PEOPLE AND PLACE

RELIGION AND AGE IN AUSTRALIA

Gary Bouma and Philip Hughes

The age profiles of religious groups in Australia are changing at different rates. Most mainstream Christian denominations have a higher proportion of adherents aged 60 or more than does the population as a whole. In most cases the age profile of people who actually attend services is older again. This is especially true of people who attend the Uniting, Anglican and Presbyterian churches. The proportion of Jews who are 60 or more is also high. In contrast, it is very low for Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

Australia is an ageing society. In 1991, 7.5 per cent of the population were over 70 years of age and 15 per cent were over 60. In 1996, 8.3 per cent are over 70 and 16 per cent are over 60. Over the last century there has been a dramatic change in life expectancy. In 1890, at birth, males were expected to live 47.2 years. In 1995, they could expect to live 75.0 years. The life expectation at birth for females was 50.8 in 1890. This has increased to 80.8 in 1995. While changes in the age structure are largely a product of lower fertility, increases in life expectancy also play a role. Together they lead to the expectation that Australian will continue to age. How is this ageing process reflected in Australia's religious communities?

Though Australia is ageing, it is not ageing evenly. Some groups are 'ageing' faster than others. Most major denominations of Christianity are ageing faster than the population, except for the Catholics. Even Pentecostals, who are supposed to be appealing to youth demonstrated an ageing shift at the same rate as the overall population. Meanwhile immigration and higher birth rates have served to keep comparatively youthful such groups as Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus although they too can be expected to age as immigration slows. Those who declare that they have 'no religion' continue to be the most youthful.

Table 1 provides one measure of ageing by comparing 1991 and 1996 census data on the proportions of those who identified with 11 large Christian denominations who are 70 and older. The 'oldest' denominational group is the Presbyterian and Reformed, followed by the Uniting Church, Churches of Christ, and Anglicans. The Pentecostals and Orthodox have comparatively low proportions of those 70 and older.

Catholics comprised just over 27 per cent of the population. They are the largest religious group in Australia and the only Christian denomination larger than 0.4 per cent of the population to have declined in the per cent 70 and older between 1991 and 1996. Anglicans, Presbyterians and Uniting together make up 33.3 per cent of the population.² In each of these three groups the proportion aged 70 or more grew by at least 15 per cent between 1991 and 1996, a rate which is substantially greater than that of the population as a whole. The highest percentage increases in the proportion 70 and over were recorded among the Churches of

Christ, Orthodox and Lutherans each of which had a different growth pattern.

AGEING AND GROWTH

Table 1: Per cent identifying with various religious groups in the 1991 and 1996 national population censuses in Australia (aged 70 years or more)					
Denomination	Per cent aged 70 or more in 1991	Per cent aged 70 or more in 1996	Per cent increase in the proportion aged 70 or more 1991-96	Per cent increase, all ages 1991-96	
Anglicans	10.6	12.2	15.1	-2.9	
Baptists	8.6	9.3	8.1	5.4	
Catholics	7.5	7.1	-5.3	4.17	
Churches of Christ	10.0	12.8	28.0	-3.9	
Lutherans	8.5	10.4	22.4	0.0	
Orthodox	4.4	5.6	27.3	4.6	
Pentecostals	3.0	3.3	10.0	15.9	
Presbyterians & Reformed	13.7	16.0	16.8	-7.7	
Salvation Army	9.1	10.9	11.2	2.8	
Seventh-day Adventists	9.8	10.7	9.2	10.4	
Uniting Church	11.2	12.9	15.2	-3.8	
(Population)	(7.5)	(8.3)	(10.6)	(6.2)	

It might be expected that ageing and growth are inversely related, with those groups which are declining in numbers likely to be ageing more rapidly. Patterns of growth and decline in most religious groups in Australia have usually been explained primarily by patterns of immigration and by birth rates.³ Groups experiencing growth due to higher birth rates and immigration would be expected to be more youthful than others.

Source: ABS, Census, 1991 and 1996, customised matrix tables PCC0124 and e01pcrat

The data in Table 1 suggest a much more complex relationship between ageing and growth. While Catholics had a lower percentage 70 and over, their numbers grew at a lower rate than that of the population as a whole. This meant that, despite their growth, they declined slightly as a proportion of the population (dropping from 27.34 per cent to 27.03 per cent). The Orthodox also showed the same pattern of lower growth and relative decline as the Catholics but had a much higher percentage increases in the proportion 70 and over. Seventh Day Adventists and Pentecostals grew at a rate faster than the population as a whole, but aged at about the same rate.

