

# Why People are Ceasing to Attend Churches and to Identify with Religious Institutions

*Philip Hughes*

[philipjhughes1@optusnet.com.au](mailto:philipjhughes1@optusnet.com.au)

Philip Hughes was the 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 program, and then at Alphacrucis University College where he taught research methods and supervised doctoral candidates. He is now an Emeritus Professor at Alphacrucis at Alphacrucis University College. 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:**

The 2021 Australian Census showed a marked increase in the numbers of people giving responses to the question on religion

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which were not associated with religious institutions. These responses included 'Christian' (as distinct from aligning with a denomination) and 'my own beliefs'. The huge increase in those ticking the 'no religion' box is also indicative of people disassociating themselves from religious institutions. Drawing on the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018), various hypotheses are tested that may explain the decreases both in identification with a religion and in religious attendance. These include the rejection of religious beliefs, the decline in confidence in religious institutions, the weakness of socialisation processes in pluralistic societies, and the rejection of pro-fertility values promoted by religious institutions. While analysis of the surveys cannot show cause and effect, the strongest factors associated with religious decline are the decline in confidence in religious institutions and the rejection of religious beliefs. The belief that one must provide one's own meaning in life is associated with people ceasing to attend religious services. The patterns offer significant challenges to ministry in an increasingly non-religious society. However, the decline in confidence in religious institutions is something over which religious institutions have some control.

### **Introduction**

The first Australian census after I started sociological analysis of religion in Australian society was in 1986. It showed that:

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- 73 per cent of Australians identified with one or other Christian denomination;
- 13 per cent said they had no religion.
- 12 per cent did not answer the question, and
- 2 per cent were associated with other religions (Hughes et al., 2012; Hughes, 2022) .

That year, Bouma and Dixon published the results of the 1983 Australian Values Study Survey which found that:

- 27 per cent of Australian attended religious services monthly or more often;
- 24 per cent attended at least annually; and
- 48 per cent never or almost never attended. (Bouma and Dixon, 1986, p.7).

Thus, at that point, three quarters of all Australians identified with a particular “official” Christian system of beliefs and half of all adult Australians attended a religious service at least occasionally. Up to 1974, more than 80 per cent of all marriages were celebrated as a religious rite by a religious celebrants. By 2000, less than half of marriages were performed by religious celebrants (Bentley, 2005). In 2021, just 19 per cent of marriages were celebrated by a minister of religion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

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Religious identification has changed significantly since 1986. In 2021, the Census showed that:

- 41 per cent identified with a specific Christian denomination;
- 3 per cent just said they were Christian;
- 39 per cent said they had no religion;
- 10 per cent identified with other religions; and
- 7 per cent did not answer the question or gave another response (Hughes, 2022).

At this time, the proportion of Australians attending churches monthly or more often, according to the Australian Survey of Social Values (2021) was 11 per cent of the adult population, with 3 per cent attending the services of other religions and 30 per cent attending the services of Christian or other religions annually or more often.

The question with which sociologists and church leaders have been grappling is why the decline, both in terms of identity with a religion and with attendance. In relation to identity, the actual question asked in the Census is one of identity with institutions. “What is your religion?” is followed by a list of institutional forms of religion from which respondents are asked to choose: Anglican, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, and so on. Thus, when people are saying they have ‘no religion’ are they simply saying that they do not wish to identify with a religious institution? Thus, is ‘no

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religion' a statement about religious institutions or is it also a statement about the loss of religious values and beliefs?

The proportion of the population identifying in the Census with almost all of the Christian denominations fell between 2016 and 2021. There was just one exception: the Oriental Orthodox Christians, who continue to grow through immigrants from the Middle East. On the other hand, there was also growth in the proportion who wrote 'Christian' into the Census, rather than ticking a box indicating a specific denominational identity (Hughes, 2022). Between 2011 and 2021, the proportion writing in 'Christian' grew by 46 per cent, while the proportion identifying with a Christian institution declined by 15 per cent, with nearly 700,000 people (2.7% of the population) writing in 'Christian' in 2021 (Hughes, 2022, p.48). This could be another indicator of people no longer wishing to identify with religious institutions, while still holding to religious traditions.

Another, even more explicit response which indicated this disconnect with institutional forms of religiosity were the people who wrote in 'my own spiritual beliefs'. Others wrote in that they held beliefs from a variety of religions, or that they were theists. A few others noted their spiritual beliefs using other terminology. In total, 45,791 people responded to the Census in this way, a growth of 17 per cent from the 39,180 who responded using these terms in 2016. While these people are a tiny fraction of the

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population – just 0.2 per cent – they are people who explicitly chose to write in a response (Hughes, 2022, p.116).

Is the change in which people are filling in the Census all about the rejection of institutions and the rise of individual approaches to spirituality and to meaning? Or are there other factors involved?

