I have taught the sociology of religion at university for more than a decade. One of the students' assignments involves visiting several different religious services. Among other things, this gives them an insight into the diverse ways contemporary Australians worship. I hand out a list that details all of the different kinds of services they can attend: Catholic, Anglican (high and low), Baptist, Pentecostal, Uniting Church, Lutheran, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Baha’i, Hare Krishna, Christian Science, Mormon, and Wiccan, among many others. What a choice! (I was somewhat chastened this year when I realised that about half the participants at a particular Wiccan festival celebrating the Autumn equinox were in fact my students doing their fieldwork.)

I encourage students to visit places that are from different traditions: perhaps a 1000-strong 'mega-church' congregation, where they will see many young faces, and listen to booming rock music choruses; or a small Spiritualist church, comprising perhaps only a dozen older people, where congregants will contact the dead and receive messages from the 'other side'. Students – almost all of whom are aged under 25 – seem to really enjoy the assignment. For many it is an eye-opener, because so few have any direct experience of religious life. Certainly, there are a handful of students who have personal and strong faith: a few Muslims, Buddhists, and evangelical Christians (often overseas students). But for most, religion has little to do with their everyday lives.

The assignment affords these non-religious students an insight into Australia's often-hidden and increasingly diverse spiritual life. Religion and spirituality in Australia is no longer just about Christianity. We have more religious and spiritual choices available to us, many of which demand a high level of commitment. As typified by Judith Lucy’s recent TV show, Judith Lucy’s Spiritual Journey, many people appear to be on a spiritual quest, looking for answers in new places, and seeking new experiences. But at the same time, a greater proportion of the population declares that they have no religion at all and atheism seems to be more popular than ever before.

Perhaps the most important part of this story is the decline of Christianity. We were once
a nation of people who called themselves Christian. Back in the 1950s, almost 9 out of 10 people identified with a Christian denomination, mainly Catholic and Anglican, and almost half the population attended services of worship monthly or more often (Singleton; Kaldor et al.). Now, only 6 of 10 people identify with a Christian denomination and around 1 in 5 attend monthly or more often (Singleton).

This drift began in earnest in the 1960s – when the parents of today’s teens and young adults were themselves youthful – and has continued apace. Since this time, the established Protestant denominations of Australia have experienced a marked decrease in affiliation. The Catholics have not fared as badly, but this is mainly because of immigration from Catholic countries. Across both of these traditions, however, attendance has decreased. Australia (Britain and Canada too) were once more Christian in the past than now.

And it is young people, more than any other age group, who are at the forefront of this drift away from the churches. One important measure of this comes from the Australian Census which is conducted every five years. Each Census asks, ‘What is the person’s religion?’ Australians have 11 categories they can tick, including several Christian denominations, major world religions, other (a write-in category), and no religion. An Australian Bureau of Statistics report published after the 2006 census found that decline is generational in character; younger birth cohorts are less likely than older cohorts to affiliate with a Christian denomination (ABS).

While this is one indicator of the youthful drift from the churches, data on religious affiliation cannot tell us how religious a person might be (this is better measured by considering practice and belief). Nor does it tell us anything about the different ways young people might be spiritual. So what is going on? What kind of spirituality do the post-Christian generation have? Are they spiritual seekers, or indifferent to any kind of spiritual life?

It was the search for these answers that prompted some colleagues and I to conduct the first national study of youth spirituality in Australia. We called it the Spirit of Generation Y. Our aim was to investigate the religious and spiritual lives of Australia’s Generation Y (for a full account of the study see Mason, Singleton and Webber). I should clarify the use of the term ‘generation’. Today’s young adults are commonly referred to as Generation Y; those born between 1981 and 1995. Generation X is typically identified as those born 1966-1980, and the Baby Boomers, born 1946-1965. There really was a ‘Baby Boom’ starting in the late 1940s. The fertility rate climbed rapidly after the war and declined markedly from the mid-1960s. Generations X and Y do not strictly fit the definition of a generation, but are handy terms that refer to distinct age cohorts that appear to differ in other qualities.

