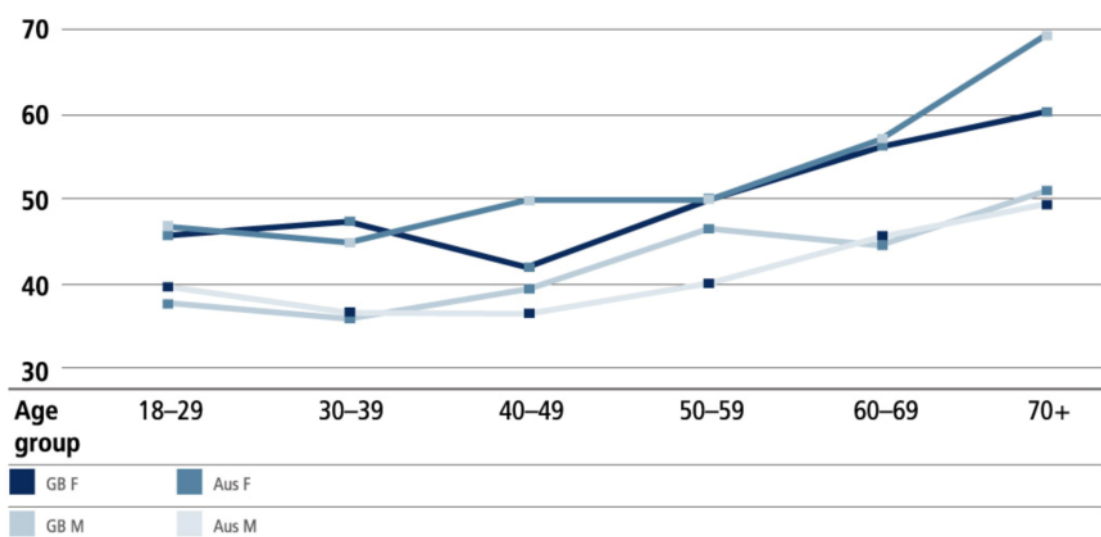
The choice of variables making up the scale will depend to a large extent on what one wishes to represent. A number of technical tools can be used to identify variables that seem to have a strong and consistent connection with the presumed construct. It is useful in this respect to distinguish an index (composed of disparate elements) from a scale (where the components are assumed to reflect a single underlying attribute). An index of personal attractiveness, for example, might include measures of physical appearance, wealth and charm, without there being any assumption that these attributes are necessarily related. By contrast one might base a scale of "traditionalism" – an attribute that cannot be measured directly – on attitudes towards authority, gender roles, sex outside marriage, the role of religion, and so on.

If a concept such as religiosity is truly multidimensional, then it is not helpful to combine scores on the different dimensions. There would be no single underlying construct for a scale to measure. If a number of variables are highly correlated with each other, however, it may suggest that they all reflect a single characteristic. Such is the position here with respect to identification with a religion, attendance at public services, frequency of private prayer, belief in God, and self-rated religiosity.

Answers to each of these questions were represented by values from 0 to 100 approximating the percentage of the population that scores lower than the respondent. The average of all five variables provides the scale. Statistical tests on this combined measure suggest that the derived scale has a high level of reliability.

By scaling Britain and Australia independently we can compare the demographic distribution of religiosity in the two places. The graph shows the contrasts between old and young and between male and female. (It does not compare the two countries, because the scales are standardised separately.) As is well known, men tend to be less religious than women in Western societies. The size of this gender gap seems fairly stable across the adult age range; the narrowing gender gap for British people in their 40s and 50s is intriguing but unlikely to be significant.

Religiosity by age and sex



Previous research suggests that differences in religiosity between age groups reflect generational change, in which people born later in the 20th century are less religious than those born earlier, rather than individual change, with people becoming more religious as they get older. The trend apparent from this survey has two components: a distinction between older (50+) and younger people, combined with no clear differences between the younger age groups. Other data for Britain and Australia generally show a continuing fall in religiosity among the young, so for the moment this dataset must be regarded as slightly anomalous.

Controlling for age and sex, none of the other sociodemographic variables available in the survey are significantly associated with religiosity. (These variables include whether living with a partner, number of children, level of education, employment status, and rural or urban residence.)

