

# Managing the Diversity of Implicit Religions in Australian Society

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## **Traditional Functions of Religion in Modern Western Societies**

Religious organisations manage religious diversity in a variety of ways. Some classify other religions as true or false, or as higher or lower on a scale of religious development. Sometimes they see other religious groups as equals deriving from different backgrounds, but working for similar ends.

At the popular and individual level, the issues of managing religious diversity are a little different because there are many functional alternatives to religion in contemporary Western societies. At a simple, behavioural level, one may go shopping, or skiing, or book in for a massage instead of attending a Sunday church service. So also one might pick up books on motivation and management, psychology or psychotherapy, astrology or aromatherapy to find some guidance for the week in place of the sermon.

Sociologists have long been conscious that functions fulfilled by religious traditions may also be fulfilled by other aspects of life and society. While religion may provide meaning, so may political systems and family life. Religions deal with the existential issues of death, but scientific thinking may also be extended to offer its own perspectives.

Thomas Luckmann's book *Invisible Religion* was a seminal statement on alternatives to 'official' religions functioning in modern Western societies. Luckmann argued that religion should be defined in terms of its primary function of articulating a transcendent world view through which individual existence may derive its meaning (Luckmann 1967:52), which he described as a 'sacred cosmos'. Over time, as societies have become more complex, they have developed distinct organisations supporting particular views of the sacred cosmos (Luckmann 1967:62). These organisations (such as Christian churches or denominations) may 'standardise' the sacred cosmos through the definitions of doctrine, may develop 'full-time' religious roles such as those of priest or minister, and may develop special sanctions to encourage conformity such as definitions of membership and rituals for inclusion (Luckmann 1967:66).

However, when religion is localised in special social institutions, there is a possibility that the 'official' sacred cosmos may be separated from what an individual may develop as her or his own version of the sacred cosmos. This possibility is heightened by the rise of competing sacred universes in societies where religious

organisations with different traditions exist side by side (Luckmann 1967:80). In modern industrial societies, Luckmann argued,

the 'autonomous' consumer selects ... certain religious themes from the available assortment and builds them into a somewhat precarious private system of 'ultimate' significance. Individual religiosity is thus no longer a replica or approximation of an 'official' model'. ... Syndicated advice columns, 'inspiration' literature ranging from tracts on positive thinking to *Playboy* magazine, *Reader's Digest* versions of popular psychology, the lyrics of popular hits, and so forth, articulate what are, in effect, elements of models of 'ultimate' significance. The models are, of course, non-obligatory and must compete on what is, basically, an open market. (Luckmann 1967:102, 104).

Where individual religiosity is not related to primary public organisations, Luckmann said, it is likely to depend on support from other organisations within the private sphere, particularly family, but also friends, neighbours, or members of cliques formed at work or around hobbies (Luckmann 1967:106).

Luckmann suggested that themes of the 'sacred cosmos' that are emerging in modern societies include 'self-realisation' and 'self-expression' which may be manifested in a great variety of ways such as through status achievement or sexuality. Another important theme is 'familism' in which family is seen as having pre-eminence in people's accounts of what is most important to them. As people put their models of 'ultimate significance' together in a variety of ways, they may also include themes from traditional religious sources.

Other sociologists have sought to identify such themes empirically. For example, Reginald Bibby (1983) looked for the invisible threads of meaning that might run in the lives of Canadians. Robert Bellah et al. (1986) undertook a rather different approach through case study work, published in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. All of these studies have noted that people approach life in many different ways, but that it is often difficult to identify clear and sustained approaches to life. The variety of approaches to meaning are evident, but the threads of meaning are not. Nevertheless, it is apparent that, at the popular level, religion exists in a market place of personal and spiritual resources.

