Re-Building Confidence as a Prelude to Ministry

Philip Hughes

philipjhughes1@optu*snet.com.au*

Professor Philip Hughes was senior research officer with the Christian Research Association (CRA) from its foundation in 1985 until 2016. More recently, he has worked at Harvest Bible College, assisting with the development of the Doctorate of Ministry degree program, and then at Alphacrucis University College where he taught research methods and supervised doctoral candidates. For many years he was a research fellow at the Centre for Social Justice Research, Edith Cowan University. He is also an honorary research fellow with the University of Divinity and with the National Centre for Pastoral Research. With postgraduate degrees in philosophy, theology and education, he is particularly interested in the relationship between Christianity and culture, and has written many books on religious faith in Australia, on ministry and on religious education.

Abstract

In order for the churches to exercise ministry in Australia, there must be confidence in them. While confidence in a range of systems and organisations has been falling over recent decades, in 2018 just 11 per cent of the adult population indicated a great deal or complete confidence in the churches and religious organisations, having fallen from 22 per cent in 2009.

Analysis of data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018) identified some factors which contributed to this low level of confidence, including the following:

- Most Australians feel that religious organisations are too powerful.

- They also feel that religious organisations have contributed more to violence than to peace.

- Many are concerned that religious organisations are a barrier to gender equity and that religious people are too intolerant.

- Many reject the "knowledge" on which the churches are based, including the idea of God.

Building public confidence will need to address these issues of the perception of power, building the perceptions that the churches are contributing to peace, that they treat women and men equally, and that they are tolerant. It also means addressing its "knowledge base", helping people to understand the meaningfulness of the concept of God.

Key words: confidence, trust, churches, religious organisations.

Introduction

Data from the 2018 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes showed that among adult Australians the levels of confidence in churches and religious organisations was lower in 2018 than at any previous time that confidence has been measured. In 1983, 56 per cent of the Australian adult population indicated some or much confidence in churches and religious organisations, dipping to 42 per cent in 1995 (Hughes,1998). In 2009, it was up again with 53 per cent expressing some or much confidence in religious organisations (Hughes & Fraser, 2014, p. 116). In 2018, 37 per cent expressed some or much confidence. More notable was the fact that between 2009 and 2018, the percentage of the Australian adult population expressing much or complete confidence in the churches and religious organisations fell from 22 per cent to 11 per cent. This lack of confidence is likely to be a major inhibitor in the churches' engagement with and contribution to the wider society.

Three groups of factors have been identified as having an impact on levels of confidence in institutions and organisations. The first has to do with experience and knowledge of the institution itself and how it operates. Confidence in the major institutions in society is a major factor in the operation of contemporary societies. In village settings, trust was built through the reputation of the individual, formed as the behaviour of the individual was observed. However, in organisations within contemporary complex societies, the individuals are often not known personally and trust has to be built through the reputation of systems (Giddens, 1990).

The second has to do with general levels of trust and confidence in organisations (Hoffmann, 1998). The third group of factors are demographic, arising from the

patterns of socialisation, the individual's place in society and their levels of education (Miles & Rossi, 2018; Hughes et al., 2007, p. 92). The purpose of this paper is to explore the relative strength of these factors in the levels of confidence in churches and religious organisations using data from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018).

Confidence in Expert Systems

The sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1990, pp. 83-92), has described well how modern societies have evolved "expert systems" through which specialist resources such as health, education and justice can be accessed. Similarly, there are systems for creating, distributing and selling consumer products and for communication. Most people do not know personally the doctors who treat them in a major hospital, the teachers who teach their children at school, the judges who sit on the bench in the court, or the people who build, sell or install an air-conditioner in the home. Their trust arises from their perceptions of the systems within which these people work.

Misztal, in her work on trust in organisations, made the point that people have trust when they see organisations acting in trustworthy ways. Trust in government is dependent on the record of promise-keeping by government, she noted. Trust in the health system is reinforced by experiences of care and of people returning to health. Awareness of promises not being kept erodes trust (Misztal 1996, pp. 198-199).

