International Journal of Children's Spirituality,
Vol. 12, No. 2, August 2007, pp. 149–163

The spirituality of young Australians

Michael Mason[a]*, Andrew Singleton[b] and Ruth Webber[a]
[a]*Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia;* [b]*Monash University, Melbourne, Australia*

A research project conducted in 2003–2006, the Spirit of Generation Y, using both extended interviews and a nationwide survey, revealed three main strands in the spirituality of young Australians: traditional, alternative and humanist. Their involvement in traditional religions was declining, like that of their parents, and although some adopted alternative spiritualities, the stronger trends were toward indifference or humanism. Eclecticism in worldviews and cautiously relativistic values seem to be responses to an uncertain world, in which isolated individuals have only fragile support structures for their identity.

Keywords: *Generation Y; Australia; Youth; Spirituality; Religion; Christian; Alternative; Humanist; Identity; Individualism*

Introduction

The Spirit of Generation Y project (Mason, *et al.*, 2007)[1] was a three-year study (2003–2006) of the spirituality of young Australians, using both extended interviews and a national survey.[2] Earlier surveys, such as the Religion in Australia Survey 1966 (Mol, 1985), the World Values Survey 1990–2005 (Inglehart, 2006) and the National Social Science Survey 1984–1989 (Kelley, 2006), have explored traditional religion in Australia (though not among younger teenagers); and many qualitative studies have focused on specific target groups, such as students in Catholic schools (e.g. Rymarz & Graham, 2006; Engebretson, 2006).

The Spirit of Generation Y is the first Australian study to report on contemporary forms of spirituality in the Generation Y population, based on a representative national sample. So it can serve to provide an Australia-wide context for the more intensive studies just mentioned and may aid in their interpretation.

*Corresponding author. Institute for the Advancement of Research, Australian Catholic University, 115 Victoria Pde., Fitzroy VIC 3065, Australia. Email: M.Mason@patrick.acu.edu.au

ISSN 1364-436X (print)/ISSN 1469-8455 (online)/07/020149–15

DOI: 10.1080/13644360701467451

What is spirituality?

The development of the definition of spirituality employed in the study was described in an earlier article in this journal (Singleton *et al.*, 2004). A person's spirituality is a way of life—a view of the world and a set of values and practices—which may be based on

- A traditional world religion;
- An 'alternative' path, such as 'New Age' spirituality;
- A blend from both traditional and alternative sources; or
- An entirely secular outlook.

Method of the Spirit of Generation Y study

The first stage of the project consisted of 91 extended interviews, with a 'strategic' sample—to get a sense of the *variety* of types of spirituality in Generation Y. Stage 2, conducted in February and March 2005, was a telephone survey, producing 1619 completed responses. To draw conclusions with confidence about the whole Australian population of Generation Y, a probability sample was drawn, and a 'control group' aged 30–59 years was included so that this generation could be compared with the two older generations.[3] Altogether, there are 1272 cases from Generation Y (aged 13–29 years) and 347 from the control group (aged 30–59 years).

The third stage of the research consisted of re-interviews with previous interviewees or survey respondents to clarify issues which had arisen in the analysis of the data obtained in the previous stages.

Types of spirituality among Australian young people

The classification of spirituality into different types takes account both of the *worldview* underlying a form of spirituality and of its *ethos*: the values it contains and the practices in which they are expressed. The following types were developed from theory and previous research and refined to suit the actual data:

- Traditional: grounded in the tradition of a major world-religion:
    - Christian
    - Other world religions (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism);
- Alternative: non-traditional religions or spiritual paths (e.g., New Age or occult forms or detached elements of Eastern religions);
- Humanist: a worldview which affirms human experience and human reason, rather than adopting religious traditions or 'spiritual' paths.

Table 1 shows the distribution of these types of spirituality within Generation Y.

The Christian traditional spirituality type includes 43% of Generation Y. The major types, alternative (17%) and humanist (31%) account for nearly all the remainder; the followers of Non-Christian traditions amount to only 6%. A small

Table 1. GenY (aged 13–29 years): spirituality types (percent)

Spirituality type	%
Traditional	49
Christian	43
Other world religions	6
Alternative	17
Humanist	31
('Theists')	3

number (3%) labelled 'Theists' did not fit into any of the major types, because they had little to say about their spirituality other than that they believed in God.

