The Spirituality of Young People in Australia

The Research Project

One task of the researcher is to look ahead as far as possible, to predict what might happen, in order to assist churches in taking control over what does happen. It was partly with this in mind that the Christian Research Association (Australia) decided that it would embark on a major project over a period of four years to study the ways that young people put their lives together, the role of religion and / or spirituality in that process, and the nature of religion and spirituality among young people. The directions young people are taking may well be indicative of future directions.

Some of what we discover with young people arises from their stages in life. In that regard, we expected to find significant differences between young people in their early teens and those in their twenties. But other characteristics of young people will be indicative of the historical generation. They arise out of the features of the culture in which young people have grown up. These characteristics may well continue over time and thus be indicative of future trends.

Seventeen organisations have supported this study of young people, including several Catholic education systems and the Lutheran school system. Other supporting organisations include a variety of denominational bodies: Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventists, Uniting Church, along with several other organisations interested in religious education such as YMCA, Victorian Council for Christian Education and the Council for Christian Education in Schools.

Our study of young people has involved four stages each taking a year:

1. A pilot stage involving 20 interviews and experimentation with various types of questions as we developed theories and hypotheses (2002-03);
2. An initial interview stage involving around 200 in-depth interviews with young people, listening to their language, the themes which emerge and the variety among those themes (2003-04);
3. A survey stage involving surveys in schools totalling about 2000 young people plus a national telephone survey of around 1500 young people, providing samples of sufficient size to make generalisations about the students in several school systems and about Australian young people in general (2004-05);
4. A final interview stage in which we return to some of the people interviewed in stage 2 and see how responses have changed over time and in relation to specific experiences of life and interviews of groups identified in the survey stage not sufficiently covered in the initial interviews.

We are currently in stage three of the project. The initial interviews were completed in 2004 and most of the surveys have also now been completed. However, the data from the national telephone survey is not yet available to me. I only have surveys of about 1500 young people from Catholic and Lutheran schools. Hence, this paper is presenting some preliminary results.

What Is Important in Life

The interviews began by asking people about their favourite activities: what they enjoyed doing. Naturally, there was a range of answers. Many young people enjoy sport. There are some who enjoy artistic activities such as music, dancing, or painting. Some enjoyed watching television, although I was personally a little surprised at the number who claimed that they do not watch all that much television.

One of the most common answers was spending time with their friends. The activity was not as important as who they were with. We asked them about when they had the most fun they ever had. Again, the answers were many and varied. Some spoke of a rock concert they had been to, or a performance they had taken part in. A number spoke about travel, visiting theme parks or finding new relatives overseas. While some spoke of enjoying extreme sports others spoke of spending time with their friends watching a sunrise or watching videos together. Again, it was often the people that they were with that made the occasion fun, not just the event itself.

In many of the interviews we then proceeded to ask the young people what were the most worthwhile aspects of life. The most common response at this point was in terms of relationships. Friends and family were referred to almost equally. Being there for one another, listening, being kind and non-judgemental were often expressed as the most important qualities of those relationships.

Similarly, we asked young people who they most admired and why they admired them. The most frequent response was a parent. Mothers and fathers were referred to in similar proportions. They admired them for their kindness, their encouragement, their support and their care. It was interesting that some students were almost apologetic for referring to their parents. It is hardly the popular picture of young people in Australia. But it is indicative that many families are functioning well. Indeed, the impression that came through many interviews was that, in many cases, there was a real friendship between one or other parent and the young person. These young people enjoyed doing things with their parents, whether it was helping each other out in the life saving club, or fixing cars together, going shopping or enjoying sporting events together, going on holiday or enjoying the festivities of Christmas.

Families have lost some of the structure and the solidity of the roles that characterised previous generations. The result has been that in some households, family life has disintegrated. But in many other households, families have responded creatively to the possibilities of family life and relationships between young people and their parents are strong.

There were, of course, many young people who did not choose a parent as most the person they most admired. A few spoke of friends. Several spoke of famous sports people. However, again, the pattern was not quite as expected. Those admired most were sports people who had suffered hardship and who had persisted in overcoming it. Rarely in the interviews was an actor, singer or movie star mentioned.

Overall, there were two major themes in young people's discussions about what was important in life. The first was relationships: family and friends. The second was enjoying life. For many young people, the enjoyment of life was found in relationships, but others referred to having special experiences such as in extreme sports, spending time with pets, camping or going to theme parks.