While religion may be defined in terms of the function of formulating a sacred cosmos through which the ultimate nature of reality may be defined and ultimate values identified, this is a difficult area to examine empirically. Most people do not reach the point of bringing their conceptions of reality and their values together into one system which they can clearly articulate. Rather, as Luckmann thought, "the prevalent individual systems of 'ultimate' significance will consist of a loose and rather unstable hierarchy of 'opinions' legitimating the affectively determined priorities of 'private' life" (Luckmann 1967:105).

Indeed, people may not conceive of themselves as having 'systems of ultimate significance' at all. We suspect, however, that people are more aware of some of the more concrete elements which may contribute to such systems. For this reason, as

part of a much wider examination of how Australians put their lives together, it was decided to ask people what were the most important locations or activities for finding a sense of peace and well-being.

The search sense of peace and well-being was not seen as necessarily the primary function of religion, but previous surveys had indicated that it was one in which traditional religious resources were considered important. In the National Social Science Survey of Australian adults conducted by the Australian National University in 1994, 30 per cent of the sample indicated that they 'often' or 'always' found a sense of peace and well-being through prayer, and another 28 per cent said they did so through 'church services'. At the same time, however, 71 per cent said they did so when by the sea, and 64 per cent when with family (Hughes 1997:4). However, this begs the question how important the various options are for finding peace and well-being, as distinct from how often they find peace and well-being in particular locations or activities.

### **Australian Community Survey**

How people seek a sense of peace and well-being was taken up in the Australian Community Survey, conducted by Edith Cowan University and NCLS Research in 1997 and 1998. The survey asked a wide range of questions about community, involvement in community, and questions about religion and values. Nearly 50 per cent of the survey questionnaires, posted to Australians randomly chosen from electoral rolls, were completed and returned. The questions on which this paper are based were asked in one version of the questionnaire for which the returned sample size was 1005 persons of whom 59 per cent were female and 41 per cent were male.

Among the questions in this survey were twenty items which invited respondents to indicate for each one *how important* it was in providing a sense of peace and well-being. The list presented to people was based on a set of items developed for the National Social Science Survey in 1996. However, in that earlier questionnaire, the question for each item had been asked a little differently: *how often* did people find a sense of peace and well-being in each of the listed occasions? The list was not meant to be exhaustive of all the ways in which people find a sense of peace and well-being, but was designed to explore something of the diversity of ways and how that diversity stood along side traditional religious ways.

Another caveat to this paper is that peace and well-being have many meanings. Peace may have to do with harmony, or with the absence of conflict. It can mean attaining a certain state of mind, or avoiding fights in the household. It can refer to the global harmony of all creation. Peace, in terms of having a quiet life, may not be very important to some people, but very important to others. Well-being also has a wide variety of meanings, from economic to social, psychological to spiritual. Financial well-being, for example, might be very important to one person and not to another. The words 'peace' and 'well-being' were not defined in the survey question, other than being placed in apposition to each other. The question was personal:

what is important to *you* and has to do with the subjective sense of peace and well-being. In that sense, the question marked out an arena rather than assuming that all people would desire a particular goal. The question allowed people to respond in terms of what they wanted in life in the arena of peace and well-being.

### Seeking a Sense of Peace and Well-being

The following tables summarises the results in order of the percentage of people indicating the item as 'very important'.

Table 1.

*The Importance of Various Ways of Seeking a Sense of Peace and Well-Being among Australian Adults*

	Importance			
	Very Important	Some	Little	Not
Spending time with your family	68.7	20.1	5.8	3.1
Spending time with friends	32.5	43.1	14.3	7.3
Home-making	32.5	33.8	21.9	5.7
Listening to music	29.8	31.8	22.1	9.6
In a garden	26.8	30.1	22.5	11.7
Spending time by the sea	26.3	26.5	22.3	14.6
Relaxing - doing nothing at all	20.1	27.4	26.3	16.7
Spending time in the bush	19.9	23.3	21.9	21.2
Working	16.7	32.4	22.8	18.5
Praying	16.0	11.5	17.5	40.2
Travelling around Australia	13.3	23.2	27.8	20.7
Reading novels	13.0	23.8	25.4	20.9
Travelling overseas	12.4	19.4	22.6	29.5
Playing an instrument or singing	11.9	11.3	18.2	42.1
At church services	10.5	9.5	12.8	53.2
Meditating	8.1	13.6	19.0	41.7
Dining out	7.8	19.2	28.9	23.6
Watching TV	7.8	16.3	34.4	19.7
Watching sport	7.4	12.9	22.0	37.0
Watching films	5.8	16.9	33.5	22.4