### **Literature Review**

Since the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many authors have written about the decline in attendance at and identity with the churches and other religious organisations. Recent books such as *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It and What Comes Next* by Ronald Inglehart (2021) and Kasselstrand et al., *Beyond Doubt: The Secularisation of Society* (2023) argue that it is a world-wide phenomenon. I will focus on four authors who have taken somewhat different approaches to religious decline in order to provide us with some specific hypotheses that can be tested.

### **Luckmann**

According to Thomas Luckmann's classical book on the changing nature of religion in contemporary society, *The Invisible Religion* (1967), the institutionalisation of religion has always had some inherent weaknesses vis-à-vis the individual. Luckmann argued

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that institutional religions develop systems of doctrines, liturgies and social ethics, (1967, p.74). These systems must find their correlation in the subjective beliefs of the individual if they are to be maintained. Luckmann argued there was always the potential danger of the subjective plausibility of the “official” model, that the model would not line up with the individual’s sense of what is of “ultimate” significance. Indeed, Luckmann suggested that there will never be perfect socialisation of the individual into the “official” model of religion.

He argued that this danger was enhanced when religion was not pervasive in all areas of social life. It was easy for religion to become a set of specific requirements in specific circumstances: for example, in the festival of Easter. But there was more likelihood of religion not relating to what was of “ultimate” significance in other places and contexts. He said:

Matters of “ultimate” significance, as defined in the *official* model, are potentially convertible into routinized and discontinuous observances (or approximate observances or nonobservance) of specific religious requirements whose sacred quality may become merely nominal. Thus the specifically religious representations may cease to function as integrating elements of

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the *subjective* system of “ultimate” significance (1967, p.76).

Luckmann argued that the problem of the relationship between institutionalised religion and the lives of individuals had grown with the increased complexity of society and with increased spheres of society which have little or no connection with religion (1967, p.72). As this had occurred, institutionalised religion had had to identify its own sphere, which Luckmann suggested, was primarily that of private life and of the family.

Increased pluralism in society regarding that the nature of the cosmos was also problematic for religion, according to Luckmann (1967, p.80). When there are competing official models, the individual is forced to make choices. Religious institutions then compete with each other through their flexibility, but also by claiming their superiority, perhaps in terms of a higher degree of purity.

Social change also puts pressure on religious institutions (1967, p.82). Social changes can influence what people consider to be of “ultimate” significance. It is not easy for religious institutions to change to counter these social changes if their roots are frozen in sacred texts, doctrines or rituals.

Thus, one might expect in today’s context of increased pluralism and complexity in society, the gap between individual’s subjective

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sense of what was of significance and official religious models would widen. Luckmann used the term 'sacred cosmos' for the set of symbols representing the hierarchy of significance underlying the world view (1967, p.70). Luckmann saw the potential for the 'official' sacred cosmos, consisting of beliefs, rituals and ethics, to become increasingly problematic in the lives of individuals in modern societies.

### **Giddens**

Approximately 25 years later, Anthony Giddens, approached the issue of the decline of religion indirectly as he described how the nature of the self and self-identity was changing in modern societies. Giddens argued that there has been a recent change in the Western world in that individuals had come to see themselves as putting life together, even in the personal and family domain, rather than accepting the traditions into which they were born. In *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), Giddens summarised his argument as follows.

In the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously

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revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options (1991, p.5).

Giddens proceeded to note that there were 'standardising influences', for example, in the forms of capitalistic commodification, but personal identity had developed in such a way that in modern societies, people felt that they had to make their own choices in relation to the varieties of possibilities and authorities for life, rather than simply accept the traditions of the past. Religious and other institutions continued to exist, but they no longer determined how individuals live. The institutions offered choices which some accepted but many others rejected. The individual was in control. Later in the book, Giddens noted that religious institutions offered 'authoritative' ways of living, but the individual had to choose to submit to these (1991, pp.194-195). In

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the Western world, at least, religions could not control the population.

In the introduction to *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Giddens put the change of the formation of identity into an historical context. He argued that the enlightenment did destabilise traditions in some ways, but the influence of traditions remained strong. However, since the 1950s, there has been a 'dissolution of tradition' (Giddens 1994, p.6). People have demanded more autonomy than ever before, and there has been a huge expansion of social reflexivity, which has affected not only religion, gender, family, but also the workplace, politics and bureaucratic systems.

In a post-traditional age, people make their own meaning, rather than being socialised into a world of accepted traditions, Giddens argued. However, he noted that such a world gave rise to fundamentalism as an explicit rejection by a minority of people of this model of engagement with the world. Thus, religion was rejected in contemporary by many people partly as an expression of the individualist responsibility to make their own lives.

### **Voas**

The main process where by culture and language are handed from one generation to the next is that of the socialisation of the child.

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As part of that process, religious faith has been handed from one generation to the next over the millennia. The question is why is that not happening in contemporary Western societies as it has happened in the past?