Since differences in increases in the proportion 70 and older among Christian denominations cannot be explained simply by differences in patterns of numerical growth and decline, these differences must be explained by variations in the ways in which these groups attract and retain people associated with them. These variations may in turn may have a bearing on the viability of different groups. It is possible for a group to age, but remain healthy and vital, so long as its pattern of recruitment is one that takes people in at later stages in the life cycle like 'seniors clubs'.

The religious groups in Australia with the highest proportion 70 and older enjoyed a growth spurt following the Second World War which peaked and then plateaued in the 1960s. This growth can be explained in part by the large scale migration to Australia of people from the United Kingdom, a migration in which Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists were predominant. In addition to increasing their numbers, this migration would have added young families to these groups. The 1996 Census revealed that of the 'overseas born' who immigrated before 1981, 16.7 per cent were Anglican, while of those who immigrated between 1991 and 1996 only 8.5 per cent were Anglican. Visits by the authors to parishes and congregations continue to reveal a high proportion of migrants among active members. This indicates the important role of migration in infusing these groups with new life in the immediate post-war period.

However, aside from migration, religious organisations largely recruit at birth, a pattern which continues to be the case for well-established Christian denominations. For example the 1991 National Church Life Survey of over 300,000 attenders in Protestant and Anglican Churches in Australia found that twelve per cent of all these attenders had changed their denomination within the past five years while only three per cent were recruited from non-church backgrounds. If birth and retention to adulthood of those born to them is the primary growth mechanism, the age profiles of long-established religious groups in Australia is a clear indication of decline. This decline results from a failure to attract the children of those who identify, and, in the case of Anglicans, Presbyterians and Uniting, a failure to attract the grandchildren of those who identify with these groups. The current age profile of people identifying with these three groups indicates that while these groups continue to attract the identification of the Pre-Boomer cohort they have failed to attract that of the Boomers. This suggests that a more complex cohort analysis is needed to understand the ageing patterns of religious groups in Australia. But first a comparison of identifiers and attenders.

AGEING: ATTENDERS VS IDENTIFIERS

The analysis of patterns of ageing of some major Christian denominations is enhanced if we compare the age patterns of those who attend with that of those who identify with a particular group in their census returns. The analysis of attenders is made possible by the National Church Life Survey of Protestant and Anglican Churches conducted in 1991 and 1996 and the Catholic Church Life Survey which gathered nation-wide data on Catholic attenders in 1996. These surveys, timed to coincide with the census, only included people 15 years of age and older. Table 2 arranges the denominations in order of the extent of

'ageing' of those who attend.

Table 2: Per cent of adult attenders and adult identifiers (15 years of age and older) with various religious groups in Australia who are 60 or more years of age

	Per cent of adult	Per cent of adult		
Denomination	attenders	identifiers		
	aged 60 or more	aged 60 or more		
	%	%		
Uniting Church in Australia	49	28		
Anglicans	43	26		
Catholics	35	19		
Presbyterians	34	32		
Salvation Army	34	26		
Lutherans	33	26		
Churches of Christ	26	27		
Baptists	22	21		
Pentecostals	11	11		
(Population)		(20)		

Source: National Church Life Survey 1996 and Catholic Church Life Survey 1996, provided by NCLS Research and Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, Pastoral Research Projects Office, and ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 1996, customised matrix table e03pcrat

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that in general attenders are older than identifiers. Since it is safe to assume that most attenders will indicate in their census forms that they identify, attenders are that subset of those who identify who actively participate in the group. The Baptists are the only group where the proportions of attenders and identifiers aged 60 or more are close to the proportion of the population aged 60 or more. Pentecostals have a younger age profile than the adult population as a whole, but the rest of the denominations presented have older profiles than the population for both attenders and identifiers. But as a rule attenders have an older profile than identifiers.

Catholic, Uniting and Anglican attenders are much older than their identifiers and the population. This means that the active participants in these groups are substantially older than those who identify with the group. This indicates a failure to attract the participation of

those younger people who are oriented to the group, a failure to be successful in the group's natural market.

In contrast Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Baptists and people associated with the Churches of Christ show a closer relationship between the age patterns of identifiers and attenders. In 1991, the disparity between the age of identifiers and attenders among Presbyterians was considerable; forty-one per cent of attenders were over 60 compared with 27 per cent of those who identified as Presbyterians. That disparity has decreased to 34 per cent for attenders and 32 per cent for identifiers 60 and older in 1996. While some younger people have been recruited to the Presbyterians between 1991 and 1996, the change has occurred largely because many older identifiers have died. This denomination has continued the process of re-formation with a younger, albeit smaller, group of attenders. Again the need for a more complex cohort analysis of religion and age and denomination is indicated.

