Why are young adults in Western Australia leaving the church?

As a church-going practicing Christian, I have significant interest in why young people are leaving the church, and the place of the church in the lives of young people. Having volunteered in youth ministries, worked as a school Chaplain, taught youth work degrees and am now completing a doctorate focusing on youth ministry, this is a subject close to one's heart. Australia's relationship with the church has changed significantly since 1966, and as a result this calls into question whether the church is perceived as good for society or bad. This article will present the results of a study conducted in 2018 into young people's experiences of the church, and analyse these results through the lens of Durkheim's concept of cohesion and social integration.

Cohesion

The origins of the concept of cohesion are usually attributed to Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist from the late 19th century, whose most notable work is his book, *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1897/1952). Durkheim's theory was based upon the premise that death by suicide was most common among groups of people that are least socially integrated, drawn from research which has been met with critiques (Kushner & Sterk, 2005) which will be discussed later. Durkheim posited that in order to reduce death by suicide, it is important to increase the individuals' social integration through socialising members of society into understanding their place as a cog in the machine of a stable society (Poole & Germov, 2019a). Durkheim believed cohesion to be the 'glue' that holds society together, and is essential for its functioning and stability (Poole & Germov, 2019a). Cohesion was achieved through each individual being integrated into society via having a role in society through their work, or through the *conscience collective* – participating in the consensus of shared beliefs (Poole & Germov, 2019a; Holmes et al., 2015). Hence, the individual's social integration could be argued to contribute to societal cohesion as a whole. Such a theory was important for a French society where a recent revolution had transformed society, hence, new ways of participating in society where needed

(Holmes et al., 2015). This theory was later built upon by functionalist sociology, a category of sociology that describes society as a functioning machine that needs all its parts to play their part for society to function with stability, proposed by Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons (Poole & Germov, 2019a).

Merton and Parsons added that aspects of society such as churches, schooling, hospitals, and so forth, were seen as having the latent function of socialising members into participating 'properly' (Poole & Germov, 2019a). Legal and punitive systems were seen as ways to deter and punish those who did not follow expectations, labelling them as 'deviant' (Poole & Germov, 2019a). Social cohesion theory assumes that as each individual plays their part, follows norms and performs sanctioned behaviour, it increases the individual's social capital, which in turn acts as a 'glue' for societal cohesion, which then in turn increases positive health outcomes (Carrasco & Bilal, 2016; Kushner & Sterk, 2005). It requires that all members of society hold shared values in order to adopt functional behaviours (Jensen, 2002), in other words, the *conscience collective* mentioned earlier. Hence, discussions of cohesion tend to focus on how to control the behaviour of, and assimilate, the individual for the benefit of societal stability (Carrasco & Bilal, 2016). Durkheim in particular saw religion as having an important role in such social integration, norming, and generating this *conscience collective* (Holmes et al., 2015). Aspects such as a shared belief system, shared ideas about what is 'good' behaviour and what is 'good' for society, and social integration into society could be aspects to how religion achieves this.

Recent research from the Scanlon Foundation indicate that Australian cohesion has been in decline generally (O'Donnell, 2023) until 2024 where it has remained steady (O'Donnell et al., 2024). However, their 2024 report showed that despite the "resilient cohesion" (p. 6, O'Donnell et al., 2024) that Australia is showing, the attitudes towards religion has declined. While negative attitudes towards Christianity have been slowly increasing, the 2024 report showed quite a stark increase in negative attitudes and decrease in positive attitudes towards all major religions in Australia. For example, 16% of the research participants had a negative attitude towards Christianity in 2023, but this increased to 19% in 2024. Conversely, positive attitudes towards Christianity decreased by five percentage

points from 2023 to 2024. However, it is not just towards Christianity, but to all major religions that attitudes have become increasingly negative (O'Donnell et al., 2024).