Giddens added the observation that confidence in people who use the resources of these systems is, in part, dependent on the confidence people have in the whole system and also in the technical knowledge that has been developed within the system (Giddens 1990, pp. 88-90). Few people will share the knowledge that is fundamental to the way the system works, but they have confidence that those people within the system know what they are doing. If there is no confidence in the technical knowledge used within the system, then there is little chance there will be confidence in the systems which are based on such knowledge.

Applying Gidden's perspectives to churches suggests that if people do not share the basic assumptions about the "technical knowledge" of the churches they may have little confidence in them. Few people have a deep knowledge of theology but most of those who attend churches have the confidence that this knowledge has been well formed and is soundly based. On the other hand, those who do not trust theological

knowledge or who do not believe in God may have little confidence in the churches. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018) found that:

- 38% of Australian adults believed in God;

- 20% did not believe in God now, although they used to;

- 28% did not believe in God and never have; and

- 14% could not choose an answer to the question.

Indeed, it has been argued by the American sociologist, Mark Chaves (1994), that the decline in religious authority as measured by the decline in confidence in religious organisations is a way of understanding secularisation. However, Hoffmann (1998, 2013) pointed out that this does not explain the dips in confidence that appeared to be related to specific events such as the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s in the USA. After detailed analysis, Hoffmann remained noncommittal as to whether the higher levels of confidence in some people led them to higher rates of religious attendance, or whether religious involvement was the major factor which led to higher levels of confidence in religious institutions (Hoffmann 2013, p. 21).

Confidence in expert systems is also reliant on the assumption that those working in the system have mastered that technical knowledge, that they have been well trained and that their training is up-to-date. It is assumed that the companies that have hired those who work for them have checked their accreditation and hold them accountable. In the Wellbeing and Security Survey conducted in Australian in 2002, it was found that the factor that had the greatest impact on people's level of confidence in an organisation was whether people saw the organisation as concerned mainly with their own interests rather than the interests of customers, clients, or the community at large. Other factors were the difficulty people had in obtaining appropriate information and in making a complaint and having it dealt with (Hughes et al., 2007, p. 93).

In terms of confidence in the churches, some people distinguish between different denominations. They may also distinguish between different services of the churches: having confidence in their schools or in their charities, but not in the worshipping communities, for example. This distinction has been demonstrated in some surveys such as the Wellbeing and Security Survey of 2002 which found much higher levels of

confidence in charities, including those run by churches, than in the churches themselves (Kaldor et al., 2010, p. 126).

Underlying that confidence, however, is confidence in the processes which recruit, train, and accredit those who work in the churches. A most important factor in confidence is the belief that the churches will serve the people who seek assistance from them and not just serve the churches' own interests. Unless there is some level of confidence in the churches, people are unlikely to turn to them for help.

Confidence works differently for those who are active within the churches. People get to know the leaders, priests, ministers and pastors of churches personally. They see how they behave in a variety of situations. The leader develops a personal reputation and the levels of confidence that people have in a leader depends on that reputation. Trust grows in the local church and in its leaders and community. However, in relation to the operations of the broader church, trust in the system becomes important wherever people are unable to rely on personal reputations.

Confidence and Specific Issues Which Affect Attitudes to the Churches

In Australia, as in a number of other countries around the world, a major factor which has harmed the credibility of the churches is the sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy and other employees of the churches. In this regard, churches and people working in them have been seen to have betrayed the trust that was vested in them. Certainly, this issue has been on the front page of newspapers and has caught the attention of the Australian public over a long period of time. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse reported that, not only have the churches caused harm to many vulnerable people, but they have covered up the sexual abuse in order to protect their own reputations (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p. 44). In that regard, they have put their organisations before the care of those who have been injured by these abuses. The Royal Commission reported that the processes in relation to complaints were often "legalistic and lacked transparency" and "failed to appropriately recognise the long-term and devastating impacts on child sexual abuse on victims, survivors and their families" (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p. 54).

One Catholic bishop has described the issue in this way:

> Millions of good Catholics have been deeply disillusioned, both by the revelations of widespread abuse, and even more by what they have perceived as the defensive, uncaring and unchristian response on the part of those who have authority in the Church and claim to speak in God's name. The effects on the Church have already been massive and the poison will continue to eat away at the very foundations of the Church for as long as the issue remains (Robinson, 2013, p. 2).

