

STUDY 4

Believing in the 21st. Century.

From the Anglican Church newspaper in Sydney.

ALMOST a third of Australian teenagers do not have any religious beliefs, new research has revealed.

And academics from Monash University and the Australian Catholic University found those with serious spiritual and religious beliefs were likely to donate more money, participate more in their communities and be more concerned about their society than their non-religious counterparts.

The research showed 31 per cent of youths aged 13 to 17 were non-believers - a significant drop from previous generations.

"When you consider that such a large percentage of young people, four out of five, don't even do an hour a month of community service, that is of great concern for Australian society," said Australian Catholic University associate professor Ruth Webber, one of the paper's authors.

While there were no comparable figures to show the size of the drop of non-believers, anecdotally it was a big decline, she said.

The paper was presented at the International Conference on Children's Spirituality at that university's Ballarat campus last week. It forms part of a book, *The Spirit Of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality In A Changing Australia.*

Researchers surveyed 1219 13- to 24-year-olds nationally. At least 47 per cent of those aged 13 to 17 identified themselves as Christians. About 15 per cent classified themselves as New Age and 7 per cent as having "other" beliefs.

Researchers found that active Christians rated helping others and social justice higher than other spirituality types and that teenagers serious about their spirituality were more likely to be volunteers. They were also more likely to be more generous when giving to charity.

Caitlyn Foster, 17, describes herself as an active Christian and voluntarily runs a stall for the Fair Trade organisation at her church every Saturday, selling products from India and South Africa. It turns over up to \$800 a week. Profits go back to the people who make the products.

"It's a good use of our time," she said. *"It benefits other people."*

David Moore, 19, is a University student who gives much of his spare time to helping 'good causes'. He went to church with his parents as a child, but has no connection today. He sees himself as an atheist.

Yes, it's true ! Atheists are the happiest. I guess we're in touch with reality and not wasting our time in fantasy land. It would be challenging to convince a young educated person to believe in any religious heresy.

A University of Queensland study found that moving away from traditional beliefs to "trendy", self-focused religions was not making young adults happier.

TASK ONE. -

The extract from the above article comes from an Anglican publication.

Do you think there is any value in studies such as the one being described? How should the church respond to them. How do you react to the statements of the two young people? Do you think they reflect the beliefs of most of their generation?

Introduction:

We have seen how the Gospel stories grew out of each other and how the writers of each of the Gospels intended that their particular story had especial relevance to their readers. We then discovered that the earliest followers of Jesus viewed the Easter story in a number of different ways. Then, as the Church grew and became more organised and structured what had been just one of a number of beliefs hardened into 'doctrine' and 'dogma'.

So, for more than a thousand years, what Christians believed was in many ways defined by the Church itself. The word of the Priest became absolute and to question what was accepted 'truth' was not only disapproved, but actively persecuted.

Then, during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, knowledge became more widely available beyond the Church and educated classes, until, by the late 18th. Century in many western nations, most people were at least able to read and write.

The Bible and church doctrine became open to scrutiny by more and more people and, by the turn of the 20th. Century, theological and biblical study was no longer the sole province of the church and an educated clergy.

We have seen how these changes allowed religious doctrines and long held beliefs to be challenged, and the role of 'theologian' to become an important aspect of religious practice.

We examined some of the ideas of three 'theologians', and seen that three substantially different attitudes to Christianity can be explained in a logical and reasoned manner using the language and techniques of modern scholarship.

TASK TWO -

Clearly, some of the things expressed caused people to feel uncomfortable and threatened. Why is that so?

Today we will look at the beliefs of some of the young people of Australian society and try to understand why they express themselves the way they do.

I have used information from a recent study being used by many of the mainline Churches as a basis for their future strategy in relating to younger Australians.

The Spirit Of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality In A Changing Australia.

They're between 17 and 28 years old and comprise the most influential generational group since the baby boomers. Within a few years, Generation Y (also known as the Internet Generation, Echo Boomers, iGeneration, the MyPod Generation and The Millennials) is tipped to inspire great change across social, political and business landscapes. There are about 4.5 million Gen Y Australians -- born between 1979 and 1990. Technology has played an important part in empowering them. About three-quarters of Gen Ys regularly use the internet. They are the most educated-minded generation in history and are more optimistic about life and work than their predecessors, Generation X. They are generally socially aware, and tolerant and accepting of cultural differences

By the end of the session we may catch a glimpse of younger Australia, and perhaps find some suggestions of how we need to connect with them as a church. Over the page is a press release from the people who conducted the study which gives a précis of their findings.