Heterodoxy

The survey included a battery of items on the image of God, inviting respondents (excluding those who described themselves as both “not at all religious” and “not at all spiritual”) to what extent they agreed that God or the divine is:

- ... like a law, which is valid throughout eternity.
- ... like energy flowing through everything.
- ... like a person you can speak to.
- ... like a higher power.
- ... like the greatest possible value.
- ... nature.
- ... nothing more than a product of the human imagination with no reality in itself.

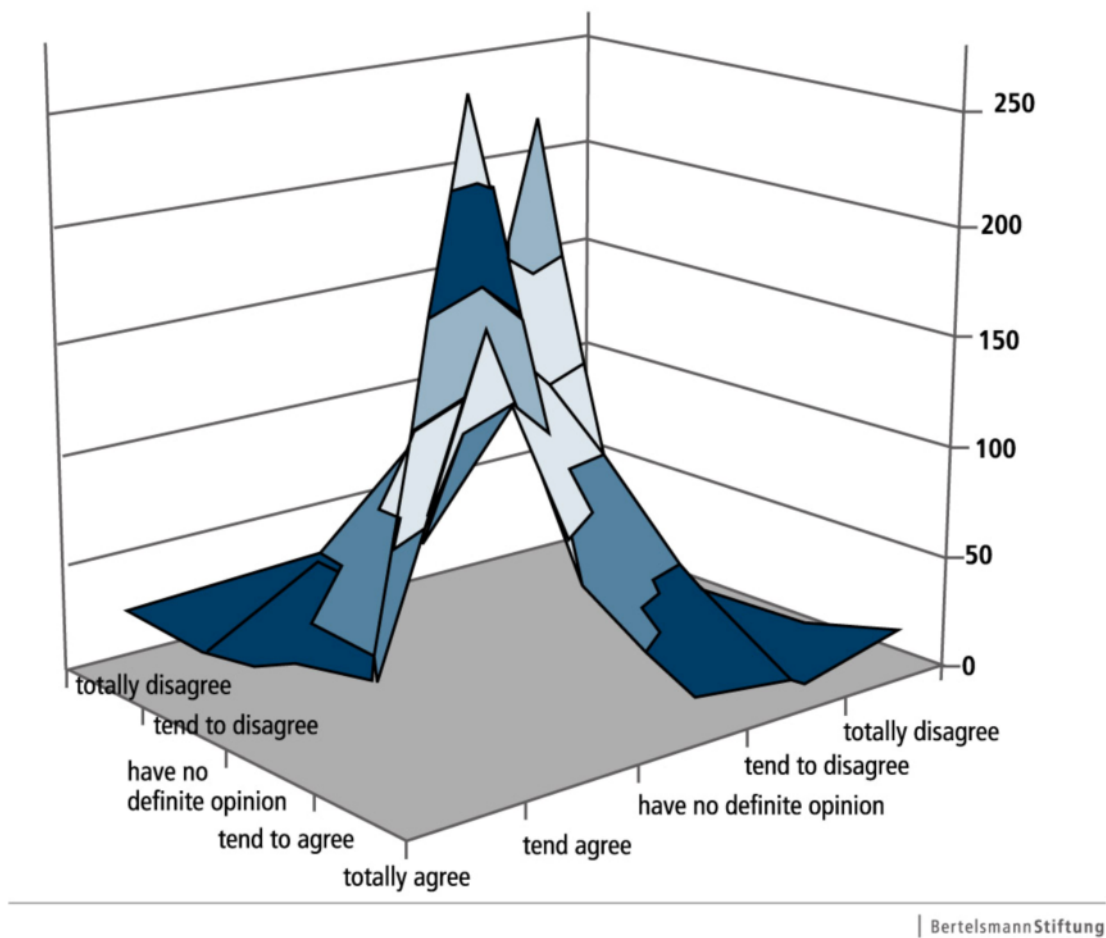
These statements correspond to very different theological positions, and one might imagine that people who believe in a personal God, for example, would not favor formulations typical of the New Age (“energy flowing through everything”), pantheism or paganism (“nature”), or liberal theism (“the greatest possible value,” “a higher power”).

In fact all of these statements (except the one describing God as a figment of the imagination) receive similar levels of agreement. Moreover there is a high correlation among these items (except the last): combining the first six produces a scale with a high degree of reliability (alpha coefficients of .93 and .92 for Britain and Australia respectively). By implication these statements all seem to relate to the same underlying belief.