As the Royal Commission showed, abuse not only occurred in Catholic churches and institutions, but also those of many other denominations (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017, p. 45). People of many denominations, as well as the wider public, have been deeply disillusioned by the revelations of widespread abuse.

While the issue of child sexual abuse has been a dominant concern in Australia, many other concerns have been raised about the operation of churches and religious organisations which have contributed to the lack of confidence. A major concern expressed by some people in the USA is that church organisations have tried to exercise political power in order to advance their own agendas. A 2021 survey in the USA found 70 per cent of adults said that "houses of worship should keep out of political matters", up from 63 per cent the previous time the question was asked in 2019 (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

While many Christians in the USA have used their political influence to support the abolition of access to abortion, other Americans have seen this as a misuse of influence. They have seen the churches as foisting their own moral agendas on people who have very different values (Stewart 2019, Chapter 3). There have been many other issues, too, where many Americans have voiced concern at the ways church organisations have used political power for their own purposes, such as the use of US Federal government money to promote religious schools to the detriment of public schools (Stewart 2019, pp. 186-208).

While the level of antagonism in relation to such issues in Australia has not reached the same level as in the USA, there are some similar concerns. There has been an

ongoing concern that public money has been spent on religious schools to the detriment of public schools (Maddox 2014, Chapter 3). There have also been concerns that churches and religious organisations have tried to exert political power to foist their own moral agendas on people outside their organisations. The major recent issue in Australia has been same-sex marriage. Most major denominations advocated strongly for prohibiting same-sex marriages in the plebiscite that occurred in 2017. Yet, two-thirds of Australians felt that such marriages should be legalized, as has now occurred. While some denominations spent much money trying to persuade the public to prohibit same sex marriages, they were accused by some people of running discriminatory agendas (ABC News, 2015). Such issues have certainly had an impact on the general levels of confidence in the churches and other religious organisations.

General Levels of Confidence in Organisations

The second category of factors has to do with the general levels of confidence in organisations. While confidence levels may rise and fall in relation to specific issues, as noted above, overall levels of confidence in organisations has fallen over recent decades (Hoffmann 1998, p. 322; Hoffmann 2013, p. 22; Twenge et al., 2014). It is thus possible that the decline in confidence in the churches and religious organisations is a product of this general decline in confidence. As shown in Table 1, between 2009 and 2018, the levels of confidence fell in most systems and organisations, including schools and education, courts and the legal system, and in Federal Parliament. How much these changes in general levels of confidence affect the levels of confidence in churches and religious organisations will be explored in the results section below.

Table 1. Percentage of Australian Adults Expressing A Great Deal or Complete Confidence in Various Systems and Organisations in 2009 and 2018

	Much Confidence in System / Organisations 2009 (%)	Much Confidence in System / Organisations 2018 (%)
Schools and educational systems	37	32
Courts and legal system	24	21

	Much Confidence in System / Organisations 2009 (%)	Much Confidence in System / Organisations 2018 (%)
Business and industry	20	19
Churches and religious organisations	22	11
Federal Parliament	15	7

Sources: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009, 2018)

It is worth noting that, between 2009 and 2018, there was also a change at the other end of the scale in those with no confidence in organisations. The percentage of the adult population with no confidence in churches and religious organisations rose from 20 per cent to 33 per cent. But there was also a rise in the percentage of the population with no confidence in other systems and organisations:

- from 10% to 13% in the courts and legal system;

- from 3% to 5% in the schools and educational system;

- from 5% to 6% in business and industry; and

- from 12% to 20% in the Federal Parliament.

Confidence in Institutions and Demographic Factors

Apart from these specific issues relating to the churches, research on confidence in organisations has shown that there are other demographic factors which have an impact on levels of confidence. Some of these factors have to do with the patterns of socialisation. Trust and confidence in others first develops through experiences with others in early childhood (Erikson, 1965; Giddens, 1990, p. 94). Schools are generally the first institutions with which children have significant contact which may have an impact on their subsequent confidence in institutions (Miles & Rossi, 2018).

