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**Teenage Religion/Spirituality: International Comparisons**

1. Teenage Religion and Spirituality: International Comparisons

Michael Mason, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

2. A Comparison of Religiously “Non-identifying” Australian and US Teens

Andrew Singleton, Sociology, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

3. A Comparison of Religion/Spirituality and Life Outcomes among Australian and US Teens

Ruth Webber, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

4. The Commodification of Religion Among Young People in Australia, USA and Thailand

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# Teenage Religion and Spirituality: International Comparisons

by

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**‘The Spirit of Generation Y’ -  
The Spirituality of Australian Youth and Young People aged 13-29**

Research Team

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Project website: <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/spir/sppub/sppub.htm>

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### **Abstract**

Research findings on teenage spirituality are compared across several different countries. World Values Survey findings show that Martin's patterns of secularisation still appear to hold, whereas several weaknesses in the anti-secularisation thesis of "European exceptionalism" are revealed. When US and Australian teenagers are closely compared on numerous parallel indicators in the National Survey of Youth and Religion and The Spirit of Generation Y surveys, Australian teenagers show a much lower level of identification with, and participation in, traditional Christian religion, and a correspondingly higher proportion of non-believers / nonreligious, reflecting a much more secular enviroing culture. However, changes in the religion and spirituality of US teenagers over the 20 years 1980-2000, and the high levels of 'religious individualism' among US and Australian teenagers, show that both groups are moving rapidly away from traditional religion towards an eclectic, private 'new spirituality'.

## Teenage Religion and the ‘New Spirituality’: International Comparisons

In all four papers of this session, research findings on teenage religion and spirituality are compared across several different countries. The focus of the first three papers is on comparisons arising from the NSYR<sup>1</sup> survey and its partial replication in the SGY<sup>2</sup> survey in Australia.

The NSYR survey is too well known to need any introduction here. Although a summary of the final report of the SGY project is available on the project website, the book version is not due to be released till July 2007, so the following background information on that project may be helpful in understanding the present paper and those that follow in this session.

### 1. ‘The Spirit of Generation Y’ project

#### *Research objective*

The research objective of the project is to advance the understanding of ‘the spirit of Generation Y’:

#### 1) Spirituality:

- the ‘varieties of religious and spiritual experience’ among young Australians aged 13 to 29 years;
- the versions of religion and spirituality which such experience shapes and reflects;
- and the alternative, non-religious ways in which young people are defining themselves and interpreting their lives;
- the components of these religions and forms of spirituality:
  - the master-narratives, the worldviews,*
  - the value-complexes,*
  - the rituals and other practices,*
  - the communal structures and activities*
  - (put simply: understandings, values, practices, company)*

#### 2) Influences on spirituality:

- the range of cultural resources used in constructing spirituality – including music, film and popular media;*
- the extent to which the contemporary cultural milieu tends to shape the interpretation of the life-story more as a solitary journey than a communal one;*
- patterns of cultural communication of spirituality;*
- the social patterns of differential access to and distribution of forms of spirituality.*

#### 3) Social consequences of spirituality:

- the association between particular styles of spirituality and the holding of particular values and attitudes to the self, to others, and to society;*
- the links between people’s spirituality and their*
  - social ethic,*
  - cultural creativity,*
  - attitudes of civility and sociability,*
  - social and political awareness and participation,*
  - pro-social and anti-social behaviour,*
  - citizenship activities.*

#### Definition of spirituality

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<sup>1</sup> Smith 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Mason, Webber & Singleton, forthcoming.

Influenced by the ‘turn to the subject’ in philosophy’s modern period, spirituality was increasingly understood as the interior dimension of religion’s public, external and visible world of doctrine, ethics, ritual and community. From the seventeenth century, especially in Europe, spirituality referred to a person’s manner of living the Christian life and seeking ‘Christian perfection’, and particularly to their mode of private prayer – to the intense cultivation of religious self-consciousness. Particularly in the religious orders, there developed ‘styles’ or schools of spirituality: Benedictine, Ignatian, Carmelite, Alphonsian. Each of these centred on a particular way of praying, but encompassed an entire spiritual lifestyle, applicable not only to the monks and nuns of the orders, but gradually, adopted also by small numbers of laity for whom piety was a primary concern. Spirituality was their personal, affective style of living the Christian life.

In the late twentieth century, from an almost exclusively Christian, (and mostly Catholic) usage, ‘spirituality’ expanded to embrace the world: of the twenty-five volumes of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, (Cousins 1985) only three volumes were devoted to Christianity.

In the SGYproject, ‘spirituality’ is defined broadly as a worldview and an ethos expressed in a set of practices. The term is applied even to secular ways of life which themselves may well repudiate all notions of ‘spirit’, and ‘spiritual’.

### SGY Research method

3 stage design blending qualitative and quantitative research

- stage I intensive interviews: initial exploration and survey preparation
- stage II national survey
- stage III intensive interviews: to fill out the survey findings; see change over time

The stage II survey was conducted by telephone. A national probability sample was designed, stratified by age and location (state, and metropolitan / non-metropolitan). The age-range principally targeted was ‘Generation Y’ (born 1971-1990). The youngest age group was ‘oversampled’ to provide greater reliability to estimates. A ‘control sample’ of persons born from 1945 to 1970 was included for comparison purposes—to avoid attributing exclusively to Generation Y characteristics shared by the two previous generations.

Table 1. ‘Spirit of Generation Y’ Survey Sample

**Survey sample: Agegroups (unwtd)**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>1 13-15</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>24.8</b>
<b>2 16-18</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>25.2</b>
<b>3 19-24</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>25.3</b>
<b>4 25-59</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>24.7</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1619</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## 2. Religion and spirituality among youth: international comparisons

First, to orient the discussion in the world scene, Table 2 shows a range of comparisons of belief in God among those aged 15-29, by different countries, drawn from the World Values Surveys at the turn of the millennium. The question was: 'Which, if any, of the following do you believe in? ... God'. The response options were: Yes / No / Don't know. The table indicates the percentage of those aged 15-29 who responded 'No', calculated conservatively: the base of the percentages is the entire 15-29 group, including the 'missing' – those who responded 'Don't know', or did not answer.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 2. World Values Surveys 1997-2001; Youth aged 15-29: Non-Belief in God by Country<sup>4</sup>**  
(Percentage responding 'No'; sorted in ascending order)

Country / Year of Survey	Percent	Country / Year of Survey	Percent
Philippines 2001	0.3	Australia 1995	20
Malta 1999	0.5	Austria 1999	20
Colombia 1998	0.6	Slovakia 1999	21
South Africa 2001	1	Latvia 1999	22
Brazil 1997	1	Finland 2000	24
Puerto Rico 2001	1.4	Russian Federation 1999	24
Mexico 2000	2	Spain 2000	28
Chile 2000	3	Britain 1999	29
Poland 1999	3	West Germany 1999	31
Italy 1999	5	Switzerland 1996	31
Argentina 1999	5	Japan 2000	36
Repub of Ireland 1999	6	Slovenia 1999	39
USA 1999	7	Belgium 1999	39
Portugal 1999	7	Denmark 1999	40
Northern Ireland 1999	10	France 1999	42
Croatia 1999	10	Norway 1996	43
Lithuania 1999	14	Hungary 1999	45
Canada 2000	15	Estonia 1999	46
Singapore 2002	16	Sweden 1999	47
Serbia/Montenegro 2001	16	Czech Republic 1999	58
Ukraine 1999	17	East Germany 1999	70
New Zealand 1998	18	Viet Nam 2001	72

<sup>3</sup> Hence the percentages are percentages of the entire age group, not of those within the age group who gave valid responses to the question. This is a more conservative estimate.

<sup>4</sup> Data for this table were derived by 'online analysis' of the most recent WVS surveys, available on the site: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com/> by crosstabulating responses to the question on belief in God by agegroup.

The variations between societies have generally continued follow the patterns described by David Martin in his *A General Theory of Secularisation* (1978). In particular, Martin drew attention to a set of countries with the following characteristics: a Protestant majority, no North/South geographical division between Protestant and Catholic, and varying degrees of establishment of religion. Across this set, he noted that the strength of Christianity varied inversely with the level of establishment.<sup>5</sup> Twenty years later, this pattern still clearly held among young people.

- At one end of this continuum, the Scandinavian countries, with the Lutheran church strongly established, showed the lowest levels of belief and involvement; in the table above, belief in God in these countries among young people aged 15-29 is towards the low end of the international spectrum; the 'No' response ranges from 40% in Denmark to 47% in Sweden.
- Next, Britain (excluding Northern Ireland), with the Anglican church established in England, but enjoying a lower level of legal privilege than the Lutheran Church in Scandinavia; here the 'No' response was 29%.
- Third, Martin considered together Canada and Australia; one could add New Zealand. These former British colonies had, historically, a strong Anglican ascendancy, which might be thought of as a quasi-establishment, but have no established religion. In this group, the 'No' response among young people to the question on belief in God varied from a high of 20% in Australia to 18% in New Zealand and 15% in Canada.<sup>6</sup>
- Finally, in the U.S.A., with its firmly anti-establishment tradition, only 7% of young people were unbelievers.

Since many surveys concentrate on the relatively more accessible population of those aged 18 and over, international comparative data on younger teenagers are rather sparse; however there are some comparable questions in recent surveys undertaken in England & Wales, Australia and the US, allowing direct comparisons.<sup>7</sup>

The data from England and Wales are only for 13-15 year-olds; so the next column in the following table shows Australian data for that age range; the third and fourth columns compare Australian 13-17 year-olds with US teens of the same age.

On every item (except perhaps 'Christianity is the only true religion' – and here the questions are not fully comparable: the Australian and US teenagers were asked whether only one religion is true, or all, or none), the English and Welsh teenagers were the least religious, the Australians next, and the Americans most religious. The teenage populations of the three countries, in terms of religion / spirituality, could be pictured as three overlapping distributions.

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<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Martin's argument 'pre-figured' one aspect of later 'rational choice' theories of religion: that religion shows more vigour where conditions are closer to a 'free-market' model.

<sup>6</sup> The data for French and English-speaking Canada are apparently combined in the version of the WVS available on the Web for online analysis

<sup>7</sup> In the following table, the sources are as follows: for England and Wales: Francis (2001 pp. 27, 36, 38, 40, 44); for the USA: Smith (2005 Ch. 1); for Australia: Mason, Webber and Singleton (forthcoming).

