

What is the future of Organised Religion in the Next Generation?

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1. Introduction

One could answer the question, what is the future of organised religion in the next generation, in a variety of ways. For example, there lurks here a profound and fascinating theological question about the steadfastness of God and the nature of hope. However, as you presumably invited me today as a church bureaucrat, and not as a theologian, you are wanting an organisational perspective. How will organised religion, as an organisation, as an institution, fare with the next generation? This is not any easy question to answer, but at least as a starting point one needs to know how organised religion has fared over the last generation? What can it tell us about the next generation?

Certainly we can say that today organised religion has a different role and place within Australian society to what it had, in say, in the 1970's. By all criteria it is profoundly different; those who believe in God are down; the numbers attending worship or involved in organised religion's activities are down; the standing of and influence of organised religion with the state or as a powerful institution is profoundly different.¹ Christians observe that Christendom has past; indeed as general secretary of the Uniting Church in WA I am often asked what I do, and I usually reply – downsize Christendom. So with this in mind, we return to our question – what is the future of organised religion in the next generation.

I want to approach this from two perspectives. Firstly, given present indicators, how will the next generation view and engage with organised religion; and secondly, what are the issues that are confronting organised religion, as an institution, within society so that it may present itself to the world, to the next generation.

2. Current Trends and the Next Generation

Several years ago I preached at the annual opening of the Law Week service in Trinity Uniting Church on St George's Terrace. It was not quite the red mass they have elsewhere for the beginning of the legal year, however, it was attended by judges, members of the legal profession. The then Chief Justice, David Malcolm also addressed the congregation. The theme was youth and the law. I suggested to organisers that given the theme, it perhaps would be good to involve young people in the occasion. This they did, inviting several classes of senior year high school students. These young people got a heavy dose of institutions that morning – school, the justice system and organised religion. I still remember the rather animated conversation I had with a group of young people after the service.

¹ See the website of the Christian Research Association, which also has access to the data of the National Church Life Survey: <http://www.ncls.org.au>.

How could I support religion? They were dumb-founded. Religion was a cause of all the current problems in the world. It was the cause of countless international disputes, wars and terrorism. It had assisted in the spread of AIDS. Also hadn't organised religion, or particularly the church, condoned child sexual abuse? And so on. To at least this "next generation" – religion – organised or not – was not a part of the solution of the world's problems, it was the cause of them. Organised religion was to be avoided.

This response I received that day will, I believe, to be the most significant factor confronting organised religion as it looks to the next generation. The next generation will, for whatever reason, not be joiners. Our current generation is sceptical of institutions; they are not joiners; they are showing themselves today not to be participants of organised religion. They will avoid it.

So what is going on here?

From the 1960's onwards the apparent decline of organised religion was neatly described by scholars as being the process of secularisation. Belief in God and spirituality was declining in the face of scientific rationalism and the thinking of the inheritors of The Enlightenment. Within modern thinking, and certainly scientific understanding, God was no longer required. The early writings of the sociologist, Peter Berger typified this view.² God was losing the intellectual debate and God's great supporter – organised religion – therefore declined as a force within society. Attendances began to fall; indecision arose within organised religion as to what one could believe; certainly the power of the church waned within the lives of its adherents. It was a straightline, inevitable decline. However, it now seems this theory perhaps was not quite so clear or simple. Certainly in my area of research in church state relations during the second half of the twentieth century I came across some strange contradictions.³ The state from eschewing state aid for religious schools in the mid century began to fund them, indeed fund them to the point of underwriting their very existence. Likewise help came for other aspects of organised religion's life – first it was orphanages, then aged care and now a full range of social service work. The secular state willingly bankrolls these activities of organised religion. Furthermore with the very belated, and in some respect still born, recognition of indigenous rights, there came with it the recognition of indigenous spirituality. Who could forget Bob Hawke restricting uranium mining in the Northern Territory because the great spirit, Bulla, of the local indigenous people, would be offended? Not really a decision of a secular state!

If we were to have this seminar in say, the mid 1970's, secularisation theory would have determined that organised religion would have just continued to decline and today there would be – well very little left. Yes it has continued to decline – but belief in God, and even organised religion has persisted. As Berger himself now says "the assumption we live in a secularised world is false, the world today, with some exceptions is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so.

² Peter Berger, **The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation** (London: Collins) 1980 and Bryan Wilson, **Religion in Secular Society** (London: Penguin) 1973.

³ John A Evans, *Church State Relations in New Zealand: 1940-1990* (PhD Thesis; University of Otago, NZ, 1992.)

