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NATIONAL STUDY OF THE “SPIRITUALITY” OF GENERATION Y COMPLETED

The Spirit of Generation Y project (2003-2006), is a national study of spirituality among Australian young people in their teens and twenties, conducted by researchers from Australian Catholic University, Monash University and the Christian Research Association. The research consisted of a survey of a nationally representative sample of Generation Y (born 1976-1990), with comparison groups from ‘Generation X’ (born 1961-75) and the ‘Baby-Boomer’ generation (born 1946-60), supplemented by extended, face-to-face interviews.

The project explored Generation Y’s range of worldviews and values, their sense of meaning and purpose in life, the ways in which they find peace and happiness, their involvement in traditional religions and alternative spiritualities, how they relate to the society around them, and the influences which shape their outlook and lifestyle.

Key Findings

- **Belief** 48% of Generation Y (Gen Y) believe in a God, 20% do not, and 32% are unsure. Two-thirds of those who do not believe in God, or are uncertain, do believe in a ‘higher being or life-force’.
- **Spirituality** There are three main strands in the ‘spirituality’ of Generation Y:
 - Christian: (44% of Gen Y) Eclectic: (17%) Humanist: (31%)
 - **Christian** Only 19% of Gen Y are actively involved in a church to the extent of attending religious services once a month or more; (conservative Protestant denominations—16% of Gen Y—have by far the highest rates of attendance); but many more believe in God and Jesus, and pray regularly. Religion is seen as a private matter, and there is a strong tide of movement among Gen Y Christians away from previous involvement or identification with a church, and even from religious belief.
 - **Eclectic** 17 % of Gen Y have an eclectic spirituality, believing in two or more New Age, esoteric or Eastern beliefs (including belief in reincarnation, psychics and fortune tellers, ghosts, astrology) and perhaps engaging in one or more alternative spiritual practices (yoga, Tarot, tai-chi). Some of these people attend religious services but most do not. Such beliefs and practices are more common among young women than young men.
 - **Humanist** 31 % of Gen Y can be classified as Humanists, rejecting the idea of God, although a few believe in a ‘higher being’. Of these secular-minded young people, almost half believe that there is very little truth in religion, and less than a quarter believe in life after death. They also largely reject alternative spiritualities.
- **Social concern** Gen Y are not notably more self centred and lacking in altruism than older generations. For example, 27% are involved in some kind of volunteer work per month. Those who are actively involved in service to the community and have positive civic values are far more likely to come from the ranks of those who have spiritual and religious beliefs and actively practise them.
- **Influences** The significant social forces shaping contemporary religion and spirituality – secularisation, the relativism of postmodernity, consumer capitalism, individualism – influence more than Generation Y alone, although young people, by virtue of their age and life stage, are more subject to their effects.

Conclusions:

Generation Y are what their parents and Australian culture have made them. They have taken strongly to two 'late modern' principles: that an individual's views and preferences, provided they harm no-one else, should not be questioned or constrained, and that spiritual/religious beliefs and practices are purely personal lifestyle choices—in no way necessary. Despite moving away in large numbers from traditional religious sources of meaning, they seem to have a strong sense of purpose in their lives. There is no evidence from this project of a widespread plague of meaninglessness or social alienation among Generation Y, nor of a critical lack of social support.

Although broader support structures such as church and local community have grown weaker over the last century, families appear to have compensated by increasing the intimacy of family life, and young people also rely more heavily on friendship networks. By these means, Generation Y appear to be successful, for now, in holding at bay the threats to personal security inherent in the much more isolated status of the individual within society.

Much has been written and theorised about the changing spiritual landscape in late modern societies: the rise of alternative spiritualities, the increasing popularity of the New Age, the attraction of Eastern religions, the development of eclectic 'mix and match' spiritualities and the emergence of nature religions and Neo-Paganism. This study did not find that Gen Y are a generation of spiritual seekers; less than one-fifth of Gen Y have a 'mix and match' spirituality, while few are seriously exploring alternatives like Buddhism or Wicca.

Many young people in Australia are what we have called Humanists—following an avowedly secular path in life, rejecting belief in God and declaring that there is little truth in any religion, affirming instead human experience, human reason and scientific explanations. Some are angry at or disenchanted with organised religion, but most simply do not care or are not interested. This is not unique to Generation Y; their parents are the 'Baby Boomer' generation, 23 percent of whom are Humanists, while a further 24 percent are nominal Christians – people who might maintain a residual belief in God and identify with a denomination, but little more than that. Non-religious young people simply reflect the broader secular context and the spirituality of their own parents.

Summary of the project's final report (A book is in preparation)

A summary report of the project's findings is available on the website:

<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/spir/sppub/sppub.htm>

or to navigate more easily to the site, just put the word **genyrep** into Google

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