Table 3. Teenagers 13-15 and 13-17: Selected beliefs and practices by country

Selected beliefs and practices	EngW 13 -15	Aust 13 -15	Aust 13 -17	USA 13 -17
Believe in God -No	26	16	17	3
-Unsure	33	34	34	12
-Yes	41	50	49	84
Believe in life after death	45	59 <sup>8</sup>	56	49
Christianity the only true religion	16	14	14	29 <sup>9</sup>
Attend church -weekly	13	16	15	40
-less than weekly	37	(47) <sup>10</sup>	(46)	42
-never	49	(37)	(39)	18
Believe in the devil <sup>11</sup>	22	32	31	41
Believe in astrology	35	25	24	9
Believe in fortune-tellers	20	19	20	9
Possible to contact spirits of the dead	31	23	24	6
Church is boring <sup>12</sup>				
-those attending less than weekly	44	26	31	(15) <sup>13</sup>
-those attending weekly	24	14	14	

A later section of this paper will present evidence that in these three countries, the change over time is 'westward' (←), in the direction of a lower level of religiosity.

### 3. Detailed comparison between US and Australian Teenagers

In an admirable spirit of collaboration, Smith and his co-workers published their questionnaire on their website early in their project, enabling the "Spirit of Generation Y" survey in Australia, which went into the field two years later, to replicate a selection of the NSYR measures.

In the following table, Australian denominations are matched as closely as possible to relevant denominational groupings<sup>14</sup> used in the NSYR: Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant and Catholic. Findings on a range of identical or closely similar measures are compared by denomination across the two countries.

<sup>8</sup> As the following paper from Andrew Singleton will make clear, the Australian percentages of belief in life after death are inflated by the very high level of belief in reincarnation!

<sup>9</sup> In the USA and Australia, the response option did not refer to Christianity; it was: "Only one religion is true".

<sup>10</sup> The percentage of those attending less than weekly, and not at all, are estimates; because of a mistake in the CATI programming, only those who said they definitely believed in God were asked the attendance question. It is likely that some proportion who answered 'Uncertain' to belief in God were attenders – but, judging by their other characteristics, probably less than weekly.

<sup>11</sup> In Australia and the US, the question was: '... believe in the existence of demons or evil spirits'.

<sup>12</sup> The question was only asked of those who attend at least once per year, and they form the base of this set of percentages. The response reported here is from those who said church was *usually* boring.

<sup>13</sup> Percentage of all attenders who said church was usually boring; no distinction re frequency of attendance.

<sup>14</sup> The NSYR category 'Black Protestant' is of course omitted; 'Jewish' and 'LDS' (Mormon, Latter Day Saints) are also omitted because of too few cases in these categories.

**Table 4. US and Australian Teens (13-17): Traditional religious beliefs and practices by denomination by country (percent)**

Belief / Practice	Denomination / Country							
	Conserv Prot <sup>15</sup>		Mainline Prot <sup>16</sup>		Catholic		No Relig ID	
	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA
Belief in God: Yes	85	94	72	86	73	85	17	49
Belief in God: Unsure	15	5	28	13	27	14	46	34
Belief in God: No	0	1	0	2	0	1	38	17
How close to God: Close <sup>17</sup>	66	81	49	74	48	74	6	35
Faith V important /important in shaping life	58	67	37	50	32	41	3	14
Only one religion is true	42	46	27	26	11	19	3	5
OK to pick and choose rel beliefs (Disagree)	35	61	22	46	25	45	2	35
Definitely believe in:								
- Miracles	66	77	58	59	56	55	9	26
- Life after death	60	62	69	51	72*	45	42*	24
- Angels	68	79	49	59	51	58	19	33
- Demons/evil spirits	53	58	33	37	32	28	22	22
Attend religious svcs once a week or more	50	55	27	44	20	40	1	0
Attendees: ch usually warm & welcoming <sup>18</sup>	88*	80	90*	82	85	66	-	-
Attendees: svcs usually boring	6	10	19*	16	24*	20	-	-
Private prayer: once a week or more often	65	78	45	66	40	62	2	27
Wore religious jewellery, clothing	29	49	26	47	38	42	4	15
Took part in a religious youth group <sup>19</sup>	68	56	45	55	31	24	5	1
Have ever had experience of:								
- Spiritual worship moving & powerful	49	70	24	64	17	37	2	11
- Answer to prayer	58	65	28	53	29	42	4	18
- Miracle from God	42	60	27	37	21	38	5	22
Have made personal commitment to God	69	79	50	60	34	41	5	13
Prayed with parent(s) (not at meal or church)	46	53	28	35	28	36	2	11
Family talks re religious/spir matters weekly	58	60	37	34	23	34	1	14
Pressured at school b/c of religious beliefs <sup>20</sup>	26	29	21	16	4	13	1	0

<sup>15</sup> Matching the NSYR categories as closely as possible, the denominations in Australia included in 'Conservative Protestant' are: Baptist, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Evangelical, Christian nfd.

<sup>16</sup> The Australian denominations included in 'Mainline Protestant' are: Anglican and Uniting Church.

<sup>17</sup> NSYR uses a 6-point scale, SGY 5-point; for comparison, the 'top' half of each scale is used in the table.

<sup>18</sup> NSYR and SGY: % is for teens who attend more than once or twice a year.

<sup>19</sup> NSYR asked whether currently involved; SGY whether involved in past year

<sup>20</sup> Adding together responses of 'A lot', 'Some' and 'A little'.

With almost monotonous regularity, Table 4 shows, across comparable denominational groups, that American teenagers are ‘more religious’ than Australians of the same age, yet not as markedly so as the comparison on the single item of belief in God across the whole population might lead one to expect. Grouping the respondents by denominational type sets aside into a single category the very large proportion of Australian teenagers who do not identify with any denomination.

Some of the exceptions to the general rule of higher US teenage religiosity are due to differences in the questions asked – these are explained in the footnotes to the table; three others which at first appear more surprising are asterisked in the table:

- The levels of belief in life after death among Catholics and No Religious Identification, higher than in the US, are inflated by the very high level of belief in reincarnation in these two groups.
- The apparently odd result, that a higher proportion of Australian, than of US attenders in several denominational groups find their local churches ‘warm and welcoming’, and the services less ‘boring’, can plausibly be explained as follows: compulsion to attend religious services is now quite low in Australian families, and expectations from peers and the general community would favour non-attendance rather than attendance; a much smaller proportion of Australians are attenders, so they are a more ‘elite’ group – fewer of them would be attending under sufferance; in the US, where pressure to attend comes from both parents and community expectations, there is likely to be a higher proportion of teenagers whose attendance is less than fully voluntary, so their experience of the church community and of the worship services is more negative.

#### Spirituality types among teenagers (13-17) in the NSYR (USA) and SGY (Aust) surveys

The Spirit of Generation Y survey replicated closely the NSYR religiosity measures which Smith uses as criteria for defining the NSYR ‘religious ideal types’: frequency of prayer and attendance at religious services, importance of faith in life, feeling of closeness to God, scripture reading and involvement in a religious youth group (Smith 2005, p. 220). So a close comparison of types within the age range 13-17 is possible.

**Table 5. US and Australian Teenagers (13-17): “Religious Ideal Types” by Country**

<b>Ideal type</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>AUST</b>
[Other/mixed – excluded]	37	23
Disengaged	12	53
Sporadic	17	11
Regular	27	9
Devoted	8	5
Total	100	100

The criteria for the Devoted and Regular types require a very high level of involvement in religious practices: among the criteria for the ‘Devoted’ type are the following:

- ‘reads scripture once or twice a month or more’
- ‘currently involved in a religious youth group’

Very few even of the more devout Australian youth meet these criteria.

The 'Regular' 'attend religious services two or three times a month or weekly'. Even those who attend every month are classified as 'Sporadic'.

The criteria for the 'Disengaged' include: 'never attends religious services, or attends many times a year and identifies as Non-religious'. This could be read as including the "Non-religious"<sup>21</sup> only if they attend many times a year; however we understand it as including all those who never attend, and also the 'Non-identifiers', regardless of how often they attend.

Comparison: fewer Australian teens qualify as Devoted or Sporadic, only one third as many are Regular; but the percentage of Disengaged is more than four times greater among Australian than among US teens.

**Table 6. US and Australian Teenagers (13-17): Life Outcomes by "Religious Ideal Type" by Country**

Outcome	Religious Ideal Type							
	Devoted		Regular		Sporadic		Disengaged	
	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA
Morals are relative; (Agree)	38%	22%	49%	46%	65%	57%	62%	61%
Avg. hrs / week spent playing video games	1.33hrs	1.2 hrs	2.94 hrs	2.9 hrs	1.54 hrs	3.1 hrs	3.9 hrs	4.1 hrs

#### ***4. The case against 'European exceptionalism': the growth of religious individualism in Britain, Australia, Canada and USA***

The rise or decline in religion in different cultures at different times is now universally understood to have multiple causes. No theory survives which successfully explains religion's decline in modern Europe solely in terms of the progress of modernisation, with its concomitant processes of industrialisation, rationalisation and bureaucratisation. At the same time, there has long been an understandable tension, in the study of contemporary religion, between explanations of religious change which chronicle the myriad contingent historical factors at work in the process (the products of historical research such as that of Chadwick (1975) and McLeod (2000) and of historical sociology like the work of Martin (1978)); and those which seek more general social-structural causes (e.g. the sociological theories of Berger (1969), Luckmann (1967) and Bruce (2002)).<sup>22</sup>

Since the nineteen seventies, sociological observers opposed to the thesis linking modernisation and secularisation have contrasted the low levels of religious belief and practice in Europe with the apparently higher levels in other countries, notably the USA. In recent years, the issue has been framed as 'European exceptionalism', contrasting Europe with an otherwise presumably universal continuance or growth of religion (e.g. Davie 2002, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> We contend that labelling those who do not identify with a denomination as 'non-religious' is misleading, since they are often found to hold religious beliefs and engage in religious practices. They will be referred to here as 'nonidentifying'.

<sup>22</sup> See the Appendix for a continuation of this discussion, which seeks to reconcile these apparently competing styles of explanation within a broader theoretical context.

Lambert (2004) takes this argument a step further, arguing that even Europe is in the midst of a religious revival, especially among youth! Emphasising differences between the later (1990 and 1999) waves of the WVS in Europe, Lambert claims that the later survey, at least in the nine EEC countries, reveals 'the downward trend is now counterbalanced by two new tendencies: a Christian renewal and the development of religiosity without belonging, especially among young people' (2004, p.29). Although he admits that belonging to a denomination and attendance at services continues to decline amongst the young, Lambert sees evidence of an 'internal Christian renewal': those identifying as Christians are more likely, in 1999, compared with 1990 and 1981, to believe in a personal God, to appreciate religious ceremonies at birth, marriage and death, to see the churches as meeting spiritual needs. Surely, as considerable numbers (presumably those with lower levels of belief and institutional participation), abandon denominational identification, it follows automatically that those who remain will show higher average levels of pro-religious attitudes. This is hardly evidence of renewal amongst Christians – it may not involve any actual changes of attitude at all on the part of individuals; the changes in the mean percentage scores of Christian groups may result largely or completely from the departure of former, less committed members. Further, large positive changes of attitude to Christianity in a few countries (notably Italy and Portugal), which contribute disproportionately to the overall index for Europe, seem more likely to be explained by factors specific to those countries, rather than being indicators of Europe-wide change.