In later life, those people who have most invested in society and who are most capable of negotiating its institutions tend to have higher levels of confidence in those institutions, as was identified in the Wellbeing and Security Survey. Younger people, those people with lower levels of education and less experience of negotiating social

systems, may find it harder to understand how organisations work, or what they are saying, or how to access what they have to offer (Hughes et al., 2007, p. 92).

Also, people with more invested in society, that is people with higher levels of income and more prestigious occupations, tend to have higher levels of confidence. They have greater understanding of how things work and more confidence in ensuring that organisations work in their favour (Hughes et al., 2007, p. 92). In a longitudinal study of confidence in the USA, Twenge et al. (2014) found that poverty rates were associated with lower levels of confidence in institutions.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018) provided the opportunity to examine some of these factors as they pertain to levels of confidence in churches and to measure the relative importance of these factors.

Methodology

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes is a national survey conducted biennially by Academic Surveys Australia, the survey arm of the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated (ACSPRI), a consortium of universities and government research agencies. It is described by the consortium as "Australia's main source of data for the scientific study of the social attitudes, beliefs and opinions of Australians" (ACSPRI, 2022).

The survey is distributed to a random sample of Australian adults (18 years and over) identified from electoral rolls. Academic Surveys Australia has special permission from government to use the electoral rolls for this purpose.

A total of 1,287 Australian adults responded to the 2018 survey. Comparison with the 2016 Census showed that while the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes had the limitations of most surveys in that people who struggle with written English, the very elderly and people without ready access to email or the internet were poorly represented, the survey generally represented well the breadth of the Australian population.

The 2018 survey contained a number of questions about levels of confidence in organisations and questions about how people perceived religious organisations and religious faith. The questions were designed by an international consortium which organises the International Social Survey Program in about 44 countries around the

world. Questions from this program are regularly included in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes and many of the questions in 2018 were the same as the questions asked in the survey in 2009. Thus, the questions on religion were not specifically related to the Australian context. They did not include explicit questions about the issue of sexual abuse or its cover-up.

However, some more general questions did cover the issue of whether people felt that religious organisations had too much power, whether religions contributed more to violence than to peace, whether extremely religious people were too intolerant, and whether religions are a barrier to gender equality.

There were also other general questions about levels of confidence, not only in religious organisations, but also in schools, courts, business and industry and in the Federal parliament. There were questions about people's own levels of religious commitment, the groups with which they identified and their levels of attendance at religious services. There were questions about respondents' belief in God and in other religious doctrines.

Other questions covered the usual range of demographic issues such as people's level of formal education, their gender and age, and their perceived place in Australian society.

Results

Religious Factors
The analysis of the factors influencing the levels of confidence in churches and religious organisations will be considered first in terms of the three categories of factors which have been identified. The first category is the level of involvement and belief in churches and in religion in general and opinions about religion. Table 2 shows that there is a strong positive relationship between the frequency of religious attendance and confidence in religious institutions. Ninety per cent of those who attend services frequently have some or much confidence, compared with just 20 per cent of those who never attend.

Table 2. Level of Confidence in Churches and Religious Organisations Compared with the Frequency of Attendance of Religious Services

Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services	Little or No Confidence	Some or Much Confidence	Total
Never Attend	80%	20%	100%
Occasionally attend	50%	50%	100%
Attend monthly or more often	10%	90%	100%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018)

However, further analysis showed that even among those who attended a religious service monthly or more often, only 48 per cent said they had a great deal or complete confidence in religious organisations. Another 42 per cent said they had some confidence, and 10 per cent had little or no confidence. Not all who attend religious services frequently had high levels of confidence in religious institutions.

Along with attendance at religious services is religious belief. Most of those who believed in God had some or much confidence in the churches and religious organisations, but few of those who did not believe had some or much confidence, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Level of Confidence in Religious Organisations Compared with Categories of Belief in God

Categories of Belief in God	Little or No Confidence	Some or Much Confidence	Total
Do not believe in God	88%	12%	100%
Do not know whether there is a God or not	78%	22%	100%
Believe in a higher power but not in a personal God	78%	22%	100%
Believe in God some of the	55%	45%	100%

time			
Believe in God but have doubts	43%	57%	100%
Believe God exists and have no doubts	21%	79%	100%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018)

While the relationship between belief and confidence was strong, there were many people who believed in God but had little confidence in churches or religious organisations. At the same time, there were a few people who did not believe in God but did have confidence.