Within most worldviews, it was discovered that the corresponding *ethos* varies considerably. The worldview may be expressed in values and carried into practice at a higher or lower level of intensity or commitment. The level of a spirituality's *ethos*, the degree to which it is *lived*, the level of effective influence it exercises over a person's life by shaping values and practices, is of capital importance. It makes the difference between the committed living-out of an ideal and merely having an opinion on some religious or spiritual issue, or claiming 'cost-free' nominal membership in an organization.

The salience of spirituality of all varieties is generally low among Australian young people. The majority of those under the age of thirty years have little interest in the spiritual trajectory of their lives. Only small proportions within any of the three major strands of spirituality just mentioned are seriously committed to them: about 15% of Generation Y could be described as *committed* to Christian faith; 4% to an alternative spirituality, and 10% to a humanistic worldview. The remaining 62%, while generally oriented in one of these three directions as a result of early childhood socialization within the family, have only a low level of commitment to their inherited worldview, and only marginal or nominal involvement in groups or organizations which embody it; and they engage in few associated practices.

Sub-types of spirituality within the Christian traditional type

The largest group of respondents, those with a Christian traditional worldview, were further classified according to their degree of commitment. A range of criteria were employed, including identification, beliefs, attendance at religious services and other practices such as private prayer. Three levels were distinguished: active, marginal and nominal. Table 2 shows the distribution of these levels of commitment within Christian traditional spirituality in Generation Y.

The three principal types of spirituality will now be considered in turn.

Table 2. Gen Y (aged 13–29 years): levels of commitment within the Christian traditional spirituality type (percent Gen Y)

Level of commitment	%
Active	15
Marginal	10
Nominal	18
Total	43

The Christian traditional type

Christian traditional spirituality was the commonest type encountered. Here we can report only on three key characteristics of this type: religious identification, belief in God, and church attendance.

Religious identification

Respondents (aged 13–29 years) to the Spirit of Generation Y survey identified with various religions or denominations, as shown in Table 3.

Denominational identification within 'Gen Y' broadly reflects that of the whole population, as reported in the Australian Census of 2001 (Table 4)—the denominations are in similar order by size—but there are also some major differences: significantly smaller proportions of Gen Y identify with the large denominations, and a higher proportion (than in the Census) claim no religious identification.[4]

Only the denominations or groups listed in Table 4 had sufficient numbers in the survey to make comparisons with the Census reliable. Identification as Anglican or Catholic is 8% lower in the survey than in the Census, and Uniting Church 4.5% lower, while the percentage of 'No identification / Not stated' is much higher. Since the survey sample matches the population closely in other respects, it follows that many people for whom a religious identification of Anglican, Catholic or Uniting Church was stated in the Census in 2001 did not state that religious identification in the survey.

How do we explain these differences between the survey and the previous Census? In most families, one parent completes a family census form on behalf of everyone. Where young people fill in their own form, the religion question is one among many others on quite different topics and is probably answered without much reflection. In the telephone survey, being asked the question on religious identification after 15 minutes of responding to earlier questions about their beliefs and values would have provided quite a different experience. Those not strongly committed had the opportunity to consider whether they really did now identify with a denomination in which they may have been baptised, whose church they may have attended in former years, but with which they now had little connection. It seems likely that the survey answer had the benefit of more reflection and indicates religious or denominational identity more accurately than a hasty response to the Census.

Table 3. Gen Y (aged 13–29 years): Current religion/denomination (percent)

Religion/denomination	%
Anglican	7.8
Baptist	1.7
Catholic	17.9
Christian not further defined	2.1
Churches of Christ	0.4
Evangelical	0.5
Jehovah's Witness	0.2
Lutheran	1.0
Mormon	0.8
Orthodox	3.4
Pentecostal	1.8
Presbyterian	1.0
Salvation Army	0.3
Seventh Day Adventist	0.4
Uniting Church	2.2
Buddhist	1.8
Hindu	1.2
Jewish	0.4
Muslim	2.2
Sikh	0.2
Neopagan	0.2
Other	0.1
No religious identification	52.2

Under these circumstances, it is all the more remarkable that the proportion in the other Christian category was *larger* in the survey than in the Census—these churches have increased in numbers, and as a proportion of the Gen Y population, between 2001 and 2005.