Some explanations for denominational differences between the proportions of those who identify and those who attend at any age lie within the nature of the denomination in addition to any demographic factors. In the 1993 National Social Science Survey a national sample of respondents were asked why religion was important to them (if it was). The results were strongly predictive of whether a respondent was likely to attend church services or not. A large majority of those who indicated that religion was important as a source of values reported a decline in their frequency of attendance since childhood. Those who saw religion primarily as worship of God were less likely to report declines in their frequency of attendance. Add denominational analysis of these data showed that Anglican, Catholic, and Uniting respondents were more likely than those of other denominations to indicate that religion was important as a source of values and were more likely to report that they had declined in their frequency of attendance since youth.

A COHORT ANALYSIS OF RELIGION AND AGE

The association between age and patterns of attendance and identification can partly be attributed to the needs and social responsibilities associated with different stages in the life cycle, but cohort differences also play a part. Earlier arguments about religion and age in Australia have contrasted cohort and life cycle explanations. For example, are older people more religious than younger people because they are closer to death (a life-cycle difference) or because younger generations are giving up, or not taking up, religion (a cohort difference)? Table 3 compares the age profiles of nine Christian denominations for four different cohorts. The denominations are ordered from that with the 'oldest' age profile to that with the 'youngest'.

Table 3: Denominational age profiles of identifiers (I) and attenders (A) compared with Australian population age profile, persons aged 15 or more								
Denomination	15-29		30-39		40-49		50+	
Denomination	I	A	I	A	I	A	I	A

Presbyterian			_		=	-	++	++
Uniting Church	-		-		=	-	++	++
Anglican	_		_		=	_	+	++
Salvation Army	-		-		=	-	+	++
Lutherans	_		_		-	+	+	++
Churches of Christ	_	_	_	_	=	=	+	+
Baptists	=	_	=	=	=	+	=	+
Catholics	++		=		=	=	=	++
Pentecostal	=	=	+	++	+	+	_	_

Source: ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 1996, customised matrix tables PCC0124 and e01pcrat. Note: the symbol = denotes that the profile is within one percentage points of the population profile; - or + that it differs by between one to four percentage points; -- or ++ that the difference is greater than four percentage points. The age group 50+ are Pre-Boomers, 40-49 are Boomers, 30-39 are a mix of Boomers and post-Boomers, 15-29 are Post-Boomers.

Table 3 demonstrates that the relationship between religion and age varies between Christian denominations and within those denominations by age cohort. For all denominations the age profile of identifiers is closer to that of the total population than is the age profile of attenders. For example, Anglican attenders are much older than the population, but identifiers more closely mirror the age profile of all Australians. Baptists are quite different. There is a very close correlation between the percentages of Baptists who identify and those who attend and the profile of the Australian population. In most cases there is no more than a two percentage point difference.

Catholics and Pentecostals are the only denominations to have higher proportions of younger people than the population as a whole. Catholics under 40 identify but do not attend. Baptists under 40 both identify and attend and at the same proportion as their age group in the population as a whole. Pentecostals are the only group under-represented among those over 50.

Anglican, Uniting, Salvation Army and Presbyterian profiles exceed the national age profile only in the 50+ group. For these denominations it appears that the generation who were adults in the 1950s, the Pre-Boomers, provide a substantial proportion of current attenders. Indeed what appears from the cohort analysis is that many of those who were adults in the 1950s and those who attended as children in the early 1950s (Pre-Boomers) continue to attend and identify. They are much more likely to do this than the Boomers. Post-Boomers appear neither to attend nor to identify in substantial proportions. A comparison with the age profiles of these denominations in the 1991 Census does not support the notion that they appeal to older people who join them later in life. Rather it suggests that they have failed to continue to attract substantial proportions as attenders from those who identify with them and that they are now losing the identifiers. The Lutherans demonstrate a similar pattern

except that they have more strength among attending Boomers (40-49).