This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists is essentially mistaken. In my early work I contributed to this literature.”⁴

What has been going on? At one level – the modernist project of secular society has itself come under intellectual attack. Science has not necessarily delivered progress: Bhopal, Chernobyl, NASA disasters, salination, global warming and so on. Voices, other than the dominant western voices are beginning being heard – various minorities, homosexuals, the immigrant. A relativism of values and thought has emerged. An individual’s own views and beliefs are seen to be just as significant as the next person’s. In short, this is post modernism. Truth has become less clear. A person’s belief, their individual belief, is respected. It might be seen as being quaint, but at least they have the right to hold it. There has been a persistence of belief. As Jose Casanova has said “religious resurgence . . . is as much a feature of modern societies as is religious decline.”⁵ Another way to express this is that even though organised religion is no longer seen to be a part of the dominant motif, or meta-narrative, of society itself, such as was the case within Christendom, individual belief in God, or Buddha, or whatever, has remained. However, within this post modern world, organised religion and religious adherence is not a significant aspect of the nation’s present and possibly future story. Indeed post modernism would say there are just many stories now – and not just the one or the few, of organised religion.

This however, does not fully describe what is happening in organised religion in Australia at the moment. There continues to be decline. This has led some scholars to describe this as the process of separation: the separation between belonging and believing. People no longer belong, but religious beliefs continue and persist. Grace Davie succinctly calls it “believing without belonging”⁶. People just do not any longer, it seems, want to belong. This is true of organised religion, but in this post modern time, it is also true of all other institutions and organisations within our society: sporting associations, service clubs, political parties, trade unions you name it – people do not belong to them. The New Zealand church commentator, Kevin Ward, in addition to studying the church, studied this phenomenon in of all things, New Zealand rugby. In the 1970’s there were 400,000 registered players – by 2000 there were just 120,000.⁷ However, as he observed that did not mean belief, if that is the word, in rugby declined. People – in so far as they were not couch potatoes - just now played their sport differently. They rolled up to a local sporting club, paid their money and had a game of touch rugby or some such, and that was it. They had the fun with no real club commitment. Post modern individualism has also affected golf. Golf club memberships – according to a recent Financial Review article⁸ - are similarly declining. People, apparently prefer to turn up and pay when they want a game. They don’t want the blazers, the fees and the commitment that membership implies.

⁴ P Berger, ‘The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview’, in **The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics** edited by P Berger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1999, 2.

⁵ Jose Casanova, **Public Religions in the Modern World** (Chicago: Chicago University Press) 1994, 61

⁶ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: **Believing without Belonging*** (Oxford: Blackwell) 1994.

⁷ See Kevin Ward, “No Longer Believing – or - Believing without Belonging” in **The Future of Christianity** edited by John Stenhouse and Brett Knowles (Adelaide: ATF Press) 2004, 63.

⁸ *The Weekend Australian Financial Review*, 22-25 April, 2006, 21.

In the field of religion, the many of the mega churches hardly can be said to have a belongsers. They have attenders, an audience for religious entertainment who may come and go as they like. I suspect this difference between believers and belongsers has always been an issue in Judaism. Isn't this the distinction between the so called cultural or ethnic Jew and a religious Jew – a person who actually engages with the organised religion and is a member of a Jewish congregation. The cultural Jew is the person who without any commitment to their faith, simply claims the Jewish heritage.

So if there is not this belonging now, what is the future of organised religion in the next generation? To begin with, the absence of belonging, will not necessarily mean belief in God – in any conventional sense - will continue. Some have argued this, however, Robin Gill is useful here. In speaking of this separation of belief and belonging, he simply observes that a “decline in Christian beliefs will follow rather than precede a decline in Church attendance.”⁹ Attending organised religion fosters the belief, and over time, religious belief, specifically Jewish or Christian religious belief will decline unless it is sustained in some other way. Simply, if people don't belong, how will they learn and know about their Jewish or Christian heritage.

This is the reality. Increasingly spirituality is seen as a rather distinctive individualistic creation – no doubt far removed from the roots of Judaism and Christianity. It is New Age, or draws on Eastern mysticism, or in some way involves a particular diet or the environment. Yes, it is spiritual, and this at least will mean organised religion should still, in a vague way, be able to communicate with the next generation. However, as their beliefs evolve – they will look very remote from what we would understand them to be in organised religion today.