Increased attraction to Christian ceremonies at the life-stage transitions of birth, marriage and death among those who are otherwise not involved in religious organisations demonstrates nicely the change of attitude 'from obligation to consumption' (Davie 2004). The other trends Lambert notes—an increase in 'religiosity without belonging', and in the proportion who have never identified with a denomination, are indicators rather of a continuing decline of religion in Europe, while there are some small increases in 'autonomous spirituality'. In sum, the changes noted by Lambert seem better interpreted as evidence of a continuing decline in religion in Europe, rather than a revival, and of an increase, among European youth, of the 'new spirituality', which, we will claim, is actually not *religious* in character.

This interpretation of Lambert's findings is supported by the preliminary findings of the Würzburg survey of senior high school students (aged about 17) in eight European countries together with Israel, which took place in 2000 (Kay and Ziebert 2006). Comparison of the religion of parents and children showed that, where children had shifted from allegiance to the religious or secular stance of their parents, 'not unexpectedly, the shift was largely in the direction of secularity'. In a ranking of a list of personal values, autonomy was ranked highest in five of the countries, and in the top three values in three others. The autonomy scale contained items referring to "leading one's own life, thinking and acting independently, holding onto one's own personal opinion and having the courage to say 'no'". Personal autonomy is the central theme in the "new spirituality".

Part of the argument for "European exceptionalism" is based on allegedly higher levels of religious belief in non-European societies. This position is open to two objections: first, both within and outside Europe, belief is increasingly 'belief without belonging' (Davie 1994). But a residual belief in God (for example) if it is unsupported by other beliefs or by identification with a religious community, and is not expressed in values and practices, is so far from what is meant by 'belief' or

‘religious faith’ in the strong sense<sup>23</sup>, that it is debatable whether it is meaningful to describe it as a religious belief at all; it would probably be better to describe such ‘beliefs’ as inconsequential opinions on matters religious. In this light, the ‘belief without belonging’ phenomenon largely evaporates. It is not impossible in individual cases, but may not be very widespread at all.

Second, the maintenance of religious ‘beliefs’ (or often, more properly, religious opinions) is relatively ‘low-cost’ if it does not entail membership of a religious community and conformity with its moral code. Membership and attendance, on the other hand, are relatively more costly in terms of time, effort, commitment and moral behaviour. We will now show that, contrary to the thesis of “European exceptionalism”, membership and attendance are continuing to decline in several Western, non-European countries at rates comparable to those of Europe.

Returning to the comparison of Britain, Australia, Canada and the USA, but this time looking at changes over time between the earliest wave of World Values Surveys conducted in 1981-1982, and that conducted in the late nineties, the following table shows that the changes in ‘beliefs’ among those aged between 15 and 29 were relatively small, but the increase in the proportion who belonged to no denomination, and the decrease in attendance at religious services, were considerably larger in all four countries, notably in the USA.

Table 7. World Values Survey, selected countries, population aged 15-29: Change over time in proportion not believing in God, not belonging to a denomination, attending religious services once a month or more often, by country (percent of those in the agegroup)<sup>24</sup>

Country	Belief or practice	1981-82	1995-2001
Britain	Believe in God? No	27	29
	Belong to a religious denomination? No <sup>25</sup>	14	24
	Attend religious services monthly + <sup>26</sup>	17	12
Australia	Believe in God? No	22	20
	Belong to a religious denomination? No	5	23
	Attend religious services monthly +	25	23
Canada	Believe in God? No	9	15
	Belong to a religious denomination? No	13	45
	Attend religious services monthly +	36	23
USA	Believe in God? No	3	7
	Belong to a religious denomination? No	8	32
	Attend religious services monthly +	53	47

<sup>23</sup> Religious belief or faith has usually meant, within both sociology and theology, not a mere opinion on some religious issue, but a real commitment of the person to the truths and moral prescriptions of that religion, and to involvement in its forms of ritual and social organisation; or as Wach once more succinctly put it: to Creed, Code, Cult and Community.

<sup>24</sup> Data for this table were derived by ‘online analysis’ of the WVS surveys for 1981-2 and for 1995-2000, available on the site: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com/> by crosstabulating responses to the questions by agegroup.

<sup>25</sup> The question was simply: ‘Do you belong to a religious denomination?’ Yes / No.

<sup>26</sup> Question: ‘How often do you attend religious services?’ The table shows the total of the response percentages indicating attendance monthly or more often.

So, among youth, at any rate, we see that the measures of two more ‘costly’ aspects of religiosity involving institutional participation, showed, in the three non-European countries, not stability but a decline comparable with that taking place in Britain, a representative European society.

Further evidence against the thesis of ‘European exceptionalism’ emerges when we consider the character of religion and ‘spirituality’ among youth in Australia and the USA. First, it will be shown that relatively secular Australia and relatively religious America share high levels of religious individualism. Then the significance of religious individualism for the continuance of traditional religion will be discussed.

### 5. *The worm in the American apple: religious individualism and ‘new spirituality’*

The following two tables show measures of religious individualism and moral relativism in Australia and the USA.

Table 8. Indicators of Religious Individualism by Denomination by Country

Belief / Practice	Denomination / Country							
	Conserv Prot		Mainline Prot		Catholic		No Relig ID	
	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA
Many religions may be true (Agree) <sup>27</sup>	51	48	66	67	76	71	62	62
OK to pick and choose rel beliefs (Agree) <sup>28</sup>	51	36	69	53	69	54	.. <sup>29</sup>	62
Need to be involved in a congregation (Dis)		64		72		67		84

Table 9. Moral relativism by Religious Ideal-type by Country

Outcome	Religious Ideal Type							
	Devoted		Regular		Sporadic		Disengaged	
	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA	AUS	USA
Morals are relative; no def right/wrong for all	38%	22%	49%	46%	65%	57%	62%	61%

The strong signs of religious individualism in the NSYR data presage a more rapid drift ‘westward’ (i.e. leftwards on the scale of religiosity) toward lower levels of traditional religion in the USA.

<sup>27</sup> This NSYR question about the truth of religions was rather complex, and not too much weight should be attached to any particular response. The response options were: ‘There is very little truth in any religion’; ‘Many religions may be true’; ‘Only one religion is true’. The responses are insightfully interpreted by Smith (2005, pp. 73-75), highlighting especially the multiple potential meanings of the ‘many religions’ option.

<sup>28</sup> The NSYR question was: ‘Some people think that it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole. Do you agree or disagree?’

<sup>29</sup> Those with no religious identification in the SGY were not asked this question, which contained the phrase ‘without accepting the teachings of your religion as a whole’; a high proportion of them did not believe in God or were uncertain, and had already responded that they had no religion or denomination with a set of teachings.

Severance of the link between religion and spirituality—a profoundly significant change  
Increasingly, the word ‘spirituality’, retaining its centuries-old sense of individual, personal religiosity, has begun to be used with a highly significant variation, contrasting with its traditional meaning: whereas in the past, spirituality, as the personal dimension of religion, was understood as an appropriation of a basically communal form, and depended on it as its source and norm, in the late modern era, when young people especially are highly ‘individualised’, the relationship of personal ‘spirituality’ to communal religion is rapidly weakening to the point of complete disappearance.

Some sociologists have had a developing awareness that a change of profound significance has been occurring in the religious sphere, signalled by a new ‘twist’ in the usage of the word ‘spirituality’ (Wuthnow 1998, Roof 1999), but I suggest that one of the principal strategies for measuring the change—by exploring how people understand or use the *word* spirituality as opposed to the word ‘religion’, (e.g. Marler and Hadaway 2002) misses the central point, and has led others to underestimate the magnitude and significance of the change.

For example, because Smith (2005) found few NSYR respondents who regarded themselves as ‘spiritual, rather than religious’, he was highly sceptical of claims that large numbers of youth were ‘spiritual seekers’. (The SGY research team would have to confess to the same scepticism, produced by finding, in our early interviews, as Smith did, the same lack of comprehension among our interviewees of the ‘spiritual versus religious’ issue. However, that question is quite peripheral to the underlying attitude of acceptance or rejection of ‘institutional’ religiosity. All that it reveals is whether the respondent is familiar with a particular terminology and uses it to identify himself/herself.)

The issue is not philological. Regardless of how people understand or use the word ‘spirituality’, the criterion of change is the strength (or even the existence) of the relationship between the individual and private dimension of worldviews and values, on the one hand, and the social and communal dimension on the other. The weakening, and in some societies, the virtual disappearance of this relationship is a sign of a major decline in religion: a ‘privatisation’ that largely deprives what was formerly the personal dimension of religion, of its properly religious character.<sup>30</sup> **If religion is defined as an essentially communal enterprise, (as it is in most sociological definitions, whether classical or contemporary<sup>31</sup>), then spirituality in this new sense, determinedly detached from and independent of institutional patterns and norms of belief and doctrine, moral prescriptions, collective rituals and communities, is not, sociologically speaking, religious at all.** One of the most frequently cited definitions of religion in the social science literature is that of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1975), who observes, in the course of his magisterial treatment, that the ‘cognitive style’ of religion is *authority* (understood as independent of the individual; imposed and accepted). It is precisely this characteristic that is missing from the ‘new spirituality’; all authority is now vested in the autonomous individual. Sociologists who treat this privatised spirituality as *religious* are

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<sup>30</sup> Luckmann (1967) long ago noted the ‘privatisation’ of religion in modern society—its increasing restriction to the private sphere of individual and family. What we see in Generation Y, is simply that process taken to its logical conclusion. It was also Luckmann who observed that the ‘dominant themes’ of contemporary religion were: personal autonomy, self-development and self-realisation. He was not widely understood or believed.

<sup>31</sup> The essential dependence of personal on communal religiosity is expressed in Joachim Wach’s memorable axiom: “*Unus Christianus, nullus Christianus*—one Christian (alone) is no Christian”.

implicitly adopting a Jamesian style of definition of religion—situated in the context of a highly individualistic psychology.<sup>32</sup> The fundamental theoretical question of whether sociology of religion should simply ‘adapt’ to privatisation by removing, or rendering ‘optional’, the social-institutional components of religion from its definition, and whether it can do so without loss, and still remain sociological in its treatment of religion, cannot be considered any further here; we must be content with having drawn attention to it.

