

The significance of the spirituality revolution

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2 May 2024, for the Progressive Christianity Network of SA

Good evening, everyone, and thank you Don for your introduction tonight and for announcing the topic of the presentation, **The significance of the spirituality revolution**. What I have decided to do in exploring this topic is to introduce you to several people who will contribute to the presentation. I have chosen them because they all have a lot to say, and what they say is very worthwhile. They will each contribute to our understanding of spirituality. We will explore various aspects of spirituality in our time, consider whether the increasing interest in spirituality today does constitute a revolution, and reflect on the significance of contemporary trends. I hope you will follow my thinking as we proceed.

The first person I will introduce is Rachel Kohn (slide). For many years, Rachel was the presenter of the very popular radio program, **The Spirit of Things**, on Radio National, and in 2013 was the Guest Presenter here for the Wilks Oration. In 2003 Rachel published *The New Believers*, which is cast as an adventure into the contemporary trends in religion and spirituality. Some while ago, Rachel did a presentation for the Progressive Christianity Network of Victoria on **What's temporary and what's eternal in current spiritual trends**. Her paper is available on their website, and is well worth reading.

I chose to include Rachel tonight, because she began her presentation with a statement that is quite provocative, but very profound. It is a strong statement, that I will quote, and when I have read it, I will invite you to comment on it, to share your thoughts about it.

She says:

(Show slides of the words)

Despite all the moaning and groaning that religion is disappearing because the pews are more empty than full, there are fewer eligible men joining the priesthood, and church real estate is being sold off, (despite all that) we can rest assured that the spiritual yearning in the individual breast is not dying off.

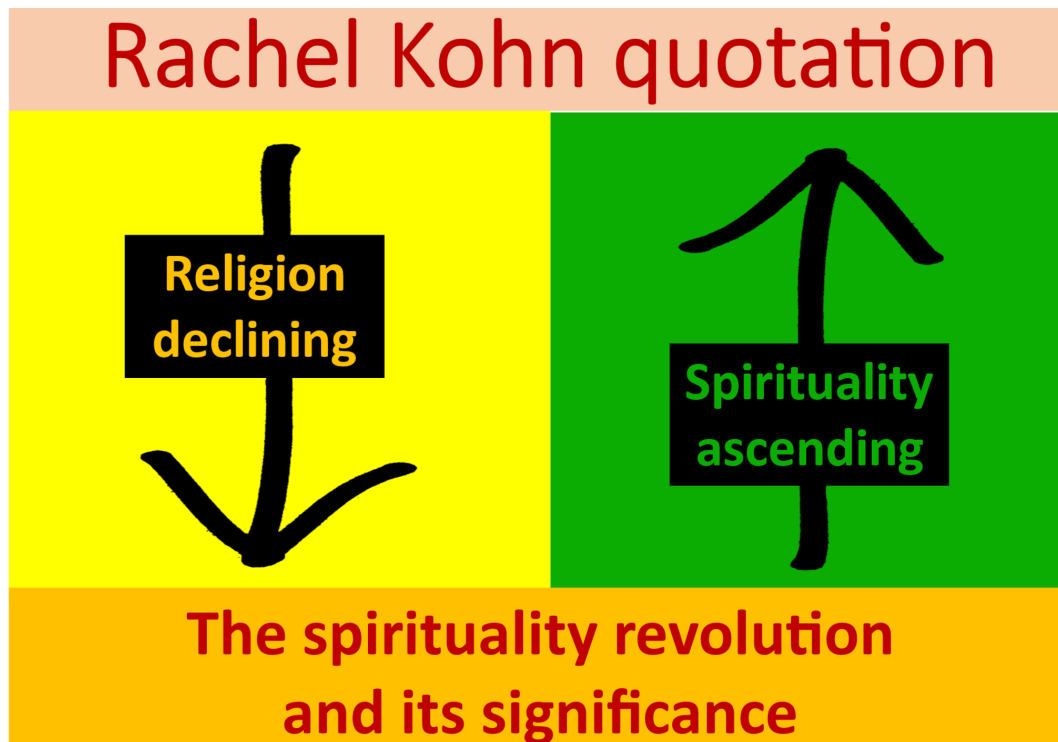
What is temporarily making itself felt right now, however, is the grief that has resulted from a misappropriation of values onto things, which are seemingly spiritual but are in fact material. Having confused religion with edifices and clerical jobs, those who ought to care about the spiritual health of the people, can be seen regularly weeping at wakes for a body that is not there.

Funnily enough, religion has resurrected somewhere else and the people in charge have not noticed.

What do you make of that statement?

What do you think she is getting at? Discuss

I will use that statement as a springboard, and as a framework for the presentation tonight.