The major explanation, according to David Voas (2003, 2007), draws on the fact that societies have become increasingly pluralistic, a point noted by Luckmann. Voas has argued that pluralism leads to more people marrying outside of their religious group. People who marry outside of their own religious tradition are less likely to pass on their own or any religious tradition to their children (Voas 2003). In other words, the process of socialisation is the major process whereby religious identity and behaviour patterns are passed on from one generation to the next. That socialisation process is weakened when the two parents are different in their religious identity or in their religious behaviours. This is more likely to occur when there is greater religious pluralism.

However, one might also add a note here in line with Giddens. It has been noted that in religiously pluralistic societies, some parents encourage their children to think for themselves and make up their own minds about religious faith. Thus, the aim of socialisation is autonomous and reflexive thinking in relation to religious identity and behaviour (Hennig and Gärtner 2023). Hence, such forms of socialisation are likely to lead some children

to take different paths from their parents, even if the parents are unified in their approach to religious identity and religious involvements.

### **Inglehart**

Thirty years after Giddens, Inglehart wrote *Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?* In this book, Inglehart (2021, p.6) argued that the popular movement towards a 'no religion' identity began in a substantial way across the world after World War II and was primarily a movement away from the values of religions. He noted that the scientific challenges to the nature of the world which began with Galileo and continued through to Darwin did not, in fact, lead to widespread secularisation as many philosophers and other thinkers expected (2021, p.22).

He posited an alternative account of secularisation, which he called 'evolutionary modernization theory' (2021, p.63), as occurring around values rather than around religious beliefs. He argued that religions around the world had supported pro-fertility values, which included the prohibition of sexual and other activities which would not contribute to procreation, including homosexual activity and sex outside marriage, and gendered roles in society in which women were expected to focus on child-bearing and child-raising. Abortion was also prohibited. According

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to Inglehart, these pro-fertility values have been dominant in most societies through human history in order to ensure the continued existence of societies (2021, p.1).

However, a number of social changes starting in the Western world after World War II made these values less important. Inglehart pointed to the fall in the rate of infant mortality, which meant that more children survived to adulthood (2021, p.7). A second factor was the development of state welfare systems which meant that people did not feel that they had to depend as much on family at times of sickness, old age or financial hardship (2021, p.107). One might also add the change in the reliability of contraception made it possible to separate sex for pleasure and sex for procreation. These social changes led to a focus on values of personal fulfilment rather than pro-fertility duties. With the focus on personal fulfilment, the prohibition of sexual activity not associated with procreation became meaningless to many people.

Inglehart argued that, through much of human history, religions have had a major role in giving moral justification to the pro-fertility values (2021, p.9). In recent years, religions have not changed their values and continued to emphasise the pro-fertility values and the accompanying prohibition of sexual activity outside of procreation. They also continued to emphasise gender-based roles and prohibited abortion. As people focussed on personal fulfilment and, at the social level, on the tolerance that

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supported people in finding that fulfilment in ways appropriate to their personalities and circumstances, they left the religions, often becoming antagonistic to them because of their continued insistence on pro-fertility values. Inglehart argued that such social changes and changes in values can be detected in most societies around the world, although they are much more prominent in the Western world (2021, p.97 for example). Indeed, in some of the poorest countries such as Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, and others, the future of society is seen as being in jeopardy and they continue to place great emphasis on women's duty in child-bearing and child-raising, and on prohibiting sexual activity that does not lead to procreation.

In Australia, this contest of values between the pro-fertility values and personal fulfilment values was very apparent in the debate regarding same-sex marriages. Such marriages were opposed by almost all Christian churches and some other religious groups. On the other hand, the majority of the Australian population affirmed same-sex marriage in the plebiscite that occurred in 2017 (Wikipedia 2023). It has been one of the issues which has highlighted the division between the official line of the churches and the Australian culture.

## **Rejection of the Institution**

Apart from the rejection of religious beliefs and the rejection of religious values, another possible explanation for the rise in no religion is the rejection of religious institutions. It is possible that the rise in 'no religion' is an expression of the lack of confidence in religious institutions. In this regard, the concern about child sexual abuse occurring within church contexts and carried out by clergy may certainly have added to a decline in confidence in the churches and a decline in church attendance.

The Catholic bishop, Geoffrey Robinson, wrote in *For Christ's Sake: End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church ... for Good*:

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 foundation of the Church for as long as the issue remains (2013, pp.2-3).

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Such opinions have been expressed by many others. Francis Sullivan, who was a spokesperson for the Catholic Church, at the time of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to the Sexual Abuse of Children, has recently written:

I have been too slow to call out the sexist and homophobic attitudes of bishops and other clergy and spokespeople. I have been too slow as well to join in the rage over the way women are mistreated in the Church, the secret double lives of some clergy and their arrogance in presuming that they can still preach about behavioural and moral standards ... These days I find myself angry with the inertia of the institution and its intolerance of differences and the demonising of sincere dissent. My impatience for changes that seem all too obvious, even common-sensical, does corrode my confidence in the Church leadership (2023, p.27).