Response habituation is likely to be at least a partial explanation. (When presented with a fixed set of agree/disagree options for a long list of items, respondents tend to select the same answers for all of them.) Nevertheless, these values hardly change when a seventh item (“I believe there is something divine in myself”) is added, and that statement appeared in a different section. To illustrate the surprising compatibility of these opinions, note that of those who totally agree that “God or the divine is like a person you can speak to” (a view we associate with evangelical Christianity), two thirds totally or tend to agree that “there is something divine in myself” (a view we associate with New Age spirituality).

A three dimensional representation of the responses to two statements will illustrate the position. Here the two statements are “God or the divine is like a person you can speak to” and “God or the divine is like energy flowing through everything.” People who agree with one generally agree with the other, despite the fact that theologically they are quite different (again being associated with conventional religiosity and alternative spirituality). The graph comparing belief in a personal God and in the view that “God or the divine is nature” is not very different, even though church doctrine and pantheism are generally seen as contrasting worldviews.

Image of God: like a person or like energy (for Britain and Australia combined)



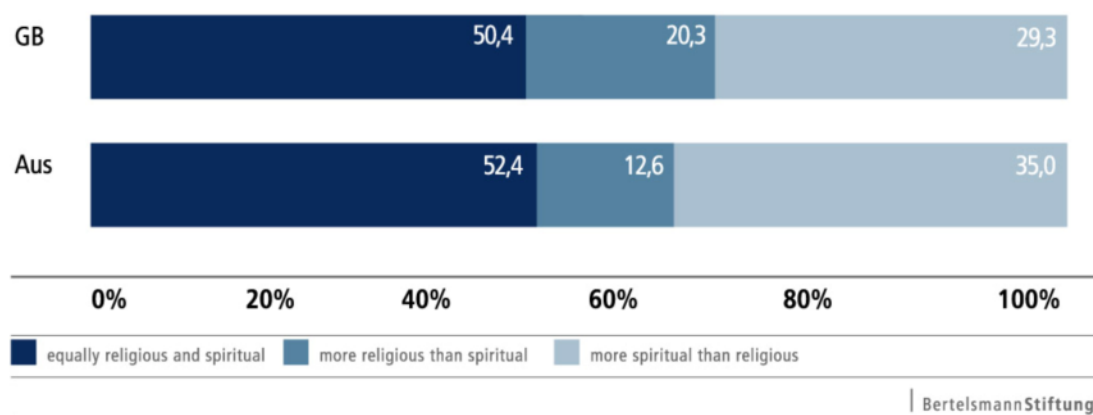
The lack of theological sophistication among ordinary people is no great surprise. These findings do remind us, however, that it is unwise to place too much emphasis on answers to any particular question in isolation. Views that religiously sophisticated people might regard as incompatible are held with no apparent sense of contradiction by much of the population.

Alternative spirituality is perhaps the most widely discussed form of popular heterodoxy. Many people (religious and otherwise) are happy to describe themselves as spiritual; in Britain the population is evenly distributed between four levels of spiritual self-identification (not at all, not very, moderately, and quite/very), while in Australia the numbers are higher at the top end, with 62 percent saying that they are moderately, quite or very spiritual. Whether this description translates into anything concrete is more doubtful. Half the sample in both countries categorically denied that

they were looking for anything in their religious beliefs, and the proportions who meditate or believe that supernatural powers are effective are relatively low.

In general, people in both countries are somewhat more likely to describe themselves as spiritual than religious. Although half choose the same level (from “not at all” to “very”) for both attributes, it is more popular to have one’s spirituality exceed one’s religiosity than vice versa, especially in Australia (where the ratio was nearly 3:1, rather than 3:2 as in Britain.)