Spending time with family was rated very high. 68.7 per cent said it was 'very important' to them and another 20.1 per cent 'important'. Spending time with friends was also very close to the top of the list, although only one third of the sample said it was 'very important'.

'Home-making' was also rated very high with nearly one third saying it was 'very important' and another third rating it as 'important'. 'Listening to music' was scored in a very similar way to 'home-making'. Music is probably the most important

form of art in Australia in terms of its popular appeal, though different kinds of music appeal to different groups in the population. One might surmise that Australian 'spirituality' revolves primarily around their families, their homes and their friends - listening to music. It is here a sense of peace and well-being is created and affirmed.

The next group of items all have to do with relating to nature. For many, being in a garden, either at home, or in public gardens or gardens of other people contributes to a sense of peace and well-being. The others are 'by the sea' and 'in the bush'. Nature is an important contributor to the sense of peace and well-being among Australians. Sometimes this occurs through active involvement in gardening, surfing, or bush-walking. At other times, peace is found through simple observation: the beauty of the flower, the roar of the waves, the colour and smells of the bush. It is expressed in the time many Australians spend in gardens, by the sea or in the bush. These are times of spiritual refreshment, even if Australians do not speak about them in explicitly religious terms.

Explicitly religious forms of seeking peace and well-being come further down the list: prayer, church services and meditation are very important to some Australians, but have no importance to others. Over half the population (53.2%) said that 'church services' were not important to them at all in seeking a sense of peace and well-being, while others said they were important - although to varying degrees. One third of the population said prayer was 'very important' or 'important', another third said it was of 'some' or 'little importance', and one third said it was 'not important at all', proportions very similar to how often Australians pray (Bentley and Hughes 1998:116).

Travel was generally rated as more important than church services in finding peace and well-being. 36.5 per cent of Australians said travel within Australia was 'important' or 'very important' and 31.8 per cent said travel overseas was 'important' or 'very important'.

Australians spend a great deal of time watching TV, sport and films. The most popular cultural venue in Australia is the cinema - considerably more popular than musical concerts, art galleries, dance, or botanical gardens. A survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1995 found that 62 per cent of Australians had been to a cinema in the previous 12 months, compared with 38 per cent to a botanic garden, 38 per cent to a library, and 36 per cent to a popular or classical music concert (ABS 1997:8). Yet, Australians rated 'watching films' as the least important out of the twenty items in the list for finding a sense of peace and well-being.

Similarly, Australians spend a great deal of time watching TV. In the National Community Survey, 55 per cent said they watched more than 2 hours of TV a day. Yet only 7.8 per cent said watching TV was very important to a sense of peace and well-being. It would appear that people are distinguishing between what is pure pastime, and what is seriously important to them in the search for a sense of peace and well-being. TV, sport and films, and, for that matter, dining out, are enjoyable pastimes, but are not important for a sense of peace and well-being.

Some Australian commentators have seen sport as quasi-religious. The big sporting match has been compared to the church service: an event whose emotion can lift or drag down, and which will make a difference for the following week. They have seen it in terms of that which gives meaning to people. It does indeed act in that fashion for some, but for most it is purely entertainment, of passing interest. Family, friends, and home are far more important.

### **Patterns of Seeking Peace and Well-Being**

Principal component analysis was used to look for component patterns in the ways in which peace and well-being are found in the Australian population. Six components accounted for 63 per cent of the variance. Varimax rotation was used to maximise the differences between the components. Based on the components identified, six scales were formed to gauge the strength of each of these patterns, and the correlations with demographic and attitudinal items. The reliability of the scale is indicated by Cronbach's alpha, which may vary from 0 to 1. An alpha of .7 or above is considered a reliable scale (de Vaus 1995:256).