Formally, Australia has no established religion and has a formal separation of church and state, as per Section 116 of the constitution (Randell-Moon, 2008), despite a multitude of blogs, articles, and other popular media claiming Australia as a Christian nation (e.g., Donnelly, 2015; Zimmerman, 2014). Most arguments that claim this to be fact tend to neglect Aboriginal and migrant perspectives on faith and spirituality (e.g., Australian Christians, 2022). However, it is very clear that the numbers of people who associate with Christianity in Australia has changed significantly over the past 60 years. In 1966, well over three quarters (86%) of Australians identified themselves as a Christian, however, in 2021 this portion has almost halved to 43.9% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, 2017, 2022). On the other hand, those electing 'No religion' on census surveys increased to 38.9% in 2021 from 0.8% in 1966 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, 2017, 2022). This number is highest among young people at 44% (ABS, 2022). Young people's attendance rates to church are very low, resulting in an underrepresented population: according to Hughes (2013), young people represent 25% of the population but only 8% of the church population. Singleton et al. (2019) on the other hand found that 12% of Generation Z young people (defined by McCrindle et al., 2021, as those born between 1995 and 2009) attend a worship service weekly or more. This figure represents all religions, hence, the number of young people attending a Christian church would logically be much lower than the figure given by Singleton et al. (2019). Young people are clearly leading the 'exodus' away from the church, with each successive generation associating with church less (Bohr & Hughes, 2021). Hughes (2015) found that of the Australian young people who attended a church service at least once a month when they were 11, by the time they were adults 72% no longer attended a church and 46% no longer considered themselves Christian. This is a significant fact that has been met with moral panics over the loss of truth and morality (such as in Campbell, 2022) and the belief that Christian voices are being excluded or deemed irrelevant from political and public dialogue over major issues (such is described in Grant, 2022). Some view this decrease in significance of

Christianity and an increase in diversity of religious views as a threat to societal cohesion (Jensen, 2002). Some may use these changes to explain the decline in societal cohesion discussed above (O'Donnell, 2023). Regardless, this does lead one to question how people perceive the church, in particular, the young people who are leading the 'exodus' (a term borrowed from Smith and Denton, 2005).

Research methods

In order to understand why young people might be leaving the church, a phenomenological study was conducted among young adults aged 19 – 27 years old. Phenomenology is a research method used to investigate how people experience a phenomenon, in this case, the church. This age group was chosen because literature (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011; Hughes, 2013) showed it to be the age group when the so-called 'drop off' in church attendance was most significant. The phenomenology involved 15 open ended interviews in early 2018, seven of whom were female-identifying and eight of whom were male-identifying, eight who were still attending a Baptist church at the time of the research ('stayers'), and seven no longer attending a Baptist church at the time of the research ('leavers'). The interviews were conducted in a neutral location chosen by the participant, recruited through asking Baptist churches in Western Australia to refer potential participants to the researcher, and through flyers in a University psychology class and around the campus. Then, snowball techniques were used to recruit more participants. Two focus groups were intended to be conducted, one with stayers and one with leavers, however, due to lack of response from the leavers group only a focus group was conducted for the stayers to fact-check interpretations. A thematic analysis was then conducted, using a symbolic interactionist paradigm. Symbolic interactionism defines society as a web of interpersonal interactions, rather than an external structure (Poole & Germov, 2019b). This paradigm studies these individual interactions and looks for symbols of meaning in these interactions by empirically studying individual experiences.

The original study (Mullen, 2020) sought to understand why young people leave and stay in churches. This broad research question resulted in six themes of leaving and staying, which is fully explained in Mullen (2020). This study then re-

analysed these results with the question of how these young people's experiences of church relate to concepts of religious dogmatism, social integration and social cohesion.