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018) canvassed a number of the opinions that may have had some impact on levels of confidence in religious institutions. Table 4 shows the responses to these attitudinal items and the fact that there was a negative relationship between each of these items and confidence in churches and religious organisations. Between 70 and 81 per cent of those who agreed with the statements about religion and religious organisations had little or no confidence in churches and religious organisations.

Table 4. Level of Confidence in Churches and Religious Organisations Compared with Agreement with the Following Statements

Attitudes to Religion and Religious Organisations	Little or No Confidence among those who agree with statement	Some or Much Confidence among those who agree with statement	Total
Religious organisations have too much power (62% agreeing)	81%	19%	100%
Religion a barrier to gender equality (51% agreeing)	77%	23%	100%
Religion contributes more to	74%	26%	100%

conflict than peace (72% agreeing)			
People with strong religious views are too often intolerant (75% agreeing)	70%	30%	100%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018)

All four issues showed a strong negative relationship with levels of confidence. The issue which related most strongly with confidence in churches and religious organisations was that the perception that religious organisations have too much power, a statement supported by 62 per cent of the Australian population. Only 6 per cent felt that religious institutions do not have enough power, with the remaining third of the population believing religious institutions had around the right amount of power.

More than 80 per cent of those who considered that religious institutions had too much power said they had little or no confidence in them. It may also be noted that among those who rejected the idea that religious institutions had too much power, 29 per cent also had little or no confidence in religious institutions. The survey responses gave no indication as to what might be meant by having too much power; whether they were thinking of political power, economic power or influence over the lives of people is not known from the answers. It is also possible that people may have had different ideas regarding the power of major denominational institutions and the power of a local church. They may also feel quite differently about the power of different denominations, although, given the lack of differentiation in most people's thinking, it is possible that many Australians have a general suspicion of churches exercising power in the wider community.

The second issue in terms of its relationship with levels of confidence was the concern that religions can be a barrier to gender equality. While only half of the Australian population saw this as a concern, more than three-quarters of those who held that view had little or no confidence in religious organisations. Such concerns may have to do with some religions teaching distinct and unequal roles in home and in work as well as the leadership patterns within some religious organisations for men and women.

The third issue was that of religion contributing more to conflict than to peace. More than 70 per cent of Australians affirmed this, and approximately three-quarters who

thought this way had little or no confidence in religious institutions. Differences in religious identity have often been and continue to be behind many conflicts around the globe. In recent years, religious-based terrorism has brought the issue to the fore of media attention and people's thinking.

The fourth issue was that of religious intolerance. Three-quarters of the Australian adult population affirmed that people with strong religious views were often intolerant. Of those who agreed with that statement, 70 per cent had little or no confidence in religious institutions.

Demographic and Other Issues

As noted in Table 1, the decline in confidence in churches and religious institutions Could be related to a general decline in the levels of confidence in organisations.

There are also demographic factors which have been found to relate to confidence in organisations. Table 5 shows confidence in churches and religious organisations by a number of the demographic factors included in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018).

Table 5. Level of Confidence in Religious Institutions by Various Demographic Factors

	Little or No Confidence	Some or Much Confidence	Total	Sig.*
Females	60%	40%	100%	.054
Males	65%	35%	100%	
Aged 18 to 39	68%	32%	100%	.002
Aged 40 to 59	62%	38%	100%	
Aged 60 and older	56%	44%	100%	
Born in Australia	65%	35%	100%	.011
Born overseas	56%	44%	100%	

Married	57%	43%	100%	.000
Divorced	74%	26%	100%	
Widowed	40%	60%	100%	
Never married	72%	28%	100%	
Own home	56%	44%	100%	.005
Paying mortgage	68%	32%	100%	
Rent privately	68%	32%	100%	
Rent from public housing	56%	44%	100%	
Other housing arrangement	64%	36%	100%	

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018)

* 'Sig' refers to the significance of the difference between the different groups as measured by chi-squared calculation. A figure of less than .05 means there is at least a 95 per cent chance that the differences found in the survey are reflected in the wider population. A figure of .01 or less means there is at least a 99 per cent chance that the differences found in the survey are reflected in the wider population.