1. Nature. =.7293.

Variables included were finding peace and well-being in the bush, sea, and garden.

2. Devotions. =.8216.

Variables included were finding peace and well-being in church services, prayer, meditation.

3. Entertainment. =.6806.

Variables included were finding peace and well-being through watching films, reading novels, dining out.

4. Home. =.6651.

Variables included were finding peace and well-being through home-making, family, work, friends. Note that 'home-making' and 'family' were the strongest factors in this scale. While when 'friends' and 'work' were added to the scale, they were comparatively weak items. Thus, it is appropriate to label the scale as 'Home' even though it includes 'Friends' and 'Work'.

5. Travel. =.7209.

Variables included were finding peace and well-being through travel in Australia, and travelling overseas.

6. Watching. =.7018.

Variables included were finding peace and well-being through watching sport, watching TV, watching films.

How important are each of these to Australians? The scales were also normalised so that each scale was scored between 0 and 12. The means scores for all Australians were as follows:

Home:	8.54
Nature:	7.15
Travel:	5.39
Entertainment:	5.15
Watching:	4.66
Devotions:	3.85

The majority of respondents scored more highly in one scale than in others. Each respondent was placed in the group in which she or he scored highest. The result was

40.9 per cent scored highest in the 'Home' scale  
23.5 per cent Nature  
16.4 per cent Travel  
9.8 per cent Devotions  
5.9 per cent Watching, and  
3.6 per cent Entertainment.

There were few positive correlations between the scales. 'Watching' and 'Entertainment' correlated positively at .42, reflecting that one of the items was found in both scales. The only other positive correlation was between 'Entertainment' and 'Travel', a correlation of .07.

Of the sample, one quarter scored high in more than one scale. The most common combinations were:

11 per cent scored high in both Home and Nature  
4 per cent Home and Devotions  
3 per cent Nature and Travel  
2 per cent Home and Travel  
1 per cent Nature and Devotions.

The least common combinations were  
Devotions and Entertainment  
Devotions and Watching  
Devotions and Travel.

### **The People Scoring High in Each Scale**

Of those who scored Home, with friends, family, work and home-making as of primary importance in their search for peace and well-being, 68.5 per cent were married. Home was less important for those never married, divorced or widowed. It

was particularly important for people with children, declining in significance among those with older children. Of those with:

pre-school children,	55.6 per cent scored higher in Home than in any other scale;
primary school children,	53.5 per cent;
secondary school children,	45.9 per cent; and
post-school children	42.3 per cent.

For 43 per cent of women, home was the primary source of peace and well-being, compared with 38 per cent of men. It was primary for almost one half (49%) of those people who indicated that their major employment of time was in home duties. It tended to be more important among those living in rural areas than in urban areas. Among those in urban areas, it was most important in higher socio-economic areas and among frequent church attenders.

Nature - being out by the sea, in the bush, or in the garden - tended to be more important among rural people, particularly those living in rural centres of less than 2000 people. It was least important to those living in the lowest two quartiles of urban areas in terms of the Australian Bureau of Statistics socio-economic indicators. It was more important to those Australians with higher educational qualifications, and was less important to many young Australians compared with older people.

Travel in Australia or overseas was more important to urban people rather than rural people but was important among all socio-economic groups. However, it was particularly important to educated young people. For 29 per cent of all tertiary students travel was primary in their search for a sense of peace and well-being. It was of greater importance among those who had never been married or who were in de facto relationships. It tended to be a little more important to men than women: identified as primary among 17 per cent of men compared with 15 per cent of women. It was also important to many immigrants, perhaps because they had already experienced travel and had a taste for it, or perhaps because they had roots in other cultures and other places.