Results

Intriguingly, the research elicited that some emerging adults stayed in church even when they had negative relational experiences and others left the church even when they had positive experiences. Once this curiosity was further analysed, it was discovered that the common thread among the stayers was a deep sense of spiritual connection in staying in church. Either they found that church was a place where they experienced God regularly (for example, felt close to God during worship or sermons), or they found a sense that they were part of something important by attending church (for example, by being part of transforming the culture of that church). Conversely, the common thread among the leavers was some combination of experiences of religious dogmatism, with a lack of spiritual gain from church attendance. The phrase *religious dogmatism* is used to describe experiences where religious authority figures or peers spoke, acted, or responded in ways that implied that their own perspective was the only correct perspective, with no allowance for others, a forcefulness of a particular belief, and a lack of openness to dialogue.

This was particularly relevant in the early months of 2018, where the Australian plebiscite on marriage equality was recent history. Many participants in the study expressed disappointment in the way public Christian leaders and pastors speaking from pulpits or other public forums expressed their disapproval of marriage equality. Participants felt that such apparent manners of speaking gave no allowance for a diversity of views, dialogue, or consideration for how LGBTQIA+ people might receive the words spoken. One participant expressed sadness for their gay friend, who was part of a church service where marriage equality was preached against:

> *I felt so bad for my mate- he should have a place where he feels like he can be ministered to, doesn't matter if he, if he's gay or if he's not gay, it [sic] should still be welcomed into church.*

This participant felt as though their church was not willing to accept anyone who did not conform to the 'norm' of heterosexuality, nor allowed congregants to express

any affirmative views of marriage equality. Hence, leaders demonstrated authoritative leadership styles that dogmatically did not create room for alternative viewpoints.

However, such dogmatic behaviours were not only exhibited by authority figures, but also by peers. For example, one participant spoke of an experience where they brought their non-Christian partner to a church service and the response of others made the participant feel they were no longer welcome: "I felt the stares … you could just tell by people's body language that they weren't as welcoming and so I was like I don't really wanna [sic] go anymore." This participant experienced a symbolic rejection from their church for not following sanctioned behaviour, internalising this rejection and choosing to leave. Another participant spoke of being stigmatised, for an unsanctioned behaviour that he did not in actuality partake in – social media posts that were interpreted as 'partying' led to the assumption he was participating in drunkenness and consequently was stepped down from a leadership role despite the fact that he had not gone to drunken parties. He then left because the stigma stayed attached to him, and the church no longer seemed useful: "So I would go, every now and then, but more and more just that stigma is attached stayed there and if I'm not gaining any real, you know, spiritual growth from it, didn't see point of attending that church." These peers demonstrated that the behaviour or decisions of the participant were 'unsanctioned' through body language, through stigmatising an individual based on rumours, and through reporting supposed rumours to authorities.

The interesting factor was that most of these experiences regarded what could be considered 'grey' or non-central areas. In other words, participants never spoke of receiving dogmatic treatment for beliefs about the deity of Christ, soteriology, the nature of God, and so forth. The experiences of religious dogmatism were more concerned with behaviour, or with politically relevant and contentious issues. For example, dogmatism was experienced in relation to behaviours such as perceived 'excessive' alcohol consumption, premarital sex, clubbing, being friends with non-Christians, sharing an apartment with the opposite sex, or non-regular church attendance. A participant commented on how these types of behaviours were demonised, while pride, gossip, and lying were ignored. These could be

considered issues that might give someone the appearance of Christianity, rather than the inner spiritual life of the person or their treatment of other individuals. Dogmatism was experienced in relation to contentious and/or politically relevant issues such as legalising same-sex marriage, legalising abortion, the role of women in church, Israel and Zionism. These were experienced through a church leader or a peer being uninterested in hearing an alternative viewpoint on a particular political or social stance or by giving placating or dismissive answers; through a lack of space to discuss doubts and ask difficult questions; through family members attempting to force views on these young adults or force them to church; or, through peers treating a person differently after discovering their different views or unsanctioned behaviours. Those who left as a result of such experiences of religious dogmatism had to face a choice: either they change themselves to fit the expectations of religious leaders, peers, and/or family, or, they had to leave the church so they can maintain integrity. The leavers evidently chose the latter.