Table 4. Comparison of religious group by age group in Census 2001 and Gen Y Survey (percent age group)

Religion/denomination	Census 2001, age 10–24 years (%)	Gen Y Survey, age 13–27 years (%)
Anglican	16.2	8.2
Catholic	27.3	19.8
Uniting	5.6	2.1
Other Christian	12.7	14.3
Other Religion	5.8	5.8
No religious identification / not stated	32.3	49.8

Source: Calculated from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001).

Respondents were asked whether they had always belonged to their current denomination (or had always had no religious identification) or had changed their religious identification since they were 12 years old. If they had done the latter, they were asked which religion or denomination they were raised in. Similarly, those who stated that they did not believe in God were asked whether they had done so at an earlier age, and if so, whether at that time they belonged to a particular religion or denomination. Comparison of young people's current and previous denominations in Table 5 reveals that considerable change has taken place since the age of 12 years.

The table reveals quite dramatic losses of young members by the Anglican and Catholic churches (far greater for the Catholics). Even the Other Christian group have sustained some losses; but the previous table (Table 4) shows that these losses have been more than replaced. The large increase in 'No Religious Identification' leaves little doubt about the main destination of the exodus from Christian churches. The 'No religion' category has been the fastest growing one in recent Censuses. Obviously, religious identity is even more volatile among the young than across the whole population.

Belief in God

Respondents' belief in God is presented in Table 6.

The proportion affirming belief in God and the proportion who expressed uncertainty vary greatly by denomination. The other Christian group, comprising predominantly conservative Protestant denominations, contained only 9% who were uncertain about belief in God; this rose to 43% of the Anglicans, with Catholics in between, at 25%. Although only 22% of those with no religious identification affirmed belief in God outright, a further 41% were uncertain, and 36% did not believe in God.

Looking at Gen Y as a whole, the column at the right of Table 6 shows that half believe in God, one third are uncertain, and one fifth do not believe in God. One might be tempted to infer that the generally high level of uncertainty of belief in God is an 'age effect'—typical of the tentativeness and confusion of adolescence, a time of experimentation with identity and beliefs. As they mature, runs this line of reasoning,

Table 5. Gen Y (aged 13–29 years): current and previous denomination

Denomination	Previous (%)	Current (%)	Percent change
Anglican	10.7	7.8	–27
Catholic	26.2	17.9	–32
Other Christian	19.0	15.9	–16
Other religion	6.7	6.2	–7
No religious identification	37.5	52.2	39

Note: A good deal of further 'switching' takes place between the smaller denominations within the 'Other Christian' category.

Table 6. Gen Y (aged 13–29 years): belief in God by denomination (percent denomination)

	Denomination (%)					
Belief in God	Anglican	Catholic	Other Christian	Other religion	No religious indentification	Gen Y
No	0	0	0	0	36	19
Unsure	43	25	9	22	41	32
Yes	57	75	91	77	22	48
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

they will 'settle down' to more certainty and confidence. However, Table 7, comparing belief in God across age groups, shows that this interpretation is not plausible.

Uncertainty about belief in God is higher in the teenage years but is still at 25% among those aged 45–59 years. This age group is particularly interesting for two reasons: they are the Baby-Boomers, born between 1946 and 1960, who in their youth brought about major social and cultural changes in Western societies; and even more to the point, they are the parents of Generation Y (or at least of its members aged 13–24 years). The project included this 'control sample' of the generations before Gen Y precisely in order to avoid attributing to Generation Y, characteristics that are more widely shared. It is clear that Gen Y mostly reflect their parents' belief in God.

Bouma and Mason (1995, pp. 42, 44) used data from the National Social Science Survey 1989 to compare the Australian Baby-Boomers with their predecessors, the pre-boomers (born 1925–40) and with Generation X, showing a considerably higher level of belief in God among the pre-boomers than among the other two generations. So although belief in God among Gen Y is lower than in the past, the decline is not recent but took place when the Baby-Boomers were growing up. It is not an age effect of adolescence or early adulthood among Generation Y, nor among their parents (since the latter's level of belief has stayed low), nor is it a 'cohort effect' attributable to the particular experience of one age group (e.g., confined to those who were growing up in the sixties and seventies), but rather a 'period effect', impacting widely across the whole age range of those who live through a particular era—in this case, affecting all those who have grown up in 'late modernity', i.e., from the early 1960s until the present: the Baby-Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y.

