

**Rachael Kohn:** A society that prays together stays together; how true is that?

Hello, I'm Rachael Kohn, and today we're looking at the evidence from a new study which shows that young Australians are not all that keen about praying together. You're with The Spirit of Things on ABC Radio National.

The [Generation Y Spirituality Report](#) was a three-year study that canvassed over a thousand people. Today we'll hear from two of the four sociologists who worked on the study, Michael Mason and Andrew Singleton, from Melbourne.

One of the big findings is the high degree of individualism in Generation Y. That might be bad news for the churches but if Velcrow Ripper is anything to go by, the new approach to spirituality is not necessary at the expense of a social conscience. His film, *Scared Sacred*, received this year's Canadian Academy Award for Best Documentary.

*Velcrow Ripper: I live on a paradise island off the West Coast of Canada. It's the year 1999. The Millennium is approaching and though I'm not expecting the Apocalypse, every week there seems to be a new war, another extinct species, diseases running wild, more hungry people. In the light of day I realise that it's impossible to run away, so I've decided to take the opposite approach. I'm running towards, I'm setting out on a journey that will eventually consume five years of my life, and take me to the Ground Zeroes of the world, searching for possibility in the darkness, for the sacred inside the scared.*

**Rachael Kohn:** The improbably named Velcrow Ripper, who was raised in the Baha'i faith. He joins me later in the program.

SONG

**Rachael Kohn:** For about a century, sociologists have believed that society works when everyone shares roughly the same values and beliefs. When there's no generation gap. But a new major Australian study of Generation TY, those born after 1975, may be challenging that view.

The Report shows that Generation Y is more inclined than the previous generation to pick and choose among the beliefs on offer, and even their understanding of God isn't confined to the received tradition. But interpreting statistics can be misleading, so I spoke to two of the four researchers who conducted the study.

Well Michael Mason and Andrew Singleton, welcome to the program.

Both: Thank you.

**Rachael Kohn:** Before we get into the details of your study on the spirituality of Generation Y, can anyone tell me where the concept of Generation X and Generation Y came from? Because it seems to be kind of like at the tail end of the alphabet. I have this feeling that we're the end of the line here.

**Andrew Singleton:** I think the term Generation Y is indebted to the term Generation X, and that was coined by an American author, Douglas Coupland in the early 1990s, and he was referring to that cohort that immediately came after the Baby Boomers who of course were well known, and he was trying to find a name for that generation and his novel, *Generation X* was the first place that that term was coined. And I guess the X kind of refers to a nothingness or an oblivion. And so commentators then just described the generation after that as Y.

**Rachael Kohn:** I guess we're going into Z as well.

**Andrew Singleton:** The next generation's called dot com or millennials, so we're not moving to Z. I think that's gone out, they're looking for the latest and greatest flashy name.

**Rachael Kohn:** Yes, I guess it was also too scary the idea of actually coming to the end of it all. Tell me, how large was the study?

**Michael Mason:** There were 1272 people from Generation Y in the sample, and we also took a control sample of Generation X and the Boomers, just to be sure, so there's about another 370. So altogether there were 1619 people in the survey, and before and after the survey we did almost 100 interviews, nearly all of those with Generation Y people up and down the Eastern States of Australia, and they were rather more intensive interviews, and they gave us a much richer picture.

**Rachael Kohn:** And Generation Y, are they the post 1975 generation?

**Andrew Singleton:** That's correct. We defined them as 1976 to 1990, which is a fairly common definition used in other research.

**Rachael Kohn:** Now what would you see as the most significant feature of the post 1975 society that has impacted or shaped Generation Y?

**Michael Mason:** I don't think they've been so much shaped by very recent things. I think the changes that have shaped them, we've said in the report that they're what, Australian culture and their parents have made them. And it was their parents who actually were Baby Boomers, who back in the late '60s and early '70s, lived in a period of major social and cultural change.

With Generation Y I think we're just seeing the working out of those changes. The interesting thing for them is that they're starting life, or they're into their teens and 20s, at a point where the Boomers and Generation X have done their work on the culture.

