**Sydney is losing its religion,says the census**

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Caitlin Fitzsimmons

The number of residents ticking 'no **religion**' rose in every local government area, writes Caitlin Fitzsimmons.

In the lead-up to the 2021 **census**, social media was flooded with messages exhorting people to select "no **religion**" in the religious affiliation question.

Variations of the advertisement included: "If you don't practise what they preach, mark No **Religion**" and "Lapsed Catholic? Mark No **Religion**".

More than $50,000 was spent on the campaign, with the Rationalist Society, Humanists Australia, the Atheist Foundation of Australia, National Secular Lobby and others chipping in.

Australians embraced the message, with 38.4 per cent selecting "no **religion**". When grouped together with those who selected secular beliefs and other spiritual beliefs such as atheism, agnosticism, humanism, rationalism and personal spiritual beliefs, that figure was a tad higher, at 38.9 per cent of the population.

Sydney is considerably more religious than the rest of the nation and the rest of the state, thanks to its culturally diverse population. Across Greater Sydney, 30.7 per cent of the population was in the broad "no **religion**" camp, while for the rest of NSW it was 37.8 per cent.

But how should we interpret the results, given the well publicised campaign? And if Australians really are losing their **religion**, what does this mean? Demographer Liz Allen at the Australian National University says the campaign simply publicised the fact that if you do not follow a **religion**, it was accurate to answer "no **religion**".

"I do not believe that there has been any distortion in the data whatsoever," Allen says. "In fact, I'm surprised the proportion of people saying 'no **religion**' didn't increase more [than it did]."

Allen says secularism is on the rise internationally, at least in wealthy countries similar to Australia, but this does not mean an embrace of hedonism. She points to increased community engagement and volunteering, and concern over climate change as ways in which secular society remains rooted in values about what it means to live a good life.

Michael Dove, spokesperson for the No **Religion** campaign, says he and his fellow secularists are "pleased with the progress" but believe the "no **religion**" category is still understated because, they argue, the wording of the question - "what is the person's **religion**?" - presumes that people have a **religion**.

The percentage of Sydneysiders who nominated a form of Christianity, such as Anglican or Catholic, was 48.8 per cent, down from 51.7 per cent in 2016, while 17 per cent followed other **religions**, particularly Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.

Dr Michael Jensen, the Anglican rector of St Mark's Darling Point, believes the rise of "no **religion**" is mostly an Anglo-Celtic phenomenon.

"We don't identify with the old tribal groupings any more," Jensen says. "I think for Anglo-Celtic Australians, the Baby Boomers identified but didn't attend, Gen X really just forgot about it, and now the Millennials have said, 'Well, it doesn't mean anything to me at all."'

His hunch seems to be backed by the **census** figures. Nationally, anyone aged under 45 is more likely than the national average to choose "no **religion**", and this is highest for those aged 25 to 34, at 48.4 per cent. Similarly, 30.4 per cent of residents born overseas selected "no **religion**", compared with 45.2 per cent of those born in Australia.

But Jensen also argues that people answering "no **religion**" may not be a statement of outright atheism so much as a rejection of organised **religion**.

He backs up this opinion with the results of the National Church Life Survey, a five-yearly research project backed by Uniting Church, Anglicare Sydney and BaptistCare. This found in 2019 that 61 per cent of Australians believe in God or a higher power.

This was true for writer Pamela Hart, 62, who lives in the inner west - one of the most secular parts of Sydney. Hart says she selected "no **religion**" for the first time in 2021, having previously always selected Catholic in line with her upbringing.

"The main reason was the increasing politicisation of **religion**, especially by the Morrison government, and their apparent belief that most Australians approved of policy based on conservative Christianity, for example, chaplains in schools," Hart says.

"I wanted to send a message that Australia did not want political decisions made on the basis of Christian doctrine, but on evidence-based policy."

She says the US Supreme Court overturning the constitutional right to abortion is a dramatic example of what happens to healthcare policy when it is overshadowed by **religion**.

Hart wants Australia to maintain separation of church and state, and says religious institutions that offer medical services, aged care, schooling or any other type of care should adhere to the same standards as other institutions.

Hart maintains a personal belief in God, but is happy with her choice to select "no **religion**" to signify her rejection of organised **religion**.

Allen says people selecting "no **religion**" purely as a political statement would be a minority, and there would be more skewing the data the other way by answering based on upbringing rather than current beliefs.

She says the religious affiliation question has never measured religiosity - how strongly someone feels about their **religion** - and the same is true for "no **religion**".

Or as Jensen puts it: "It doesn't tell you how many are decided intellectual atheists. Anecdotally, I would say many people are agnostic, or they sense there's something higher."

(Of course, people who really want to make their disbelief crystal-clear could write "atheist" in the other box, but few people did, partly because the No **Religion** campaign encouraged the catch-all "no **religion**" category.)

A cut of the 2021 **census** figures by local government area, prepared for The Sun-Herald, shows the response of "no **religion**" rose in every local government area of Sydney, from 2011 to 2016 and again to 2021. The least religious parts of Sydney are the inner city and inner west, closely followed by a swath of established areas clustered around the harbour and beaches.

A narrow majority of residents in the City of Sydney and Inner West Council areas selected "no **religion**" for the first time. The LGAs of the Blue Mountains, North Sydney, Northern Beaches, Willoughby, Waverley, Ku-ring-gai, Lane Cove, Mosman and the Central Coast also clocked "no **religion**" responses higher than the national average.

Meanwhile, south-west and pockets of western Sydney are the most religious, closely mirroring the areas with the lowest "yes" vote in the 2017 same-sex marriage survey. Liverpool is the most religious LGA, with only 14 per cent selecting "no **religion**", followed by Fairfield, Cumberland, Canterbury-Bankstown, Blacktown and Campbelltown.

In these suburbs, Christianity is in the mix along with other **religions**. Nearly one in four people in both Canterbury-Bankstown and Cumberland are Muslim; nearly one in five in Strathfield are Hindu; and nearly one in five in Fairfield are Buddhist.

Christianity in this part of the world is also characterised by multiculturalism, such as South Sudanese Anglicans, Fijian and Tongan Protestants, and Vietnamese and Lebanese Catholics.

Semi-rural Wollondilly, south-west of Campbelltown, was the most Christian LGA with 60 per cent of the population selecting a Christian denomination on the **census** form, followed by nearby Camden.

The Sutherland Shire and Hunters Hill were the next most Christian LGAs. The Hills District, famous for Hillsong Church and often referred to as Sydney's bible belt, is only the eighth-most Christian LGA, at 51 per cent Christian, 18 per cent other **religions**, and 27 per cent "no **religion**".

Pentecostalism - an umbrella grouping of evangelical churches including Hillsong and former prime minister Scott Morrison's Horizon church - proportionally declined from 1.1 per cent of the Greater Sydney population in 2016, to just 0.9 per cent, as it shed nearly 5000 followers across the city over the five years.

Dove says **religion** still holds a privileged place in society - from religious chaplains in schools, hospitals and prisons to prayers in parliament and faith-based programs on the ABC - and the "no **religion**" results show this should change.

Associate Professor David Smith at the University of Sydney says the declining Christian identification is already reflected in politics.

"Even as devout Christians have recently risen to become prime ministers, Australia's laws around marriage, abortion and euthanasia have moved away from the positions of the country's largest churches," Smith says.

"Christian activists are increasingly focused on their rights as a minority, rather than asserting moral leadership over the country."

Allen does not agree with the No **Religion** campaign that the wording of the religious affiliation question is biased.

But if the most obvious use of the data is to plan culturally appropriate services for the public, she says the question itself might become redundant given current trends.

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