Table 7. All (aged 13–59 years): 'Belief in God' by age group (percent age group)

	Age group (years)						
Belief in God	13–15	16–17	18–21	22–29	30–44	45–59	All
No (%)	16	20	16	22	22	18	20
Unsure (%)	34	33	32	32	27	25	28
Yes (%)	50	47	52	46	52	56	52

Religious practices

Table 8 shows church attendance by denomination.

A comparison of attenders by age group (not shown) reveals that Gen Y scarcely differs from the two older generations: a generally low level of attendance prevails among those less than 60 years of age.

Eclecticism within the Christian traditional type

Those classified as Christian showed a surprisingly high level of eclecticism—not in the sense that they mixed a wide range of alternative beliefs and practices with their Christianity—but in the sense that few disagreed with the propositions: 'It is okay to pick and choose religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of one's religion as a whole'; and 'Morals are relative: there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody'. There was little concern for orthodoxy, consistency among beliefs or adherence to the doctrinal and moral teachings of their churches. In other words, they chose their beliefs within Christianity in a highly personalised and eclectic fashion. But once again, these characteristics applied not just to Gen Y but to their parents as well.

Attention turns next to the second major type of spirituality among Generation Y.

The alternative type

Over the past 30 years in Australia, a diverse spiritual and religious mosaic has emerged. Some sociologists describe the contemporary context, full of choices, as a 'spiritual supermarket' (Roof, 1999; Lyon, 2000). Similar changes have also taken place in the United Kingdom (See Carrette & King, 2005; Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Partridge, 2004). Those interested have available to them easily accessible alternatives to traditional religions.

In the spiritual marketplace, consumers can select 'unbundled' components of spirituality from a very wide range of sources, rather than having to 'buy' any complete package. So someone might put together the belief that she or he had once

Table 8. Gen Y (aged 13–29): Frequency of attendance at religious services by denomination (percent denomination)

	Denomination					
Frequency of attendance	Anglican	Catholic	Other Christian	Other religion	No religious identification	Gen Y
Not asked – unbeliever or uncertain	43	25	9	22	41	32
Less than once a month	38	41	32	53	56	48
Once a month or more often	19	34	59	23	2	19

lived a past life, the regular practice of an Eastern form of meditation and the occasional reading of their horoscope.

In what follows, we examine the extent to which Gen Y adopt these spiritual alternatives and focus especially on those who mix disparate elements in order to fashion their own distinctive spiritualities.

Alternative spiritual practices and beliefs

Recently, various religious practices originating from Asian religions and traditions have become popular in the West, notably yoga, Eastern meditation and tai-chi. These are usually undertaken in ways disconnected from their original religious or cultural context. The Spirit of Generation Y survey questionnaire asked about these practices, as well as about Tarot. Perhaps contrary to expectations, we found the uptake of these practices among Generation Y is low: only 1 in 5 has ever engaged *seriously* in yoga, Eastern meditation, tai-chi or Tarot reading. The most popular activity with young people is yoga, more so among the older members of Gen Y. The pre-survey interviews revealed almost no evidence of other kinds of New Age practices among young people, like reiki, crystals or channelling.

In summary, we suggest that for the overwhelming majority of Generation Y, alternative spiritual practices, whether exotic, occult or New Age, are simply not important. The same cannot be said, however, of various alternative spiritual beliefs, which have greater acceptance among this age cohort.

The alternative spiritual beliefs we asked survey respondents about were astrology, i.e., that stars and planets affect people's fates; the possibility of communicating with the dead directly or in a séance; reincarnation, i.e., that people have lived previous lives; and the power of psychics and palm readers.

Table 9 shows how widespread alternative spiritual beliefs are among Australian youth and young adults. Survey respondents had a choice of answering, 'yes, definitely', 'maybe' or 'no, definitely not'. The table shows the percentage of each age group who definitely believe in astrology, séances, reincarnation and psychics.

There is a fairly high level of *definite* belief among Generation Y in reincarnation (29% of this generation), the possibility of communicating with the dead (25%), and in astrology (24%). Slightly lower is the belief in palm readers, at 20%.

