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978-0-521-67389-1 - Australian Soul: Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century

Gary Bouma

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## AUSTRALIAN SOUL

### Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century

*Australian Soul* challenges the idea that religious and spiritual life in Australia is in decline. This fascinating book describes the character of religious and spiritual life in Australia today, and argues that, far from petering out, religion and spirituality are thriving.

Gary Bouma, the leading expert on the state of religious life in Australia, provides the most up-to-date facts and figures and compares the 'tone' of our religious practices with those of other countries. Australians might be less vocal and more reticent about their religion than Americans are, but their religious and spiritual beliefs are no less potent. *Australian Soul* describes and analyses our religious and spiritual life in detail as well as providing a series of case studies that illustrate the range of practices and beliefs in Australia today.

*Australian Soul* predicts a vital future for religion and spirituality.

**Professor Gary Bouma** is head of the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University. He holds the UNESCO Chair in Interreligious and Intercultural Relations – Asia Pacific and is Chair of the Standing Committee on Ethics in Research Involving Humans. He is the author of numerous works on the interaction between religion and society in Western countries including Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

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## PREFACE

Even before September 11, 2001 religion and spirituality were gaining increasing attention and discussion both in Australia (Tacey 2000, 2003) and in other parts of the world (Anderson 2004; McGrath 2002; Martin 2002). Since then there has been a rapid increase in publications dealing with religion and spirituality, particularly those discussing Islam, Buddhism and global movements in the realm of the religious. This change has taken many by surprise. After all, according to the dominant sociological view of the last half of the twentieth century, religion, along with the state, was supposed to wither away as the successes of modern, secular rationalism in the form of science overcame the vicissitudes of life: poverty, illness and indeed death itself, thus making the religious, the mystical and the spiritual unnecessary. Death, plagues, genocides and the failure of attempts to bring about global peace, harmony and justice have radically undermined the underlying optimism of those assumptions. Secular humanism has not proven as satisfying as many thought it would be. The best evidence of this is the rise of other philosophies and world views, including religions and spiritualities, alongside a discernible reawakening of more traditional forms of the religious life. However, the return of the religious and spiritual is not merely a return to times past. This reawakening is taking place in a different sociocultural environment: a world characterised by the global movement of ideas, capital and people; and a world to which some are happy to apply the term 'postmodernity'; that is, a world that is radically different to modernity. While some prefer to speak of high modernity (Giddens 1997; Beckford 2003), the choice is a matter of taste and the argument not worth a candle as both groups agree that today is substantially different from the immediate post-war period and from the 1950s. For Australia, this postmodernity is also secular and post-Christendom.

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A secular, postmodern and post-Christendom society presents a different context for religious and spiritual life. The secularity of the twenty-first century is not anti-religious or irreligious, as it was in the twentieth century (Fenn 2001). Rather, according to Fenn, contemporary secularity is best seen as a social condition in which the religious and spiritual have moved out from the control of both the state and such formal organisations as the church. No longer strictly controlled, the forms taken by the religious and spiritual become increasingly varied, divisions between the forms previously assumed to be fixed blur and the ethical implications of belief are less clear. The implications of these changes for Australia's religious and spiritual life and for social policy are discussed in chapters 4 and 5 while the responses to these changes are examined in chapters 6 and 7.

While some scholars blench at the term 'postmodern' (Beckford 2003; Giddens 1997: 526–529) and argue that the degree of change does not warrant the claim to a radical break with the recent past, I find the concept useful in describing the social and cultural changes currently shaping Australia's religious and spiritual life. Many of those who reject the use of the term 'postmodern' react understandably to some of the excesses in the early formulation of this term. Others who object are often either American scholars whose sociocultural context is not postmodern but appropriately described as a high modern industrial and imperial, or European scholars whose religious context is still subject to much higher levels of state control to constrain diversity. Australian society provides an opportunity to examine the workings of twenty-first-century secular postmodernity in a post-Christendom context.

This book is for people who want to understand Australians and the nature of twenty-first-century religious and spiritual life in Australia. Australian society can be seen as post-empire, post-colonial, post-modern, post-ecumenical, post-secular and post-family. As a result of this unique social structure and culture Australians experience religion and express spirituality in distinct ways.

This book is also intended for students of sociology and theology as much as it is intended for those who work as clergy: priests, pastors, imams and leaders of religious communities; indeed anyone who seeks to shape, nurture or develop Australian religiosity. This includes counsellors, social planners and marketers – anyone who is interested in the nature of Australian life.

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Most particularly, this book is for sociologists. Understanding the nature and operation of Australian religion and spirituality is important to an understanding of Australian society. Some sociologists of the late twentieth century failed to notice the religious and spiritual in Australian life because they confused it with what happens, or was supposed to happen, in churches or other formally organised forms of the religious and spiritual. Few sociologists have taken seriously the religious and spiritual life of Australia, often because their expectations have been shaped by secular, anti-religious social theories on the one hand or by negative comparisons between Australian and American religious activity on the other.

I take sociology to be that discipline that seeks to find in differences or changes in the qualities, quantities and arrangements of sociocultural contexts partial explanations for some patterns in human life. After a discussion of the nature of the religious and spiritual in chapter 1 this book describes the qualities (chapter 2) and quantities (chapter 3) of Australian religious and spiritual life, including the way they have been shaped by their sociocultural origins. Then the book explores those factors at work to change Australian religion and spirituality (chapters 4 and 5) and the responses being made to these changes (chapters 6 and 7). Chapter 8 explores current issues of religion and public policy. Finally, chapter 9 revisits the question of hope in the light of the analysis of Australia's religious and spiritual life. In addition to data from a variety of sources and my own experiences, I have included a number of spirituality vignettes or case studies to provide an exposure to the variety of spiritualities current in Australian society.

Gary Bouma  
Ash Wednesday, 2006

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A vote of thanks to Dr Sylvie Shaw, who provided several of the case studies about Australian spirituality that are interspersed through the book to give rich examples of the variety of Australian religious and spiritual life. Thanks to Mark Manolopoulos who diligently read several drafts, commented thoroughly and provided a case study of his own. Anna Halafoff has provided a helpful Buddhist perspective at the end. Finally, thanks to Dr Ian Dobson and Naomi Berman for producing the tables in chapter 3.

I am also deeply indebted to my father, Dr Donald H. Bouma, from whom I first learned about sociology, theology and critical thinking about their relationship to each other, to life and to society.

Last and foremost I am indebted to my wife, the Reverend Patricia V. Bouma, from whom I have learned a great deal about spiritualities, contemporary and traditional, and how their various forms have many mothers whose progeny are often hard to distinguish.