TASK THREE-

As you read the information from the research see if it reflects how you experience the beliefs of the younger Australians you know in your life.

PRESS RELEASE – EMBARGO: UNTIL THURSDAY AUGUST 3, 2006

NATIONAL STUDY OF THE “SPIRITUALITY” OF GENERATION Y COMPLETED

The Spirit of Generation Y project (2003-

2006), is a national study of spirituality among Australian young people in their teens and twenties, conducted by researchers from Australian Catholic University, Monash University and the Christian Research Association. The research consisted of a survey of a nationally representative sample of Generation Y (born 1976-1990), with comparison groups from ‘Generation X’ (born 1961-75) and the ‘Baby-Boomer’ generation (born 1946-60), supplemented by extended, face-to-face interviews.

The project explored Generation Y’s range of worldviews and values, their sense of meaning and purpose in life, the ways in which they find peace and happiness, their involvement in traditional religions and alternative spiritualities, how they relate to the society around them, and the influences which shape their outlook and lifestyle.

Key Findings

Beliefs

48% of Generation Y (Gen Y) believe in a God, 20% do not, and 32% are unsure. Two-thirds of those who do not believe in God, or are uncertain, do believe in a ‘higher being or life-force’.

Spirituality

There are three main strands in the ‘spirituality’ of Generation Y: Christian: (44% of Gen Y) Eclectic: (17%) Humanist: (31%)

Christianity

Only 19% of Gen Y are actively involved in a church to the extent of attending religious services once a month or more; (conservative Protestant denominations—16% of Gen Y—have by far the highest rates of attendance); but many more believe in God and Jesus, and pray regularly. Religion is seen as a private matter, and there is a strong tide of movement among Gen Y Christians away from previous involvement or identification with a church, and even from religious belief.

Eclectic

17 % of Gen Y have an eclectic spirituality, believing in two or more New Age, esoteric or Eastern beliefs (including belief in reincarnation, psychics and fortune tellers, ghosts, astrology) and perhaps engaging in one or more alternative spiritual practices (yoga, Tarot, taichi). Some of these people attend religious services but most do not. Such beliefs and practices are more common among young women than young men.

Humanist

31 % of Gen Y can be classified as Humanists, rejecting the idea of God, although a few believe in a ‘higher being’. Of these secular-minded young people, almost half believe that there is very little truth in religion, and less than a quarter believe in life after death. They also largely reject alternative spiritualities.

Social concern

Gen Y are not notably more self centred and lacking in altruism than older generations. For example, 27% are involved in some kind of volunteer work per month. Those who are actively involved in service to the community and have positive civic values are far more likely to come from the ranks of those who have spiritual and religious beliefs and actively practise them.

Influences The significant social forces shaping contemporary religion and spirituality—secularisation, the relativism of postmodernity, consumer capitalism, individualism— influence more than Generation Y alone, although young people, by virtue of their age and life stage, are more subject to their effects.

Generation

Y are what their parents and Australian culture have made them. They have taken strongly to two 'late modern' principles: that an individual's views and preferences, provided they harm no one else, should not be questioned or constrained, and that spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are purely personal lifestyle choices in no way necessary.

De

spite moving away in large numbers from traditional religious sources of meaning, they seem to have a strong sense of purpose in their lives. There is no evidence from this project of a widespread plague of meaninglessness or social alienation among Generation Y, nor of a critical lack of social support.

Al-

though broader support structures such as church and local community have grown weaker over the last century, families appear to have compensated by increasing the intimacy of family life, and young people also rely more heavily on friendship networks. By these means, Generation Y appear to be successful, for now, in holding at bay the threats to personal security inherent in the much more isolated status of the individual within society.