Nearly a third of teenagers believe in reincarnation. What is the source of this belief, and how salient is it for those who hold it? Our research found that 23% of Generation Y have explored Buddhism, and 16% Hinduism, the two world religions in which reincarnation is an important part of the belief system. There is no clear relationship, however, between belief in reincarnation and having explored these two religions. Seventy percent of those who definitely believe in reincarnation have never explored Buddhism, while 84% of those who believe in reincarnation have never explored Hinduism. This strongly suggests that belief in reincarnation is more like a folk belief that circulates widely in the culture—an unsophisticated idea that we have had past lives—than a seriously understood belief connected to its original Eastern religious heritage. Information drawn from the interviews suggests that young people

Table 9. All (aged 13–59): alternative spiritual beliefs by age group (percent age group)

	Age group							
Alternative beliefs	13–15	16–17	18–21	22–29	Gen Y	30–44	45–59	All
Definitely believe in astrology, that stars and planets affect people's fates	25	22	21	26	24	23	20	23
Definitely believe in the possibility of communicating with the dead directly or in a séance	23	24	25	26	25	25	16	22
Definitely believe in reincarnation, that people have lived previous lives	31	29	29	27	29	26	21	25
Definitely believe in the power of psychics and palm readers	19	21	18	23	20	25	15	20

have quite varied understandings of what reincarnation means. A few interviewees seriously believed in past lives. Others—and this is probably true for most—are less certain of its meaning or its implications for the way they live their lives.

While quite a large portion of the youth population accept one or two alternative spiritual beliefs, the overall spiritual orientation of most of them remains Christian or Humanist. However, a smaller group, classified as belonging to the alternative spirituality type, feel more certain about their alternative spiritual beliefs and draw more heavily on alternative sources, frequently mixing several alternative spiritual beliefs and practices together.

A profile of the alternative spirituality type

Seventeen percent of Gen Y report three or more alternative spiritual beliefs or practices. They mix disparate alternative spiritual elements in order to fashion their own distinctive spiritualities. Forty-eight percent of those in this group report three alternative spiritual beliefs and practices, 43% report four or five, while the remaining 9% have adopted more than six alternative spiritual beliefs or practices. It is clear that eclecticism is endemic among those espousing alternative forms of spirituality.

These young people are more likely to be female than male. Alternative spiritual practices are largely seen as feminised. Most of the weekly magazines pitched at women contain horoscopes, 'ask the psychic/palm-reader/numerologist' columns and advertisements for Tarot readings. Much of the New Age is associated with care of the self or self-development and personal exploration, values not commonly associated with Australian notions of manhood. Age also has an influence: those who are older are more likely to adopt multiple alternatives.

Eclecticism among those who favour alternative spirituality extends even to the inclusion of some traditional religious beliefs: 78% believe in life after death (the

highest proportion among any of the spirituality types), and 63% believe in the existence of angels (a proportion second only to that of the most committed Christians).

It is difficult to declare precisely what 'Alternative' believers understand by life after death or angels. Eighty-one percent of those in this type who believe in life after death also believe in reincarnation, so it is possible that many who believe in life after death are affirming their belief in reincarnation. Similarly, there has been a recent New Age popularisation of the protective power of angels but in a manner disconnected from orthodox Christian teaching about angels.

Yet while they may espouse some Christian-derived beliefs, alternative believers are not religious in the more conventional sense of identifying with a denomination and engaging regularly in Christian practices. Two-thirds do not identify with any Christian denomination (although 19 per cent identify as Catholics, and 13% as members of other Christian denominations). Fifty-two percent definitely believe in God, 37% are unsure, and only 10% do not. Six percent attend services of worship either monthly or more often, 22% attend a few times a year, while the rest do not attend. Only a few of those involved in alternative spiritualities are sitting in a church pew each week, taking part in organised religion while holding a genuine mix of quite disparate beliefs. Most are not involved in organised religion.

Finally, caution should be exercised concerning the salience of this eclectic mix of beliefs and practices in the lives of young people. Our qualitative exploration leads us to suggest that many, particularly those who report three or four beliefs or practices, simply have a light interest or belief in alternative spirituality, which makes little difference to their lives. However, those reporting five or more beliefs and practices do appear to have a distinctly alternative spirituality that impacts on their worldview and lifestyle—about 4% of those aged 13–29 years.