AGEING AND ETHNICITY

Table 4: Birthplace of Australians identifying with various religious groups, 1996					
Religious Group	Per cent born in Australia of Australian-born parents	Per cent born in Australia with one or both parents born overseas	Per cent born overseas		
Anglicans	67.7	15.3	17.1		
Catholics	53.2	21.4	25.4		
Uniting Church	76.7	13.1	10.2		
Churches of Christ	72.1	15.2	12.7		
Salvation Army	74.3	14.6	11.1		
(Population)	(55.8)	(18.7)	(25.5)		
Source: Hughes, 1997, based on Census of Population and Housing, 1996, customised matrix table e03pcrat					

The percentage of the Australian population born overseas increased between 1991 and 1996 from 22 per cent to 25 per cent of the population. The proportion of Australians born of Australian-born parents decreased from 59 per cent to 56 per cent of the population. Catholics also increased slightly in the per cent born overseas between 1991 and 1996. Table 4 compares the birthplaces of those identifying with several Christian denominations. The proportion of Catholics born overseas, or in Australia of Australian-born parents, nearly matches the figures for the population as a whole. The higher proportion born in Australia but with one or both parents born overseas indicates the impact of immigration in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The data in Table 4 indicate that those who identify with the Anglican Church, Uniting Church, Churches of Christ, and the Salvation Army are predominantly Australians born of Australian-born parents. Taken together the data in Tables 3 and 4 suggest a pattern of dissociation with British Christianity as consecutive cohorts reduce their level of identification and attendance with these groups. Religion is a strong bearer of identity. In the past Anglicanism and, to a lesser extent, Methodism, have been bearers of English identity while Presbyterianism has played a prominent role in Scottish identity. The decline in the appeal of these denominations may reflect a decline in maintaining an interest in those identities, identities which may be undergoing further erosion with the success of the republican movement and as economic, social, and cultural ties with Britain decline in significance. ¹³

AGE PROFILES OF OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS

The data in Table 5 indicate that those who identify with religious groups which are not Christian are generally much younger than Christians.

Table 5: Percentage of Australian adults 60 years of age or more identifying with various religious groups, 1996				
Religious Group	Percentage of adults (15 plus) who are 60 or more years of age			
Buddhists	9			
Hindus	7			
Jews	29			
Muslims	5			
No Religion	9			
(Population)	(20)			
Source: ABS, Census of Population and Housing, 1996, customised matrix table e01pcrat				

The youthful age profile of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam reflects the pattern of immigration to Australia of recent years. Almost one third of Buddhists were born in Vietnam and arrived here since 1975. Between 1991 and 1996, a further 78,709 immigrants arrived from countries in South East Asia, many of them Buddhists. In 1996 most Buddhists were under the age of 50.

Most Muslims arrived in Australia since 1970, early arrivals coming from Turkey and Lebanon. More recently, many have arrived from Indonesia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and other places around the globe. Seventy-seven per cent of all Hindus living in Australia in 1996 were born overseas. Many have arrived recently from India and Fiji, some from Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Immigration has brought increased diversity of religious traditions to Australia. As a result, some of the religious groups which were dominant among white Anglo-Celtic Australians have decreased in overall significance.

NON-INVOLVEMENT IN RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

It might be assumed from the above data that younger people mostly belong to a religion other than Christianity or declare 'no religion'. However, because of the comparatively massive size of the Christian groups, this is not the case. Among people aged 20 to 24, for example, 27.5 per cent identify themselves as Catholic, 19.5 per cent as Anglican, 5.7 per cent as Uniting, 21.2 per cent as having 'no religion', and 4.1 per cent as belonging to a religion other than Christianity. But when compared with the national distribution, young people are over represented among those with 'no religion' and those declaring religions other than Christianity (one-third higher in each case).

There has been a significant increase in the per cent of the population claiming 'no religion' since people were first invited to indicate that preference on the Census in 1971. In 1971, 6.7

per cent took that option, compared with 12.7 per cent in 1986 and 16.6 per cent in 1996. 'No religion' indicates a desire not to identify with any particular religious group. That many who declare 'no religion' once did identify with a religious group was indicated in a sample survey of over 6000 Australians in 1989-90. Of those who said they were now 'no religion', 31 per cent said that when growing up they had been Anglican, 21 per cent had been Methodist or Presbyterian, and 19 per cent had been Catholic. While for some, declaring 'no religion' may mean a lack of interest in religion, it does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in spirituality. Other surveys have shown that some people who indicate 'no religion' continue to express belief in God and may conduct some personal religious practices. ¹⁶

A cohort analysis shows the strength of 'no religion' among younger people, with 22.2 per cent of those aged 20-24 years saying they have 'no religion' compared with 12.0 per cent of those aged 50-54 years, and 5.5 per cent of those over 75 years of age. There is a significant difference between people under 40 and people over 50. Those people in their 40s appear to be 'transitional'.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary figures for different age groups and the data on changes over time both reflect a change in Australian culture toward lower levels of religious identification and participation than was the case in the 1950s. While most people under 50 still identify with a religious group, those over 50 are much more likely both to identify with such a group and to attend religious services. This change is gradually extending through the population. The changes reported here do not imply that this 'extension' will continue indefinitely any more than that it is safe to assume that rates of church attendance were high before the 1950s. At the moment, however, there is no evidence that the portion of the population claiming to have 'no religion' will rise above 25 per cent in the near future.