**Rachael Kohn:** And that culture, what's the feature of it? We do live in a very multicultural society, don't we?

**Michael Mason:** Yes, and they're as multicultural or more multicultural in terms of their parents' places of birth and their own countries of origin. But Australian culture, during that last 40 or 50 years, has become much more secular. There's a fear of illusion in Australian culture that's almost led to us being reluctant to dream. So in a way you could perhaps characterise Generation Y as the first to be young in a culture that doesn't trust dreams or visions.

**Rachael Kohn:** Gosh, that sounds pretty bleak. But Michael I imagine that studying religious attendance in the old style of looking at how frequently people go to church, is far easier than actually looking at something called spirituality. How did you come up with a working definition?

**Michael Mason:** It was very difficult. We looked at the history of the concept and we saw that initially it had a meaning for the Ancient Greeks, and then it took on religious meanings especially in Israel. The idea of spirit was connected with the Spirit of God.

From the 17th century on, spirituality came to mean a person's particular take on religion, their own personal style of religiosity. They're nearly always referring of course to Christianity, but in more recent times, spirituality has a much wider common definition. It's taken to be extremely broad and institutional religion would only be one small part of that.

People define their own spirituality. We initially had difficulty with people who refused the entire notion of the spiritual, but they have a way of life, they have a world view, they have their own set of values and ethics, and so as not to arbitrarily exclude them, we finished up with a very broad definition that says Whatever your world view and the set of values that go with it, we are going to treat that as your spirituality even if perhaps in more common parlance you might say Well I don't have a spirituality, I don't believe in anything spiritual.

We wanted to include the whole range of world views and value systems that young Australians follow.

**Rachael Kohn:** And so you came up with these three categories: traditional, eclectic and humanist. Can you give a description of who constituted those categories?

**Michael Mason:** Well the first one's the easiest. I'll leave the other two to Andrew.

In traditional spirituality we had those who identified as Christian, who attended Christian churches, but also quite a range of people from other major world religions. There are primarily Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, they're the most numerous other traditional religions which have extremely ancient traditions of their own. We only find of course small numbers of them in a survey.

In the census they're much more accurately represented. So traditional religions were Christian and Other Traditions. Within traditional religions we looked mainly at Christians because they were the vast majority of those following a traditional path. Andrew will tell you what we included in eclectic and humanist.

**Andrew Singleton:** Eclectic were those people that believed in two or more New Age, esoteric or Eastern religious beliefs. For example, belief in reincarnation, believe in psychics, fortune tellers or astrology. In addition they may practice up to four different New Age or esoteric or Eastern religious or spiritual practices: yoga, tai chi, tarot or fortune tellers.

**Rachael Kohn:** Did you ever find Christian as part of that complex of beliefs and practices?

**Andrew Singleton:** About a certain percentage of those who we described as eclectic also held a number of traditional Christian beliefs. For example, belief in life after death, or a belief in angels, or demons and so forth. But we don't necessarily know whether their view of life after death for example might accord with a traditional Christian view. They just said that they affirmed that belief, but given that they're fairly eclectic in their other range of beliefs, we're not exactly sure what they might understand by that.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well it's interesting that humanist was also included in this category, because clearly spirituality in your study is not necessarily the product of traditional religious practice. Or even a belief in God.

**Michael Mason:** No, not at all. We felt that this was a very important group, at the very least because they're such a large proportion of Generation Y, so we wanted to understand their view of life, their outlook.

We labelled them humanist because they seem not to wish to follow any spiritual path, neither the traditional ones nor an eclectic blend of various old and new, nor the New Age or appropriated Eastern spiritualities. They seem to be turned resolutely against all of that.

We didn't mean humanist in the perhaps better-known sense of humanist society, rationalist society, they're not necessarily terribly angry at traditional religion, they're more likely to be quite tolerant of it. Many of them will say Oh yes, I've got friends who are Christians and I can respect what they believe. So they're not by definition anti-religious, they just don't choose that path for themselves.

**Rachael Kohn:** And it seems some of them even believe in God, there are a few that did say that they believed in God, and I actually wonder whether there's a change going on here about how God is perceived?