Entertainment - going to see films, dining out, and reading novels - was important to the more educated, single people. Some people who were separated were particularly attracted to this way of seeking peace and well-being, with 7 per cent identifying this way as primary, compared with 3 per cent of married people. It was also largely an urban pattern, particularly in the upper-middle class areas, and with little importance for rural people. It was more important for women than men: 68 per cent of the people for whom this way of seeking peace and well-being was primary were women, and 32 per cent were men.

Watching films, TV and sport was important to those with lower levels of formal education, particularly to males. 69 per cent of those for whom this pattern was primary were men, compared with 31 per cent women. 78 per cent had no qualifications higher than the completion of secondary school, compared with 58



per cent for the sample as a whole. These people were found in all types of communities although more in the lower socio-economic urban areas.

People scoring high on the Devotions scale tended to be older people rather than young people, often married people with families or people who had been widowed. For 17 per cent of widowed people, this was the primary way of searching for peace and well-being, compared with 8 per cent of those who had never been married, and none of those in de facto relationships. It was more attractive to women than to men with 63 per cent of those for whom this was primary being women, and 37 per cent being men.

Discriminant analysis showed that age was one of the major discriminators in the choice of the primary pattern of finding peace and well-being. As is apparent in the discussion above, along with age, life-stage is important. Young people who have not settled into family life tend to be drawn to the Entertainment or Travel or Watching patterns. Well-educated single women are more likely to find peace and well-being through Entertainment: dining out, reading novels and going to films. Many well-educated men look to Travel. The less educated men prefer the pattern of Watching TV, sport and films.

When people have children, the patterns change and the opportunities to go out or to travel may not be as frequent. Family life, home-making and work tend to become dominant interests and sources of peace and well-being. However, those who are separated or divorced may well return to the Entertainment patterns of eating out, frequent visits to the cinema and reading, or to watching sport and television.

Devotions - prayer, meditation and church services - are most important among older people, although many people with families and some other people of all ages affirm it. Some older people, particularly those who are widowed and who perhaps feel insecure going out at night, turn to the television for a great deal of their sense of peace and well-being.

One scale did not relate clearly to life-cycle stage: Nature. People of all ages may find a sense of peace and well-being in nature although it was a little more important to older than younger people. It appeared, however, to be related partly to context. Those who lived close to nature in rural areas scored higher.

## **Correlates of the Scales**

Correlations between scores on the peace and well-being scales and a range of other beliefs, attitudes and behaviour tell us a little more about how each of these categories of people think about life.

Table 2.  
*Correlations between Scores on the Scales and Various Items of Belief and Practice*

	Home	Nature	Entertain- ment	Travel	Watching	Devotions
Belief in divinity of Christ	-.015	-.162**	-.182**	-.247**	.074*	.502**
Belief in life after death	-.036	-.141**	-.138**	-.220**	-.181**	.474**
There are many, more important things in my life than my spiritual beliefs	.045	.102**	.195**	.200**	.267**	-.533**
I make sense of life largely in terms of the here and now	.046	.062	.084**	.089**	.152**	-.293**
We only live once, so let's make the most of it	-.026	.065*	.082*	.150**	.159**	-.320**
Science explains everything we need to know	.029	.026	.143**	.131**	.229**	-.326**
What is good and evil depends on the circumstances at the time	-.007	.068*	.052	.117**	.077*	-.247**
Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own way	.019	.143**	.024	.080*	-.095*	-.161**
I feel society is going from bad to worse	.069*	-.050	-.104**	-.050	.037	.046
I feel the future holds good things for me	-.013	.034	.015	.051	-.121**	-.022
It is more important to act on your individual rights than to look to the needs of others	.005-	.081*	.090**	.041	.274**	-.167**
Have sought direction from horoscope, tarot, fortune teller or similar method (never to often)	-.069	.008	.086**	.052	-.074*	-.059
Have practised Eastern meditation (never to often)	-.102**	.107**	.017	-.029	-.163**	.034
Have explored or used psychic healing or crystals	-.058	.091**	.056	-.041	-.065*	-.025
Have had mystical or supernatural experiences	-.084**	.016	-.038	-.096**	-.215**	.172**
Generally speaking, you can't be too careful in dealing with most Australians	-.044	-.038	-.058	-.036	.075*	.040
Satisfaction with life	.123**	.028	.022	.081	-.010	.019

Correlations marked \*\*significant at the .01 level; \*significant at the .05 level.

