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Freedoms, Faiths and Futures

Andrew Singleton, Mary Lou Rasmussen, Anna Halafoff and Gary Bouma, *Freedoms, Faiths and Futures: Teenage Australians on Religion, Sexuality and Diversity* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), ISBN 978-1-3501-7956-1, Hardback, 235 pages. Also available in ePDF and eBook formats.

For today's teenagers, Australia's religious, cultural, spiritual, gender and sexual diversity is a part of everyday life. *Freedoms, Faiths and Futures* is a report of the first Australian national study exploring important questions about how teenagers experience living in such a diverse society.

The book is the product of exceptionally important research on the religion and spirituality of Australian teenagers. It is important for its innovative research methodologies and for its findings about teens' views on religion, sexuality and diversity.

Drawing on data from the mixed methods *Australia's Generation Z* study, the book offers new ways of understanding the complexity of young people's lives and the ways they are apprehending and dealing with cultural and religious diversity, and gender and sexual difference. After collecting data in three stages— focus groups, a national survey, and in-depth personal interviews with selected survey participants—the authors used a powerful form of statistical analysis called latent class analysis, often described as a 'person-centred' approach, to create a typology of six different types of teenage worldviews. Five young people from each of the six groups were interviewed to ensure that the types were more than theoretical assumptions by checking that they made sense to the teenagers themselves, and the book includes numerous extracts from these interviews.

The book examines how teenagers engage with organized religion, exploring patterns of conventional religious belonging, belief and practice. More teenagers than ever before live in a non-faith world; most are not interested in religion, but that is not to say that they are not interested in alternative spiritual beliefs and practices. There is still an openness to the transcendent. And there are still teenagers for whom religion plays an important and defining part in their lives.

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Completed against the backdrop of the global pandemic that has severely impacted young people's schooling, mental health and economic prospects, the book provides evidence that informs education about diverse religions and worldviews in Australia. By taking the pulse of teenagers' worldviews, it will assist professionals working with this age group, within and outside schools, to tailor programs and curricula that better reflect their complexity and interests.

One shortcoming of the book is its failure to refer to Philip Hughes' excellent publications on the religious outlook of teenage Australian's, such as *Putting life together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality research* (2007) and *Educating for purposeful living in a post-traditional age* (2017), both published by the Christian Research Association. Nor do the authors, while constructing their typology of young Australian's approaches to faith and life, apparently consider earlier work in developing similar typologies, for example, those developed by Peter Kaldor, Philip Hughes and Alan Black in *Spirit Matters: How Making Sense of Life Affects Wellbeing* (Mosaic Press, 2010) or by Jörg Stolz and his colleagues in *(Un)believing in modern society: Religion, spirituality and religious-secular competition* (Ashgate, 2016).

Freedoms, Faiths and Futures is very well-written, easy to read, and has an occasional dash of Aussie humour. The complex statistical material is explained very well, so that the meaning is clear to all readers, specialists and non-specialists alike. It contains valuable insights for anyone working in ministry with young people in Australia today. As the authors themselves, all experienced Australian sociologists of religion, include the late Gary Bouma, note on page 186, by "taking the pulse of teens' worldviews" they have assisted "people working with this age group, within and outside schools, to tailor programs and curricula that better reflect the complexity and interests of the group".

Dr Robert Dixon

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Religiosity in Australia

Neil Francis, *Religiosity in Australia*, Parts 1, 2 and 3 (Hawksburn, Vic: Rationalist Society of Australia, 2021-22). 416 pages in total. Only available as PDF from <https://rationalist.com.au/religiosity-in-australia/> .

Neil Francis is a social researcher who has been involved in medical research, particularly in the area of rare genetic diseases. However, this three-part report on religiosity in Australia, commissioned and published by the Rationalist Society of Australia, appears to be his first foray into research on religion. It is described on the Rationalist Society's website as "the most comprehensive report on the nature of religious adherence ever written in Australia". That claim is wildly exaggerated, but the report does examine aspects of religiosity in Australia which have been under-developed by other researchers.

The major intent of the work is to demonstrate that religion plays a minor role in the life of most Australians. Indeed, the report has been written specifically for politicians and community leaders to persuade them that they should ignore Christian lobby groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby and the Catholic bishops when they are speaking about social issues such as abortion, voluntary assisted dying, marriage equality and schools discriminating against gay students or gay teachers.