Dixon (2023, p.41) reported that a survey in 2016 showed that 58 per cent of Catholic attenders agreed that the cases of sexual abuse by priests and religious had damaged their confidence in Church authorities. And these were the people still attending

Catholic churches. For many others, that damage to confidence has led them to cease attending.

### **Summary**

In summary, then, there are five major hypotheses in the literature reviewed offering explanations of the movement of people from attending Christian churches and identifying with religious institutions to ceasing to attend and identifying themselves as having 'no religion'. These are:

1. Based on Giddens, individuals are taking the process of making meaning into their own hands in a socially reflexive world, and rejecting the meanings offered to them traditionally by the churches;
2. Based on Luckmann, individuals are rejecting the whole 'sacred cosmos' offered to them by institutions as not fitting their life experience in pluralistic and complex societies;
3. Based on Voas, increasing plurality in society means that parents more frequently have different religious identities and behaviours, weakening religious socialisation in their children;
4. Based on Inglehart, religion is becoming functionally irrelevant as the focus of values has moved from pro-fertility values (which Christian and other religious traditions have supported) to

personal fulfilment values which include individualised patterns of sexual fulfilment and equality of gender;

5. Based on the literature around the sexual abuse issue and its cover up by some religious institutions, people are rejecting the religious institutions for their moral failures and failure to change.

### **Methodology**

The 2018 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes contained a number of questions which assists in the further exploration of these hypotheses. The survey which was conducted by the National Social Science Data Archives associated with the Australian National University contained a wide variety of questions about religion. This survey was distributed randomly across the adult population of Australia and obtained a sample of 1,287 people. The survey is widely used by social scientists in Australia and is highly regarded as a reliable national survey of Australian adults (ACSPRI).

In the survey, people were asked “Do you belong to a religion and, if yes, which religion do you belong to?” Thus, there was a specific measure of whether people identified themselves as having no religion or not. Another question asked “Apart from such special occasions as weddings, funerals, etc., how often do

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you attend religious services?” The responses which could be ticked ranged from never to several times a week.

The survey asked similar questions about the respondents upbringing: “What religion, if any, were you raised in?” This provided a way of measuring change in identification. Another question asked “And what about when you were around 11 or 12, how often did you attend religious services then?” which provided a way of measuring change in attendance. There were also questions about the religious identity and attendance of the respondent’s father and mother, providing a way of testing Voas’ hypothesis about the comparative weakness of socialisation when parents do not have the same religious identity or practice.

A specific question asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself”. This was specific indicator as to whether people saw the development of meaning as a personal activity or as something which was given, for example, by religion. That statement was placed among other statements about whether life is meaningful only because God exists or whether life does not serve any purpose.

Another question asked people whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services”. This statement also

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indicated whether religious faith itself was seen as something which an individual could pursue outside of institutional involvement.

A set of questions asked people about their religious beliefs: belief in God, heaven, hell, life after death, and miracles. It was found that the responses to these questions correlated quite highly. They formed a scale with a high level of reliability, as indicated by the Cronbach's Alpha of .93

Another set of questions asked people about the sorts of values noted by Inglehart as being 'pro-fertility' and as being rejected by many people in the movement to a focus on personal fulfilment. These questions asked about attitudes to sex with people apart from one's partner, sex among partners of the same-sex, about abortion and about gender-based roles within the family. Again, the responses to these questions correlated positively and a scale was created for them with a Cronbach's Alpha score of .69

Two questions asked specifically about attitudes to the churches and other religious institutions. The first question was about the levels of confidence people had in such institutions. The second question asked "Do you think that churches and religious organisations in this country have too much power or too little power?" The responses ranged from 'Far too much power' to 'Far too little power'. The responses to these two questions correlated

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highly and again created a reliable scale of the lack of confidence in religious institutions with a Cronbach's Alpha score of .78.

Most of these questions were asked a comparable version of the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes in 2009. Thus it is possible to make comparisons between the two surveys, shedding light on trends between 2009 and 2018.

Analysis involved an examination of whether those who identified as no religion had a significantly different score on each of these scales from those who identified with a religion and those who attended religious services. Then, to examine the relative weight of each of these factors, regression analysis was used: linear regression in relation to attendance, and logit regression in relation to whether people identified as no religion or not. Logit regression was appropriate because the dependent variable, whether people identified as no religion or not, was a dichotomous variable.

## Results

### *Initial Analysis*

Table 1 presents the responses regarding a range of measures of religiosity in 2009 and 2018.

**Table 1. Responses to Various Questions about Religion in the Australia Survey of Social Attitudes 2009 and 2018 (Percent of respondents)**

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2018</b>
Identifying with a religion	55%	43%
Attending religious services monthly or more often	16%	13%
Believing in God without doubts	25%	21%
Having a great deal of confidence in churches and religious organisations	21%	11%
Religious organisations have too much power	37%	49%
Agreeing that life is only meaningful if we provide the meaning ourselves	55%	55%
I have my own way of connecting with God	42%	37%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009) and (2018).