Religious and spiritual self-identification



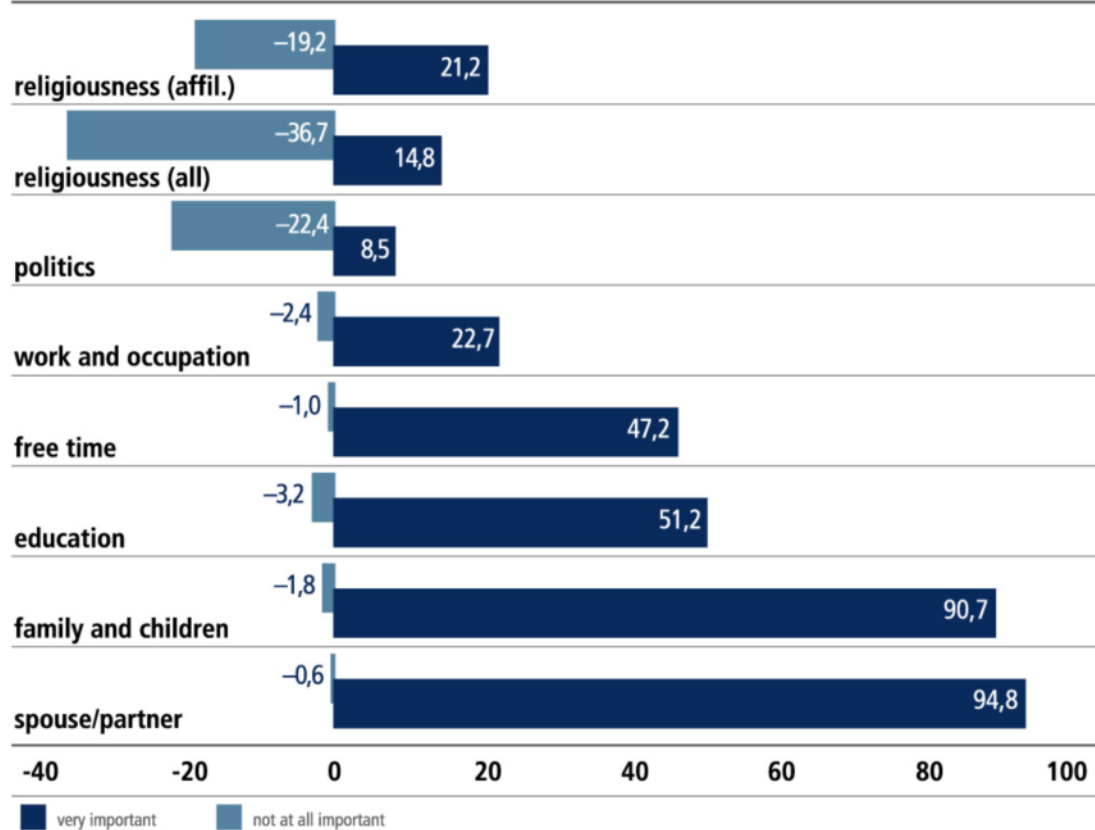
Salience

If the first question that we tend to ask is *how* religious people are, the next and arguably more interesting question is *how important* religion is to them. People have attitudes and beliefs about many things, but few such opinions make much difference in their lives. Although it seems likely that religion will be personally salient to people who are highly religious and vice versa, in principle it is possible that someone who is afflicted by doubt and does not belong to a church or go to services may nevertheless see religion as central to his or her existence. It is therefore essential to consider the importance of religion in life for our respondents.

The first point to note is that declared importance varies enormously across the sample. The degree of polarization is much higher than for other domains of interest. While there is a good deal of variation in what people describe as “very important” to them, from the 95 percent who classify their partners that way to the 23 percent in

Britain who say the same about their jobs, only a negligible number assert that spouses, children, education, free time or even work are “not at all important.” By contrast a great many people say that about religiousness, and even removing the third of respondents who do not have a religion still leaves a remarkably uniform distribution across the categories of importance.

Importance of various areas in life in Great Britain (% holding extreme positions)



Note: Figures include all respondents for religiousness (all), politics, free time, education, family and children. "Religiousness (affiliated)" includes only those with a religion (66%), "work and occupation" those working (59%), and "spouse/partner" those living with a partner (65%).

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Respondents were also asked about the importance of particular forms of religious practice: attendance at services and private prayer. As one would expect, the whole sample is strongly polarized, but even when only respondents who have a religion are considered, there are more people at the extremes than in the middle. Among Australians with a religious identity, prayer is very important for 30 percent, but it is not important at all for 21 percent.

Respondents were asked to what extent their religious beliefs affect 11 areas of life. The ranking (based on the proportion who responded “quite a bit” or “very much so”) in Great Britain follows; the Australian rank is shown in brackets, where different.