Religion declining and spirituality ascending

To contribute to our thoughts on religion declining and spirituality ascending, I would like to introduce to you to our second person, Hugh Mackay (slide). Hugh Mackay is an Australian psychologist, social researcher and writer. You may already know him — he was a weekly newspaper columnist for 25 years, and is a regular commentator on ABC radio and television.

He is speaking at the Hawke Centre, UniSA, on 25th this month, on the topic, *The way we are*.

The publicity for his address says:

Life is messy. Relationships are complex. Outcomes are uncertain. Yet none of our differences — whether based on ethnicity, politics, religion, cultural tastes and preferences, or gender — are nearly as significant as the humanity we share.

That sounds like a great topic, but unless you have already secured a seat, you can't go, because it is fully booked.

(People are very interested in such topics these days)

I chose to include Hugh Mackay in this presentation because he has written this book (*Beyond Belief*), in which he argues that a growing number of people are abandoning religion in favour of a different kind of spirituality, one not restricted by institutions or guidelines.

In his book, Mackay includes the results of research carried out by the Pew Research Centre, based in Washington DC. This is a non-sectarian Think Tank, that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping the world. One of the areas of interest to Pew Research is religion, and a specific section of the Centre is identified as the Global Religious Futures Project.

The Centre conducts public opinion polling, random surveys, media content analysis, and a whole range of other social science research activities. This appeals to me – gaining evidence to support the claims made.

But, I would have to say that I found some of the evidence he quotes most surprising. The introduction is entitled **Religion goes marching on**, and reports that globally, religion is on the rise.

For example, in the very countries where the most vigorous attempts have been made to stamp out religion:

Russia under Stalin

India under Nehru, and

China under Mao Zedong

in those countries the evidence is that there has been a massive upswing, a massive increase in religious interest.

Results that were surprising to me included these:

- **Russia's President**, Vladimir Putin, maintains a private chapel, and sometimes wears a baptismal cross.
- And the Russian Security Organization (the successor to the KGB) has its own orthodox church just across the road from its Moscow headquarters.

In China, the post-Mao rise of religion has been extraordinary. At the time of Mackay writing in 2016

- The Pew Research Centre's 2006 Global Attitudes Project reported that 31% of Chinese people regard religion as either somewhat important or very important (they are mostly Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian).
- But in terms of Christianity, there are now many more Christians in China than members of the Communist Party.
- Pew Research projections are that by 2030 (not too far away) there will be more Christians in China than in any other country on earth. By then Chinese churchgoers will outnumber US churchgoers.
- Other Research data predicts that by 2050 China will be the world's biggest Muslim Nation, as well as the world's biggest Christian nation.

These surprising results along with the commitment to religion in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East all contribute to the massive global rise in religion.

But we don't see that here in Australia. In fact, religious observance in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavia and some parts of western Europe paint a very different picture from the global trend. In those places, there is plenty of evidence that religious affiliation and church attendance has been continuously waning for the last 50 years. Some commentators refer to this as the west's post-Christian era.

1. Refer to **Australian Bureau of Statistics census data** showing decline in religion in glaring terms.

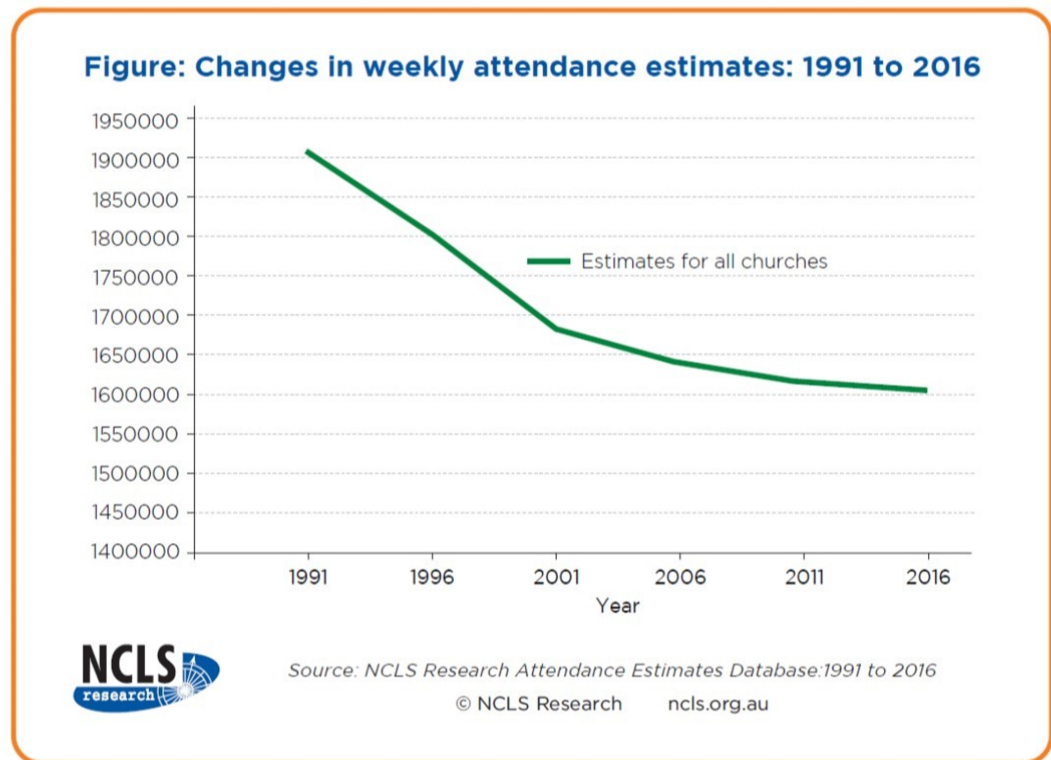
Religious affiliation (count and percentage) – census results: Key findings from the 2021 Census