Setting aside the issue of whether individuals define themselves as ‘spiritual vs. religious’, there is clear evidence in the NSYR (as shown in the two tables just above), that a high proportion of youth in the USA have adopted the ‘new spirituality’.

It is not the understanding of the word ‘spirituality’, but the measures of religious and moral individualism shown above in Tables 7 and 8 which are the appropriate means for detecting the ‘new spirituality’, and they are almost as strong in the USA as in Australia, despite the deceptive apparent continuance in the USA of traditional, communal forms of religion. In other words, even those who are not involved in ‘New Age’, ‘alternative’ or esoteric spiritualities, who are not exploring the psychic or paranormal realms, whose ‘beliefs’ are apparently still traditional, should be regarded as participants in a ‘new spirituality’, rather than a traditional religion, if they are ‘religious individualists’ on the measures shown above, and are not regular participants in the worship and other communal activities of a socially shared religion. That definition appears applicable to one third to a half of US teenagers.

It is worth emphasising that this argument is **sociological**: it is in no way a theological evaluation of changing styles of religiosity. If we do glance aside for a moment at theological evaluations of the ‘spiritual revolution’, we note that while many church officials and theologians have welcomed the rise of these new forms of ‘spirituality’ among youth, and hoped that they might presage an eventual infusion of new life into today’s jaded religious institutions, other more critical theological observers discern in it, perhaps more perceptively, an ominous sign: the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture, in the conclusions of its 2004 Plenary Assembly, speaks of the emergence of ‘unbelief and bad belief’, describing the ‘new spirituality’ as follows:

- Everywhere there is a new, growing spiritual quest, rather than a religious one, that is not a return to the traditional faith.
- What ensues is a search "for an experience which is entirely individual, autonomous and guided by one's own subjectivity." This sort of instinctive religiosity is based more on emotions than on doctrine and is expressed without reference to a personal God. Modern culture is, therefore, characterized by a twofold phenomenon: "unbelief and bad belief." Both of them have in common a desire for autonomy. The Pontifical Council for Culture also identifies a number of other characteristics of these new forms of belief.
- It is a romantic form of religion, a religion of the spirit and of the self which has its roots in the crisis of the subject who is more and more narcissistic, and rejects all historical and objective elements. This do-it-yourself religion leads people to create a new image of God at different stages of their lives, according to the needs they perceive.
- It is a strongly subjective religion, where the individual is under no obligation to give an account of his reasons or behaviour.

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<sup>32</sup> “The feelings, acts and experiences of [individuals] in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 1961, p. 42).

- It is an adherence to a God who often has no face or personal characteristics. God is often seen more as a force or superior transcendent being, but not as a Father. In some circles this leads to a return of pantheism.
- It is a religion in which there is a lack of interest for the question of the truth. For many, truth has a negative connotation, associated with concepts such as "dogmatism, intolerance, imposition" (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2004).

This describes the form taken by the new spirituality with quite amazing precision of detail.

In Australia, the rise of this 'new spirituality' is accompanied by a more obvious decline in the forms of traditional religion, spanning all generations from the Boomers downward. But I would argue that this development is just as strongly present in societies like the USA, where institutional manifestations of traditional religion are often asserted still to be thriving vigorously. The apparent vigour is internally hollow, and tends only to mask the underlying transformation which is nonetheless proceeding apace. If we think of a religion as a train: the occupants of some wagons have removed the pin of the 'coupling' which joins them to the other wagons and the institutional locomotive. In some cases, their continuing momentum makes them appear as still attached, but if the line heads up an incline, they fall behind and disappear; others have thrown trackside switches and headed off in diverging directions.

The argument for the increase of secularisation in modern industrial societies, for which we have here shown empirical evidence from research on youth, was theoretically elaborated long ago by Peter Berger<sup>33</sup> (1969, especially pp. 134 ff.) and Thomas Luckmann (1967). When he first proposed his critical analysis of the 'internally secularised' condition of much US religion, Berger was assailed for inappropriately employing theological criteria in sociological work. We believe that the argument that the new spirituality is basically non-religious is defensible on purely sociological grounds.

## 6. Conclusion

International comparisons of the findings of research projects on teenagers show that the patterns found by David Martin (1978) appear to be holding. Changes across time, however, show that while 'low-cost' items such as religious 'beliefs' remain more stable, there is considerable movement towards the European pattern: a significant decline, even in the more 'religious' countries like the USA, in the proportion who are members of religious denominations and attend religious services. This finding puts in question the thesis of "European exceptionalism".

Further, the strong growth of 'religious individualism' and 'moral relativism' in countries such as Australia and the USA should be interpreted as indicating that even those whose beliefs remain traditional are practitioners of an eclectic 'new spirituality', not of religion sociologically defined.

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<sup>33</sup> Berger has since disavowed his secularisation theory, (or at least those elements of it which were interpreted as implying that modernisation in developing countries would rapidly reduce the influence of religion in those societies). However he appears to retain other components of the theory. Others have interpreted his original theory more generously than the author himself, and found nothing in it which has been falsified by later historical developments (cf. Bruce 2002).

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## Appendix

### **Does modernisation tend, as a general principle, to promote secularisation, or is the latter to be explained solely in terms of variable historical factors in each society?**

#### **Some methodological and theoretical considerations.**

(The following introductory paragraph is repeated from the main text.)

The rise or decline in religion in different cultures at different times is now universally understood to have multiple causes. No theory survives which successfully explains religion's decline in modern Europe solely in terms of the progress of modernisation, with its concomitant processes of industrialisation, rationalisation and bureaucratisation. At the same time, there has long been an understandable tension, in the study of contemporary religion, between explanations of religious change which chronicle the myriad contingent historical factors at work in the process (the products of historical research such as that of Chadwick (1975) and McLeod (2000) and of historical sociology like the work of Martin (1978)); and those which seek more general social-structural causes (e.g. the sociological theories of Berger (1969), Luckmann (1967) and Bruce (2002)).

Despite the tension which makes it appear that they are in direct competition, these different types of explanations are the fruit of different methods, each of which brings to light a different aspect of reality; and each has its meed of truth, which does not depend on overcoming the claims of the other. If the relationship between history and sociology is understood within the framework of a comprehensive philosophy of the social sciences, it is clear that there can in fact be no contradiction between them, since they operate on different levels of abstraction. Understanding will profit most by harvesting the results of both types of inquiry, rather than by seeking to decide which of the two is more 'valid' than the other. Nonetheless, at the present time it seems that the more specific and limited historical style of explanation is more in favour, and that more general sociological theories are in retreat. Why? Surely not because these theories were advanced (by their best exponents) in simplistic terms which have been falsified by subsequent events; perhaps more because they have been understood simplistically, or because they placed insufficient emphasis on 'retarding factors' which can delay or nullify the *tendency* of modernisation to promote secularisation.

Without denying the added richness and depth contributed to sociological explanations by historical studies, there is some danger, in this reverse of theoretical fashion among sociologists, that a powerful explanatory factor will be lost to sight, or "die the death of a thousand qualifications": namely, that modernisation tends to promote secularisation. Not that it will always and everywhere have a complete and immediate effect – evidently in many situations the effect may be long delayed or even indefinitely postponed by potent countervailing forces. Sometimes these 'de-secularising' factors may be purely contingent: grist for the historian's mill, and unable to be accounted for sociologically. But in other cases, the retarding factors may be of a more general structural character: regular, repeated in different situations, recognisably similar under varying cultural guises, and so able to be explained sociologically.

It is against this background that the present paper takes issue with the thesis of 'European exceptionalism', which claims that modernisation (which by now has extended in some form to almost all societies) has not brought about a decline of religion; that religion is thriving everywhere

but in Europe. Thus theories which propose a general link between modernisation and secularisation are said to have been disproved, and the causes of religious decline in Europe must be sought elsewhere.

We propose, on the contrary,

- that 'moderate' secularisation theories such as that formerly proposed by Berger and continued by Bruce, are essentially correct;
- that, contrary to the specific claim that Europe's secularity is exceptional, many modernised societies outside Europe (specifically, in this paper, Australia and the USA) show a marked decline in religion among youth,
- and that the continued high levels of religion in other modern societies can be quite sufficiently explained by the operation of counter-forces which can delay for a time, or indefinitely, the *tendency* of some of the components of modernisation to secularise those societies. The latter portion of the argument is beyond the scope of this paper.

# A Comparison of Religiously “Non-identifying” Australian and US Teens

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on nationally representative data from the US NSYR and the Australian SGY surveys, this paper compares religiously “non-identifying” teens in both countries. Comparisons are made between the beliefs these teens hold or do not hold, including the uptake of “New Age” and other alternative spiritual beliefs, and the factors which are associated with not having a religious identification. A substantially higher percentage of Australian teens are non-identifying compared to their US counterparts. Australian non-identifiers report lower levels of Christian-derived beliefs, but are more open to spiritual alternatives. That said, the majority of teens in both countries reject alternative spiritual beliefs. Some of the factors associated with teens being non-identifying are similar in both countries, including increasing age and less family intactness.

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## A Comparison of Religiously “Non-identifying” Australian and US Teens

Drawing on nationally representative data from the US National Study of Youth Religion (NSYR) and the Australian Spirit of Generation Y (SGY) study,<sup>34</sup> this paper compares religiously “non-identifying” or “nonreligious” teens in both countries. Comparisons are made between the beliefs these teens hold or do not hold, including their uptake of “New Age” beliefs. The data show that Australian teens are much more likely to be non-identifying than their US counterparts. The overall higher level of nonreligiousness in Australia is explained through reference to the impact of broader socio-cultural influences.

This paper explores the beliefs of those who do not identify with a religious tradition, or who claim no religious affiliation. In *Soul Searching*, the book about the NSYR, Smith (2005) describes this group as “nonreligious,” however, in our research we favor the term “non-identifying,” given that some of those who do not claim a religious affiliation are found to hold religious beliefs and engage in religious practices. The criteria used in this paper for classifying both US and Australian teens as “non-identifying” or “nonreligious” is the same. For the sake of expediency, I will refer to these teens as non-identifying.

In the US, 16 percent of those aged 13-17 are classified as non-identifying, compared with 47 percent of Australians aged 13-17. Clearly, this is a major difference, one which reflects the place of organized religion in both societies. For all of the secularizing tendencies of Western societies, non-identifying US teens still live in a culture in which having a religious identity is the norm, where 40 percent of teens attend religious services once or more a week, and 84 percent definitely believe in God. Australia, on the other hand, is more obviously secular, a country where only 52 percent of teens identify with a religion, while only 15 percent attend services weekly or more often and only 49 percent of Australian teens believe in God.