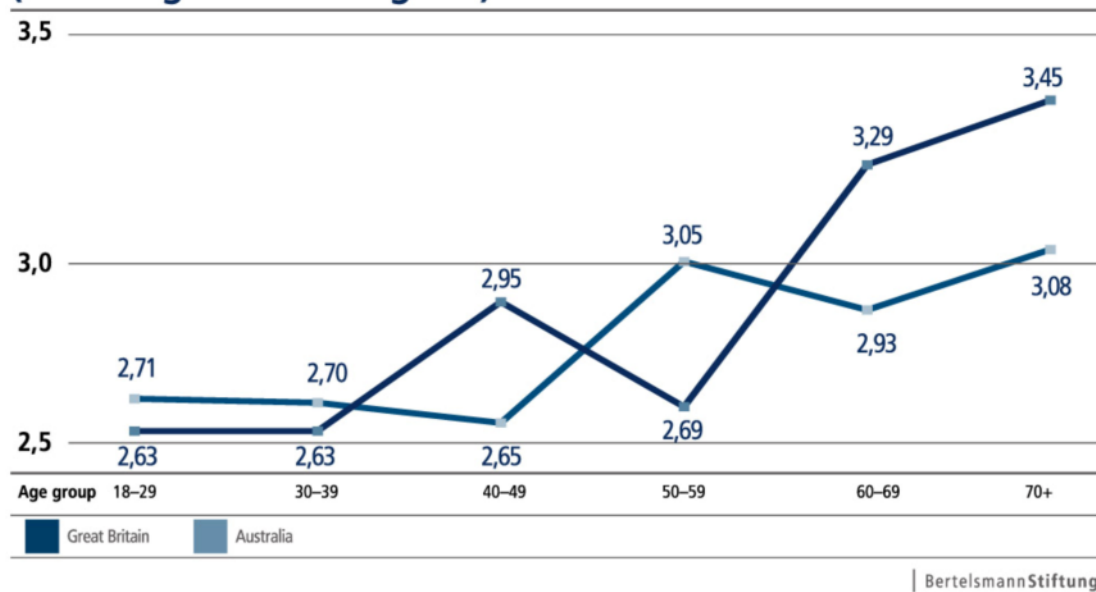
- 1 (2) Your dealings with vital events in your family, like birth, marriage, or death
- 2 (1) The upbringing of your children
- 3 Your attitude towards nature
- 4 Your coping with life crises
- 5 Your relation with your partner
- 6 Your coping with disease
- 7 Your questioning the meaning of life
- 8 (10) Your free time
- 9 (8) Your attitude towards sexuality
- 10 (9) Your work, your occupation
- 11 Your political opinion

There is a very high degree of consensus between Britons and Australians both in where religion is significant and how far: going from the top to the bottom of the list, the proportions giving positive answers start at one half and end at one sixth.

Religion in these countries seems connected with families. It is important for rites of passage and the socialization of the young. It helps people to deal with misfortune. It has less effect in the social sphere (work, politics) and also in what we see as our personal domain (free time, sexuality).

These items are highly correlated; the values can be summed to form a good scale with a high degree of reliability. The graph shows the relationship between age and the salience of religion measured in this way. Even excluding people who are not at all religious, it is apparent that older people find religion more important than those who are younger.

Average salience of religion in 11 areas of life (excluding the non-religious)

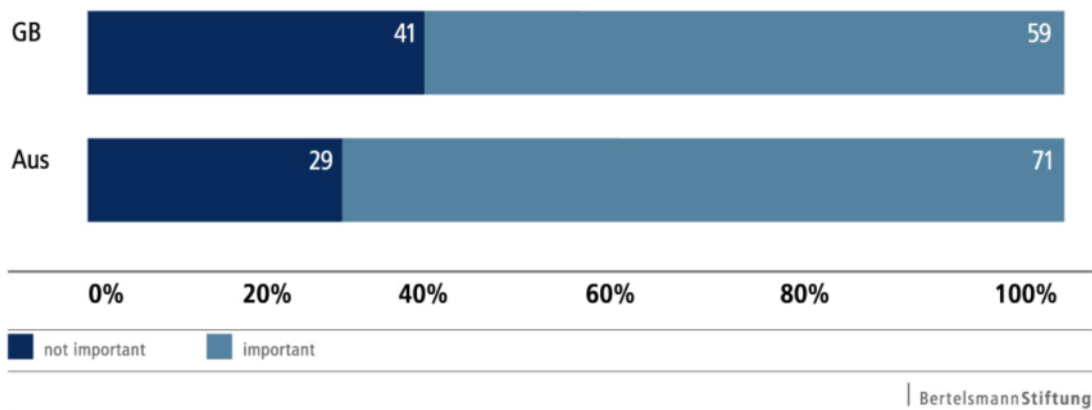


Views about religion

An intellectual concern for religion itself is another aspect of salience, particularly in modern conditions. In the past it was possible to take religion for granted and to be religiously committed in an unselfconscious way. Such an attitude has become much more difficult when everyone is aware of alternative worldviews and behaviors, both religious and non-religious. Religious identity, belief and practice are increasingly matters of choice, even for people who were raised in a religion. To make such choices requires first interest in and then knowledge of the options.