The youngest students, around 13 to 15 years old, were the most likely to say that what they wanted was a nice car and a nice house, but many students explicitly said that having lots of money was not important to them – just enough to be comfortable and to have the freedom to do what they wanted to do. However, there were many who spoke about travel. Either through work or in their leisure time, they wanted to experience a variety of cultures and live in a range of places.

There were some minor themes among the young people. We met a few whose lives revolved around social justice, young people involved in voluntary activities or social justice causes. Several young people interviewed were committed to working in the public arena through politics. There were also a few whose lives revolved around their church involvement, youth groups and Bible study. There were one or two others who found life oppressive, who found life full of pressures and whose goal in life was finding a way they could find ways to relieve those pressures.

Very similar results were found in the school surveys that have been conducted in six Lutheran schools and four Catholic schools. Students at least three levels in each school were asked to complete a survey which included a question about how important were a range of values on a scale of 0 to 10. The two values which had the highest scores were 'enjoying life' and 'deep friendships'. 'Excitement' follows close in importance, followed by several values which have to do with the social environment in which people want to live: a world free of war and conflict, where there is social justice, where people help one another and where there is security. In the middle of these values is the personally oriented value of 'wealth'.

At the bottom of the list is 'a spiritual life'. In this list of values, it received the lowest average score among both students at Catholic and Lutheran schools. However, it was also the value among which there was greatest diversity of opinion. Approximately one third of all students said it had very little importance at all (scoring it less than 5 out of 10). Another 38 per cent of students scored it as having some importance (between 5 and 7). 27 per cent of students scored it as being of high importance (between 8 and 10 out of 10) with 12 per cent scoring it as 'most important', giving it a score of 10.

Table 1. Values – and Their Importance in Life	*Mean Score (between 0 and 10) for all Catholic Students*	*Mean Score (between 0 and 10 for all Lutheran Students*
Enjoying life (food, leisure)	8.7	8.5
Deep friendships (close, supportive)	8.6	8.5
Excitement (stimulating experiences)	8.1	7.8
World peace (free of war and conflict)	7.1	6.9
Wealth (material possessions, money)	6.8	6.7
Helping others (working for welfare of others)	6.6	6.5
Social justice (correcting injustice, care for the weak)	6	6.0
National security (protection of the nation)	5.9	5.7
Protecting the environment	5.8	5.7
Spiritual life (emphasis on spiritual, not material matters)	5.4	5.1

Achieving the Good Life

For most young people, the way forward involved satisfactory completion of their education and getting a job. Quite a few mentioned that they would look for a job which gave them time for other things in life. 'I want to work to live, not live to work', said one young person. At the same time, most wanted a job which interested them, one that gave them some enjoyment. Several students said they wanted a job where they could contribute to the lives of others: perhaps in medical work or working among refugees.

A range of other resources they used in achieving their goals were mentioned when we asked them how they coped in difficult times and how they made decisions. Many said that difficult times were not easily resolved. A few said they got angry or upset and did not handle things well. Others said they talked things through with friends or with family. Quite a few said that their brothers and sisters were very helpful in talking about things that they did not feel were easily shared with their parents. Quite a few said that prayer helped.

Many students talked about having time on their own, times to 'chill out', to relax, to work through things. They would retire to their rooms, or go for a run. Some listened to music. Others would sit under a tree. Almost none of them were practising yoga or meditation, but many found ways to withdraw from everyday activities and to reflect on life.

In the surveys, students were asked to rate twenty-two different items in terms of their importance in providing them with peace and happiness. The following table indicates the proportion indicating that this 'resource' was very important (giving it a score of 8 or more out of 10).