Much has been written and theorised about the changing spiritual landscape in late modern societies: the rise of alternative spiritualities, the increasing popularity of the New Age, the attraction of Eastern religions, the development of eclectic 'mix and match' spiritualities and the emergence of nature religions and NeoPaganism. This study did not find that Gen Y are a generation of spiritual seekers; less than one-fifth of Gen Y have a 'mix and match' spirituality, while few are seriously exploring alternatives like Buddhism or Wicca. Many young people in Australia are what we have called Humanists following an avowedly secular path in life, rejecting belief in God and declaring that there is little truth in any religion, affirming instead human experience, human reason and scientific explanations. Some are angry at or disenchanted with organised religion, but most simply do not care or are not interested. This is not unique to Generation Y; their parents are the 'Baby Boomer' generation, 23 percent of whom are Humanists, while a further 24 percent are nominal Christians –

people who might maintain a residual belief in God and identify with a denomination, but little more than that. Non-religious young people simply reflect the broader secular context and the spirituality of their own parents.

I am moving on in my life and finding other aspects of my life that are keeping me interested... working, socialising, are more important as I basically need to get ahead in my life and do things for myself, again I don't believe as strongly as I used to

I sometimes find people who go to churches a bit hypocritical, as in they don't practice what they preach; they follow but don't actually do their faith. I prefer to have a simple belief in God on my own. I believe that people don't practice what they preach with their faith.

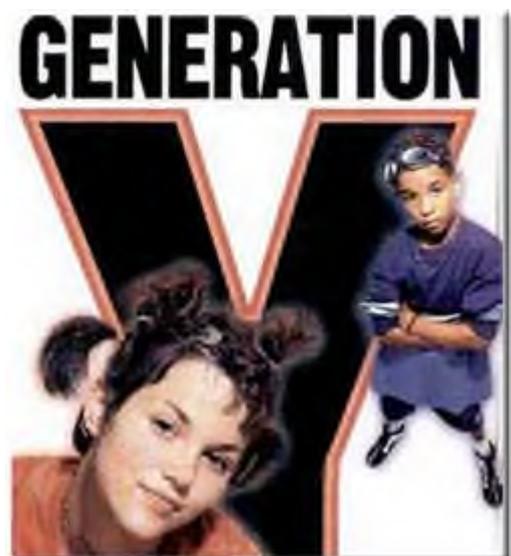
Having learned some things about science and evolution I can see that people were not made to be in God's image and that led me to realise that I don't believe it

TASK FOUR -

Do you see these descriptions of young people today as different to when you were young? If so, what reasons might there be to explain the differences?

Over the page are comments from four of the young people who took part in the research. In order to retain their privacy the names of those involved have been changed.

Each of the following young people claim to have come from some sort of 'Christian' background. Their family is Christian or they attended a Christian school, or had a connection with a church. They are therefore not 'representative' of all young Australian people, but their responses to questions about the faith can be said to have some connection with experience. They are more informed about the faith and therefore should be better prepared to make 'faith' choices in their lives.



Michael—(Anglican)

I do – negatively – it informs how I think about things, but in the negative. I see Christianity really negatively because of its extreme stance on things like homosexual marriages, abortion, premarital sex. Things that I think are okay, churches that I have seen on TV seem to condemn. So in that sense I totally distance myself from them. . . . I guess what it is that turns me off most about it is Christian people who I talk to. You know, people who try and harass you about their faith, and also media portrayals of it.

I never had a huge involvement with it, a guess what is that turns me off most about it is Christian people who I talk to. You know, people who time and harass you about their faith, and also media, media portrayals of it. But I did when I was younger go to Sunday school. It seems like another world for me now. As an adult, or sort of an adult I would never make that choice now. It was my parents choice to give me that, umm, but I don't think at that young age it gave me much... or to pull my own bases on religion, so that has come through the media and chatting to people now. Now that I am a free thinking university students or something like that. So yeah, it was minimal, I didn't grow-up in a religious family, I was just sort of taken along to Sunday school as a bit of a thing but I've never really felt religion very strongly in a country like Australia.

Monique—(Roman Catholic)

I mean, I think if everyone sticks to themselves, like if every religion say for example, minds their own business and lets each other religion go about their own way then they'll be fine. Obviously everyone thinks their religion is the right religion, but whose to judge that a faith isn't right for them, and Judaism isn't right for them or that. You can't judge that. If they think it's right for them, then it's right for them. As long as it works for them, leave us alone.

Yes. My views are a little bit different. I do believe in the Big Bang, but I think that it was God who created the Big Bang. I mean, all the scientific stuff, they still can't explain what had actually started. They know that it all was little and everything went off with a bang, but, yeah, they still don't know what had actually started it. There had to be something there for it and what it did. So yeah, I don't think so far that that conflicts with anything in the Bible. I mean, I still know that God created, by everything that's in Genesis, God still created the world, and all the people and trees and everything. . . . I wrestled with it for a long time, but that's what I believed in the end.