**Home:** There were few statistically significant correlations between scoring high

on the Home scale and scores on other beliefs and attitudes. In other words, the group affirming Home as a source of peace and well-being was broad and not very specific in its beliefs and attitudes. While some also affirmed spiritual resources, only 21 per cent affirmed that they had had a mystical or supernatural experience, compared with 31 per cent of those who scored highest in the Nature and Entertainment scales, and 42 per cent who scored highest in the Devotions scale. 9 per cent reported that they had engaged in Eastern meditation compared with 18 per cent of the those who scored highest in the Nature scale.

Those who scored high on this scale affirmed more strongly than any other group that they were satisfied with the neighbourhoods where they lived and with life in general.

**Nature:** High scores on the Nature scale correlated negatively with most aspects of traditional religion such as belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible, the divinity of Christ, the historicity of the resurrection and life after death. Many people scoring high on the Nature scale reported that they found it hard to believe in God when there was so much suffering in the world.

There was an openness to other forms of devotion among some of them. Many believed in some sort of life-force, even if they did not believe in a personal God. They tended to affirm that different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own ways. People scoring high on the nature scale were more likely than any other group to have tried Eastern forms of meditation. They affirmed that they tried hard to carry their spiritual beliefs into their other dealings in life.

Although the correlation was not strong or significant, a greater percentage than in any other group were open-hearted towards others. Around 60 per cent of those scoring highest in the Nature scale, compared with 54 per cent overall, rejected the idea that 'one can't be too careful in dealing with others' either in the local area or among Australians in general.

**Entertainment:** Approximately two-thirds of those scoring high on the Entertainment scale were neutral, unsure or rejected traditional religious beliefs such as the divinity of Christ and life after death. A smaller percentage than in any other category (9%) said the Bible was literally true.

They tended to affirm that 'science explains everything we need to know' and affirmed the statement that there are many more important things in life than spiritual beliefs. On the other hand, they were more likely than any other group to seek direction from horoscopes, tarot cards, fortune tellers, or other methods with 9.1 per cent claiming that they often do so, compared with 5.7 per cent of the total sample.

In general, this group tended to make sense of life largely in terms of the here and now. They affirmed the idea that we only live once, so we should make the most of it. More than any other group, they rejected the idea that society is going from bad to worse.

**Travel:** In many ways, the pattern of beliefs of those who affirm travel as the

means to peace and well-being was similar to the Entertainment group, although they tended to be a little more confident in some of their opinions about some matters such as regarding life after death. Perhaps their confidence reflected their higher levels of formal education. They rejected traditional spirituality more strongly than any other group. 13 per cent denied the existence of God compared with 8 per cent of the total sample, and another 18 per cent said that we cannot know whether there is a God. Science can explain all we need to know, and there is little sense of spirituality beyond the realm of science, many said.

Even more strongly than the Entertainment group, they affirmed that we only live once and that we should therefore make the best of it. They indicated that they made sense of life largely in terms of the here and now.

This group was distinctive from all other groups in its affirmation of moral relativity, saying there can never be clear guidelines about good and evil. What is good and evil, they said, depends on the circumstances at the time. They tended to affirm epistemological relativity too: that all religions and philosophies may be equally right in their own way.

**Watching:** Among those who found their sense of peace and well-being primarily through watching TV, films and sport, many also rejected traditional religious beliefs, God, the Bible and life after death. They also appeared to reject the idea of a life-force and any notion of spirituality. They agreed strongly that there are much more important things in life than spiritual beliefs and affirmed more strongly than any other group that science explains everything there is to know.