Organised religion will also be affected in another way. Within Christianity, and it would be interesting to see if this is happening in Judaism as well, the growth of the church is coming through independent and Pentecostal churches who have a congregational polity. At one level this is individualism on just a bigger scale, and is a typical post modern phenomenon. These churches see themselves as being complete in themselves; they do not need anyone else to assist them, correct them, sustain them. In organised religion, we call the linking of congregations, denominationalism. The simple idea is at least of unity, let alone uniformity, within the one body, or denomination. The bishop or council of the church, represents that identity. This understanding of denominationalism is also dying. It is my experience that congregations just do not feel they need to belong with other churches, or participate in some common, historical or traditional structure of being the church. They certainly do not want to support central denominational coffers! Once within Christendom, it was important that the one church covered the land. The use of the word parish implied that every section of the countryside was divided into areas of the local congregation's, read also denomination's, area of responsibility. Congregations today within these denominations now do not see that necessarily as being important today. What is true for them, what they find meaningful, then that is what is important. This rising congregationalism is just another sign that people no longer see a need to belong. . . this time it is the congregation to the organised religion itself.

⁹ Robin Gill, **Church Going and Christian Ethics** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1999, 66.

All this throws up interesting challenges for organised religion; but it also throws up interesting challenges for society too. If this radical individualism persists, and the loss of belonging continues, we will have the scenario that the founders of sociology, Weber and Durkheim foresaw, of the individuals held together in the iron cage of bureaucracy.¹⁰

3. Organised Religion as an Institution

My second theme relates not so much as to what is happening in the next generation; but what is happening with institutions generally. Organised religion itself is struggling to cope as an institution within Australia society. In some respects this is because there is the lack of belonging, and there is this pre-eminence of individualistic thinking, but in other respects it is what is happening to institutions generally within Australia. Perhaps that iron cage of bureaucracy of Durkheim and Weber is already happening. To begin with organised religion, as an institution, is becoming over-regulated by the state. Congregations cringe when they get the letter from head office about the latest government requirement – privacy legislation, occupational safety and health, heritage legislation, working with children checks are just a sample of what is required now. All of this is independent of the prudent requirements what it takes to a well governed organisation. But there are more subtle attacks. The church as an institution once relied on that band of willing volunteers to do the task. As I have indicated, those who belong have dwindled, but those who remain are not qualified or prepared to bear the risks of running such an institution today. Just this last week I have been dealing with one of our institutions about their very expensive legal advice it received concerning the indemnification of their board members in the event of loss occasioned by their individual or corporate decision making. This was required by members of the board before they would act. People are put off being involved in what is still essentially a volunteer organisation. People will now sue religious bodies like they will sue their doctor, or local council or whoever, and even people within organised religion also will sue if they feel aggrieved and don't get their way. There are fewer people belonging, and of those who do belong, even fewer are willing to serve.

In recent times churches in Australia have been able to survive because they have been “smart” with their money and property. . . and as a result they have been able to buy the expertise required. Most religious bodies will have an investment fund of some sort, so one does not have to go to a bank to get one's finance. One now lends to one part of the organisation out of other assets another part holds . . . and make a profit. One may even lend to outsiders. Certainly one endeavours to invest wisely. Any profit that is made from these activities can go back into the church. These financial activities are now being increasingly regulated, taxed and any privileges that once existed for organised religion are being removed. This in turn jeopardises how churches can afford to be present as institutions within society. One has to ask what is the good being served? Some of the difficulties have been brought upon us through our own sinful action – child sexual abuse is the obvious example, however, government treatment of organised religion, or the bowls club or whatever on the level playing field of the market, does threaten many of our Australian institutions.

¹⁰ Kevin Ward, *op cit*, 69.

It is interesting there is one exception to this – and to a certain extent I do not begrudge it. Mass political parties have ended – people don't belong, but they are seen to be important for our democracy, so there is government funding for elections.

Also evident is the fact that insofar as the government wants to relate with aspects of Australian society it wants to do this with large, competent organisations. In the area of caring services, we within the Uniting Church have undergone a constant process of amalgamation of our smaller, boards, agencies to form ever larger organisations. Bureaucratically it is easier to deal with all institutions the same, regardless of whether they are for profit or not for profit, or operated by organised religion. Less people with more responsibility is the lot of organised religion. Perhaps this is some special pleading on my behalf, however, looking to the next generation – organised religion itself faces profound questions about its own viability and will find itself very diminished as it endeavours to be attractive to people who find belonging not really in their nature.

4. The Future?

I would like however, to conclude by saying these are exciting times for organised religion. With cultural Christianity, now becoming increasingly like cultural Judaism, my hope is that those who do belong within organised religion will find great meaning and hope in what they do, and indeed find belonging important. . . and not be put off by it all. And those who do belong, will truly exist for those who do not belong to them – to rephrase a favourite saying Archbishop William Temple. Organised religion will however, need to be flexible in its structures and consciously make belonging something that is worthwhile – and not just expect the next generation will want to come.