Most people who were young, male, born in Australia, single or divorced, and renting privately had little or no confidence in churches and religious institutions. On the other hand, older females, widowed or married, and owning their own home were much more likely to have confidence in churches and religious institutions.

There was no clear or significant pattern between the level of education and confidence in religious institutions. However, whether one owned a home or was paying a mortgage, whether one rented privately or publicly, did make a difference.

Which are the Most Significant Factors?

The tables above have demonstrated that there are many factors related to confidence in churches and religious organisations. However, it is likely that some of these are secondary factors. Older, married and widowed people, for example, have been shown to be more religious than younger, single and divorced people. The levels

of religiosity, then, may lead to the levels of confidence in religious institutions rather than the demographic factors having a direct influence.

The best way of examining the relative importance of these factors is through regression analysis. The following model has been produced using binary logistic regression. The dependent variable, confidence in religious institutions, was originally an ordinal variable and has been reduced to a binary variable for the sake of the regression procedure.[1] The model has been created in terms of factors contributing positively to confidence in churches and religious organisations.

Table 6. Logistic Regression on Confidence in Churches and Religious Organisations

Factor	Exp(B)	Sig.*
Churches do not have too much power	3.18	.000
Religion brings peace rather than conflict	2.78	.000
Belief in God at least sometimes	1.90	.010
Religion is not a barrier to equality of gender	1.63	.017
How religious are you?	1.34	.000
People with strong religious beliefs are not intolerant	1.33	.237
Confidence in institutions (apart from religion)	1.23	.000
Own one's own home	1.16	.501

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[1] Most forms of regression are built on the assumption that the data, known as interval data, comes from scales where the gap between each number in the scale is similar. Ordinal data, such as that produced by questions which ask whether a person strongly agrees, agrees, disagrees or strongly disagrees to a statement, cannot be used in such forms of analysis as one does not know the size of the gap between each response. However, data which is in the form of 0 or 1 response, known as binary data, can used in regression. Ordinal data can be changed to binary data, in which disagree and strongly disagree are re-coded as 0 and agree and strongly agree are re-coded as 1, and then used in regression analysis. This special form of regression, where the dependent variable is in a binary form, is known as logistic regression.

How often do you pray?	1.10	.017
Social class (self-assigned)	1.10	.128
Married or widowed	1.09	.694
How frequently attend religious services	1.03	.010
Years of formal education	.97	.131
Male / not female	.91	.638
Born overseas	.79	.308

The factors in this regression model correctly predict the dependent variable for 91% of cases for those with little or no confidence in churches and religious organisations, and 73% of cases for those who do have confidence in churches and religious organisations. In other words, these factors explain well the overall differences in confidence in churches and religious organisations. * For an explanation of significance see the comment below Table 5.

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018)

In Table 6, Exp(B) functions as an "odds ratio". Thus, the model shows that the odds of a person who says that the churches *do not* have too much power having confidence in the churches and religious organisations is 3.18 times the odds of a person who believes the churches *do* have too much power having such confidence. That is, a person who says that the churches do not have too much power is much more likely to have confidence in the churches and religious organisations than a person who believes the churches have too much power. A person who believes that religious organisations bring peace rather than conflict is also much more likely to have confidence in the churches and religious organisations; here the odds ratio is 2.78 to 1. The model shows that these are the two most important issues which divide those who have confidence from those who do not. A third issue is that of gender equality. Those who reject the idea that religion is a barrier to gender equality are more likely to have confidence in the churches. The issue of tolerance was included in the model, but was not statistically significant.

The model in Table 6 also shows that belief in God and whether one sees oneself as a religious person are important in whether one has much confidence in religious

institutions. Whether one attends religious services and whether one prays are significant factors but add little more to the model of confidence above belief in God, which is a much stronger factor.