It would be incorrect, however, to characterize Australian non-identifying teens as avowedly secular. One in six non-identifying Australian teens hold an eclectic mix of alternative spiritual beliefs, while a substantial proportion believe in the existence of a higher being. In like manner, writing about US teens, Smith makes the observation that “self-identified nonreligious (US) teenagers are far from entirely secular in their beliefs and practices” (Smith 2005, p. 87).

### **The Environing Culture and the Beliefs of Non-identifying teens in Australia and the US**

Given the different place of organized religion in both societies and the major differences in the number who do not identify with a religion, it is worthwhile comparing the uptake of various religious, spiritual, and paranormal beliefs among non-identifying US and Australian teens. The following table compares the level of religious, spiritual, and paranormal beliefs among US and Australian non-identifying teens. Questions about these beliefs were asked in an identical manner in both the NSYR and SGY surveys.

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<sup>34</sup> Refer to Mason paper in this session for a description of the aims, method, and sample of the SGY project. Further details are also available at the SGY project website: <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/spir/spir.htm>

**Table 1. Religious, Spiritual, and Paranormal Beliefs of Non-identifying/Nonreligious Australian and US Adolescents (13-17) (Percentages)**

	US	Aust
<b>Belief in God</b>		
Believes in God	49	17
Unsure	34	46
Does not believe	17	38
<b>Believes in existence of angels</b>		
Definitely	33	19
Maybe	42	24
No	25	55
<b>Believes in existence of demons and evil spirits</b>		
Definitely	22	22
Maybe	39	20
No	39	57
<b>Believes there is life after death</b>		
Definitely	24	42
Maybe	57	25
No	19	31
<b>Believes in reincarnation</b>		
Definitely	21	33
Maybe	48	22
No	31	43
<b>Believes in astrology</b>		
Definitely	13	26
Maybe	35	20
No	52	54
<b>Believes in communicating with the dead</b>		
Definitely	11	25
Maybe	33	19
No	56	55
<b>Believes in psychics and fortune tellers</b>		
Definitely	10	22
Maybe	28	17
No	62	60

Sources: (US) *National Survey of Youth Religion 2002-3*; (Australia) *Spirit of Generation Y Survey 2005*.  
 Note: Percentages in this table may not add to 100 because of rounding and unreported refused/ "can't say" answers.

This table is based on one in Smith, C with Denton, ML 2005, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 43.

This table usefully highlights key differences and similarities between US and Australian non-identifying teens. The more religious orientation of the US appears to make a significant difference when it comes to the acceptance by non-identifying teens of several Christian-derived beliefs. These are listed in the top half of the table and include belief in God, belief in the existence of angels, and belief in the existence of demons and evil spirits. Almost half of US non-identifying teens believe in God (49 percent), compared to just 17 percent of non-identifying Australian teens. 33 percent of non-identifying US teens believe in the existence of angels, compared to 20 percent of non-identifying Australian teens.

Furthermore, Australian teens are much more likely to *not* believe in God (38 percent of non-identifying Australian teens compared to 17 percent of US non-identifying teens), *not* believe

in the existence of angels (55 percent of Australian compared to 25 percent of US teens) and *not* believe in the existence of demons and evil spirits (57 percent of Australian compared to 39 percent of US teens). (Australian and US teens are identical in *affirming* a belief in the existence of demons and evil spirits.) In sum, we see that in the more religious culture of the US, Christian-derived beliefs have a greater currency among the non-identifying than in a more secular country like Australia. Just as the US culture is conducive to a higher level of acceptance of religious beliefs among non-identifying US teens, so it appears that the more secular culture of Australia is conducive to a higher level of non-belief.

This is only part of the story of non-identifying teens, however. Note that non-identifying Australian teens are more likely to affirm a belief in life after death, 43 percent compared to just 24 percent of US teens. It is probable, however, that most non-identifying Australian teens who believe in life after death are actually affirming their belief in reincarnation rather than a more conventional Christian understanding of life after death. 75 percent of non-identifying Australian teens who definitely believe in life after death also definitely believe in reincarnation.<sup>35</sup> This leads to a related point.

#### *Spiritual Alternatives*

Generally, non-identifying Australian teens are more open to spiritual alternatives, including belief in reincarnation, astrology, communicating with the dead and fortune tellers. These are listed in table 1. Non-identifying Australian teens are twice as likely to believe in psychics, communicating with the dead and astrology compared to non-identifying US teens and more likely to believe in reincarnation, 33 percent compared to 21 percent. Religious organizations in Australia are weaker compared to the US, thus opening the way for those who are spiritually interested to search elsewhere.<sup>36</sup>

It is only a minority of Australian non-identifying teens who are open to spiritual alternatives: the main pattern is for non-identifying teens to reject alternative spiritual beliefs out-of-hand. This is apparent in the US as well. US and Australian non-identifying teens are equally likely to *not* believe in astrology, the possibility of communicating with the dead and belief in psychics and fortune tellers. In each case, this is more than 50 percent of non-identifying teens in both countries. A higher percentage of non-identifying Australian teens reject a belief in reincarnation (43 compared to 31 percent).

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<sup>35</sup> Francis (2001) found that 20 percent of English and Welsh teens aged 13-15 believed in reincarnation (cited in Savage *et al.* 2006). This compares with 31 percent of Australian teens aged 13-15.

<sup>36</sup> Arguably, this pattern of growth in spiritual alternatives is similar to the UK. See Carrette & King (2005); Heelas & Woodhead (2005); Partridge (2004).

### *Humanists and Eclectics: Australian non-identifiers*

How might we explain the Australian pattern of both skepticism towards religion and an embracing of superstition, in the form of belief in astrology and the power of fortune tellers? Non-identifying Australian teens are not a homogenous group, rather they tend to fall into one of two types. 16 percent of non-identifying Australian teens believe in 3 or 4 of the alternative spiritual beliefs listed in the table, while 45 percent believe in none. In our other research papers, we have described these two groups as “Humanists” and “Eclectics.”<sup>37</sup> Humanists are a very large group who typically accept non-religious explanations of the world and life and express values and motives that are humanistic rather than religious or spiritual. Eclectics are a smaller, yet still substantial, group of Australian teens who are open to spiritual alternatives. The Eclectic spirituality type comprises people who report three or more New Age, esoteric or Eastern practices and/or beliefs (up to a total of eight).<sup>38</sup>

Humanists are more likely to be male and have never identified with a religion compared to the Eclectics. Eclectics are more likely to have seriously undertaken yoga, tai-chi, believe in God, believe in a higher being and explored other world religions.

Australian Eclectics are most similar to what Smith (2005) describes in *Soul Searching* as “spiritual seekers”: “these teens are likely both distancing themselves from what they consider to be religious while simultaneously maintaining a spiritual identity which ... indicates that they are not hard-core, secular, atheistic materialists” (Smith 2005, p. 84). That said, the numbers of both “spiritual seekers” and more secular types appears far lower in the US compared to Australia.

### **Non-identifying teens: Demographic and other Characteristics**

Table 2 shows a comparison of selected demographic variables of non-identifying teens. The age and gender distribution of non-identifying teens in both countries is quite similar. The difference in school type is more much noticeable with a higher percentage of Australian teens attending a private school, however, this says more about the education systems in both countries. Australia has a much larger private primary and secondary education sector compared to the US. US non-identifying teens are just as likely to attend a public school compared to conservative Protestant, Jewish or Catholic students (Smith 2005, p. 289) whereas non-identifying Australian teens are much more likely to attend a public school compared to conservative Protestant of Catholic teens.

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<sup>37</sup> For a full description of the Australian spirituality types, see Mason, Singleton, and Webber, forthcoming.

<sup>38</sup> Although we found a substantial number of “Eclectics” we identified few Neo-pagans; a case of interest outstripping number of adherents. See Ezzy (2003) for a discussion of Australian witchcraft.

**Table 2. Selected demographic details of Non-identifying/Nonreligious Australian and US Adolescents (13-17) (Percentages)**

	US	Aust
<b>Age</b>		
13	17	16
14	18	17
15	18	23
16	24	22
17	23	23
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	58	55
Female	42	45
<b>School type</b>		
Public	87	73
Catholic	2	10
Private other	1	16

Sources: (US) National Survey of Youth Religion 2002-3; (Australia) Spirit of Generation Y Survey 2005.

Note: Percentages in this table may not add to 100 because of rounding.

This table is based on one in Smith, C with Denton, ML 2005, *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 289.

*Soul Searching* reports on logistic regression analysis which examined a range of social and religious variables in order to identify which are statistically significantly associated with teens being “nonreligious” (Smith 2005, p. 91). Controlling for age, sex, living in an urban or rural area, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, our own binary logistic regression analysis found a number of socio-cultural variables to be associated with Australian non-identifying teens, some of which overlap with the US findings (see appendix 1 for a full description of the analysis). Specifically, these are:

- *Age*. Smith reports that older US teens are more likely to be nonreligious than younger teens (Smith 2005 p. 91).<sup>39</sup> The same is true Australian: older teens are more likely to be non-identifiers than younger teens.
- *Family integrity*: US teens with divorced parents are more likely to be nonreligious than teens with married parents (Smith 2005, p.91). The SGY survey did not ask directly about parental marital status, but instead asked about current and past living arrangements. Australian teens who live with one biological parent now, but have not lived with both biological parents since primary school are more likely to be non-identifying than teens who live with both biological parents now.

In addition, we also found that Australian teens attending government schools are much more likely to be non-identifiers than those attending Catholic schools; teens who report that they are “hurting inside” are more likely to be non-identifiers than those who say they are not; teens who have never explored world religions are more likely to be non-identifiers than those who have explored at least one (full odds ratios are presented in table 3, see appendix 1). There was no significant relationship between socio-economic status and not having religious identification among Australian teens.

<sup>39</sup> Similar results were found in the US Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (see Smith *et al.* 2002)

## No longer identifying

Some non-identifying teens previously identified with a religion, or using the terminology deployed in *Soul Searching*, were “raised religious.” Among non-identifying Australian teens, 48 percent have never identified with a religion, compared to just 14 percent of non-identifying US teens.<sup>40</sup> Only 16 percent of Australian teens were raised in any religion, where 44 percent of US teens were definitely raised in either the Catholic or Protestant tradition. Again, these figures highlight the more religious character of the US – religious identification is simply far more common.

With which denomination did non-identifying Australian teens previously identify? 49 percent once identified as Catholics, 16 percent with other Christian denominations and 13 percent with the Anglican Church (Episcopalian). This contrasts with the US figures, where it was found that “no one religious group is especially overrepresented as the religious tradition out of which nonreligious American teenagers come” (Smith 2005, p. 88).