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Table 1 shows that in every measure of religiosity, there was a change between 2009 and 2018. A smaller percentage of the population identified with religion, attended services and believed in God without doubts. The levels of confidence in churches and religious organisations fell and more people felt that religious organisations had too much power.

The 2018 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes asked respondents about whether they were raised identifying with a religion and whether they attended religious services when they were around 11 years of age. This means that one can identify the people who have changed since they were children. It found that 45 per cent of the total sample had reduced their involvement either from monthly or more often to occasional or never, or from occasional to never attending. It also found that 33 per cent of the respondents had changed from identifying with a religion to having 'no religion'.

There was evidence that the change in identity was more frequent when mothers and fathers had different identities. If the parents shared their religious identity, then 71 per cent of the children maintained their religious identity from when they were growing up and 29 per cent of children changed their religious identity. For the 38 per cent of respondents whose parents had different religious identities, 58 per cent of the children maintained the identity with which they grew up, and 42 per cent changed. Thus,

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there was greater maintenance of identity when the parents shared their religious identity.

The 2018 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes also asked about the parents' frequency of religious attendance. Again, the theory of socialisation being stronger if the parents had similar levels of attendance is applicable. There were 301 cases in survey in which both parents were recorded as attending at least monthly. In these cases, 38 per cent of their children maintained their level of attendance, but 62 per cent reduced their attendance. There were 146 cases in which one parent went frequently but the other did not. In those cases, 33 per cent of the children maintained their attendance, but 67 per cent reduced their attendance.

Values also changed over that period as shown in Table 2. While most Australians continue to believe it is always wrong for a married person to have sexual relations outside of marriage, there has been a significant liberalisation in attitudes towards same-sex relations. In 2018, fewer people felt that abortion for economic reasons was wrong, and that roles in family should be associated with gender.

**Table 2. Responses to Questions on Pro-Fertility Values in the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2009 and 2018. (Percentages)**

	<b>2009</b>	<b>2018</b>
Always wrong for a married person to have sexual relations outside of marriage	65%	62%
Always wrong for sexual relations between two adults of the same sex	33%	23%
Always wrong for a woman to have an abortion if the family cannot afford more children	19%	14%
Agree that husband's role is to earn an income and the wife's role is to look after home and family	17%	12%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2009) and (2018).

Tables 3 and 4 provides the responses to people about the two statements about the individual, meaning and religion.

**Table 3. Percent of Australian Adults Agree or Disagree with the Statement that ‘Life is meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself’ by Frequency of Attendance of Religious Services and Identity as ‘No Religion’**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not sure / Cannot choose</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Signifi- cance</b>
Monthly attenders	32	14	54	.000
Never attend	63	23	14	
Identify as ‘no religion’	65	22	14	.000
Identify with a religion	49	21	30	
Total population	58	21	21	

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018).

Table 3 shows that the majority of Australian adults (58%) considered meaning to be something that they must develop themselves as individuals. This was particularly true among those who never attend religious services (63%) and those who identify as having no religion (65%). It is notable that among those who attended religious services monthly or more often, many (32%) also considered meaning to be something that they had to develop themselves as individuals.

**Table 4. Percent of Australian Adults Agree or Disagree with the Statement that ‘I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services’ by Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not sure / Cannot choose</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Signifi- cance</b>
Monthly attenders	38	18	44	.000
Never attend	29	31	40	
Identity as ‘No Religion’	24	34	42	.000
Identify with a religion	59	19	22	
Total population	41	27	32	

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018).

The responses to the statement about having one’s own way of connection with God shows that many (38%) of those who attend religious services monthly or more often felt that they could connect with God without churches or religious services. Religious institutions were not necessary for their faith. Again, that points to a form of individualism among attenders. However, the question did not work for those who never attended religious services or for those who identified as having ‘no religion’. A large portion of them disagreed with the statement, but not because they rejected

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an individualised approach to God. Rather, they disagreed or could not choose an answer because they did not believe in God, and thus they could not connect with God, with or without religious services.

Table 5 describes the characteristics of the scales of rejection of beliefs, values and institution by whether respondents described themselves as having 'no religion' or not.

**Table 5. Characteristics of Scales Measuring Rejection of Beliefs, Values and Religious Institutions**

Scale	Minimum Maximum Score	Midpoint in scale	Mean for Monthly+ Attend- ers	Mean for Never Attend- ed	Mean among 'No Religion' respond- ents	Mean among for those identifi- ying	Signifi- cance of differen- ces in means
Rejection of beliefs	5 - 22	13.5	6.4	17.6	18.3	10.3	.000
Rejection of values	4 - 17	10.5	8.0	12.8	12.9	10.2	.000
Lack of confidence in religious institutions	2 - 10	6	5.3	8.5	8.6	6.4	.000

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2018.