They were less likely than any other group to have tried Eastern meditation and they were not likely to have had a mystical or supernatural experience. They were unlikely to have explored or used psychic healing or crystals, or to have sought direction from horoscopes or fortune tellers.

To a greater degree than any other group, they were self-centred. They affirmed strongly the idea that one must act on one's individual rights, rather than look to the needs of others. 38 per cent of those scoring highest in this scale affirmed 'you can't be too careful in dealing with most Australians' compared with 22 per cent of the total sample.

There was a tendency in this group to say that there were no clear guidelines about right and wrong. On the other hand, they rejected the epistemological relativist's position that all religions and philosophies may be equally right in their own way.

The members of this group were not content with life. They were not at all sure that the future held good things for them. Nor were they confident their lives had any purpose. More than any other group, they had time on their hands. They were not busy.

**Devotions:** Those who scored high on the Devotions scale generally affirmed traditional religious statements about the existence of a personal God, the divinity of Christ, the historicity of the resurrection and the existence of life after death. Over two-thirds of them said that the Bible was literally true. They rejected the idea that

science explains all we need to know; likewise, they affirmed that there is much in the universe, particularly the realm of the spiritual, which cannot be explained by science.

They also rejected the idea that we only live once and so should make the best of it. They denied that they made sense of life mostly in terms of the here and now. They also rejected relativism, both in relation of the understanding of good and evil and in terms of all religions and philosophies being equally right in their own way.

The Devotions group was also characterised by their concern for the well-being of others even above that of themselves. They affirmed that 'It is more important to put responsibilities towards others before your own rights'. 50 per cent of those scoring highest in this scale rejected the statement, 'It is more important to act on your individual rights than to look to the needs of others', compared with 26 per cent of the total sample.

This group had diverse views about society and their personal futures. The correlation between the Devotions scale and the statement, 'I feel that the future holds good things for me' was not significant nor was the correlation with the statement, 'I feel our society is just going from bad to worse'.

## **Managing the Diversity**

At the popular level, managing the diversity of possible sources of peace and well-being is not an issue. To some extent, the choice is dictated by circumstances. Thus, people with dependent children seek their peace and well-being in their families. People with good incomes can afford to dine out. However, to a large extent, people personally choose the ways they will seek peace and well-being, through travel, dining out, home life, sport, nature, or whatever it be. Advertising and the development of a consumer culture have encouraged self-expression through a diversity of life-styles (Featherstone 1991:83).

The data indicate that many people find their sense of peace and well-being in the common activities of life: looking after children, making their homes a pleasant place to live, listening to music, or taking a holiday by the sea. Some people do not feel the need for further sources of peace and well-being of a traditionally religious nature. They are not necessarily denying the existence of God or life after death. But they are indicating that their sense of peace and well-being has much more to do with life here and now rather than with a religious framework that transcends death.

Respondents were asked about the statement, 'I make sense of life largely in terms of the here and now'. Sixty per cent agreed, and only 18.5 disagreed with it. The remaining 21.5 per cent were neutral or unsure. Even more direct was the statement 'We only live once, so let's make the most of it'. 62.5 per cent agreed with that statement and 20 per cent disagreed.

While people have chosen ordinary activities as important sources of peace and well-being, they are not just reporting what they do. As noted above, many people spend hours watching television or films. Yet, this did not rate as highly as

spending time with the family or even spending time by the sea. They have discriminated between those activities which are purely pastimes and those which are important in providing them with a deeper sense of peace and well-being.

While there was a primary pattern apparent in the responses of many people, most people identified a range of resources as having some importance and one quarter of the sample scored high on more than one pattern of resource. Traditional religious resources exist within a plethora of alternatives. In practice, people who are seeking a sense of peace and well-being may chose to go to a church service or may prefer a week-end in a holiday house in the bush. They may spend some time in meditation, or may go to the cinema to watch a film. To that extent, it may be said that people approach some of these resources as consumers, choosing what suits them at the time.