We conducted a large, national telephone survey of randomly selected 13-24 year-olds. The findings from the survey are statistically generalisable to the entire population of teens and young adults. We also sampled more lightly a ‘control group’ of Boomers and Generation Xers so Gen Y could be compared to the two generations that proceeded them. To complement our
survey with a more detailed picture, we also conducted more than 100 in-depth interviews with a diverse range of young people: high school students, tertiary students, young workers, the unemployed, and people from both high and low socio-economic backgrounds. There were equal numbers of males and females, and respondents came from a mix of rural and urban areas.

Confirming the Census trends, we found a pronounced drift away from Christian identification, belief and practice. As reported extensively in our book, the evidence was stark: almost half of Australian young people aged between 13 and 24 at the time of the survey (2005) did not belong to or identify with any religion or denomination. Barely half of Gen Y believed in God; another third were uncertain. Attendance at services of worship was low, as were other kinds of religious practice. Only about 1 in 10 are "strong Christians" (i.e. pray weekly or more often, attend services weekly). More youth believed in reincarnation than traditional Christian ideas about the afterlife (e.g. "immortality of the soul"). For many, church was something that happened in their childhood and now they have lost touch.

Of course, some types of churches – individual congregations – are doing well with young people. The largest Christian congregation in Australia is the Hillsong Church. I often describe this church to my students as one of the "modern marvels of Australia". I make this claim based on the sheer size of the place and because of how many young people worship there. Its main "campus" is located in the outer suburbs of Sydney. From the outside it looks more like a sports stadium than a traditional church. In the foyer is a coffee shop and a bookstore. The actual church itself is a huge auditorium seating thousands. Congregants and visitors are shown to their seats by ushers equipped with two-way radios who use these to organise seating. At the front of the church is an enormous stage, room enough for a large rock band and choir. Behind them is a huge video screen. Once the service begins the congregation feels the full force of the sound system: the music really booms out. The band plays contemporary religious pop music rather than traditional hymns. At the front of the stage a rather tame "mosh pit" is formed by some of the more enthusiastic congregants. All of this appeals to young people; it's not stuffy old-time religion. These kinds of churches are the ones that tend to attract the remnant of Christian Gen Ys. But the exception proves the rule, and these churches will not stop the drift.

Rather surprisingly, the alternatives are not that popular either: only a minority of youth are strongly secular – genuine 'atheists'. This is perhaps unexpected. Atheism appears to be enjoying a recent surge in popularity, and atheists have found renewed voice in the public sphere. Well-known Australian atheist and comedian Catherine Deveny is one such example. She wrote an opinion piece recently in Melbourne's Age newspaper:

The number of churchgoers in Australia is about 9% and dwindling, the diversity of spiritual belief is flourishing and atheism is going off like a frog in a sock. In his inauguration speech, President Barack Obama, a man raised by atheists, mentioned non-believers. We exist. Like it or not.
There is little doubt that atheist perspectives have figured prominently in recent public conversations about religious education, abortion, and euthanasia. Atheists are maintaining a profile in other ways – as evidenced by the popularity of Richard Dawkins et al., the 2010 Global Atheist Convention held in Melbourne, or advertisements on the back of buses sponsored by various atheist organisations. But the message doesn’t appear to be cutting through with young people. Rather than being strident atheists, we discovered that most youth are indifferent to religion, but don’t reject it out of hand and most hold a smattering of religious or spiritual beliefs, even if they don’t do much about it.

Contrary to expectations, and this surprised us, Gen Y are not a ‘generation of spiritual seekers’ either. Much has been made about the changing spiritual landscape in late modern societies, especially the emergence or re-invigoration of faiths and spiritual practices that are outside the bounds of traditional, organised religion. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘spiritual marketplace’. None of these new religious or spiritual movements constitutes anything like a broad-based replacement for traditional religion, but it does represent a proliferation of spiritual choices. We found that alternative religions – Witchcraft included – remain for most little more than a curiosity. A reasonable proportion of youth believe in the supernatural but these beliefs are low-cost and do not reflect a strong commitment to either spiritual practices or a strongly defined or clearly articulated alternative spiritual worldview. Few, then, are truly committed to alternative spiritual paths.