General level of confidence in institutions is a weak but significant factor in the model. Those people who generally have confidence in social systems such as the education, health and justice systems were a little more likely to also have confidence in the churches and religious organisations.

Most of the demographic factors included in the model, including years of formal education, whether one was male or female, self-assigned social class, married or not, or born overseas or in Australia, were not statistically significant when the attitudes to religion factors were taken into account. The strongest item was whether one owned one's own home or not, with home owners more likely to have confidence in churches and religious organisations, but that factor was also not statistically significant when all the other factors were taken into account.

Discussion

According to the model in Table 6, the factor which most strongly divided those people who have confidence in the churches and those who did not was the perception of the power of the churches. It is quite possible that this perception of the churches' power is related to the sexual abuse cases, which have been widely interpreted as abuse of power, as many abusers had positions of leadership and authority (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, p. 47). Further, the churches have been seen to have abused their power by covering up these cases and in the ways they have dealt with complaints and claims for redress (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, p. 54).

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson has explained the decline in confidence in the following way.

> A major reason why the revulsion against the Catholic Church over
> abuse has been so great is precisely that for centuries the Church
> presented itself as the great and infallible moral guide that could
> tell everyone else what to do and threaten eternal punishment for
> anyone who did not bow down and obey. And now this Church—
> which so vaunted its own perfection—has been shown to have a

rottenness at its core. When the school bully is exposed, the whole
school rejoices! If we are ever to come out of this crisis, there must
be a far greater humility (Robinson, 2013, pp. 86-87).

The issue of church power has arisen again within recent months in regards to the
legislation to protect against religious discrimination. There are some Australian
Christians who feel they have become a "persecuted minority", because they and the
churches no longer have the authority they once had. Their values, for example, on
homosexuality, are not being accepted. On the other hand, many Australians may
interpret the proposed legislation as a way of protecting the churches' power when it
comes into conflict with other rights and freedoms (Liveris, 2022).

It is not evident from the survey results what powers Australians are concerned about:
whether it is the power embedded in financial and built resources, their influence in
political circles, or the ways they can shape the behaviour of those involved in them.
Whatever the nature of the power which concerns contemporary Australians, it not
only lowers the level of confidence in the churches, but also contradicts the churches'
founding in Jesus who chose to have "nowhere to lay his head" and who said:

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the
Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his
life as a ransom for many (Mk.10:43-45, New International
Version).

Confidence is also related to the perception of whether churches and religious
organisations in general have brought peace or war. This issue has had a very long
history and many wars have been fought in the name of religion. Many older
Australians remember the enmity between the Catholics and Protestants in Australia
(Dixon 2005, p. 5), divisions similar in kind if not in intensity to those that fuelled
brutal wars in Ireland. It is likely that many Australians responding to the survey had in
mind the terrorist acts that have been conducted by people in the name of Islam,
particularly since 2001. There are two sides to the narrative. Christians have often
been at the forefront of working for peace, as remembered, for example, in the
activities of Bishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa. Which side of that narrative, for
peace or for division, people feel is the dominant side of the churches' historical

narrative has a great impact on whether people have confidence in the churches and religious organisations.

The third major issue was whether people saw religion as promoting gender equality or as being a barrier to such equality. The male domination of leadership of most Christian denominations and the leadership of many other religions is an important issue for many Australians in contemporary society. It is another way in which many Australians feel that the churches and some other religious groups have not measured up to contemporary moral values.

Whether people see the extremely religious as intolerant does not appear to be a major factor in the model in Table 6 because it does not distinguish clearly between those who have confidence and those who do not. A large portion of Australian population feel that the extremely religious are intolerant, including people who have some confidence in the churches and religious organisations. The reason it is not significant in the model in Table 6 is because it added little to the issue of the power of the churches. Those who were concerned about power probably saw the intolerance of some churches and religious organisations as demonstrations of the misuse of power. Nevertheless, other studies, such as Bohr's Australian study of the attitudes of Generation Y to the churches, have noted the perception that many Christians in general and church leaders in particular are intolerant of different life-styles, particularly homosexual relationships. This study found this perception of intolerance was significant in younger people leaving the churches (Bohr & Hughes, 2021).