The argument begins in Part 1 with an examination of Australian census data on religion. Francis claims that the census "over-counts" Christians partly because it includes children, who, he claims, are too young to have a religion. Francis uses the word 'affiliation' when discussing the census figures and suggests that the decline in affiliation in the census would represent "a congregational loss" (Francis 2021, Vol. 1, p.11). It is a good demonstration of the lack of understanding of religious data and religion which Francis shows throughout the report. Every author on religion in Australia knows that a proportion of people who indicate a religion on the census form rarely if ever attend worship at an institution which bears the same name. While 44 per cent of the Australian population identified with a Christian denomination or simply wrote in 'Christian' in the 2021 Census, the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018) showed that only 10 per cent of the population attended a Christian church monthly or more often. Francis notes correctly that many of the people who indicate 'Christian' on the census do not believe in God and do not hold other Christian beliefs.

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Part 2 of the report is a mishmash of observations about the nature of religion. It draws on a wide range of articles on religion from all over the world and Francis generally assumes that these articles describe the nature of religion in Australia. Strangely, Francis ignores almost all the literature on religion in Australia. He almost never mentions any of the works of Gary Bouma or other prominent scholars who have written about religion in Australia, and never discusses the extensive work of NCLS Research or the Christian Research Association.

Part 3 of the report explores further Francis' underlying argument: that religious attitudes on social attitudes should be ignored by government and political parties. He draws on data which has not been used by most other researchers on religion in Australia: the Australian Election Study. The 2019 edition of this survey involved random responses from 2,179 voters and was conducted by the Australian National University. It is a valid set of data for research on this topic.

Based on that data, Francis argues that those who attend a church monthly or more often tend to align themselves with Coalition agendas and while a few have aligned themselves with the Greens, the proportion of church attenders aligning themselves with Labor has declined. His contention that church attenders align themselves with Coalition agendas for economic reasons rather than for religious or social reasons is suspect. However, his observation that most attenders take a conservative stance politically as well as on social values is affirmed by other surveys such as the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes. He also correctly points out that, on the other hand, many church attenders do support abortion, marriage equality, voluntary assisted dying and the decriminalisation of marijuana, issues more commonly associated with the Labor side of politics. It is true that the Australian Christian Lobby and other church leaders who speak out on social issues do not necessarily speak for most people who identify themselves as Christian, or even for those Christians who attend church.

Francis ignores the roles that the churches play in education, welfare, aged care and health care, and in advocating for people on the margins of society. The report is not well balanced in that regard. Its analysis of data is basic and Francis often misinterprets it. Thus, it must be read with great caution. On the other hand, it is a helpful reminder of our social context and that ministry now takes place in a post-

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Christendom context. When religious organisations are engaging with government and political parties, it is helpful to know both the origins and positions of other lobbyists.

Professor Philip Hughes

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Imagination in an Age of Crisis

Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden (Eds.), *Imagination in an Age of Crisis: Soundings from the Arts and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), ISBN 978-1-6667-0688-8, Paperback, 372 pages.

Since the start of COVID-19 in 2020, we have become accustomed to the familiar “cancelled conference”. These announcements have often been met with disappointment and sorrow. Jason Goroncy and Rod Pattenden took the vision and energy from an arts and theology event to be held in Naarm/Melbourne in July 2020 and transformed it into this exquisite collection of essays, poetry, artworks and reflections. Goroncy, Associate Professor of Theology at the University of Divinity, and Pattenden, Adjunct Fellow with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, gathered an array of voices and artistic genres to create a smorgasbord for the reader. Whether you are seeking scholarly justification for the place of imagination in times of crisis or the solace of a poem which speaks the words you have not yet found, this compilation contains a myriad of offerings.

Although the book has a distinctive Australian flavour, the 35 contributors offer a window into the universal nature of times of crisis. The reader is introduced to a New Zealand artist’s portrayal of two non-violent Maori figures by Scott Kirkland and a few pages later hears Trish Watts reflect on the power of song for children in Cambodia. Jennifer Wakeling presents the power of textless music by French composer Olivier Messiaen before we find ourselves in locked-down Paris in the poetry of Kevin Hart. Turn the page again and the prophetic works of Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei, provoke a passionate response in solidarity with those across the world. The global nature of this diverse anthology does not simply represent isolated artistic expressions in distinct locations, but brings them into conversation. Jason Goroncy’s own article examines the scripts of Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett, and how they have inspired Japanese playwrights to address trauma in their own context. Rod Pattenden unearths another dialogue between Australian artist, George Gittoes, and the war-torn countries of the Philippines, the Middle East, Sudan, Cambodia and Ukraine over the last five decades.

