

The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia.
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The Spirit of Generation Y project (2003-2007), was a national study of spirituality among Australian young people in their teens and early twenties, conducted by researchers from Australian Catholic University, Monash University and the Christian Research Association. The research consisted of a survey of a nationally representative sample of Generation Y (born 1981-1995), with comparison groups from 'Generation X' (born 1966-80) and the 'Baby-Boomer' generation (born 1946-65), supplemented by extended, face-to-face interviews.

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

Excerpt from Chapter 12 – Conclusions

Key Findings

Without recapitulating at length the findings stated in each chapter, we draw together in summary form the most important of them.

Traditional spirituality

1. Just over half of Generation Y said they believed in God (51%); 17% said they did not believe, and 32% were unsure.
2. Almost half of Australian young people between the ages of 13 and 24 do not belong to or identify with any religion or denomination. 46% consider themselves Christian, 17% pursue New Age forms of spirituality, 28% are Secular, 6% belong to other Traditional world-religions, and 3% believe in a God, but do not identify with any religious tradition.
3. Gen Y Christians (46% of Gen Y) hardly differ on most measures of belief and practice from those of their Baby-Boomer parents who are still Christian.
4. But there are major differences between these two generations in other respects; one of the most important is that young women are now no more religious than young men on a wide range of measures.
5. There is a generally low level of interest in and involvement with religion or spirituality among Gen Y: only a minority (about 41%) are really engaged with any of the 3 major types of spirituality – only 17% with any form of Christianity.
6. Gen Ys from conservative Protestant denominations manifest much higher levels of religious belief and practice than Catholics or Anglicans, and also higher levels than their parents' generation within the same denominations.
7. A majority of all denominations agreed that it was 'okay to pick and choose your religious beliefs ...'; and a majority of Gen Y agreed (although less than half of Other Christians and Anglicans) that 'morals are relative, there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody'.
8. Australian young people are reluctant to declare that only one religion is true – only 13% of Generation Y make such a claim.

9. There is a strong drift away from Christianity among Generation Y: some previously attended more regularly, but have stopped doing so; others once believed in God but now do not; before they reach the age of 25, about 18% of those who used to belong to a Christian church are already ex-members.
10. Overwhelmingly it is practising parents who are enthusiastic about their faith that influences young people towards a more committed level of Christian spirituality. No effect of attendance at church schools was detectable, except in the case of 'Other Christian' schools. However, a majority of those who believe in God and attend church schools say that religious education at school is helpful/very helpful in strengthening their faith. About a third of the more religiously committed students reported sometimes being pressured or made fun of at school because of their religious beliefs and practices.

New Age Spirituality

11. About half of Gen Y have explored religions apart from Christianity, but mostly 'just finding out general information'. Those who have ranged most widely over other religions are themselves the most religious, especially because they are much more likely to attend church schools, and to take up the comparative religion units offered in the last two years of high school, which can be credited towards their high school certificate.
12. 31% of Gen Y 'definitely' believe in reincarnation, the idea that people have lived previous lives, and 24% in astrology, that stars and planets affect people's fates. For most of those who believe in reincarnation, this belief is not based on an understanding of reincarnation in the setting of a Traditional religion like Hinduism or Buddhism, but is more like a folk-belief.
13. For Generation Y, New Age *practices* are simply not important. 4 out of 5 members of Gen Y have *never* participated seriously in Yoga (as a form of spirituality), tai-chi, Eastern meditation or Tarot reading.
14. Of the 17% of Gen Y who were classified as New Age in their spirituality, slightly less than half 'New Age Believers', people who hold an eclectic mix of New Age beliefs but have not undertaken any New Age practices. The remainder can be described as 'New Age Participants', people who both hold an eclectic mix of New Age beliefs and have got seriously involved in one or more New Age practices. The majority of the New Age type are not involved in a Traditional religion, but many hold one or two Traditional religious beliefs.
15. Demographic and social factors associated with being a New Age Believer include watching more TV, living away from home and living in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Factors associated with being a New Age Participant include being older and being female. Overall, females are much more likely than males to be exploring New Age spirituality.

Secular spirituality

16. 17% of Gen Y do not believe in God, 19% hold that there is very little truth in any religion and 23% believe that there is no life after death.
17. Of the 28% of Gen Y who follow a secular path in life, 10% are Nonreligious, having never believed in God and rejecting New Age beliefs, 4% are Ex-religious, having once believed in God but now rejecting both Traditional and New Age beliefs, while 14% are Undecided, unsure about whether God is real, but also not accepting New Age beliefs.

18. Demographic and social factors associated with being either Nonreligious or Ex-Religious include being male and living away from the family home. Being older makes no difference to the likelihood of a person's being either Nonreligious or Ex-religious.
19. Gen Y are a media-focussed generation: more than a third of them spend between twenty and fifty hours each week in front of a screen – watching TV, playing video games or surfing the internet, while a further third spend between ten and twenty hours.
20. While there is a popular appetite for TV shows and movies featuring the paranormal and the occult, these shows seem more a reflection of the interests, tastes and beliefs of many of those who watch, rather than an influence persuading audience members to believe in ghosts, psychics or vampires.

Values and social concern

21. Young people indicated that they placed a high value on close relationships with friends and family, and on having an exciting and enjoyable life. They also wanted a peaceful, cooperative, just and secure world. Religious or spiritual concerns were generally not considered important.
22. Most young people said they had purpose in their lives, although some felt that their lives did not fit into any wider scheme, that they did not really belong anywhere or 'were hurting deep inside'.
23. The activities rated most important for enjoying peace and happiness were listening to music, work or study. Most rated meditation very unimportant.
24. Active Christians who put their religious beliefs into practice are more likely than Marginal or Nominal Christians, and much more likely than New Agers not raised Christian, or Seculars, to have positive civic attitudes, to demonstrate high levels of social concern and to be actively involved in service to the community. Christians were humanistic in proportion to their level of Christian commitment; few Seculars were humanists.
25. Gen Ys from conservative Protestant denominations show higher levels of social concern and involvement than members of more liberal denominations.
26. New Agers who were raised Christian, and Secular women (but not men) raised Christian, showed higher levels of social concern, especially in volunteering.
27. Churches and youth organisations can and do help young people to move out of their 'comfort zone' and become involved in high levels of civic participation. They are important avenues for the provision of both skills training and volunteering opportunities.