There were statistically significant differences in the mean scores on all three scales between those who attended religious services

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monthly or more often and those who never attended (with the F scores significant at greater than 99.999 per cent likelihood that the results were not a product of chance). The respondents who did attend religious services generally affirmed the religious beliefs, and, to some extent, the pro-fertility value statements, and expressed some confidence in religious institutions. Their mean scores were below the mid-point in the scale for beliefs, the value scale, and the scale of lack of confidence in religious institutions.

Similarly, there were differences at a similar level of significance (99.999 per cent likelihood that not a product of chance) between those who identified with a religion and those who did not, although the means were not as far apart as between those who attended and those who did not. Those who identified with a religious institution were over the mid-point in their lack of confidence in religious institutions.

Regression analysis allows us to bring these various scales and measures into one equation to see which of the scales and measures is most significant in predicting the change in identity from a religious identity to 'no religion' and as predicting people who have reduced their attendance from monthly to occasional or non-attendance of religious services. Regression analysis does not prove causality, but, by allowing us to look at all the variables in the one equation, it is indicative of what may be having an affect

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and provides a measure of the relative weight and significance of each of these scales in relation to having no religion. In the follow equations, both variables are treated as binary. In other words, those who have dropped religious identity were defined as 1 while those have retained religious identity were defined as 0. Those who declined in their attendance were defined as 1, while those who maintained monthly attendance were defined as 0. Because these dependent variables are binary, logit regression is the appropriate form.

In these equations some demographic factors have been added in order to ensure that there is control of these factors. Thus, the equations have included the levels of education of the respondents, their age (as measured by the year of birth), whether the respondents are male (who are known to be more strongly represented among those who are no religion), and those who are overseas born (who are known to be more strongly represented in church attendance).

**Table 6. Logit Regression on Changing Identity from Religious When Aged 11 to ‘No Religion’.**

Scale	Exp (B)	Significance
Rejection of religious beliefs	1.36	.000
Rejection of pro-	1.01	.896

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fertility values		
Lack of confidence in religious institutions	1.82	.000
Must make meaning yourself	1.02	.860
Parents having different religious identity	1.33	.317
Education level	1.02	.689
Male	.911	.742
Year of birth	1.00	.840
Born overseas	.383	.005

Cox & Snell R squared for the model as a whole: .493

**Table 7. Logit Regression on Decreased Attendances of Religious Services from Frequent Attendance When Aged 11**

Scale	Exp (B)	Significance
Rejection of religious beliefs	1.53	.001
Rejection of pro-fertility values	1.16	.133
Lack of confidence in religious institutions	2.18	.003
Must make meaning yourself	1.59	.037
Parents with different religious identity	1.84	.470
Parents with different levels of attendance	1.91	.444
Education level	.830	.041
Male	.639	.778
Born overseas	.999	.999
Year of birth	.977	.096

Cox & Snell R squared for the model as a whole: .464

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Tables 6 and 7 shows that the model as a whole is powerful in explaining associations with change in identity as 'no religion' and dropping out of attendances of religious services, accounting for a relatively high proportion of the variance. The Cox and Snell R squared statistic provides a measure of the goodness of fit for the totality of the factors, and, for this sort of model, a measure above .4 is considered relatively high. The Exp(B) refers to the exponential value of B which is a measure of the predicted change in odds for a unit increase in the predictor. Thus, values over 1 mean that for every unit in the scale being measured there is an increased expectation that there is a drop in identification or decline in attendance. Of the four items, the strongest in its association with changing identity to 'no religion', when all predictor variables taken into account, was the lack of confidence in religious institutions with an Exp (B) score of 2.18. This lack of confidence was also the strongest factor in ceasing frequent attendance of religious services with an Exp (B) score of 1.82. In other words, the odds of a person who has no confidence in religious organisations ceasing to attend religious services and ceasing to identify with a religion were approximately twice the odds of a person who continued to have confidence in religious organisations.

Thus, the hypothesis is confirmed that the dropping of religious identity and the ceasing to attend religious services frequently is

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most strongly associated with the lack of confidence in religious institutions. This rejection may occur because of the perceived failures of those institutions. One of the items in this scale is agreement with the statement that churches and religious organisations have too much power, the implication being that they have misused their power (Hughes, 2023).

The second strongest factor in ceasing to identify with a religious tradition is the rejection of religious beliefs. This was also a strong factor in ceasing to attend religious services. When people cease to hold the beliefs that are propounded by the religious institutions, there is a strong tendency to cease attending religious services and also to cease identifying with the religious tradition irrespective of the level of confidence in religious institutions.

While people who cease attending and who drop their religious identity reject the 'sacred cosmos' of the religious institutions, they do not necessarily lose all spiritual beliefs. Looking closely at belief in God, for example, 42 per cent of those who identified as no religion said they did not believe in God (the atheist position) and another 21 per cent said they did not know whether there was a God or not but did not believe there was a way to find out (the agnostic position). Another 23 per cent said they did not believe in a personal God but did believe in a higher power of some kind. However, 14 per cent said they did believe in God, at

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least some of the time. Of those who identified with no religion, 30 per cent affirmed the statement “I don’t follow a religion, but I consider myself to be a spiritual person interested in the sacred or the supernatural”.