**Michael Mason:** That's a very good point, yes. We divided humanists into various levels.

There are more hard-core humanists you might say who say they don't believe in God and they never have, but there's a boundary between humanist and traditional, where people very often have formerly been associated with usually a Christian religion, but also some of the other religions, have moved away from that, but still retained a few beliefs. Not only may they perhaps believe in God; if they don't they often believe in some kind of life force or higher being.

In fact right across the board the statistic that's very often quoted is that only 48% of Generation Y believed in God. Well that's a little bit misleading. There were another 30% who said they were unsure. Even those who said No, they don't believe in God, we think they were saying 'We don't believe in your kind of God, or in the God that institutional religion puts forward'.

When you look at those who said they were unsure or didn't believe, it turns out two-thirds of them said they believed in some kind of higher being or life force in the universe. And most of those actually believe that this higher being or life force cares about us. So you've actually got 80% of Generation Y who believe there's something out there, and 70% of Generation Y believe that this something or somebody out there cares about us.

So I think it's a more individualised picture of whatever he or she or it is, out there. But most of them believe there's something.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well that individualised picture is really one of the themes that comes across in the survey, and I'd like to pursue that a little bit later, but first, just generally, what's the proportional representation of Generation Y under the three categories: traditional, eclectic and humanist?

**Andrew Singleton:** We had traditional at 44%, we had eclectic at 17% and humanists at 31% of the population.

**Rachael Kohn:** Gosh, that's pretty high for humanists isn't it?

**Andrew Singleton:** It certainly is.

**Michael Mason:** Much higher than the census would lead you to believe. We think that after people have talked for 20 minutes about their outlook on life, mostly not about religious things or spiritual things. We ask them what social activities they were involved in, what they enjoyed doing, and gradually moved towards what were their deeper values, and we found that after that time of reflection when we asked them did they consider themselves to be this denomination or that, they often said No, and their proportion of identification was different denominations is much lower than the census would give.

But it's just one question amongst many others you tick it or your parents tick it without very much reflection. We think the answers they gave us were based on a good deal more reflection and more serious consideration. So we think they're plausible.

**Rachael Kohn:** That's how the spiritual choices of Generation Y line up. Michael Mason of the Australian Catholic University, and Andrew Singleton of Monash University are two of the researchers on [The Spirit of Generation Y Report](#), which is available on the web.

Later in the program we'll be talking to a Generation X film maker whose documentary, *Scared Sacred*, is having profound effects on audiences around the world.

Now back to the Spirituality Survey that gives some indication of where Australia is headed.

Let's look at how the churches are doing. Now Michael, this was your main area of involvement in the Survey, and it looks like the Anglican and Catholic churches are not as appealing to Generation Y as some of the other churches.

**Michael Mason:** That's correct. Anglicans were about 8% of Generation Y; that's 8% or 9% lower than the census. There were quite a number of Anglicans of Gen Y people who'd previously been Anglicans, but said that they now had no denominational identification.

We asked people who said they didn't belong to any church now, Did you when you were younger? Very often it was until the end of primary school. The transition from primary school into high school is very

often a point where young people decide that's not for them. And in both the Anglican and Catholic groups there were more than a quarter who said Yes, I used to belong to that denomination, I used to think of myself as Anglican or Catholic, but now I don't.

**Rachael Kohn:** But it seems that in the other churches, there was much more of a strong and active commitment, and it seems those are the ones that are more likely to be the full Gospel, the Baptist, the Hillsong-type of church.

**Michael Mason:** That's quite true. The other Christian group were consistently higher on almost every measure, it would be safe to say on every measure of religious belief and practice. And they are the denominations that you mentioned: Lutheran, Churches of Christ, Baptist, Pentecostal.

We had to group them together because both in the census and in the survey, individual churches within that group are too small for us to be dividing up further across answers to questions. They're about 16% of Generation Y and they excelled in all of these measures of Christian belief and practice, no question about that.

**Rachael Kohn:** Your study also showed that some Generation Y Catholics were more spiritual than their Baby Boomer parents. They had a stronger sense of a personal connection to God, and I wonder whether that had something to do with the shift from the political to the personal that one has seen over that period.

**Michael Mason:** That could be. It may also be an age effect that if ever people are going to be responsive to an ideal or enthusiastic about fate. The later teens are classically the predominant age for religious conversion. It might be due to that.