Both the NSYR and SGY research examined the reasons why teens who previously identified with a religion no longer do so. In the SGY survey, people who once identified with a denomination but no longer did so had up to six opportunities for providing reasons for not identifying now – three open-ended responses: (“what is the main reason you no longer consider yourself Catholic/Anglican etc.”; “what other reasons do you have for no longer etc.”; “what other reasons etc.”). Then they were asked if any of the following were also reasons why they no longer identified (the question did not repeat reasons they had already given):

- Don't accept some of the beliefs;
- Don't accept some of moral teachings; and
- Don't agree with some of the policies or statements of the organization or its leaders.

As noted in the Mason paper, the SGY survey principally targeted “Generation Y” (born 1971-1990), but also included a “control sample” of persons born from 1945 to 1970. Those in the older age groups were more likely to no longer identify with a religion. 16 percent of non-identifying teens once identified, compared with 26 percent of non-identifiers aged 18-29 and 36 percent of non-identifiers aged 30-59. Moreover, those who were older were far more likely to provide clear reasons for no longer identifying.

The main reason offered by US teens for no longer identifying was “intellectual skepticism and disbelief”. This was certainly the main theme among no-longer identifying Australian teens when asked for the first reason the no longer identified. They said things like:

I don't believe there is a God in particular. (13-year-old male)

I learnt about scientific studies and I listen to the radio and read books and it didn't seem to fit in. (15-year-old female)

There is no evidence to back up what they are saying. (17-year-old female)

Another strong theme emerging among no-longer identifying Australian teens was a dislike of the Church's moral teachings, or a dislike of religion or the Church generally. For example:

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<sup>40</sup> All US data in this section are taken from Smith 2005, pp. 87-89. Australian data are from the SGY survey.

The Church discriminates against women not letting them be priests, discriminates against gay marriage. (14-year-old female)  
 Don't accept no sex before marriage. (16-year-old male)  
 No sex before marriage, hypocrites about having wars in the name of religion, unfair wealth – the Pope is given an Aston Martin. (16-year-old male)

This tendency to criticize the Church appears stronger among Australian than US teens, however, the Australian teens were offered specific opportunities to comment on the Church's teachings and policies, while the US teens were simply asked the main reason for no longer identifying.

### **No belief in God**

To conclude, this paper examines those who do not believe in God. Just 3 percent of all US teens do not believe in God, compared to 18 percent of all Australian teens aged 13-17. Both the NSYR and SGY inquired as to whether the non-believer had previously believed in God. Among Australian non-believers, 63 percent have never believed, while half this number of US non-believers, 31 percent, have never believed. In contrast, 66 percent of US teens were believers at some stage, compared to 36 percent of Australian non-believers. Thus, unlike the comparable US teens, most Australian non-believers have not lost a previous belief (cf. Smith 2005, p. 87).

The Australian teen non-believers are not entirely without belief in something beyond, however. 38 percent of them believe in a higher being or life force, and of these believers in a life force, about a third believe that it cares about them.

### **Conclusions**

A substantially higher percentage of Australian teens are non-religious compared to their US counterparts. Australian non-identifiers report lower levels of Christian-derived beliefs, but are more open to spiritual alternatives. That said, the majority of teens in both countries reject alternative spiritual beliefs. Some of the factors associated with teens being non-identifying are similar in both countries, including increasing age and less family intactness. The overall higher level of nonreligiousness in Australia is explained through reference to the impact of broader socio-cultural influences.

## Appendix 1. Details of Binary Logistic Regression Analysis

In order to state with greater certainty which factors are associated with having no religious identification, direct logistic regression analyses were conducted. The outcome was no religious identification, with demographic, family context, school context, personality, behavior, and attitude variables being used as predictors. Two models were tested. Model 1 tested demographic, family context, and educational context predictors, while Model 2 added personality, behavior and attitude predictors. Table 3 shows the odds estimates, standard error values and significance levels for both models.

*Model 1.* 563 cases were available for analysis. A test of this model against a model with the constant only was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(10, N = 563) = 76.377, p < .001$ . Model 1 was able to classify 73.2 percent of those who claim a religious identification, and 56.1 percent of those who are non-identifiers, with an overall rate of 65.5 percent.

Age, last having lived with both biological parents when pre-school aged (reference category was living with both biological parents now), attending a tertiary institution rather than school (this tertiary institution may not be a university but a technical college, where a person can study a trade), having an Australian-born father, and attending a private school or government school (reference category was Catholic school) had significant partial effects ( $p < 0.5$ ).

In this model, when holding all the other predictors constant, the odds ratios show a person who attends a government school is almost 4 times more likely to be a non-identifier than a person attending a Catholic school; a person who last lived with both their biological parents when pre-school aged is 2.5 times more likely to be a non-identifier than a person living with both biological parents now, and a person who has an Australian-born father is one and a half times more likely to be a non-identifier than person who has an overseas-born father.

*Model 2.* 555 cases were available for analysis. A test of this model against a model with the constant only was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(14, N = 555) = 95.432, p < .001$ . Model 2 was able to classify 73.3 percent of those who claim a religious identification, and 60.9 percent of those who are non-identifiers, with an overall rate of 67.7 percent. This is an improvement over the previous model, with more non-identifiers being classified than in Model 1.

Age, last having lived with both biological parents when pre-school aged, having an Australian-born father, attending a private school or government school (reference category was Catholic school), feeling that one was "hurting inside" and not having explored other religions had significant partial effects ( $p < 0.5$ ).

In this model, when holding all the other predictors constant, the odds ratios show that a person who attends a government school is 3.2 times more likely to be a non-identifier than a person attending a Catholic school; a person who last lived with both their biological parents when pre-school aged is 2.6 times more likely to be a non-identifier than a person living with both biological parents now; a person who has never explored a world religion is twice as likely to be a non-identifier than a person who has explored at least one.

**Table 3. Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Models Predicting No Religious Identification among Australian Teens (13-17)**

<b>Effect</b>	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
<b><i>Demographic</i></b>		
Age	1.194* (.079)	1.234* (.083)
Male	1.195 (.186)	1.270 (.192)
Higher socio-economic status	1.000 (.003)	.999 (.003)
Urban 1-100k	1.208 (.235)	1.188 (.243)
Rural 200- 1k	2.535 (.750)	2.398 (.761)
Rural <200	1.110 (.357)	.990 (.364)
<b><i>Family context</i></b>		
Lives with one biol. parent now, last with both earlier in secondary school	.471+ (.449)	.521 (.465)
Lives with one biol. parent now, last with both in primary school	1.367 (.284)	1.512 (.292)
Lives with one biol. now parent, last with both when pre-school age	2.562** (.304)	2.610** (.317)
Person born in Australia	1.350 (.381)	1.202 (.397)
Father born in Australia	1.608* (.240)	1.680* (.252)
Mother born in Australia	1.079 (.258)	1.056 (.267)
<b><i>Educational context</i></b>		
Attending tertiary institution (TAFE, university)	2.202* (.385)	2.117+ (.401)
Not undertaking formal education at time of survey	1.141 (.380)	.970 (.397)
Attends/ attended non-Catholic private school	2.237** (.313)	1.972* (.327)
Attends/ attended government school	3.963*** (.263)	3.283*** (.279)
<b><i>Personality, Behavior, Attitudes</i></b>		
Joined club or group in previous two years		1.020 (.202)
Person is "hurting inside"		1.746* (.267)
Person feels they do not belong anywhere		1.116 (.354)
Never explored world religions		2.140*** (.208)
<b><i>Model fit</i></b>		
-2 Log Likelihood	699.830	699.989
Nagelkerke R-square	.169	.211

Standard errors appear below the coefficient, in parentheses.  
 Key for significance levels: +  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .  
 This table based on one presented in Regnerus and Uecker (2005).

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# A Comparison of Religion/Spirituality and Life Outcomes among Australian and US Teens<sup>41</sup>

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Society for the Scientific Study of Religion  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper compares the results of the Australian study *Spirit of Generation Y* (SGY) with the US *National Study of Youth and Religion* (NSYR) in respect to spirituality and life outcomes. In the study by SGY the age-range principally targeted was 'Generation Y' (born 1971-1990). A telephone survey of 1619 people from the ages of 13 to 59 was conducted as well as 91 interviews. In the telephone survey there were 673 in the 13-17 age group which is the same age group used in NSYR. While there are many similarities, there are also subtle differences between the ways in which Australian and American young people view their societal obligations and engage with their community. In both Australia and US, religiously active teenagers are quite different from religiously disengaged in respect to their values, attitudes to others, personal behaviour and community participation.

### Spirituality and Life Outcomes

Previous studies have shown a direct link between service to others including community engagement and attitudes to justice and tolerance (Smetana & Metzger 2005; Youniss, McLellan & Yates 1997). Adolescents' spirituality and religiosity have a significant influence on how they relate to the society around them (Smith 2003). The propensity to actively participate in society in a manner that is intended to benefit others is one way that a person's values can be measured. For example, the propensity to volunteer is often connected to people's religious or humanitarian values as they attempt to make a link between how they behave and their belief system (Smidt 2005a). Religion has been found to be a strong contributor to civic engagement with people who endorse religious values putting self interest aside in favour of assisting others in the community (Tocqueville 1945; Youniss, McLellan & Yates 1997). People are more likely to give money and time, even to secular efforts, if they are church members (Wuthnow 1996). In an Australian study, it was found that religiously involved students were more likely than non-religiously involved students to volunteer and do community service as well as hold normative assumptions that these activities were important (Hartley, 2001). Many churches have a strong commitment to social justice and service to others and thus the link between values and service is imbedded in their teaching and evidenced in their programs. Parents who send their children to churches may also hold these same values which further re-enforces them to young attenders.

However, holding religious beliefs does not seem to translate into community participation nearly as well as does religious practice. Roehlkepartain and Benson (1993) found that there was a gap between religious belief and religious activity with the latter more likely to translate into service to others. Religious activity, like frequency of prayer seems to act as a stimulus to public life and is associated with higher levels of community service (Lam 2002). Lam suggests that prayer may serve to reinforce religious values that promote associational life. The Spirit of Generation Y study (Mason, Singleton & Webber forthcoming) of Australian young people confirms this view, demonstrating that regular and frequent prayer is associated with high levels of social concern and participation and that religious practice is more important than religious belief. The gap between holding a belief and acting on that belief is not confined to one's spiritual or religious life. The study by the Australian Temperament Project of 1650 adolescents (Sanson 2001) found that while adolescents reported a strong commitment to the ideal of individual responsibility for problems at the community and global level, this did not always translate into action.