Discussion

That these participants were forced into an 'either-or' scenario is clearly strongly relevant to this discussion of cohesion and faith communities in Australia. A Durkheimian lens might interpret these results by explaining that when authorities engaged in authoritative teaching and leadership styles, and placating or shutting down of alternative viewpoints, they sought to maintain a social homeostasis (Rodolfo, 2000). In other words, they aimed to keep the status quo in order to maintain cohesion and stability. In order to maintain local social cohesion and avoid conflicting stresses, the authority must enforce certain viewpoints. According to a Durkheimian lens, without such enforcement the group would descend into chaos, and hence, when there are dissenting views this is a threat to the stability of the group but also a threat to their own authority. These teachings and sanctioned behaviours then become accepted as the norm of that church community.

As a result, the congregants internalise these norms through the *conscience collective*, which they then reinforce to each other through disapproving body language, criticism, or reporting behaviour to authorities. These peers and family members treat those engaging in unsanctioned behaviour as 'other' (Holmes et al.,

2015). They began to treat that person as someone they no longer owed solidarity to, as someone who they believed no longer belongs. When study participants engaged in so-called deviant behaviours or held deviant beliefs, their peers responded in ways to reinforce the unsanctioned nature of such beliefs and behaviours. For example, when one research participant expressed supporting a woman if she decided to have an abortion, that participant received a strong negative emotive response from his peers, who then began to treat him as though he was no longer a Christian. These peers engaged in dogmatic behaviours toward the participant by acting as though one's opinion on abortion determined whether one was truly a Christian – even though this is not a central tenet of the Christian faith. According to a Durkheimian lens, their dogmatic behaviours may have been utilised in order to seek a stable and cohesive group by rejecting him – so that the group could be in agreement over a contentious issue and therefore experience cohesion once more. The group attempted to label this individual as deviant, a practice that makes those who agree feel more cohesion with one another (Holmes, et al., 2015). It appears that for participants, the impact of peers dogmatic attitudes held the same weight as authorities engaging in dogmatic leadership styles.

Alternatively, the theory of social integration could be used to interpret why these young adults left. When they experienced symbolic rejection, they determined that they were no longer welcome and so left the church. From a social integration interpretation, this could be used to explain that they no longer felt socially integrated into that community and sought communities where they could feel that integration. The example of one participant whose family demonised 'outsiders' fits well here. Her family repeatedly taught her that non-Christians are bad people, teaching her not to mix with them. She tried to believe in God, tried to integrate into the church community, but neither were possible for her. She was unable to build any meaningful friendships until she started to make friends outside of the church, discovering that they were not bad people as her parents asserted. Because she felt no sense of social integration as part of her church community, but felt social integration outside of the church, it felt logical for her that she left church and engaged with peers where she felt integration. Hence, the lack of integration in one

setting led to finding integration elsewhere. This participant was treated as deviant by her family, disrupting the sense of cohesion within her family unit.

Durkheim also spoke about the concept of deviance as being a functional part of creating a cohesive society: conformity (rule keeping) is defined in opposition to deviance (rule breaking) (Holmes, et al., 2015). Hence, the way institutions and societies respond to deviance can reinforce it as unacceptable behaviour and create more social cohesion amongst those who continue to conform (Holmes et al., 2015). In this study, young people could be considered the 'deviant' ones, because they have attempted to challenge the accepted beliefs and notions of acceptable behaviours of their churches and peer groups. The concept of *Ideas Marketplaces* by Singleton et al. (2021) certainly has some merit in contributing to this discussion – since young people are able to 'shop around' for ideas and choose what they believe, they are more likely to hold eclectic views (Singleton et al., 2021). Young people would be able, through their smartphones, to explore different beliefs even within Christian denominations over what is the "accurate" interpretation of theological concepts such as hamartiology, eschatology, soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and so on. This increased likelihood to hold eclectic views could challenge those who wish to maintain a status quo of acceptable beliefs, norms and behaviours. This would clearly lead to behaviours, by leaders, family and sanctioned-behaviour-conforming-peers, to try and prevent dissent and encourage conformity – rejecting any belief that does not conform, such as what was seen through the behaviours of peers, family members, and authority figures experienced by participants in this study. Their attempts to enforce conformity are compounded by the loss of trust in the institution of the church as a result of the increase in public controversies involving the church such as sexual abuse allegations, sexism, corruption, and slavery (for example, see Cooney, 2005, Smith, 2007, Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, Westmore-Peyton, 2022, McKinell, 2023, Ward, 2023, Shorter and Riches, 2023). Singleton et al. (2021) claim that this is a significant factor for young people's decreased religiosity: they have lost hope in the church. Hence, the refusal of church communities to allow spaces for plurality and dialogue of different views – through enforcing the 'accepted' view/behaviour – as well as the controversies involving the church publicly, are driving young people away from the church. This is especially