However, there was another strong factor in ceasing to attend religious services which was not significant in the change in identity. That was the affirmation that one must provide one’s own meaning. It seems likely that this factor is not important in ceasing to identify as there are many people who value the traditions and identify with them who hold that one must provide one’s own meaning, but it is a factor in ceasing to be involved in religious institutions.

The factor associated with the strength or weakness of socialisation as measured by whether the parents had similar or different religious identity appeared as a relatively strong factor. However, it did not achieve statistical significance. It was also a strong factor in ceasing to attend religious services, but again did not achieve statistical significance. This suggests that the strength of socialisation is a complex phenomenon that may well vary according to the extent to which children identify with their parents and the extent to which their own patterns of behaviour are supported by their peers.

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The same applies to difference in the frequency of attendance among the parents. In relation to ceasing to attend religious services, this was a strong factor, second only to the lack of confidence in religious institutions. However, again, it did not achieve statistical significance, perhaps because of the variability in the outcomes of parents' attendance patterns in their children.

The other demographic variables were not strong. Significantly, those who had high levels of education were less likely to cease attending religious services than those with lower levels of education, but education made no difference to change in religious identity.

Being born overseas made it less likely that a person would cease to hold a religious identity, but it did not have any impact on ceasing to attend religious services. No other factors were significant: gender, age or where one was born. The rejection of religious beliefs and the lack of confidence in religious institutions were much more significant.

The third hypothesis, as proposed by Inglehart, was that people reject religion because of its values. This hypothesis was not supported significantly, either for ceasing to attend religious services or for changing one's identity from a religion to no religion. Close analysis suggests that one of the reasons it did not strongly predict whether people had 'no religion' or not is because

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the differences in values between the ‘no religion’ group and others were not strong.

Table 8 looks at the responses to the specific items in the scale of pro-fertility values.

Table 8. Rejection of Religious Values by Adult Australians (Percent Affirming by Religious Identity and Religious Attendance (Monthly or More Often)

<b>Affirmed as not wrong at all or wrong only sometimes</b>	<b>Identify as No Religion</b>	<b>Identify with a Religion</b>	<b>Attend religious services monthly+</b>	<b>Never attend religious services</b>
Sex with people other than spouse	12%	5%	0%	12%
Sex between adults of the same sex	86%	52%	24%	84%
Having an abortion if cannot afford more children	90%	59%	25%	89%
Rejection of gendered roles in the home	74%	59%	48%	74%

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2018)

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Table 8 shows that few people either among those who identified as no religion and among others accepted the idea of sex with a person other than one's spouse. For most people, whether they are religious or not, sexuality outside marriage is still unacceptable. Thus, there is little difference between the religious and non-religious.

The picture is different in relation to homosexuality. Most Australians identifying as 'no religion' affirmed sex between adults of the same sex as **not** wrong. Half of those identifying with a religion made the same affirmation. Similar patterns were present in relation to abortion. Abortion was affirmed as not wrong by more than half of those identifying with a religion.

On the other hand, attenders of religious services tended to have quite different attitudes on homosexuality and abortion. Indeed, almost half (48%) of all people holding that abortion is always wrong attended religious services frequently.

Gendered roles within the home are not accepted by most people who identify as having 'no religion', but also by the majority of those who identify with a religion. Half of all religious attenders see gendered roles in the home as unacceptable.

Overall, however, these pro-fertility values did not distinguish clearly those who had 'no religion' from those who identified with a religion. Many people who identified with a religion rejected the

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traditional pro-fertility values. Indeed, some of the Christian churches, such as the Uniting Church, have not officially rejected same-sex marriages (although the Uniting Church has not officially affirmed same-sex marriages either) and have rejected the gendered roles both within the home and in the church.

Other research (Bohr and Hughes, 2021) has suggested that homosexuality, in particular, has been an issue which has led many people to leave the churches or cease identifying with a religion. For some people, this has been associated with the lack of tolerance in some churches for different lifestyles and for people finding personal fulfilment in their own patterns of relationships.

A more common issue is that of sex before marriage. Most people now live together before marriage. This remains unacceptable in many churches and can often become a catalyst for people moving out of the churches. However, this issue was not canvassed in this survey.

### **Discussion**

The strongest factor in describing oneself as having 'no religion' is the lack of confidence in religious institutions and one part of this is the affirmation that religious institutions have too much power. Neither Luckmann nor Giddens foresaw the widespread moral

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failures of some Christian churches in the sexual abuse of children being enacted by clergy and the attempted cover up. The abuse and cover up have undoubtedly had an impact on the levels of confidence in religious institutions in recent years beyond the rejection of tradition and the sense that meaning in life was something for which one was personally responsible.