So what is it about active membership in a church or synagogue that underlies this tendency to be community minded? I propose four possible and plausible explanations. Firstly there are many values that are the foundation of both religious faith as well as community service, which include such things as: honesty, compassion and selflessness. Smidt (2005b) argues that adherence to religious faith can promote attitudes and practices that are conducive to democratic life. Many church or religious organizations typically provide direct exposure to explicit ideological orientations or worldviews that are designed to promote the common good. This exposure helps provide young members with the moral underpinnings to communitarian sentiments.

Secondly, active church membership is about communitarianism which is accompanied by obligations that are associated with being a member of a community. The habit of belonging and of working for the good of others is catching and can easily be transferred to other settings. Putnam (2000) argues that it is the connectedness, not merely the faith that is responsible for the beneficence of church people.

Thirdly, churches provide opportunities for young people to practice their skills by encouraging them to take on certain roles and responsibilities within the faith community. These skills can be easily translated into working in the community. Having values that are inclined to working for the common good does not equate with having the skills or the opportunity to put the values into practice. Without some base level of civic knowledge and skills, individuals are less likely to aspire to be involved in community engagement (Smidt 2005b).

Fourthly, active membership in a church or synagogue supplies people with the contacts and networks that provide young people with the opportunity for service and forges associational ties. Contacts made this way can provide additional entry points to young people who would like to be involved in volunteering as well as giving them the confidence to commence (Mason, Singleton & Webber forthcoming).

Parents can also provide contacts for service and can be role models for their children. Previous research has shown that parental involvement in political and social causes is associated with children's greater participation (Smetana & Metzger 2005). Parents may model this behaviour or they may provide opportunities and contacts for their children's entry into civic engagement. Likewise, non-profit and charitable organisations give young people meaningful experiences that have long lasting impact by exposing them to ideologies, values and norms of the sponsoring organisations, and by providing them with opportunities to put them into practice. This uniting of common ideology or interpretation of life animates participation (Youniss, et al 2002).

Young people need assistance to enter new volunteer experiences without which they are inclined to stay within their personal arena. In a study of 47,000 6th to 12th graders in the United States, Roehlkepartain and Benson (1993) found that young people spend a great deal more time helping friends and members of the local community than being involved in wider social justice issues like helping the sick and poor and promoting justice or peace. Roehlkepartain and Benson (1993, p.78) explain that young people preferred to do volunteer work in areas that did not take them outside their 'comfort zone'.

Churches are but one of many avenues that provide networks and links to more demanding types of service. School and secular youth organisations can fulfil these functions. Young people volunteer through community service and volunteer programs at school, through family connections and parental involvement in voluntary works. In

Australia, friends are very important sources of information and influence regarding volunteering (Hartley, 2001). However, participation in organised groups during adolescence has a lasting impact and incorporates civic engagement in their identity e.g. team membership, shared goals. Those who belonged to youth groups are twice as likely to be members of civic organizations when they are adults (Younniss, McLellan, & Yates 1997).

## Adolescent Religion and the Social Context: Comparison between US and Australia

This paper reports on a project on youth spirituality in Australia. The age-range principally targeted was 'Generation Y' (born 1971-1990). It involved a telephone survey of 1619 people from the ages of 13 to 59. The sample was stratified by age and location (state, and metropolitan / non-metropolitan). The youngest age group (SGY) was 'oversampled' to provide greater reliability to estimates. A 'control sample' of persons born from 1945 to 1970 was included for comparison purposes. There were 673 in the 13-17 age group which is the same age group used in the study by Smith (2005). In addition 91 people were interviewed either prior to or after the survey. We categorised participants according to spirituality types that seemed most applicable to the Australian context<sup>42</sup>, as well as according to the religious ideal-types developed by Christian Smith and reported in '*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*'. Smith's four ideal religious types: *Disengaged*, *Sporadics*, *Regulars* and *Devoted*, are reported in this paper (Table 1). Those who do not fit cleanly into one of these four ideal-type categories were classified as *Other/mixed*.

**Table 1. US and Australian Teenagers (13-17): Religious Ideal-types by Country**

<b>Ideal-type</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>AUST</b>
Other/mixed	37%	23%
Disengaged	12%	53%
Sporadics	17%	11%
Regulars	27%	9%
Devoted	8%	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Smith (2005) found that religiously active teenagers are quite different from religiously disengaged in respect to their values, attitudes to others, personal behaviour and community participation. In this paper I seek to explore some of the similarities and differences between the outcomes for Australian and US teenagers across the four religious ideal-types that Smith developed. Sixty-four percent of US teens in Smith's study fit into one of the four ideal religious types in comparison to seventy-seven percent of teens in Australia.

Items contained within five specific outcomes areas are discussed in this paper and are presented in the same order that occurred in Smith's (2005) chapter 7 on adolescent religion and life outcomes. These outcomes are: media consumption, emotional well-being, moral relativism, social compassion and community participation.

<sup>42</sup> In the Australian study, we formulated a different set of spirituality types that included three broad types of worldview: *Traditional* - grounded in a traditional world religion; *Humanists* - held a worldview that affirms human experience and human reason, rather than adopting religious traditions or 'spiritual' paths'. *Eclectics* - held a collage of beliefs and practices from disparate sources including both traditional and alternative.

## Media Consumption

Table 2 explores the comparative media consumption of American and Australian teens as categorized into the four religious ideal-types.

**Table 2. US (NSYR) and Australian (SGY) Teens aged 13-17: Media Consumption by Religious Ideal-type in hours<sup>43</sup>**

	Australia [US]	Religious Ideal-Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadics	Disengaged
Average hours spent playing video games (including X.Box, Game Boy, computer games)	3.2 [2.9]	1.3 [1.2]	2.9 [2.9]	1.5 [3.1]	3.9 [4.1]
Average hours (weekdays & week end) watching TV	11.3 [7.8]	6.7 [6.2]	10.7 [8.7]	11.4 [8.3]	11.7 [7.9]

In Australia, the differences between the Devoted and the Disengaged are statistically significant at 0.05 for hours of watching TV hours but not for hours of playing video/computer game after controlling for age, gender, region and social class using multiple regression.

The hours spent playing video games by teens in both countries is similar, while Australians appear to watch a lot more TV than teens in US. There was little difference between the amount television watched and video games played for the Devoted in both countries. In the NSYR study, Smith found that highly religiously involved American teenagers appear to watch less television and spend considerably less time playing video games than the Disengaged. The difference between the Devoted and the Disengaged is significant for both watching television but not for playing video games. In Australia, there was no gender difference in respect to the hours spent watching TV but there was for time spent on video games, with males spending significantly more time than females.

## Emotional Wellbeing and Religious Ideal-type

**Table 3. US (NSYR) and Australian (SGY) Teens aged 13-17: Emotional Well-being by Religious Ideal-type (percentages)**

	Australia [US]	Religious Ideal-Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadics	Disengaged
My life has a purpose (SGY) Strongly agree	51.	77	52	64	42
I feel I don't really belong anywhere (SGY) Strongly Disagree	48	68	57	66	43
Deep inside I'm hurting—nothing helps (SGY) Disagree/strongly disagree	79	84	91	82	76
Drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs for peace/happiness (SGY) Important/very important	16	3	7	13	20
How often life feels meaningless (NSYR) Never	[40]	[56]	[40]	[37]	[30]
Feels alone and misunderstood (NYSR) Never	[39]	[52]	[40]	[37]	[32]
Often feels sad or depressed (NSYR) Never	[19]	[23]	[21]	[17]	[14]

<sup>43</sup> Sources: (US) National Survey of Youth Religion 2002-3; (Australia) Spirit of Generation Y Survey 2005. Note: Percentages in this table may not add to 100 because of rounding, unreported 'don't know' and 'refused' answers. The information in the tables which report US data is drawn from Smith 2005. pp.229-231.

In Australia, the differences between the Devoted/Regulars and the Disengaged are statistically significant at 0.05 for 'Life has a purpose', 'I don't really belong', 'drinking alcohol/taking drugs and ' deep inside I'm hurting' after controlling for age, gender, region and social class using multiple regression.

As can be seen in Table 3, while questions about how meaningful is life for teens were worded differently in the two studies, the results show a similar trend, which is that Devoted teens seem to have a more positive view of their lives than do the Disengaged. All differences between the Devoted and the Disengaged are statistically significant at the 0.05 level for NSYR and for SGY for all questions. It is also worth noting that the majority of teens in both countries do not feel depressed or vulnerable.

In the SGY study the participants were asked how important drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs was for finding a sense of peace and happiness. It is worth noting that they were relatively unimportant for the peace and happiness for three quarters of all Australians (13-59). However, there was a significant difference for teens in the importance for peace and happiness of taking alcohol/drugs between the Devoted/Regulars and the Disengaged after controlling for demographic variables.

In Australia, more males than females said that drinking or drug-taking was very important to their peace and happiness. There were no gender differences in respect to the other questions on emotional well-being.

**Table 4. All (aged 13-59): Emotional Well-being: Comparison by age group for SGY (percentages)**

	Australia	13-17	18-29	30-59
My life has a purpose (SGY) Strongly agree	59	51	61	60
I feel I don't really belong anywhere (SGY) Strongly Disagree	56	48	55	57
Deep inside I'm hurting – nothing helps (SGY) Disagree/strongly disagree	79	79	79	79
Drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs for peace/happiness (SGY) Important/very imp.	26.	16	32	26

There is a no significant difference at 0.05 for 'life has a purpose', 'don't really belong' or 'deep inside I'm hurting' but there is for 'for drinking alcohol/taking drugs' between 13-17 and 18-29 age group.

There is a significant difference between 13-17 and the other two age groups at the 0.05 but not between the 18-29 and 30-59 groups for alcohol/drug consumption being important for their peace and happiness' (Table 5).

## Moral Relativism

Table 5 explores moral relativism of American and Australian teens as categorized by the four religious ideal-types<sup>44</sup>.

**Table 5. US (NSYR) and Australian (SGY) Teens aged 13-17: Moral Relativism by Religious Ideal-type (percentages)**

	Australia [US]	Religious Ideal-Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadics	Disengaged
Believes that morals are relative, that there are no definite rights or wrongs for everybody	60 [45]	39 [22]	50 [46]	66 [57]	63 [61]

<sup>44</sup> There were no gender differences for moral relativism for the Australian teens.

In Australia, the difference between the Devoted /Regulars and the Disengaged was statistically significant at the 0.05 level for moral relativism but it is not after controlling for age, gender, region and social class using multiple regression.