**Rachael Kohn:** Interesting. Now there was another finding about other religions, and there seemed to be a great deal more participation in those religions, which had to do with a sense of community identity. Would they have been amongst what, largely the immigrant classes?

**Michael Mason:** Yes, that's exactly right. The strongest group within other religions were Muslims. They were very high on a range of beliefs and personal practices, and a good number of them of course came from immigrant groups. The only indicator really on which they were somewhat lower than the other Christian group was attendance at religious services, but one can well understand that because not all of them would live within convenient reach of a place of worship. But on most other indicators, they were right up there with the most active Christians and in some cases had higher scores than even the other Christian group.

**Rachael Kohn:** And what about adaptation to modernity and change? Is there any evidence there in that category that young people, Generation Y are making changes in their religion?

**Michael Mason:** If you're looking particularly at the other religions group, there was a kind of fascinating finding there, that even though they're strongly influenced by their ethnic heritage, and its religious component, they turn out to be very Australian in some other ways. They think it's fine to pick and choose amongst the various beliefs that make up their religion, they tend to agree that moral values are relative, that there are no absolute rights and wrongs for everybody.

So some of the individualistic emphasis that's highly characteristic of Generation Y, came through even in this other religions group, like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well I gather those immigrant groups didn't appear very strongly under the 'No Religion' category. And I wanted to ask you Andrew, about that 'No Religion' category, because it seems to be something of a misnomer.

**Andrew Singleton:** Sure. Do you have a specific question, sorry Rachael?

**Rachael Kohn:** Yes, -

**Michael Mason:** I think Rachael's referring to the fact that people who don't necessarily belong to any religious denomination nonetheless share a whole range of beliefs. They're saying No, we don't belong to any of your institutional churches, and they're a high proportion; they're the majority of Generation Y, don't consider themselves to belong to any religious denomination.

But 22% of them say unhesitatingly they believe in God; another 41% say they're unsure, but as we saw before a lot of those who were unsure or say No, do believe in a higher being, that God relates to us as a person, so it's a misnomer indeed to say as the census insists on saying, you have this option, you can belong to a religious group or else you have no religion. It's not quite true. You may not feel that you belong to any existing religious group and yet you may have a range of religious beliefs and you may engage in quite a number of more private religious practices.

**Rachael Kohn:** I think Hans Moll, the great sociologist of religion back in the '70s, said that a lot of that 'No Religion' category was in fact representative of people who had a private practice, a private sense of spirituality.

**Michael Mason:** Absolutely right, now this is - see Rachael Kohn the sociologist talking. Yes, Moll was absolutely spot on. I regard his study and its follow-up report as the greatest work that's been done in sociology of religion in Australia, and his foresight was absolutely superb.

He called these people private believers. Of course it's a much-debated question in the sociology of religion whether one believer by himself can really retain very much of that. It's a pretty fragile thing when it's solitary, but he identified quite a significant group that he called private believers, who just kept to their beliefs to themselves, didn't participate very much in any public fashion but held on to certain key values and beliefs.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well in fact Andrew, I wonder whether - and I think you're probably closer to Generation Y than Michael is.

**Andrew Singleton:** I'm Generation X.

**Rachael Kohn:** Generation X. Well I wonder whether the problem with the No Religion category is that a lot of young people reject even the concept of religion. They often say, Oh, no to religion, yes to spirituality. Is it the case that the census and other types of surveys haven't been able to pick up on that spirituality?

**Andrew Singleton:** I guess to some extent. There's considerable research that's been done in the United States trying to explore the relationship between people say Yes, I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious.

I think for us the category of eclectic opens that up a little bit more, because then we see that people are applauding a range of beliefs and to a lesser extent practices that you could certainly describe as spiritual, but they're outside the bounds of religion themselves.

We chose not to ask those spiritual versus religious questions in our survey because particularly prior to this survey when we did a large number of in-depth interviews, we found that most young people weren't actually sure what the term 'spirituality' actually meant, even in some of the pilot stage interviews, asked them to offer their definition, or what did they think of the term, and there seemed to be a large amount of confusion. So for the most part we didn't actually say Well define spirituality. Do you think you live that type of life? Or whatnot. We tended to find a less direct way of managing that.