However, the lack of confidence in religious institutions is not the only factor in moving to no religion. The results of the survey analysis showed that a separate and additional factor is the lack of acceptance of traditional beliefs in God, heaven, hell, life after death and miracles. There is widespread doubts about the whole 'sacred cosmos' among Australians. Most of those who have moved to 'no religion' no longer accept the details of that traditional 'sacred cosmos'. Again, this is something that sociologists have been expecting for a long time. Luckmann and others have suggested that the 'sacred cosmos' was moved into the private sphere over the last couple of centuries. However, even in the private sphere, there was always the possibility that the conflict in views of the world between the religious and the scientific would come to a head and this is now occurring on a large scale in Australian society. Even at the personal level, the 'sacred cosmos' means little to most Australians. The rejection of belief is a strong factor for explaining the lack of attendance at religious services and is a little stronger at that level than with

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ceasing to hold a religious identity. Some people still identify with a religious tradition, but do not attend religious services because they cannot accept the 'sacred cosmos' as the religions describe it.

Inglehart's hypothesis that people are moving to no religion primarily because of the change in values from pro-fertility values to values of personal fulfilment is more weakly affirmed than the two other hypotheses. Nevertheless, it is significant apart from the rejection of religious beliefs and is even more significant in explaining why some people still attend religious services while other people do not. Many people who attend religious services maintain pro-fertility values rejecting homosexual relationships and abortion.

It remains possible that the clash in values, rather than beliefs, has been a major catalyst for people moving to no religion, as Inglehart has argued. Sex before marriage and same-sex relationships are acceptable in the wider culture, but not in most churches. As people move into such relationships, they move out of the churches and often out of identity with religion as a whole.

The 2021 Census data showed that 30 per cent of all people who identified as 'no religion' were in a a de facto relationship and 2.4 per cent were in a same-sex relationship (Hughes 2023, p.90).

This compares with just 13 per cent in de facto relationships and

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0.8 per cent in same-sex relationships among those who identified as Christian (Hughes 2023, p.50). The proportions were lower again among Hindus and Muslims. It is possible that people who have 'no religion' feel free to enter such relationships. It is also possible that entering such relations, they cease to identify with religious groups.

Longitudinal census data from 2006 and 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023) showed that between those years a little over 4 million Australians who identified as Christian in 2006 moved into a relationship in those ten years. Just 5 per cent moved into de facto relationship. Among those who did, 13 per cent moved from identifying themselves as Christian to identifying themselves as no religion. Among the vast majority who moved into a married relationship, just 5 per cent ceased to identify began to identify as no religion. Thus, while movement into de facto relationships may increase the likelihood of dropping religious identity, it does not appear to be a large factor.

There is strong support in the survey as a whole for the fact that most Australians believe they must put their own lives together reflexively, finding meaning for themselves. This factor did not quite reach statistical significance at the 95% confidence level in relation to identity as 'no religion' because there are many people who identify with a religious tradition who believe that they must put their lives together. They see religion as something they

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choose rather than being a community into which they are born and which is given to them. On the other hand, it was significant in relation to lack of attendance. People who attend religious services were more likely to reject this idea, being ready to accept the meaning that the religious traditions offered to them.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the results suggest there is something of a progression in moving out of attendance and then moving out of identity with religion. People who cease to attend have generally ceased to accept the 'sacred cosmos' of their religion and the values. They also believe that they must make meaning for themselves.

In the 2021 Census, 54 per cent of Australians identified with a religion, even though only 14 per cent connected attend worship services monthly or more. Many Australians identify with a religious tradition although they are not involved. While they may not agree with all its teachings or values, these people still value the religious tradition in some way. However, this analysis suggests that the lack of confidence in religious institutions is a major factor in taking the further step of ceasing to identify and to say they have 'no religion'.

Australians now live in a largely secularised culture where most people feel that they must find their own sense of meaning. Just

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one person in seven connects frequently with a religious community. Just one in five people feel confident that there is a God. Just one person in three accepts what most religions condemn in same-sex relationships (Wikipedia).

There is no one explanation for the movement away from religion. There is support for all the theories examined in this paper. Support for the 'sacred cosmos' of religions has been eroded, both in terms of its beliefs and doctrines and its values. There is a widespread acceptance that people have to provide their own sense of meaning in life. And there is little confidence in religious institutions. There remains the issue of what is cause and what is effect. Do people cease to attend religious services because they reject the 'sacred cosmos', or does ceasing to attend lead them to reject the 'sacred cosmos'? Probably there is an interaction which works both ways. This paper has not identified what are the primary catalysts for change.

From the perspective of ministry, this is indeed a worrying scenario. There is no one solution to re-engaging people in ministry. There are two factors which are, at least partly, in the control of the religious institutions. The first is the levels of confidence in such institutions. While it is tempting for the religious institutions to look inward and seek to preserve the structures and the people who are still committed to them, confidence will only be built as they seek to serve the wider

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community and do so without discrimination or judgement. The second is the strength of socialisation processes. Strong socialisation into a community which supports faith is more likely to lead to its continuity over generations, but it certainly does not guarantee it.

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Note that all percentages and other calculations are the responsibility of the author of this paper.

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