The collection has been gathered in such a way that the reader may dip their toe in at any point and find challenge and inspiration. In saying this, I read the book as it is presented and found its careful crafting guides the reader on a significant journey of

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discovery. The introductory essay by Jason Goroncy sets the scene by presenting a convincing argument for the place of imagination and the arts in times of crisis. What follows is a montage of evocative poetry, poignant artworks, insightful essays and personal reflections. Each piece is an invitation to look more deeply, linger a little longer and savour each offering. This is not a book to devour, but invites a more reflective, contemplative reading.

The intended audience of this collection seems as broad as the contributions. While there is plenty for the scholar of public or practical theology to digest, ministry practitioners will also find a wealth of inspiration within this work. The book is not only an exemplar of how the artist is both witness and prophet in times of crisis, it paves the way for new expressions to emerge in the reader. On more than one occasion, while engaging with *Imagination in an Age of Crisis*, I was inspired to take up pen or paint brush to respond to my own experience of the world around me. At the conclusion of other sections I found myself searching the internet for a piece of music or art, each opening a new door into a different world. Through the generous sharing of the contributors, the reader is invited to engage both their head and their heart in responding to this age of crisis.

I was particularly impressed by the significant contribution of Indigenous Australian artists, writers and actors throughout the collection adding a profound depth and sacredness to the experience. The breadth of contributors and genres represented widened my own thinking and challenged me further to explore the use of the arts in my own ministry. My only disappointment with Goroncy and Pattenden's book was the noticeable absence of dance as a significant art form. As I read, I was reminded of memorable dance performances in the wake of Australian bushfires and tragic loss. Perhaps this could be included in the next volume.

Imagination in an Age of Crisis is an invaluable gift to the conversation between arts and theology. I would highly recommend it to anyone involved in the thinking or feeling of what it means to live as people of God in a time of much pain and despair in the world. I know I will be revisiting many of the contributions again to take more time to linger and learn.

Rev Dr Catherine Lambert

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Encountering God

Robert Dixon and Mary Eastham (Eds.), *Encountering God: Practical theology and the mission to heal*, Explorations in Practical Theology series (Bayswater, Vic: Coventry Press, due to be published in 2023), paperback.

The current work is the fourth volume originating from the regular conferences of the *Association of Practical Theology in Oceania* (APTO) and the third in the series “Explorations in Practical Theology”. The book continues the important ecclesial trajectory of intellectual praxis through the application of theology to particular and various aspects of pastoral ministry in the context of Oceania. That said, the authors collectively do not shy away from a number of key existential questions about the future of the Church, including: “has Christianity been a force for good in the world?” And “how can churches contribute to bringing about healing in the world” in the light of the Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse?

The book contains fourteen chapters by individual scholars from around Oceania who contribute to the broad area of practical theology, with a focus upon healing from various perspectives: theological, social, cultural, political and ethical concerns of the region. [A further six papers from the 47 presentations at the APTO conference appear in this issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*.]

Encountering God: Practical theology and the mission to heal is divided into three sections which analyse: “Healing Shattered Relationships”, “Frameworks for Healing”, and “Creating Healing Communities”. Part One addresses the range of shattered relationships caused by the sexual abuse crisis and two horrific instances of terrorist violence. Part Two explores the adequacy and appropriateness of traditional Christian resources for healing and justice—communitarian, scriptural and mystical—to the healing task at hand in the contemporary Church and world. Drawing further on these traditions, Part Three highlights creative and hope-filled efforts of Christian communities in the region that are expressions of healing.

Particular highlights for this reader included the courageous chapter by Francis Sullivan AO on “Being Church after the Royal Commission”, and how we might explore the possibility of bringing healing to the effects of sexual abuse, together with Robert Dixon’s chapter and his must-read insights into the impact of the sexual abuse crisis

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on ordinary mass-attending Catholics and the essential need of the Catholic Church to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission, if it seriously intends to support the victims of abuse.