A range of factors is causing an ageing among major Christian groups, particularly among attenders. These factors include changing immigration, birth rate and cultural patterns resulting in a sharp decline among younger people both in identifying with religious groups and in attending them. Mainstream Christian denominations do not seem to be providing links with cultures, whether ethnic or life-style, that are valued by young Australians. While many young people continue to be interested in spiritual matters, they are less likely to see Christian churches as the best way to express or develop these concerns.

Many Australians see religion as important in providing values for themselves and society but they do not feel it necessary to participate in religious organisations. They do not consider attendance at a church necessary for the maintenance of these values. In contrast, people who see religion primarily as worship, many of whom are Baptists and Pentecostals, feel that church involvement is important for the maintenance of their religious interest. ¹⁷

In the dying down from prominence of such major Christian denominations as the Anglican, Presbyterian, Uniting and Lutheran churches some see the passing of Christendom. We see these changes as marking a major transition from a pattern of church and society relationship

established in the course of the nineteenth century and characterising the twentieth. This pattern saw Australia as a Christian country, with Christian British institutions and grounded personal identity in association with major Christian organisations. These organisations interpreted life, instilled the core values and guarded morality. The Pre-Boomers are the last cohort of this era, the last to see the world in these ways and to relate to religious organisations in these ways. All of this is passing on and a new era is emerging, an era of leaner religious organisations, greater diversity and competition for fewer but more committed members.

References

- 1 Year Book Australia 1988, Catalogue No. 1301.0, ABS, Canberra, 1988, p. 274; Australian Social Trends 1997, Catalogue No. 4102.0, ABS, Canberra, 1997a, p. 40
- 2 G. D Bouma, 1997b, 'Increasing diversity in religious identification in Australia: comparing 1947, 1991 and 1996 census reports', *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1997b pp. 12-18
- 3 ibid; G. D. Bouma (Ed.), Many Religions, All Australian: Religious Settlement, Identity and Cultural Diversity, Christian Research Association, Kew, 1997a
- 4 Bouma, 1997b, loc. cit.
- 5 See P. Hughes, *Religion in Australia: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Kew, 1997 p. 9 based on 1996 National Population Census, 1996, customised matrix table ep01crat provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and P. Hughes, *Religion: A View from the Australian Census*, Christian Research Association, Kew, 1993, p. 11.
- 6 P. Kaldor, J. Bellamy, R. Powell, M. Correy and K. Castle, Winds of Change: The Experience of Church in a Changing Australia, Anzea, Sydney, 1994, pp. 213, 226
- 7 See P. Hughes, 1997, op. cit., pp. 8, 56, 68
- 8 Data provided to the Christian Research Association by the National Church Life Survey from their survey of Anglican and Protestant church attenders in August 1996 and by the Catholic Church Life Survey which surveyed a random sample of 180,000 Catholic church attenders in November 1996.
- 9 D. Burke and P. J. Hughes, The Presbyterians in Australia, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1996, p. 84.
- 10 P. Hughes, C. Thompson, R. Pryor and G. D Bouma, Believe It or Not: Australian Spirituality and the Churches in the 90s, Christian Research Association, Kew, 1995, p. 82.
- 11 G. D Bouma and M. Mason, 'Baby boomers downunder: the case of Australia' in W. C. Roof, J. Carroll and D. Roozen (Eds) *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, Westview, Boulder, CO, 1995, pp. 59-86
- 12 Compare Hughes 1993 op. cit. with Hughes 1997, op. cit.
- 13 See P. Bentley and P. Hughes, *Australian Life and the Christian Faith: Facts and Figures*, Christian Research Association, Kew, 1998, p. 103 for data on the attitudes of identifiers of various denominations towards Australia becoming a republic. Opposition to the idea was much greater among those identifying themselves as Anglicans and with the Uniting Church than among Catholics and those with 'no religion'.
- 14 For the data in this section see Census of Population and Housing: Selected Social and Housing Characteristics Australia, catalogue no. 2015.0, ABS, Canberra, 1997b, table B05, p. 38 and Hughes, 1997, op. cit., pp. 17, 29, 45.
- 15 P. Bentley, T. Blombery, and P. Hughes, Faith without the Church? Nominalism in Australian Christianity, Christian Research Association, Kew, 1992, p. 48

16 Hughes, et al., 1995, op. cit., pp. 35-37

17 ibid., p. 82

Back to Contents Vol. 6 No. 1

Back to People and Place Home Page