Table 2. Ways of Finding Peace and Happiness	***All Students at Catholic Schools Rating Item as 'Very Important' %***	***All Students at Lutheran Schools Rating Item as 'Very Important' %***
Spending time with friends	71	70
Spending time with family	69	61
Listening to music	57	50
Engaging in a sport, hobby or club	47	51
Doing some exercise	45	43
Relaxing, doing nothing	44	40
Spending time with pets	34	38
Travelling on holiday	44	36
Watching movies, DVDs, TV	34	34
Being close to nature	18	28
Working (eg part-time work)	19	21
Studying for school or own projects	35	27
Drinking alcohol	13	18
Being creative artistically	18	22
Playing a musical instrument	19	20
Involvement in dance or drama	17	19
Reading books	26	22
Praying or meditating	16	17
Spending time on the computer	21	17
Attending a church or youth group	20	15
Taking recreational drugs	7	9

The most strongly affirmed means of achieving peace and happiness were the relationships of friends and family. Most students indicated that these were very important to them. There was much greater variation on other options. Further analysis indicated that 68 per cent of the variation in how peace and happiness was found could be explained by 7 clusters of interests. These clusters probably reflect different personality types, but also different life orientations and experiences of life. These were:

1) Sport, exercise and travelling
2) Music, playing an instrument, being in nature and time with your friends and pets
3) Watching movies, DVD and TV, time on the computer, reading books and relaxing
4) Attending church or youth group and prayers
5) Part-time work and study
6) Involvement in dance or drama and being creative artistically, e.g. painting and craft.
7) Drinking alcohol and taking recreational drugs

Boys were more likely to consider computers, sport, alcohol and recreational drugs important. Girls were more likely to mention being close to nature, family,

friends, pets, dance / drama and art / craft. Australian born students were more likely to experience peace and happiness through study and part time work than those born overseas. Urban students tended to affirm a more diverse range of options for finding a sense of peace and happiness. Attending a church or youth group and prayer were the items which rural students affirmed more strongly.

The Spiritual Aspect of Life

When asked whether students felt there was a spiritual aspect to life, most said that there was. Most felt that it was seen in people's beliefs. One person said it was 'the answers one gives to life'. Another spoke about it being that part which was beyond the physical and the chemical, or the aspect of life apparent in caring.

Most students we interviewed believed in God. For some, God was seen in very personal terms – mostly as a warm, parent figure, although a few saw God primarily as judge and the One who made sure you did the right thing. For the majority of students, belief in God was vague. There was something out there, they thought, and generally whatever was there was good. One student said:

> I'm not sure if there's an actual person but there is something: maybe a little floaty thing in the sky, kind and open and welcoming.

Several spoke of God being in nature, rather than the creator. One spoke of God as the sun shining through the clouds and as a newborn baby. Another spoke of everything being in God. One student asked if belief in the self was the same as belief in God.

The surveys provided similar data. Students were asked to select from a series of statements the one closest to what they thought about God. It is notable, however, the proportion of students who said they just did not know what to think. Their responses were as follows:

- 45% of Lutheran school students and 56% of Catholic school students believed there is a personal God;
- 20% of Lutheran and 18% of Catholic school students believed in some sort of spirit or life force;
- 25% of Lutheran and 19% of Catholic school students said they don't really know what to think;
- 11% of Lutheran and 7% of Catholic school students did not believe in any sort of spirit, God or life force.

Younger students were more likely to believe in a personal God. Those in the middle years of their secondary schooling were most likely to have little idea what to believe. The senior students were more likely to have made their decisions, either for or against belief.

Of the students surveyed, 42 per cent of Lutheran and 27 per cent of Catholic school students said they never attended a church. On the other hand, 19 per cent of Lutheran and 23 per cent of Catholic attended weekly or more often.

Among those who went to church frequently, there were some significant differences in attitude and orientation.

1. Those for whom faith was a duty – often with strong encouragement from their families. Among these were a number of immigrants from Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Malta, Tonga and Samoa. For most of these, church attendance was not only a religious, but also a cultural event. Some went reluctantly, not understanding all that went on. Several of them commented on the length of the ethnic services – and said they preferred the shorter English services. Others were happy to fulfill the duty. For many of the recent immigrants, the sense of duty was strong.

2. One or two said the ritual of church attendance gave a rhythm to their lives. They felt it was especially important to participate in the sacraments.

> It feels divine and you get so wrapped up in it and stuff…you feel content with the world and it helps you, whatever you feel you know God is there.

3. A number of students saw church involvement as times for connecting with God. Faith was something personal. They felt that, at church, they met with God and they appreciated the help and support that this meeting gave them.

4. Many students went to church occasionally. Many of these appreciated the values of the church and the sense that God was there for them even if they did not 'call on God' very often. For some, it was just a part of life that was accepted. They listened and sometimes found it relevant. Others did not enjoy it much. They found it boring when they did go and did not appreciate it on a personal level.