The humanist type

The third major spirituality type among young Australians is called humanist. The humanist worldview affirms *human* experience and reason, rather than adopting religious traditions or 'spiritual' paths. Most of this group do not believe in God now (many never have); nor do they hold New Age, exotic or Eastern religious beliefs. Thirty-one percent of Generation Y are identified as humanists and fit into one of three sub-categories, as follows:

Non-religious. Ten percent of Generation Y humanists can be classified as 'non-religious': people who have *never* believed in God, do not engage in religious practices, and do not identify themselves as belonging to a religion. This group is not open to alternative spiritual beliefs; almost all reject such beliefs out of hand, except for a few who definitely believe in reincarnation. Affirming a 'this-worldly orientation' (cf. Pasquale, 2006), 61% of this group do not believe that there is a higher being or life force, and of those who do believe in a life force, the overwhelming majority believe that this force 'does not care about us'. Twelve percent of Australian males

aged 13–29 years are non-religious, compared with 9% of females, while age has no major influence.

Ex-religious. The next sub-group of humanists—the 'ex-religious'—used to believe in God, do not affiliate with a religion, and are not seriously involved in alternative spirituality. They constitute 7% of Generation Y. Two-thirds of this group of former believers are those who were raised in a religious tradition but have since repudiated it; the remaining third were simply believers in God at some previous stage in their lives but have never identified with a religion. Most of the former believers who were raised religious previously identified with one of the two largest Australian denominations, the Catholic and Anglican churches. Eighty percent of the ex-religious do not believe that there is a higher being or life force out there, and of the few who do, the majority believe that this force does 'not care about us'. Males have a slightly higher probability than females of being in this group, but age has no major influence.

Undecided. The third group of humanists are the undecided: those who are unsure if they believe in God, do not identify with a religious tradition, and are not seriously into alternative beliefs. Two-thirds have never had a definite belief in God at any point in their lives, while the other third once believed and are now unsure rather than confidently negative like the ex-religious. This group is also not as assuredly this-worldly as the other two humanist categories: 60% definitely believe that 'there is a higher-being or life force out there', and two-thirds of these believe that this force cares about us. Fifteen percent of all females aged 13–29 years fit into this category, compared with 13% of males, while age has no influence.

Why call them humanists?

Only small proportions of Australians identify themselves as atheists or agnostics; 24 000 atheists and 18 000 agnostics were counted in the 2001 census of the population. Moreover, while the life-orientation of young Humanists is grounded in the 'here-and-now', not all are resolutely secular in the strictest sense of the term; while none definitely believe in God, 42% believe that a 'life force' or 'higher being' exists.

A careful review of the in-depth interviews led us to favour the description 'Humanists', rather than 'seculars' or some other alternative. Although we use the word 'humanist' in a modern sense to refer to a non-religious view of life, we nonetheless define this worldview in somewhat broader terms than modern 'Secular Humanism', which is often militantly anti-religious. The commoner form of humanism among Generation Y is post-Enlightenment, rationalistic, and non-religious but often quite tolerant of religion and appreciative of its values.

The fundamental value exalted by this variety of humanism is the infinite worth of the human individual and the inviolability of personal freedom and autonomy: freedom in cultural, artistic, sexual, political and economic terms; freedom from every kind of restriction, censorship, oppression or discrimination—whether based on race,

ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, gender, sexual preference or age. A natural corollary is the emphasis these young people place on personal autonomy, self-development and self-realisation.

Implications

The findings of the Spirit of Generation Y study have implications for spheres of life outside the realm of academic research. Parents and those involved in the care of youth in such fields as education, health care and social welfare will find that approaches and policies are better adapted to young people's lives when based on a deeper understanding of their spirituality.

The supposed 'generation gap' is not a gulf between the worldviews and values of parents and children—in these respects Gen Y (with plenty of individual exceptions, no doubt) are remarkably similar to their parents. The contrast between generations is much more marked in the *lifestyle* dimension of popular culture: especially communication and self-presentation in language, music and fashion. Here, each new generation strives to achieve a distinctive style to differentiate it from its predecessors.

Yet despite the similarities between Generation Y and their parents of the post-World War II generation, there are also significant differences: Gen Y are growing up in a world which has changed greatly since the childhood of their parents. A smaller proportion of them are Christian than of their parents at this age, and a significant number who were Christian earlier in childhood have already moved in other directions before turning thirty years of age—about the same as the proportion of their parents' generation who have moved away from Christianity but over almost a lifetime.

While Generation Y are often described as highly individualistic, it seems more appropriate to understand them as 'individualised'—the isolation of the individual in post-traditional society is seen by theorists of postmodernity as more of a fate than a choice. Their eclectic mix of worldviews and the cautious relativism of their values result from facing an uncertain world with only fragile support for their identity, beliefs and values.