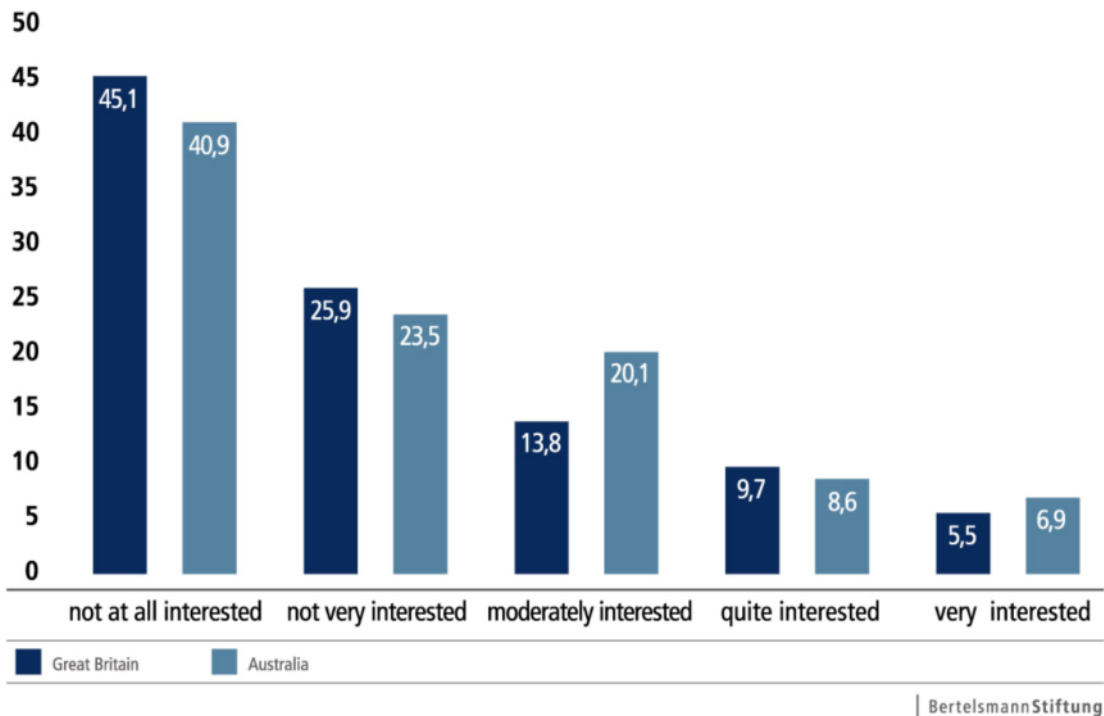
Respondents claimed to have some concern for religion; two thirds said that they thought about religious issues at least occasionally, though only about a third in each country reported doing so often. Whether they were referring to religion in their own lives or in the news is difficult to say. Slightly more than half claimed to be at least occasionally sometimes critical towards religious teachings they would in principle agree with. There was very general agreement that it is important to consider religious issues from different perspectives: in Australia only 30 percent said that this approach was not important, though the figure reached 40 percent in Great Britain.

Importance of considering religious issues from different perspectives



Nevertheless, most respondents had very little interest in learning or reading more about religion, and the majority had never or only rarely rethought their own views.