We had expected to find students drawing on a variety of religious resources following some surveys of adults that had found, for example, that 11 per cent of all adult Australians had tried Eastern meditation within the 12 months prior to the survey. However, there were very few students who were actively drawing on the resources of other religions, such as Eastern religions or New Age. Just 5 per cent of Lutheran students surveyed and 6 per cent of Catholic school students frequently practised meditation. Four per cent of each group were regularly practising yoga and three per cent of each group used crystals frequently.

However, a few were toying with ideas such as reincarnation and the planes of existence. They had read about them in books and found they made sense of aspects of their lives or experiences they had had. Many had studied other religions in school, and found the beliefs interesting. But we only met one student who was attracted to practising one of the other world religions – in this

case, Buddhism. A few students talked about the search for finding themselves, the quest to discover what life was all about.

The survey invited students to respond to ten categories representing various approaches to life. Students were able to choose more than one response.

- 61% of Lutheran and 65% of Catholic school students said what was most important in their lives were friends or close family. They agreed that it was really important for them to be there for their friends and / or their family.

- 36% of Lutheran and 43% of Catholic school students identified with family or community affirming that for them, life revolved around their family or a community (such as a club or church group). Through their involvement they felt a strong sense of belonging.

- 32% of Lutheran and 40% of Catholic school students identified with the option, 'God is my friend'. They agreed that they had a close relationship with God or Jesus. They affirmed that they pray often and God helped them.

- 36% of Lutheran and 28% of Catholic school students selected the 'life's fine' option. They said they did not believe in God and that the most important thing was to enjoy and make the best of one's life.

- 15% of Lutheran and 16% of Catholic school students affirmed that 'life sucks'. They affirmed that deep inside they were hurting, and turning to God did not seem to help.

- 21% of Lutheran and 29% of Catholic school students believed that God tells us how to live. They said they believe in God who has told us how we should live and that they try to follow those instructions.

- 24% of Lutheran and 28% of Catholic school students were focussed on helping others. They agreed that their beliefs, values and spiritual side were best expressed through doing things for others: either caring personally for people or being involved in issues of social justice

- 20% of Lutheran and 23% of Catholic school students identified with the "choosing what I like option". They said they explored different religions and spiritual practices and, from those, choose what was most meaningful to them.

- 18% of Lutheran and 27% of Catholic school students affirmed that there were more questions than answers. They agreed that it is hard to know what to believe and questioned, why if there is a God there is so much pain in the world. For those students, they had a lot more questions about life than answers.

- 18% of Lutheran and 17% of Catholic school students identified strongly with nature. They said they felt most spiritual in nature: in its beauty,

order, complexity and the sense there was something there bigger than themselves, yet something of which they were a part.

This typology shows again the major importance in life of relationships with friends and family. This dominates the ways in which young people put life together. Religious faith is important for a significant portion of students. For many of them, it is a personal relationship with One who is able to help them in times of trouble and who shares life with them. For others, and particularly among the immigrant students, there is a sense that religion provides directions and values for life, and that one responds to the demands of faith out of a sense of duty.

However, about one third of students felt that life was fine and felt there was no need for God. Life was there to be enjoyed, to be 'lived to the max', and one should make the best of the experiences that come one's way.

There were others who were puzzled by life, who felt that there were more questions than answers. There was a lot of uncertainty about what life was really about. Others put together whatever they found that made sense to them.

From a pastoral perspective, the most worrying group were those who said that 'life sucks'. It was one of the smaller groups, but constituted around 15 to 16 per cent of students. In some rural schools, the proportion climbed to around 25 per cent. These were young people who were saying that 'life is hurting' and that 'turning to God' did not help.

There is one thing about which almost all young people are convinced: the decision is theirs. They must work out as individuals what they will believe. They have a personal responsibility to pursue the spiritual life – if they believe it to be important. They will decide whether to go to church or to pursue other religious practices or to do nothing.

One young Lutheran student put it this way. The sense of surprise in his voice is indicative of how much this sense of choice is taken for granted by young people is indicative of the prevalence of such ideas.

> [Religion at school] confuses me. We're told to believe in things sometimes. Like at our last assembly last year our principal pretty much told us we had to believe in God and the Church. Kind of annoying because we all feel that we want to believe in what we want to. I was kind of confused. I just kind of thought we don't have to do that because you tell us to.

