

'No religion' and Jedi Knight find their place in Australian identity

Written by Gary D Bouma, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Monash University



Formally organised forms of religion are only one part of the picture of Australian society. Shutterstock

In a nation that is increasingly secular, religion still plays a vital role in the way we run our country. In [this series](#), we examine the role of religion in Australian politics and education.

The 2016 Census [reported on](#) the changing distribution of Australians' religious identity. This might prompt some to ask: what is religion? How is religion related to spirituality? And what does the census tell us about this?

Finding a definition

Defining religion has [exercised the minds of many](#), and the results are far from satisfying. [Spirituality](#) is not much better. Most definitions reflect the proposer's religious origins.

For example, if one starts with Christianity or Islam, then all other claimants to be religions are judged according to the [standard set](#) by these groups – that is, do they have:

- a sacred scripture;
- a systematised theology;
- explicit ethical standards;

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formal organisation with a head office;

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professional clergy;

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historical presence; and

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an association with the state?

Further reading: [Census 2016 reveals Australia is becoming much more diverse – but can we trust the data?](#)

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) [defines religion](#) according to the finding of the High Court. In 1983, it held that “the beliefs, practices and observances of the Church of the New Faith (Scientology) were a religion in Victoria”.

As part of the ruling, it was stated that:

For the purposes of the law, the criteria of religion are twofold: first, belief in a Supernatural Being, Thing or Principle; and second, the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief, though canons of conduct which offend against the ordinary laws are

outside the area of any immunity, privilege or right conferred on the grounds of religion.

Buddhism, a religion that denies the existence of a deity, the afterlife and is very differently organised, pushes the boundaries of a definition for those more accustomed to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Spiritualities and other beliefs

However, formally organised forms of religion are only one part of the picture of religion in Australia.

In the past few decades spirituality has become popular, in part as an alternative to religion – a way to have the benefits of religion without having to belong to a religion.

First, it must be noted that the term “spirituality” has a long history of use within Christianity and in particular in the Roman Catholic Church, which maintains centuries’ old traditions of spiritual practice – Benedictine and Ignation, for example.

Similarly, in Islam, Sufi spirituality refers to a centuries-old form of mystical religious practice.

While spiritualities have a long history, the term spirituality has more recently come to refer to the generic in religion minus the organisational, historical and clerical trappings.

The one-in-five Australians who say they are [spiritual without being religious](#) tend to be [seeking connection](#) with something that is greater than themselves: a cosmic sense of caring, a powerful but benevolent presence that attends to them, provides guidance, gives hope, shares joys and comforts in sorrow.

Many who don't choose to be affiliated with one of the brands of religion available negotiate

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their own relationships with the “more than” by:

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associating with others in informal networks to seek to build a better world;

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devising forms of the sacred with help from online resources; and

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taking responsibility for their own spiritual life and development.

The ABS has category 7 in its [classification of religious groups](#) “Secular Beliefs and Other Spiritual Beliefs and No Religious Affiliation” to begin to capture the dimension of religion and spirituality not associated with formally organised religions.

That it includes atheists, those who declare multiple religious affiliations, and “other spiritual beliefs” indicates the rich diversity of this category – most of whom by far indicated “no religion”.

Some Category 7 responses reflect elements of popular culture with cosmic, moral and heroic themes such as [Star Wars, Star Trek, and The Ring Trilogy](#) .

Religious identity

The census asks Australians, “What is the person’s religion?” The answer indicates a person’s religious identity, not their beliefs or practices or participation patterns; just identity. Religious identity does indicate an association with a particular culture.

Differences associated with religious identity used to be quite marked and are still detectable.

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Giving your religious identity as “none” means at the least that you do not associate yourself with any particular organised form of religion – no church, mosque, temple, or denomination.

It has also become associated with being younger, more progressive and inclusive and accepting than those who nominate a religious identity.

“Nones” are not atheists, nor necessarily anti-religious. They are just not affiliated with a formally organised religion.

Read other articles in the series [here](#).

Gary D Bouma does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/no-religion-and-jedi-knight-find-their-place-in-australian-identity-81392>