**Michael Mason:** In other words, they don't use the terminology of spirituality, we don't think that matters at all, and it was more or less our responsibility to say what we were going to treat as spirituality, but the word itself doesn't seem to have the currency here that perhaps it does in the US. And besides, we were interviewing young people, some of them were only 12, and of course your basic point is that spirituality of various kinds extends much more widely than religion.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well Michael, as a Catholic priest as well as a sociologist, you'd certainly be concerned about how religion and spirituality are shaping the society we live in. Are you concerned? Is society in trouble?

**Michael Mason:** Well, unfortunately being a priest doesn't make me a prophet as well. The old school of sociologists used to be concerned about how a society would hold together if it didn't have a very strong common world view, and especially, a strong basis of shared values.

My suspicion is that our society is integrated more now by a vast structure of law, an even vaster range of regulations, and that governments have the power of very close supervision of individual citizens if you're getting a government payment or pension, and you're on Social Security's computers, well they track very closely your job applications and all of that, and the tax system, once it gets hold of you, once you start earning, has a really very comprehensive control over people's lives, and I think probably the society depends much more on these measures of constraint really for its social control, though there's no conspiracy.

But it's just turned out that society can function with these measures in place and can almost dispense with the degree to which people internalise serious values about the common good. That's regrettable, I think it leads to a rather thin sense of identity in individuals.

I'm concerned for Generation Y I suppose because they're the first to grow up in this much more secular, this dream free environment, and I think their identity which depends very heavily on the support of their family and friends, and is not now reinforced by all those churches, scout groups, community groups, local communities, so it's I think rather more fragile than it used to be. How that's going to play out in our society in the future I'm not sure.

As far as the churches are concerned there isn't a magic bullet, there isn't any simple solution, there isn't an advertising campaign to Generation Y that's going to make much difference I think to their fortunes. What I would advise them to do is to understand the very different situation in which Generation Y are growing up compared with those of 50 years ago, and if and when Generation Y come through life experience to a sense that they want to belong to something larger, the churches have wonderful resources from a tradition.

Not being part of an institution means that you just have to make all the mistakes yourself, you have to reinvent the wheel in every major issue in your life. What the traditions offer is a kind of sedimented wisdom of the ages at their best. I think they just have to hold that there for when Generation Y come to have a sense of needing it.

**Rachael Kohn:** So you're keeping the doors open. Certainly there is a sense from what you've said that the danger here could be that Generation Y doesn't feel a sense of personal responsibility to society, if indeed that big machine of government is clicking along, willy-nilly, there might be a sense of people being cut off from the fate of society and where it's going. Andrew, is that too dark a view?

**Andrew Singleton:** No, I really agree with that. I think that it seems to be that individuals' orientations is primarily to themselves, their own wellbeing, their self fulfillment, and beyond that, their family, and not the community good as a whole. And I think you see that not just in the emergence of suburbs with large houses with kids ensconced with X-box, and not venturing out to participate, and even playing with their peers in the street, but also in the churches that do seem to be popular with young people, emphasise a doctrine that God's desperately interested in things like your financial security, your personal wellbeing, the state of your business affairs, and so forth, even though those churches often have some element of community orientation.

It seems the first point of call is Well, what's God doing for me in my life? And I would be concerned about that.

**Rachael Kohn:** Well it's very absorbing reading, and I thank you so much, both of you, for trying to clarify some of these very complex issues that are going to be with us for the next generation.

**Michael Mason:** You're most welcome Rachael, thanks.

**Rachael Kohn:** There you have it, just some of the trends that you can read about in The Spirit of Generation Y Report. Andrew Singleton from Monash University and Michael Mason from the Australian Catholic University, both in Melbourne, conducted the study along with Ruth Webber of the ACU and Phillip Hughes of the Christian Research Association.

MUSIC

## **Guests**

### **Rev. Dr Michael Mason**

is a Research Fellow at the Institute for the Advancement of Research, and Director of the ACBC-ACU Office of Pastoral Research at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne.

### **Dr Andrew Singleton**

is a Lecturer in the Sociology department at Monash University in Melbourne. His research interests include the sociology of men and masculinity and spirituality in contemporary society.