They derive this support especially from family and friendship networks. Half of those under the age of twenty-five years were still living at home. Although the more robust support structures of local community, churches, and associations involving youth have grown weaker over the last century, families appear to have compensated by increasing the intimacy of family life. Young people also enter sexual relationships at an earlier age.[5] By these means, Generation Y appear to be successful, for now, in holding at bay the threats to the security of personal identity inherent in the altered relationship between individual and society. But these will impinge more as the generation ages, and they lose the support of their parents.

Generation Y are what their parents and their society have made them and will require more than the usual level of understanding and support if they are to thrive in the world into which they have been placed.

Notes

1. The research team which conducted the study comprised M. Mason, R. Webber, A. Singleton and P. Hughes. A series of detailed reports on the study is available at http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/ccls/spir/sppub/sppub.htm. The concluding report is due for publication in book form in July 2007.
2. The boundaries defining the Baby-Boomer generation and Generations X and Y are debated—some authors include in Generation Y those born 1976–90; others date them five years later. Here, 'Generation Y' refers to the cohort born between 1976 and 1990, following 'Generation X' (1961–75) and the 'Baby-Boomers' (1946–60).
3. For technical details of the survey, see Appendix II and for the project questionnaire, Appendix IV, both available on the project website (see note 1).
4. Census data for those aged 10–24 years in August 2001 were compared with survey data on respondents who, three and a half years later, when the survey took place in February 2005, were aged 13–27 years. The percentages are slightly different from those in Table 3 because of the omission of those aged 28–29 from Table 4.
5. See the evidence cited in Mason *et al.* (2007), chapter 2, note 23.

Notes on contributors

Michael Mason is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for the Advancement of Research at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia. He has been involved in a series of large-scale sociological surveys of religion and spirituality in Australia. He is interested in a multidisciplinary phenomenological approach to religion, combining the perspectives of social science, religion studies and theology.

Andrew Singleton is a lecturer in the Sociology Programme, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. His research interests include youth spirituality and the sociology of men and masculinity.

Ruth Webber is an Associate Professor in Sociology at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia, where she teaches youth studies and family studies in both the undergraduate and post-graduate programs. She is the Director of the Quality of Life and Social Justice Flagship. Her research interests include youth spirituality and the sociology of the family.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001) *Census of Population and Housing, Household sample file* [available to approved researchers from ABS].

Bouma, G. & Mason, M. (1995) Baby boomers downunder: the case of Australia, in: W.C. Roof, J. Carroll & D. Roozen (Eds) *The postwar generation and establishment religion: cross-cultural perspectives* (San Francisco, Westview Press), 27–58.

Carrette, J. & King, R. (2005) *Selling spirituality: the silent takeover of religion* (London, Routledge).

Engebretson, K. (2006) 'God's got your back': teenage boys talk about God, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 11(3), 329–45.

Heelas, P. & Woodhead, L. (2005) *The spiritual revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality* (Oxford, Blackwell).

Inglehart, R. (2006) *World values survey*. Available online at: http://www.worldvaluessurvey. com/ (accessed 30 December 2006).

Kelley, J. (2006) *National social science survey*. Available online at: http://www.archivists.org.au/directory/data/13.htm (accessed 30 December 2006).

Lyon, D. (2000) *Jesus in Disneyland: religion in postmodern times* (Cambridge, Polity).

Mason, M., Singleton, A. & Webber, R. (2007) *The spirit of Generation Y* (Melbourne, John Garratt). (In press)

Mol, H. (1985) *The faith of Australians* (Sydney, Allen & Unwin).

Partridge, C. (2004) *The re-enchantment of the West* (London, T & T Clark).

Pasquale, F. (2006) Varieties of irreligious experience in the American Northwest, paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Portland, OR, 19–21 October.

Roof, W. C. (1999) *Spiritual marketplace: baby boomers and the remaking of American religion* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

Rymarz, R. & Graham, J. (2006) Drifting from the mainstream: the religious identity of Australian core Catholic youth, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality,* 11(3) 371–83.

Singleton, A., Mason, M. & Webber, R. (2004) Spirituality in adolescence and young adulthood: a method for a qualitative study, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality,* 9(3), 247–61.