Apart from these issues, confidence in churches and religious institutions has a lot to do with whether one believes in religious teaching and whether one perceives oneself as religious or not. People who believe in Christian doctrines and who consider themselves religious are much more likely to have confidence in the churches. This confirms the general point made by Giddens, that confidence in systems involves confidence in the technical knowledge on which the system is based. Most people who do not believe in Christian doctrines have little confidence in the churches. The model found this issue was stronger than whether one actually attended church services.

What is not clear from this analysis is whether the lack of confidence in the churches leads to a lack of belief, or whether the decline in belief leads to the lack of confidence in the churches. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes indicated that there were more people who believed in God but had little confidence in the churches than people

who had confidence in the churches but had no belief, as shown in Table 3. This suggests, but does not prove, that, for many Australians, confidence in the churches declines first and is followed by a decline in belief. However, it is likely that for some people it works the other way around: a decline in belief leads to a lack of confidence in the churches.

There is a general issue in society of a lack of confidence in institutions generally. However, the logistic regression results showed that this was not a large factor in relation to religious institutions and the levels of confidence in religious institutions are not likely to go up greatly if there is a rise in confidence in institutions generally.

Conclusion

These results are very significant for the churches in Australia at this present time, demonstrating the widespread suspicion of churches and religious organisations. Australians are currently less confident in the churches than they are in most institutions in society. If the churches are to play a role of service in the wider public, this must be changed. Although this will be difficult following the very public failures of trust in the sexual abuse cases and the attempt to impose on the public the rejection of same-sex marriage, confidence must be built.

First of all, the churches must recognise that they exist as "expert systems" and confidence is dependent on the trustworthy operation of the whole system. It involves careful attention to the processes of recruiting people to work in the system, to the processes of training and continuing professional development, and to the systems whereby people within the system are held accountable and complaints are examined.

The survey results shows that, in particular, churches need to be careful how they exercise power and how that exercise of power is perceived. Based on previous research, it is very important that the exercise of power is perceived to be in the interests of those people the churches seek to serve, in the interests of the vulnerable and the powerless. If the exercise of power is used to limit the recompense given to survivors of sexual abuse, for example, the confidence levels may continue to diminish. If the exercise of power is seen to be used to protect their own reputations, rather than to serve others, confidence levels will continue to diminish. It is quite possible that support for religious discrimination legislation could be seen as a move

by the churches to protect themselves, and may deepen further the widespread lack of confidence in the churches.

As Inglehart (2021) has well demonstrated, a significant gap has opened up in the Western world between the values of the churches and the values of the majority of the population. If churches seek to impose their own values on the wider public, as they did in relation to the same-sex marriage debate, that will hinder the development of confidence in the churches in the wider community. The debate was not about the morality of same-sex marriages but about its legality. People are not so concerned about the moral stance the churches may take in regard to their own members, but may well see the imposition of values on others as a misuse of power.

The ways the churches and other religious organisations operate internally also has some impact on how they are regarded by the wider community. There is evidence here that the fact that many denominations continue to treat men and women differently when it comes to leadership is a major stumbling block for many Australians. If churches are to regain the confidence of the community, they must treat women equally to men in positions of leadership as well as teaching equality. Their continued biases in this regard are offensive to the morals of the wider community.

Churches also need to show that they are contributing to peace and harmony rather than to division and violence. The churches and religious organisations of all kinds need to show that they are making positive contributions to peace, both in the relationships they have with each other and in the wider world. An immediate example is that Putin's invasion of Ukraine should be clearly condemned by all the churches and that the Orthodox Churches in particular should disassociate themselves from the Russian Orthodox Patriach, Kirrill, and other Orthodox leaders who have supported his invasion as a "holy war" (Grant, 2022).

Finally, the regression analysis suggests that very basis of the "knowledge" on which the churches are based must be addressed. As belief in God is understood as meaningful, there is a greater chance that the wider public may gain confidence in the churches as guardians of that knowledge.

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The author of this article is responsible for the analyses presented here.