- Christianity decreased by more than 1 million people, but is still Australia's most common religion;
- Almost 10 million Australians reported having no religion. Note: "no religion" refers to the broad group Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious affiliation (which can include those who are SBNR – spiritual but not religious).

2. **Act 2 Project of the Uniting Church** reports "declining membership and an aging demographic. This has led to an underutilised property base and a constrained financial environment. These factors are all leading to strains on the structural sustainability of our church ... this project's work is to understand both the causes & consequences of these strains so that effective solutions can be identified and

implemented.” Recommendations for action are to be put to the the 17th Assembly of the Uniting Church in July 2024.

3. **National Christian Life Survey.** The 2020 survey shows the decline in church attendance (slide)



In the 2020 NCLS community survey, respondents were asked “what their preferred style of spiritual activity is,” and Australians preferred spiritual practices are as shown (slide):

AUSTRALIAN'S PREFERRED SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Spending time in nature	57%
Listening to music that lifts my spirits	47%
Prayer, meditation or mindfulness	32%
Attending religious services (worship)	16%
Religious or spiritual reading	13%
Religious/spiritual talks, clips, podcasts	10%
Small groups for spiritual/social support	9%
Other spiritual practices	2%
None of the above	23%

NCLS research 2020 survey

In the face of this massive decline in religion in Australia, Mackay observes that the spirituality movement has captured the imagination of many people — especially young people — who vehemently deny any interest in religion, but still want to explore the non-material values and concepts traditionally associated with religion. He devotes a whole chapter, replete with case studies, to the increasing numbers of people who identify as spiritual but not religious, and form part of the SBNR movement.

The decline in religion and the ascendancy of spirituality is a western phenomenon, not a global phenomenon. So, I have to qualify the topic for tonight, and change it to **The significance of the spirituality revolution in the west.**

Rachel Kohn introduced us to the notion of spirituality, and Hugh Mackay extended our understanding of it by observing that whilst religion is waning, a more generic spirituality is very much on the rise.

So far, we have loosely spoken of religion and spirituality, without defining them. Before we move on, it might be a good idea to clarify those terms.

Are they one and the same thing?

Are the 2 terms interchangeable?

Or do they refer to different concepts?

Let's hear ideas that you might have about the terms religion and spirituality.

Discuss

DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

(Had access to a paper by Jonathan on the response of the church to the spirituality revolution. Have included some of his ideas).

- (1) Spirituality refers to a connection with something greater than oneself, to the ways in which human beings relate to the sacred.
- (2) Unlike organised religion, spirituality is more subjective and individualised, allowing people to explore their own understanding of the sacred.
- (3) It is a journey that goes beyond the material world, focussing on the inner self, as distinct from the material aspects of life.
- (4) Many spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of compassion, love, and the interconnectedness of all things, fostering a sense of unity and harmony.
- (5) Some people find spiritual fulfilment within established religious frameworks. Others discover it through: personal experiences, philosophical enquiries, or connections with the natural world.

Some characteristics of spirituality

Religion focuses on a set of beliefs and doctrines — spirituality focuses on experiences which put a person in touch with the sacred, often associated with awe and wonder.

Spirituality fosters a search for meaning beyond material existence.

Many people are spiritual, but not religious. Their spiritual pathway is found outside of religion.

Spirituality requires reflection, so meditation, contemplation and prayer are most significant.

(Anything you would like to add?)

At this point, let me introduce a third person, David Tacey. David Tacey is an Australian public intellectual, a writer, and a public speaker. He presented the Wilks Oration here in 2003, speaking on “Emerging spirituality in Australia today”, and we are still talking about it tonight.