When considering moral relativism of American teens according to the ideal religious types, we observe some remarkable differences between the Devoted and the Disengaged, with Devoted teens being much less inclined to moral relativism than Disengaged teens. The difference was not significant in Australia after controlling for age, gender, region and social class. When comparing the teens from the two countries, there is a striking difference between Australian and US teens, with a greater proportion of Australian teens being moral relativists than their US counterpart. In Australia 66 percent of teens are moral relativists in contrast to 45 percent in the US. How can the difference between Australia and the US in respect to moral relativism be explained? One possible explanation, given that the same proportion of the Disengaged are moral relativists in both countries, there are a greater proportion of religiously active teens in the US than there are in Australia, and this could be expected to influence the overall result. However, when comparing the proportion of Devoted/Regular (46%) in Australia with the whole population in the US (45%) there is a similar proportion. This would indicate that the greater religiosity in the US is not a major factor in explaining the difference between countries.

**Table 6. All (aged 13-59): Moral Relativity by age groups for SGY (percentages)**

	<b>Aust</b>	<b>13-17</b>	<b>18-29</b>	<b>30-59</b>
Believes that morals are relative that there are no definite rights or wrongs	48	60	59	42

There is a significant difference at 0.05 between those aged 18-29 and those aged 30-59 with those aged 18-29 being more moral relativistic.

Table 6 outlines the responses to moral relativity according three age groups for the SGY study. There is a significant difference between age groups 13-17 and 30 -59 on moral relativity with the teens (13-17) and young adults (18-29) being more relativistic than the older age group. While it may be no surprise that older Australians are less likely to be moral relativists than younger groups, we cannot assume that this means that as the teens grow older, they will follow in their footsteps. An alternative explanation is that the difference between young and older Australians is not due to maturity but that moral relativity is a societal trend and one which may well continue. Relativism seems be increasing and is becoming quite widespread in Australian society.

### **Social compassion**

While both SGY and NSYR teens were asked several questions about compassion for the disadvantaged, because of the different situations in each country most are not directly comparable. Table 8 reports on the differences between the US and Australia in respect to only one of them. It also includes a question that was only asked of the Australian group. There were gender differences for both questions with Australian female teens showing more concern than male teens.

**Table 7. US (NSYR) and Australian (SGY) Teens aged 13-17: Social compassion by Religious Ideal-type (percentages)**

[NSYR in brackets]	Australia [US]	Religious Ideal-Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadics	Disengaged
Personally cares about the needs of poor people in Australia (US) Cares Very much	22 [51]	42 [69]	12 [43]	19 [44]	20 [33]
Importance of helping others (SGY only) Very important/important	48	90	55	49	40

The differences between religious ideal-types for Australians for 'Cares for needs of the poor' and 'Importance of helping others' are significant between Devoted/Regulars and Disengaged after controlling for age, gender, region & social class using multiple regression.

There was a clear link between the religiously active and level of social compassion as illustrated by *Helen* who was a Devoted Christian teen:

I know it's really hard to change the world overall but if you at least make one person happy and then that person, I don't know it's like a light I guess if you take the light that you have and you pass it on to someone else, someone else passes it on to someone it's just like a reaction. So I guess from that sense it might change to world a little or at least your suburb. (Helen aged 15)

Smith (2005 p.227) asks, "Do American teens differ in moral compassion and commitment to justice by religious type?" We could well ask the same question about Australian teens. Both sets of teens were asked how much they 'personally care about the needs of the poor' with some significant differences in their responses. While in both countries twice as many Devoted as Disengaged are personally concerned about 'the needs of poor people', overall a greater proportion of Americans personally care about 'the needs of poor people': 69 percent (Devoted) and 33 percent (Disengaged). The results signify that US teens (51%) irrespective of religiosity, care more about 'the needs of poor people' than Devoted Australian teens (42%), indicating that the greater religiosity of US teens does not provide an adequate explanation for the differences in the two countries. How then can this difference be explained? One possible explanation is that Australia's welfare system is more accessible in comparison to the United States, with welfare benefits at a level that while not overly generous, nevertheless are enough for people to live on. A universal health scheme also means that access to basic health care is available to all, with it being almost free to those on welfare benefits or health care cards. There is little begging in Australia because of this effective welfare safety net. Thus Australian teens would not be confronted by the obvious presence of the poor, so would be less concerned about their plight. Previous research has found national differences when taking into consideration denominational effects as well as the social welfare system, with young people living in countries with better welfare systems being less welfare orientated (Uslander 2002). It is interesting to ponder whether having a well resourced safety net leads to Australian teens having less compassion for the poor than US teens.

**Table 8. All (aged 13-59): Social compassion by age group for SGY (percentages)**

	Australia	13-17	18-29	30-59
Personally cares about the needs of poor people Cares very much	35	23	28	40
Importance of helping others (SGY only) Very important/important	56	48	55	57

There is a significant difference between 13-17 age group and the 30-59 age group but not 18-29 in 'caring for the needs of the poor'. There is no significant difference between age groups for 'importance of helping others' at 0.05.

What is interesting about both items noted in Table 8 is that a greater proportion of older Australians care about the needs of the poor and helping others than do teens. One explanation is that those in the 30 to 59 age groups will be self supporting and are less likely than teens to rely on parents to support them. They may well have experienced bouts of unemployment or of being on restricted incomes. They will also have had more opportunities to have seen the negative effects of poverty in Australia, firstly because they have lived longer and secondly because they are more likely to watch or listened to the news or read newspapers which report such things. In addition, the parents of those at the older end of this cohort were children during the Depression and the parents of those at younger end were children during the Second World War. The parenting they experienced may have raised their awareness of the need for providence.

### Community Participation

Both the US (Smith 2005, p.229) and the Australian study sought to discover whether professed feelings and attitudes of concern are translated into action differently among teens who are more or less religiously active. In both studies the answer was in the affirmative. The results are reported in Table 10. How do we explain the difference in community participation across religious ideal-types? It seems clear that there is a match between Christian values and community service as illustrated by a comment made by Renee.

Yes, I suppose you would call it voluntary work. I helped one summer with a missionary outreach thing that our church was doing in the inner city. They put on a carnival for the kids that live in the high-rise and they have a show beforehand and they would have rides and food and it was just a big fun carnival. They would do that every week at a different high-rise in the city. (aged 19, Pentecostal)

**Table 9. US (NSYR) and Australian (SGY) Teens aged 13-17: Community Participation by Religious (percentages)**

	Australia [US]	Religious Ideal-Types			
		Devoted	Regulars	Sporadics	Disengaged
Regulars or occasionally did volunteer work or community service work in typical month	30 [32]	68 [50]	39 [34]	20 [29]	26 [25]
Has given more than \$20 of own money to any organisation or cause	33 [38]	58 [65]	47 [41]	34 [33]	27 [21]

For both volunteering and donating (generosity) the differences between the Devoted and the Disengaged are statistically significant at 0.05 after controlling for age, gender, region and social class using multiple regression.

In US and Australia, young people who are religiously serious are more likely to be involved in volunteer activities. In both countries the Devoted and Regulars are more involved in volunteer activities, while the Sporadics and Disengaged are involved in fewer.

While around 30 percent of young people in both countries engage in regular volunteer work, a greater proportion of Australian Devoted teens (68%) do so in comparison to US Devoted teens (50%), while the reverse is true for Sporadic teens. Why would this be so? More young people go to private schools in Australia than in the US and most of these schools are church based. These schools also have programs that foster volunteering and community service. This may well be the motivator for Australian young people to

become involved in volunteerism and to gain confidence as well as obtaining contacts that may lead to further involvement within the community. In the SGY study, 26 percent of those aged 13-17 went to private schools, in comparison to 3% in Smith's study. Peter, aged 19 a committed Catholic, is a good example of being introduced to community service at school:

I think the Brothers really reminded the school of its history they also were instrumental in the establishment of Christian Service Programs. Sort of running programs for Amnesty International and charity collections which you know they sent out the boys from the school to go and collect for the missions and that sort of thing. And organise things like, Missions fun run and the pilgrimage to India, and that sort of thing. They were really very good. I suppose they initiated it and fostered the social conscience of the school.

It was also found that in both countries, Devoted teens are much more likely than Disengaged teens to have given more than \$20 of their own money to charity or a good cause in the past year. In the US, the Devoted (65%) performed better than their counterparts in Australia (58%), but the reverse was true for the Disengaged, with Australians (27%) doing better than the US teens (21%). When considering the total population in both countries, there was not much difference between the two in the proportion of young people who were generous. Previous research has found that females rate themselves as volunteering more than males (Smetana & Metzger 2005). Our research did not support this finding in respect to the teens. There was no gender difference for the Australian teens in the hours of volunteering but female teens donated more money to a worthy cause than males.

**Table 10. Community Participation: Comparison between age groups in SGY (aged 13-17, 18-29 & 30-59) (percentages)**

	Australia	13-17	18-29	30-59
Regularly or occasionally did volunteer work or community service (not counting required service eg by school)	35	30	25	39
Has given more than \$20 of own money to any organisation or cause	68	33	60	77

There is a significant difference at 0.05 between 13-17 age group and the 30-50 age group for volunteering and between 13-17 and both other groups for generosity.

Table 10 notes the differences in the level of community participation between three age groups in Australia. In respect to generosity, it is no surprise that the older group was more generous than the teens given that they have a much greater amount of money to give away, their earning power being so much higher. In respect to volunteering, older people generally volunteer more than younger people but this increase does not occur until after twenty-nine. Teens would not have the opportunity or the skills to be as involved as their parents' age group, nor would they be old enough to be involved in certain kinds of activities. This helps to explain the difference between the youngest and oldest age groups. How do we explain the apparent dip in volunteering in the 18-29 age group? Members of the 18-29 age group will either be at University or trying to establish themselves in the workforce and this may explain their low level of volunteering. They may well be also trying to establish a home of their own and a family. They will have limited amount of time to volunteer in comparison to the younger and older groups.

## Conclusions

Religiously active young people are more likely to show high levels of social concern as well as scoring higher on emotional wellbeing. The SGY findings match those of the NSYR study in respect to these findings, however there are some subtle differences. When comparing Devoted US teens with Devoted Australian teens, there are a greater proportion of US teens who respond more positively in respect to some community values. They are more concerned for the needs of poor and fewer US teens are moral relativists. US teens watch less television than Australian teens but both play about the same amount of video games. Both groups on average do about the same amount of volunteer hours in a month and donate about as much money to worthy causes.

At the beginning of this paper, four possible reasons were put forward to explain the link between church membership and religious commitment and community mindedness. How well are they borne out in this research? Religiously inclined teens are involved in higher levels of community participation than the Disengaged and they donate more money. It seems that the habit of working for the good of others has been transferred from one's church life to other settings, and that the skills learned in the church community were also transferred. Further, it can be assumed that being involved in a church community does provide teens with a greater range and number of people who can assist them in gaining access to community service.

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