That is not the way that Christian organisations have traditionally offered their resources. Rather, they had generally sought a level of regular commitment throughout life. They have sought to create communities which come together regularly for prayer, worship and other activities rather than offer a resource which may be used one week but not another. The major exceptions to these have been rites of passage. Some clergy have sought to place even these within the context of the community serving only involved members of the community.

Part of the issue for Christian organisations is that they have approached their resources in terms of what is true as compared with what is false. Thus, many have seen themselves, to varying degrees, as offering truth compared with other groups which have less or no 'truth'. In Luckmann's terms, they have seen themselves as 'official' articulators of the sacred cosmos.

Most Australians reject that sort of exclusivism. The *National Community Survey* asked to people to respond to the statement, 'Different religions and philosophies have different versions of the truth and may be equally right in their own way' 58.1 per cent of the respondents agreed and only 14.9 per cent disagreed. The remaining 26.9 per cent were neutral or unsure. If different religions and philosophies are equally right in their own way, then it is possible to gain something from one and something from another. Indeed, it may be helpful to see truth offered by one tradition and then turn to another for its own particular insights. Many people in Western societies draw on a variety of traditions or perspectives, picking and choosing from them what seems helpful to them. Their approach to truth may be similar to peace and well-being: personal and pragmatic.

Such a situation re-defines the problem of 'managing religious diversity'. The problem for traditional religious organisations is how should they enter into the market place of spiritual resources, of religious and philosophical truths and values, in an appropriate way? Would they be selling their souls by setting up a stall alongside the astrologers or the fitness clubs? Or could they engage more people if they offered holidays with the resources of a spiritual director alongside Club Med?

Such questions have a major theological component and the sociologist cannot

say what should or should not be done from the internal perspective of a religious organisation. However, the sociologist may comment that most religious traditions have espoused ideal forms of life, recognising that many people will not attain these in all their fullness. Most religious traditions have allowed people to taste these ideal forms, if only briefly. For example, most young Thai men spend a period of time as a Buddhist monk. The period may be only a few weeks and depends on the personality, passions and commitment of the individual.

Gerd Theissen (1978) has argued that, in early Palestinian Christianity, the ideal form of Christian was the 'wandering charismatic' who had given up home and family, friends and community, wealth and pleasure to wander through the land announcing the kingdom of God. However, few people felt able to enter such a life. Alongside these people were others who lived in the local communities and sought to live a more domesticated Christian life in the context of home and family, friends and community.

Because Christians, or members of any other religious tradition, believe an ideal form of faith involves an exclusive and frequent commitment to the activities of a religious community, does not mean that that should be the only form in which it presents itself to people. There may well be other times and places when people are engaged, when they are offered the opportunity to explore the symbols, systems of meaning, the resources for peace and well-being apart from a commitment to the regular activities of the community.

Offering people such opportunities would mean presenting faith in a greater variety of ways. For some Christians it could mean moving away from a major pre-occupation with the local church congregation and its week-end pattern of services., replacing them with a variety of ways in which faith was explored, from film and pilgrimage to networks of parents focussed on issues of parenting to short courses on meditation.

In contemporary Western societies, no religious tradition is in a place to enforce its particular values or systems of truth or put political pressure on people to attend its activities. At the personal level, whether Christian or other religious organisations like it or not, given the plethora of options, the market will determine the 'management of religious diversity'. Christian and other traditional religious organisations have the options of entering the centre of the market place or remaining on the fringe with their exclusive options.

To enter the market place would force such organisations to ask questions, not so much about the 'management of the diversity', but about themselves. What is central to their traditions of faith? What is peripheral? What would compromise its message and the very nature of its resources and what would not? How could the visions of the *telos* of the tradition be maintained, while people come from many directions and many backgrounds to explore the diverse resources of its traditions?

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## Note

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