Mary Eastham's chapter analysing the terrorist attack against the Muslim community in Christchurch, New Zealand, is equally poignant. The author convincingly makes the case that the Catholic bishops of Oceania must take seriously their interfaith responsibilities to work for religious harmony and mutual respect. It is past time that the churches made a courageous effort to move beyond interfaith dialogue towards the deeper and potentially dynamic healing capacity of interfaith relations on a variety of issues, including religious tolerance, peace in our world and ecological justice.

Catherine Lambert's chapter highlights a further major concern and case for healing in the church, the relationship of women to the hierocratic church. Lambert constructively identifies approaches that have brought healing to women through the understanding of spiritual authority and provides practical suggestions for how the church could embrace the ministry of woman more fully and provide concrete support for their faith development.

Overall, this wide-ranging and inclusive book serves in its own right as an inspiring work of healing ministry. The authors in various ways and contexts, united by their association with practical theology through APTO, speak boldly and name the historical reality of suffering in our churches and in our world. The book highlights the ethical imperative of the churches to bring healing to those who are suffering, and to take responsibility to advocate for those on the margins of society.

The work will support the work of the theological academy; after all, pace Lonergan, it is through practical theology that the entire theological enterprise bears fruit in the concrete life of the people the churches are called to serve. The book will be of interest to a wide-ranging audience of academics, practising ministers, church leaders and ordinary Christians who are committed to the ministry of healing and justice in our broken church and world.

Professor Anthony Maher

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Australia's Religious and Non-Religious Profiles

Hughes, Philip. *Australia's Religious and Non-Religious Profiles: Analysis of the 2021 Census Data* (Box Hill, Victoria: Christian Research Association, 2022), ISBN 9781875223893, Paperback & Electronic, 128 pages.

Australians should feel quite privileged to have a national Census which includes a question about religion. They should feel equally fortunate that such high-quality data is updated every five years, and that most Australian Census data is readily available to the general public and free of charge. However, many involved in Christian ministry fall into the trap of thinking that the data is therefore easily understandable and interpretable, which is not necessarily so.

Australia's Religious and Non-Religious Profiles is a new reference publication providing an overview of 26 of the main religious and non-religious groups according to the 2021 Australian Census of Population and Housing. Details are provided for religious groups which had 10,000 or more Australians identifying with them in the 2021 Census. In this book, Philip Hughes has done the hard work for everyone in analysing and presenting data in such an accessible format that all level of readers, from secondary school students to university academics, can take something away from it.

The book is structured to ensure quick and simple access to data about the religious group of one's choice, either by using the table of contents, the index or simply by flicking through its pages. It is a fascinating read in its entirety or as the reference book it is intended to be.

Australia's Religious and Non-Religious Profiles opens with a short essay about religion in Australia today, providing responses to key questions related to religious identity, cultural change, the impact of immigration, and the growth and decline in religious groups, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and the Australian population as a whole. The essay also intermittently elicits questions about the impact of religious change in Australian culture and society.

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For each of the 26 main religious groups, the book provides background information and a description of the demography of those identifying with the group. It then includes graphs, tables and commentary on growth and decline, age profiles, relationships and households, education, ethnicity and language, as well as maps of variations in the population around the states and capital cities of Australia. While the majority of the data in the book comes from the 2021 Census, for each religious group it also contains historical data from earlier Censuses, some as far back as the first Australian Census in 1911. One interesting and valuable feature of the detailed statistical information is a summary on the number of religious leaders in each group. There is additionally a summary for other smaller religious groups of less than 10,000 Australians identifying, including those groups with a Christian heritage, those associated with other religions, and a variety of other groups.

Absent from the book, though, is a summary section where one might turn in order to compare the changes in Australians' identification with, for example, the various Christian denominations, or between non-Christian groups, although this data can easily be obtained from other publications of the Christian Research Association and elsewhere.

In summary, *Australia's Religious and Non-Religious Profiles* provides its reader with an accurate, up-to-date and engaging account of Australia's religious landscape and will prove to be a useful and important resource for those in local church or denominational ministry, or indeed for anyone studying or interested in religion in contemporary Australia.

Dr Stephen Reid

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