significant against a backdrop of what is becoming an increasingly pluralised society (evidenced by Singleton et al, 2021; O'Donnell, 2023). Hence, to hold a dogmatic view in a pluralistic society is beginning to equate to being seen as 'bad' in Australian society. It appears that young people perceive a 'good' society both at the micro level (i.e., a church community) and at the macro level (i.e., all of Australia) is one where a multitude of values and beliefs are welcomed (Singleton et al., 2021).

Paradise lost?

Returning to Durkheim's theory of social cohesion, one could consider that this means the idyllic 'paradise' of social cohesion through a *conscience collective* is being lost as young people are looking for a place where they are not told what to believe. However, one main critique of Durkheim's theory of social cohesion and integration is that it assumes that when everyone believes the same thing (in the conscience collective), there will be cohesion. Some people might falsely assume, then, that Australia had great social cohesion in the early 1950s when the majority of the country identified with Christian values (and prior to the sexual revolution and Vietnam war protests). However, I would argue that Australia only would have *seemed* to have great cohesion (in retrospect) because the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were excluded formally from the census and from voting (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), because women were "economically and politically subservient to men" and hence, silenced (Poole, 2019, p. 153), and the colloquially named White Australia Policy prevented non-white migrants from entering the country (Possamai, 2008), just to name a few. In other words, Australia was only cohesive in the 'paradise era' because marginalised groups were silenced. It was only cohesive so long as marginalised groups remained silent about their marginalisation and kept their opinions to themselves.

In a sense, the experiences of participants of this study echoes this idea. Participants could only experience integration into the community if they represented that which was deemed most acceptable to their authorities, peers and family members. If they remained silent when they disagreed – pretending to agree, if they toed the line with their behaviours, and if they never challenged the status quo – then perhaps they may have experienced integration and a sense of being part

of a cohesive community. However, if they did not abide by certain behaviours, they were shamed into leaving so that the majority could experience cohesiveness brought by a conscience collective (Holmes, et al., 2015). Hence, cohesion for the group could only be brought about when everyone agreed, and dissenters remained silent, or left. Young people appear to be no longer accepting this way of approaching faith, and are hence rejecting the church. This supports the findings by Bohr and Hughes (2021) that one of the main reasons young adults leave the church is because of rigid theology, demonstrating that this way of thinking is becoming less popular and those who hold it are seen in a negative light.

This seemingly puts the church into a somewhat awkward position, where they could take two stances. One, they could compromise on all values, affirm every behaviour and take the popular stance on everything. However, this would lead to the church no longer being distinct from the world, like the allegory of the salt in Matthew 5:13-16 (NIV). It might lead to more young people attending this 'edgy' church; however, they may find the church to be shallow and shift quickly with whatever is popular, losing the essence of what the church 'is'. It would be no different from a for-profit company seeking to capitalise on Pride Month in order to keep making more sales and remain popular, making sure to take down rainbows oat the end of the month. Alternatively, the church could go to the other extreme, and condemn publicly behaviours it does not agree with. It could be outspoken, hold protests, lobby the government, in order to try and prevent society from changing; in order to keep the church in a position of power and influence over society. This is the type of dogmatic attitude that is causing young people to leave the church, as evidenced by the findings of this research. This could also be considered an unloving and ungracious approach, certainly not reflecting the principle in 1 Peter 3:15: "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with *gentleness and respect*". How then, can the church maintain theological and moral integrity without slipping into dogmatic behaviours in an increasingly pluralistic society?