Degree of interest in learning more about religious issues

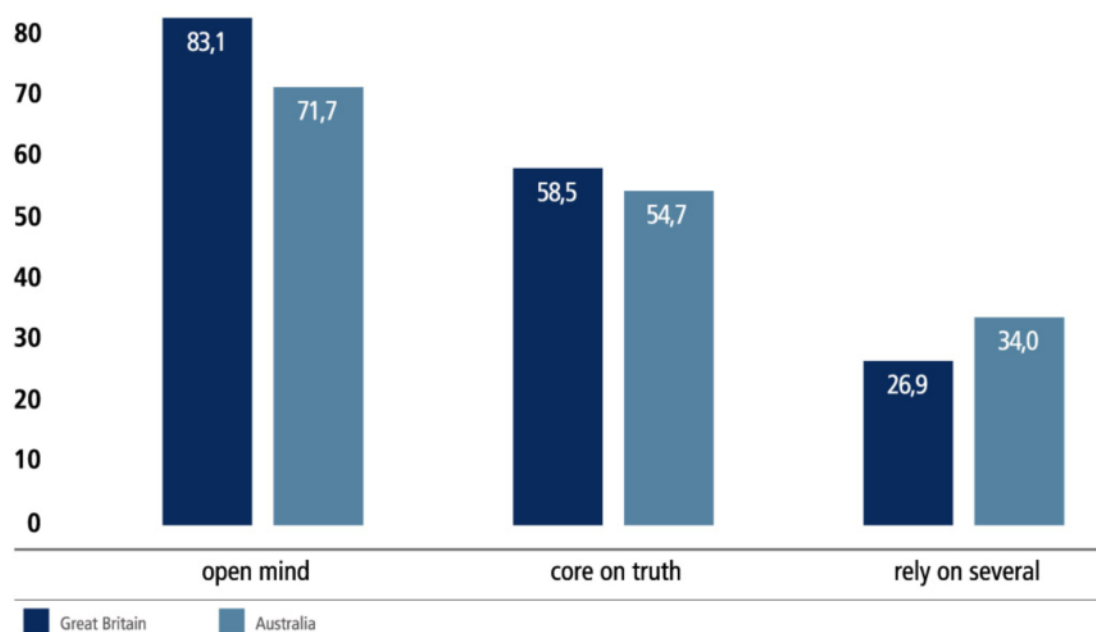


Tolerance

Tolerance for different religions is another feature of contemporary religious pluralism, though tensions have also risen with concerns over immigration and extremism. A very large majority of respondents in both Britain and Australia claimed to believe that one should have an open mind to all religions, though social desirability is likely to affect these answers strongly. (It is not acceptable to be seen as close-minded.) Oddly, the proportion of people who totally or tend to agree with this sentiment is higher in Britain than in Australia, while as we have just seen the positions were reversed for the similar notion that it is important to consider religious issues from different perspectives.

There was less agreement that every religion has a core of truth, and still less with the statement that “I rely on teachings from several different religious traditions.” Nonetheless, a quarter of Britons and a third of Australians did make this claim, which on the face of it seems rather implausible. One imagines that they had in mind an overlap in the ethical teachings of different religions, which thus justified a reliance on several of them jointly.

Agreement that: “one should have an open mind to all religions”; “every religion has a core of truth”; “I rely on teachings from several different religious traditions.”