Tacey was born in Melbourne, and at 12 years of age, his family moved to Alice Springs where he was greatly influenced by Aboriginal cultures. After completing secondary school there, he enrolled at Flinders University and studied literature, philosophy and art history. He then transferred to Adelaide Uni and completed a PHD in literature and analytical psychology.

In terms of his own spiritual journey, Tacey says

- Religion taught him to find God in heaven
- Aboriginality led him to find the sacred on earth
- and psychology revealed to him the possibility of finding sacredness within

Tacey taught literature, spirituality and psychology at La Trobe University from 1985 — 2014

He retired from academic life in 2014 to commence a new phase in his life as an independent scholar.

I have chosen to include David Tacey in the presentation because he is recognised as one of Australia’s leading thinkers in religion and spirituality. In 2003 he published this book, **The Spirituality Revolution**.

In it, he says that a spirituality revolution is taking place in western societies, a revolution that he defines as a spontaneous movement in

society, showing a new interest in things of the spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and well-being. The spiritual life is no longer a specialist concern, confined to the interests of a religious group. It is available to everyone. Tacey contends that mainline churches are unable to take up a dialogue with the new spirit of our time, partly because they only acknowledge traditional ideas of the sacred, conventional ideas within their own religious tradition.

To obtain a measure of the extent and popularity of spiritual interest, in 1998 Tacey surveyed fifty students at la Trobe who had enrolled in one of his literature and psychology classes.

47 of those students (ie 94%) indicated that personal spirituality was a major concern in their lives, while only 2 students said that religion was important.

In 2002 he surveyed 125 students in one of his subjects.

115 of those students (92%) indicated an interest in spirituality, and only 10 (or 8%) indicated that they followed one of the religions.

Tacey quotes Soul of Britain surveys which are administered by the BBC. Researchers at Nottingham University have been monitoring the results in terms of spirituality, and found extraordinary results.

In the early 2000s, 76% of the population said that they had had a spiritual experience.

This was 59% higher than 10 years before, and 11% higher than 25 years before.

In an address given in Adelaide in 2002 entitled *The rising interest in Spirituality today*, Tacey lists all the areas that had recently invited him to speak at their conferences. The list includes

Healthcare and nursing	adolescent health
psychiatry and medicine	religious education
psychology & psychotherapy	business management
outdoor and physical education	social work
business management and leadership	
anthropology and sociology	
architecture and landscape design	
environmental activism and ecological concern	
Aboriginal reconciliation and the political process.	

An impressive list, showing the breadth of interest.

Tacey concludes that virtually every traditional discipline struggles to come to terms with the postmodern interest in spiritual matters.

THE SPIRITUALITY REVOLUTION dictionary

A revolution (other than the overthrow of a government) is

- A dramatic and wide-ranging change in conditions, attitudes and operations,
- A significant and far-reaching change in thinking and ways of being.

The dramatic decline in religion in the west, and the extensive upswing in spiritual pursuits, does constitute a spirituality revolution.

What is the evidence for a Spirituality revolution (some egs)

Growing interest in spiritual practices and beliefs, including the increasing popularity of mindfulness and meditation practices.

The focus on inner calm, stress reduction, meditation and work-life balance practices.

The rise of eco-spirituality, emphasizing a harmonious relationship with nature, and recognising the sacredness of the environment.

The rise in SBNR numbers, highlighting the changing landscape of belief systems, with people finding spiritual meaning outside of traditional religious structures.

The plethora of spirituality resources online. People now have access to a vast array of spiritual teachings, practices and philosophies from around the world, allowing people to tailor their spiritual journey to their individual preferences.

Social media platforms have become hubs for spiritual communities, fostering a sense of connection among like-minded individuals.

The prevalence of spirituality books in bookshops (show books).

The significance of the spirituality revolution

The spirituality revolution is significant in the transformation of approaches to the sacred, away from conventional religious structures towards a more personal and experiential engagement with the sacred.

The SR is significant in terms of addressing a yearning for meaning and purpose in an increasingly complex and fragmented world. Modern society, marked by technological advancements and material pursuits has left many people feeling spiritually unfulfilled. The spirituality revolution serves as a response to the rapid pace of contemporary life, by providing a framework for self-discovery and inner peace.

A central significance of the SR is the emphasis on personal experience and autonomy. Traditional religious structures often prescribe rigid doctrines and practices. The spirituality revolution encourages people to embark on their own spiritual journeys.

The SR has been successful in reshaping the cultural narrative around success and fulfilment. In a world that often measures success in terms of material wealth and external achievements, the SR introduces alternative measures such as inner well-being, purpose and a sense of peace.