Brian—(Lutheran)

[What gives life its meaning and purpose?] Um, I think that to make other people happy I think. Yes, just to make everyone else happy. Yep. Just to pray to God and making people happy. . . . Umm, I would like people to remember me sort of yeah, as being a happy person and someone that can help people but also hopefully something to do with astronomy, but yeah, that I've made an impact somehow.

Yeah. Like, I used to believe in God, like a lot of Jesus and all that. Now I'm starting to doubt that. Starting to think oh yeah, he's probably just – as I grow older, like I learn more about science and evolution and all that so I'm starting to think that would probably be more accurate.

Rosa—(Orthodox)

Yeah. I believe in something. Not specifically God, like, I'm still not quite sure about what I believe in. I certainly believe in something higher than that, whether it's the Christian God or something else, I'm still not quite convinced. I'm still on a journey to finding what my true beliefs are. . . . I haven't done huge amounts of research into other religions and stuff. I would prefer not to conform to a specific religion but at the moment combine them all into what I feel works for me.

I stayed in a caravan park and I would go for a walk on the beach in the morning or night and just sort of that being at the beach makes you feel like not smaller but certainly there is something else out there. I certainly believe that experience has helped me convince myself almost that there is something else, something higher. I haven't really decided to go searching as much as some others, simply because I don't think at this stage of my life it's most important that I make a decision of what I believe. Certainly that kind of experience has given me this feeling that there has to be something more around me, something bigger and if it something bigger it's better.

TASK FIVE-

Are there any consistent themes in the thoughts of these young people? Do they seem to express themselves similarly to the young people you know? How would you describe 'generation y'?

There is consensus amongst those who spend their time examining the sociology of Australian society that *Generation Y* is generally the best educated, most technologically aware and the most sceptical group of Australians ever born. These young Australians are not unique. Those of their age in most of the western nations reflect the same characteristics and attitudes as our young people.

There are certainly *generation Ys* who have connected with the church. Particularly the more evangelical churches like *Hillsong*. However, some studies conducted into those churchgoers suggest that the major reasons for their attendance are 1. *family pressure*, 2. *'hip' music & 'techno' worship*, 3. *relationships with the opposite sex*.

The majority of generation Y's have distanced themselves from the organised religious experience and indeed from commitment to 'membership' in anything other than their own peer groups.

This presents a clear problem for the church. How do we communicate with these young people? How do we develop a spirituality and community that is attractive to them?

The Roman Church has decided to retain a consistent expression of their faith and doctrine, recognising that it will not be popular. However, they feel that the maintenance of 'core beliefs', despite leading to a smaller practising community, will in the end once again become popular leading to a period of renewal and growth.

TASK SIX-

Do you agree with the attitude of the Roman Church? Do they have the answer to the 'problem'? What are the benefits and the dangers of their strategy?

Conclusion.

This Easter there will be few young people attending Christian churches throughout Adelaide. Most will be celebrating the Australian lifestyle by taking the long weekend break to spend time with their friends. For them Easter is the last of the 'good weather' long weekends.

FOR OUR CHURCHES AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH—EASTER IS THE CORE MOMENT OF FAITH IN OUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS—EASTER, AS WE HAVE SEEN THROUGHOUT THIS STUDY, IS THE CORE BELIEF FOR CHRISTIAN.

BUT IT IS ALSO CLEAR THAT THE MESSAGE OF EASTER IS NOT BEING COMMUNICATED TO OUR SOCIETY AND THE GENERATION Y'S PARTICULARLY, IN A WAY THAT TOUCHES THEIR LIVES.

HOW DO WE CHANGE THIS?

DO WE RETAIN THE TRADITIONAL BELIEF AND APPROACH AS EXPLAINED BY 'CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL' GROUPS?—OR SHOULD WE ACCEPT THE NEED TO 'CHANGE' AS SUGGESTED BY MANY 'LIBERALS'? - OR SHOULD WE START ALL OVER AGAIN AS RADICAL PROGRESSIVES SUGGEST?

OR DO WE SIMPLY ACCEPT THAT IT IS TOO DIFFICULT?