Making Sense of the Findings

Rather than simply disappearing, religion is changing in form. The persistence of religious beliefs despite decline in organised religion suggests that the dominant trend is not trend is not secularization but an individualisation of religion. Religion is being seen as something individuals pursue rather than being the responsibility of organisations. In so doing, individuals decide for themselves whether they will use the resources offered by religious organisations.

These changes from 'religion' to 'spirituality' may be understood in the context of more general changes occurring in Western culture. Culture had always been somewhat open-textured, offering people within its patterns, a variety of options. It had always had a dynamic nature, constantly undergoing change. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a dramatic increase in the open-weave and the dynamism of culture. Indeed, such was the extent of change that in many aspects of life, the traditions and habits of past generations were left behind. Rather than one or a few sets of new patterns emerging, each individual person appeared to be developing his or her own cultural patterns.

From the perspective of their personal needs and interests, and aware of the range of possibilities, young people began constructing life as a series of scenarios, as evolving biographies, rather than as copies of previous generations. This process has been described by one social theorist as seeing the self as a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991). Life was open. For example, the new generation did not have to eat what their parents had enjoyed. From the simple things such as the patterns of eating to the basic structures of family life and the relationships between males and females, every aspect of life was seen as being negotiable.

Religion had had provided, in each culture, basic frameworks for how people saw the world. Through those frameworks, the structures of life and society had been justified and their rules given prescriptive force. While science had increasingly taken the primary role in Europe in providing details of the framework since the Renaissance, the idea that God had created the universe in general and human society in particular, and had ordained both the laws of nature and the moral rules for society persisted among the majority of European populations and their diasporas until the 1960s.

Within the changed nature of culture, the very idea of there being one basic framework for seeing the world became untenable for many people. The awareness of the plurality of cultures meant that an awareness of the many frameworks for seeing the world and many ways of justifying the structures of life and society. There was no need to adopt one worldview to the exclusion of all others. If an individual chose one particular set of cultural patterns or life-style, it was on the basis of personal preference.

It was within this context that religion appeared to be rapidly nearing the end of its existence. Giddens (1990) himself argued

> Religion and tradition were always closely linked, and the latter is even more thoroughly undermined than the former by the reflexivity of modern social life, which stands in direct opposition to it (p.109).

Yet, rather than disappearing, religion has re-emerged in the form for which I have used the term 'spirituality' within the reflexivity of modern social life, a resource that people used as they found it personally helpful. Some individuals have chosen the certainty provided by conservative religious movements (Giddens, 1994). Others have chosen to explore the variety of spiritual resources associated with Eastern religions, the New Age, and nature religions. For both groups, spirituality was no longer the tradition into which one was born and which provided the framework for cultural life. Rather, it has become a set of resources from which one could choose according to personal needs and tastes.

Religion and spirituality have not disappeared under the weight of the processes of secularization, but have re-emerged in more individualistic forms among the younger generations. Nevertheless, the salience of these emergent forms should not be over-emphasized. Perhaps as many as half of all Australian adults under the age of 60 and a similar proportion of Australian young people have little interest in spirituality or religion or any kind. Many feel that life is fine and they can manage comfortably on their own without divine interference. On the other hand, the post-traditional world has left many feeling confused and even oppressed by the decisions and choices they have to make. They do not know what to do about life or religious faith. They do not know whether there is any reality in it or not. They do not know how to make the decisions and their one desire is to remove themselves from having such a responsibility. It is this latter group which turns sometimes to alcohol or other drugs to avoid the responsibilities of choice that face them, and occasionally to suicide.

Many students thrived on the diversity of opportunities. Their lives were full and they were enthusiastic about 'living life to the max'. Some of these people felt they could manage without religious faith. For others, religious faith was one of several sources of help and direction to which some young people would turn if they felt they needed to.

In these young people, we may have some glimpse of what a post-traditional world looks like. It is a world of choice, a world in which some revel in the opportunities that are now available, while others feel oppressed by the very need to make their own decisions.

This is a very different world for the churches and for those who are responsible for religious education. There is little time here to explore what the implications might be. Somehow, I would argue, young people need to be prepared for these choices that the culture is putting before them. They need to be trained to make wise choices. Such choices will require knowledge and understanding, but also

they need the skills of making choices about religious faith and spiritual options and the ability to translate those choices into action and life-style.

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