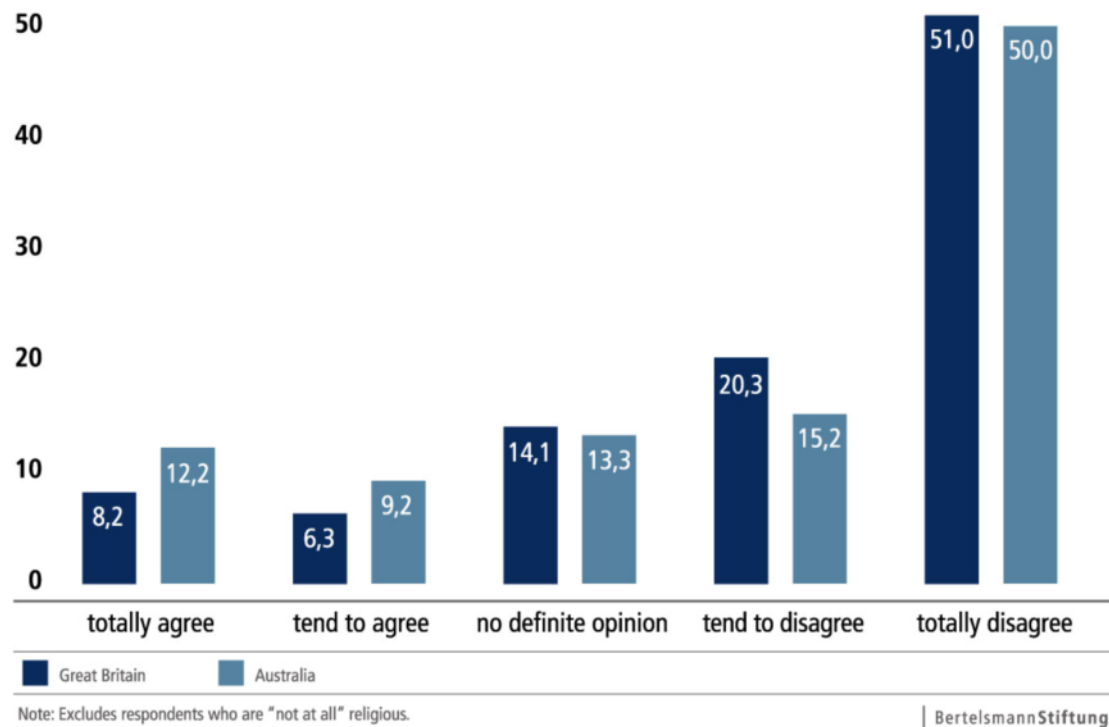


Agreement with the statement that “I think that foreigners should adapt their lifestyle to that prevailing in their host country” is largely uncorrelated with these items on religious pluralism. Indeed, to the extent that there are significant (albeit small) correlations, they are opposite in direction to what one might predict: positive with the view that “one should have an open mind to all religions” and “every religion has a core of truth,” and negative with “I try to convert as many people to my religion as possible.”

It is not surprising that relatively few people (11 percent in Britain, 17 percent in Australia) agree that “I try to convert as many people to my religion as possible.” Even these figures seem likely to exaggerate the number of those actively engaged in evangelism. After all, it is one thing to want as many people as possible to convert, and another to try to bring about that result personally.

What is more interesting is how few people agree that “I am convinced that in questions of religion, my own religion is right while other religions tend to be wrong.” In both countries half of all those who say that they are at least slightly religious totally disagree with this statement. Tolerance is such a powerful feature of modern morality that people are more willing to accept religious relativism than to assert that their own religion is right.

Degree of agreement that “my own religion is right while other religions tend to be wrong”



Summary

Connection with religion remains very widespread in Great Britain and Australia; two thirds of people describe themselves as having a religious identity, and many who do not report that religion was part of their upbringing. That is not to say, however, that religion is important to everyone. One might summarize the findings described above under four broad headings:

- polarization
- broad-mindedness
- generation gaps
- limited importance.

Firstly, we observe a degree of polarization in religious participation. Many people are committed in their beliefs and practice, but likewise many have no taste for religion. The distribution of frequency of attendance at services and private prayer is

somewhat bimodal, with people tending to be involved fairly often or not at all. Similarly half the sample said that they believed either “very much” or “not at all” in God or in an afterlife.

It is apparent, however, that the tendency to be either religious or non-religious does not rule out “soft” adherence. While half the population is confident about what they believe, the other half is not. This “fuzzy fidelity” is highly characteristic of modern societies and may be seen as a feature of the social transition whereby secular worldviews displace religious ones. The greater willingness to accept a description as spiritual rather than religious is a symptom of this condition.

Secondly, we see a tendency to be broad-minded to the extent of accepting a remarkably broad range of images of God, supernatural entities, and so on. Indeed, people are prepared to entertain so many possible beliefs that inconsistencies arise. Because popular theology is eclectic and unsophisticated, one should be cautious about taking all of the opinions reported too seriously. Whether assenting to an unusual belief has an impact on everyday life may be doubted.

The willingness to contemplate many different religious ideas may result from an unwillingness to claim possession of the absolute truth. Tolerance is one of the highest virtues in modern society, and people have come to be tolerant of different beliefs as well as other believers. In any event, the decline in respect for traditional authority has promoted the view that everyone can judge things for him or herself.

Thirdly, there is a marked difference between older and younger adults in the average degree of religiosity and in the importance assigned to religion even by those who are religious. By contrast with other surveys, however, there are no clear differences apparent here in the younger age groups, implying that the secularizing trend might have bottomed out. The usual gender gap is in evidence: women are on average more religious than men.

Finally, although the importance attached to religion varies greatly across the sample, its salience is relatively low compared to other areas of life. Religion in Great Britain and Australia is seen as important in family matters and in times of crisis, but much

less so at work or in personal free time. Few people are interested in learning more about religion.

To the extent that anything is certain, it is that the religious environment is changing in the modern world. The interpretations offered here are not definitive and some will be debated. All evidence about what is happening is precious, and the Religion Monitor contributes more material to the framework of our understanding.

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