Younger Australians seem particularly inclined to say they have 'no religion'.Shutterstock

In the past 50 years, the nature and shape of religion in Australia has changed dramatically. While secularisation and religious decline was one way of telling this story, it has become increasingly unsatisfactory.

Religion has not gone away , nor has it retreated into the private sphere as predicted, even though increasing numbers declare they have “no religion”. These changes have major implications for social policy and research.

Religion is constantly in the news. It seems to fuel global events, frightens politicians, and is claimed to influence the voting on moral issues.

In the 2011 Census , Australia became at the same time both less religious and more religious. While a rising number declared they have “no religion” (22%), the number declaring a religion also increased significantly. This was partly due to 17% fewer people taking the option of not responding.

The declaration of “no religion” is becoming particularly evident among young people – the so-called millennials. In the 2011 Census, nearly 30% of Australians between 25 and 34 declared that they had no religion.

Research in the UK reports many young people are turning their backs on formally organised religious communities that seem incapable of according women full dignity or recognising and celebrating love among LGBTIQ people.

Increasing proportions of young people have been raised by parents who declare they have no religion. In the UK, the likelihood of children of religious parents being religious themselves is

about 50%. But those raised in non-religious households are very unlikely to take up religion. Similar figures are likely for Australia.

From recent research overseas and in Australia, there appears to be three broad types of orientation to religion, and not just the two predicted by secularisation theory, which is no religion or faith celebrated and practised in private.

Also, there has been a tendency to essentialise the religious/secular divide and to ignore the diversity of ways in which people are religious.

First, there are those who associate with formally organised religion because they find it informs their lives and motivates them to do service. They are public about this, and about their efforts to put faith into practice. Religion is important to them and informs the way they seek to shape and reshape society.

Recent focus groups among millennials reveals some who are religious are exclusivist, believing they have “the truth” and that everyone should have the same religious belief as they do. However, most are confident in practising their own religion while being comfortable to let others be themselves – whether religious or not.

While probably a smaller percentage of the population than 50 years ago, those taking their religion seriously cannot be ignored in any analysis of what is happening today. A recent National Church Life Survey (NCLS) revealed 14% of Australians said “religion was very important” to them, and 11% attend worship weekly.

However, this group is highly diverse. It includes many varieties of Christians along with those who are Buddhist, Muslim, Hindus, Sikh, Jewish, and others.

Second, there are many ways of belonging to a particular faith. As one billboard declares: “there are 1.6 billion ways of being a Muslim”. The internal diversity of religious groups is huge.

Among the “nones” there are at least two groups. First, there are those who fully reject or simply ignore religion. It is meaningless and pointless to them.

While a few may be actively anti-religious, most simply do not care about religion, but do not mind if others follow one. The NCLS revealed 36% of Australians said “religion was not important”, and another 25% said “religion was of little importance”. Similarly, 68% said they never (or less than once a year) attend any kind of religious service.

The second group among those who declare “no religion” includes those who actively engage in spirituality, practise meditation, ask questions about the meaning of life, seek ethical ways to live their lives, and reshape society.

According to the NCLS, 28% of Australians claim to “have had (and another 25% believe it is possible to have) a mystical or supernatural experience about which they have no doubts about its reality”. Given that 11% claim to attend religious services once a week (and 7% once a month), supernatural experiences are not limited to religious organisations.

This second group of “nones”, sometimes referred to as SBNRs (spiritual but not religious), needs further research to understand the ways people are engaging with questions of meaning, seeking to promote personal and social wellbeing and improve their world.

The fact they are not associated with existing organisations does not mean these activities have become privatised. They are simply differently organised and networked.

The diversity of ways Australians are and aren’t religious or spiritual impacts on social policy, education, and interreligious relations.

First, the diversity is not among just an increased number of monolithic blocks of identity. No-one speaks for all Christians, or Muslims, or Buddhists, or Hindus or Jews. Intrareligious relations are at times more difficult among people claiming the same religious identity. Alliances on issues will form between people from different religious groups, which are internally divided on the issue.

Responses to census categories indicate one level of increased diversity but do not reveal the huge diversity within the categories. Nor do they reflect the fact that increasing numbers of Australians, given the chance, will claim more than one category.

Overlooking diversity both within the ways of being religious and the ways of having no religion neglects the many forms of spirituality, wholeness, caring, sacred spaces and meaning found within and alongside formally organised religion.

Gary D Bouma is an Anglican Priest in the Diocese of Melbourne.

Authors: Gary D Bouma, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Monash University

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