A way forward?

Perhaps the Durkheimian focus on cohesion is the wrong direction for the church. Cohesion as a concept has been critiqued for Durkheim's research methods that underpinned the theory. Durkheim, in studying suicide, excluded deaths by suicide among stay-at-home-mothers and men in the army, claiming these were not true suicide (Kushner & Sterk, 2005). He then built his theory upon all other suicides, where he found that these other suicides occurred with those people who were not socially integrated (Kushner & Sterk, 2005). By excluding the forms of suicide from individuals because he claimed they were too integrated for it to be true suicide, this has undermined the whole thesis behind integration, and its link with generating cohesive communities and societies (Kushner & Sterk, 2005). Additionally, as discussed earlier, Durkheim's cohesion through the *conscience collective* requires that everyone agrees, and that those who do not are silenced, or that there are clear boundaries on who is 'in' and who is 'out' (Jensen, 2002). With these issues in mind, and a recognition that doctrinal conformity is not achieving the goals hoped for, perhaps a new approach is needed. Essentially a focus on a cohesive community would require either the church to conform *to* the world and follow its standards, or try to enforce conformity *on* the world by dogmatically insisting laws, culture and congregants follow its standards and doctrine. As argued, these are both flawed approaches if the church wants to be good for society. An approach that moves away from cohesion through consensus is needed.

Perhaps the approach instead is that of dialogue between diverse views, rather than seeking to enforce one standard view. Dialogue is sometimes used as a method of decreasing conflict between religious groups in Europe and can allow people who have different perspectives to discuss these and begin to understand the perspectives and motivations of the other (Orton, 2016). It does not require that the dialogue concludes with everyone agreeing, however, it can result in a deepening of one's own faith and own theological understanding (Orton, 2016). It does not require that one relinquishes conviction in pluralistic dialogue, but that one approaches dialogue with openness, humility, and a willingness to learn. In this sense, dialogue between diverse views can create the safety that participants in this study seemed to be seeking: safety to express their views and remain to be seen as welcome in the group, or safety to be accepted unconditionally rather than based

upon their adherence to norms. Those seeking dialogue can certainly learn from youth work and psychology practices of mutuality: a focus upon *knowing* and *being known*, mutual understanding and equal relationships, as opposed to seeking to correct and conform (Lester et al., 2019). If there can be a shift in church culture from social sanctions being placed upon individuals for nonconformity, towards a culture of approaching the *other* with the desire to understand and respect their viewpoint, this may prevent the experiences described by participants in this study. This, however, would require further research to identify whether youth and young adult ministries might already be engaging in dialogue, and whether it is a viable option to prevent conformity focused options.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that young people tend to leave the church when they have experiences of dogmatic attitudes. These dogmatic attitudes took the form of disapproving statements, placatory responses, shifts in body language, or change in treatment of that individual. The dogmatic attitudes were equally exhibited by peers, family members and authority figures alike, holding equal value. These attitudes and experiences can be understood through a Durkheimian lens of church communities seeking cohesion and integration through uniformity of beliefs (conscience collective), and the 'deviant' individual who does not conform must be treated in such a way to maintain that sense of cohesion through uniformity. Such a way of thinking is flawed because it is causing young people to leave the church, and this paper has proposed that a new method is required. This is perhaps utilising dialogue as a platform for seeking to know and to be known, rather than to enforce conformity. This is perhaps where the church can impact society once more – through creating spaces for humble, respectful, and unconditionally loving dialogue.

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