Those Gen Ys who are members of other faith traditions – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – tend on the whole to take their religion seriously. Indeed, it is among Gen Y that religions, apart from Christianity, flourish the most. The Census data tells us that Generation X and Y had the largest proportion of people out of any group in the population affiliated with non-Christian religions (ABS, 57). This change is not from conversion among Gen Ys, however, but from immigration.

So the picture we see among Gen Y is small, interesting pockets of religious vitality, but on the whole, they are a generation for whom religious faith does not rate as particularly important. But this is to be expected. Generation Y are the product of both wider social forces and their parents, the Baby Boomers. Using data from our survey, along with reliable data from other sources (such as the World Values Survey), we established in our book that when the Boomers were teens and young adults the drift from the churches began in earnest. As they have aged, the Boomers have also increasingly turned away from faith.

The processes identified here in Australia are not unique. The best research in Canada and Great Britain shows a similar turn away from Christianity, and a decline in the religiousness of young people (Bibby; Crockett and Voas). Even the US, more religious than these other countries, is seeing young people drifting from Christianity (Wuthnow).

What was it about the 1960s that produced this major decline in Christianity? The seeds of Church decline were sowed in the 19th century with the rise of specialised institutions
performing roles once undertaken by the church, the scientific challenge to religious worldviews, growing individualism and the privatization of religion. Despite these challenges, affiliation and attendance remained steady in the immediate post-war era. But the church could only hold firm for so long. There are many complicated historical reasons as to why the process accelerated.

One of these is a society-wide trend in which people are less involved with large-scale community organisations and community life, compared to the 1950s and 1960s (Evans and Kelley: 35). It is an indisputable fact that in the post-war years churches, with their associated tennis, cricket and football clubs and regular dances, played a role in the community that went beyond simply meeting people's religious needs. The churches are not alone: membership in other voluntary organisations has dwindled in recent years. Well-known British historian of religion, Hugh McLeod, also notes that after Vatican II, the Catholic and Protestant churches became more alike (2). Differences between these denominations that had shaped sectarian life and made being a Catholic or C of E relevant ceased to be as important.

My co-investigator in the Spirit of Gen Y research project, Michael Mason, has offered further insight into other influences causing a drift from the churches. These include the sheer size and influence of the Baby Boomer cohort. So important did they become to marketers and opinion-makers that the generation's attributes took on the status of norms for the whole culture. The authority of personal experience superseded that of parents, the state, the church.

The student riots of the 1960s, and the opposition to the Vietnam war, also drove a wedge between young people and their elders, who were seen to represent archaic authority structures (61). In sum, challenges to the Church's traditional centrality abounded.

I haven't mentioned those in the middle of the Boomers and Gen Y – the Generation Xers – of which I count myself. Our parents were born mostly before the Baby Boom (and thus are members of the 'Lucky Generation', circa 1935-1945) and they can readily remember a life in the 1940s and '50s when Christianity was more a part of everyday life. My in-laws can recount a time when it really meant something to be a Catholic or a Protestant, and how that difference mediated everyday interactions. My own folks, like so many of their peers, met at a church youth group. I think Gen Xers are the last generation to be sent off en masse to Sunday school or the Church of England Boys' society. I can still remember my suburban Anglican church in the mid 1970s. The Sunday school seemed to be teeming with kids. But the services were boring and formal and we couldn't wait to get home. And so Gen X couldn't resist the broader trend of secularisation either, and their parents didn't insist on church after a while. Too many other options and choices. Almost all of my friends who went to church youth group (and there were quite a few) lost their faith by their mid twenties. Only a few remain.
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