Candidate’s Statement

This work was an original piece of research, which investigated data-sets made available through the Australian Bureau of Statistics, The Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Social Science Data Archives.

The data sets provided by these bodies are

Australian Bureau of Statistics

Census Data for the 1991 and 1996 Censuses compiled in a format requested by the researcher.

Australian Institute of Family Studies

The Australian Family Formation Project 1991 Stage Two
The Australian Living Standards Survey 1991
These contained limited data-sets of each survey and were compiled in a format requested by the researcher.

Social Science Data Archives

The Religion in Australia Survey 1966
The Australian Family Formation Project 1981 Stage One
The International Social Science Survey 1993

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John Malcolm Armstrong
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“Until quite recently, it was easier in traditionally Christian countries to keep Sunday holy because it was an almost universal practice and because, even in civil society, Sunday rest was considered a fixed part of the work schedule. Today, however, even in those countries which give legal sanction to the festive character of Sunday, changes in socioeconomic conditions have often led to profound modifications of social behaviour and hence of the character of Sunday. The custom of the ‘weekend’ has become more widespread, a weekly period of respite, spent perhaps far from home and often involving participation in cultural, political or sporting activities which are usually held on free days. This social and cultural phenomenon is by no means without its positive aspects if, while respecting true values, it can contribute to people’s development and to the advancement of the life of society as a whole. All of this responds not only to the need for rest, but also to the need for celebration which is inherent in our humanity. Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a ‘weekend’, it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that it can no longer see ‘the heavens’. Hence, though ready to celebrate, they are really incapable of doing so.”

‘Dies Domini’ Paragraph 1, Section 4
John Paul II, August 1998
Dedicated to the Memory of Robert (Bob) Harold Rowland Armstrong and Ann Josephine Patricia Vella

FIDELIS
Abstract

The period between 1966 and 1996 was a period of great change for society in Australia. Two particular aspects of that change have been highlighted in this study. It will examine the changing patterns of attendance at religious services and religious affiliation over this time period. In particular it examines the connection of attendance and belief patterns, which have changed during this period, with particular reference to Christian religious groups.

By examining data from each of the Censuses in the period between 1966 and 1996 it was possible to note three fundamental changes in the patterns of religious affiliation. The first was the movement away from patterns of Christian affiliation to no religious affiliation. The second was the shift of migration patterns which drew substantially from Europe in the period prior to 1971 to a pattern with higher levels of migration from Asia and Oceania. The third saw a decline in Christian affiliation among the 15-24 age group.

After analysing this affiliation data a weekly average religious attendance measure was composed to compare data from each of the social science surveys. This made it possible to examine generational trends by age and sex which resulted from changing patterns of affiliation, immigration, stability of residence and marital status. Also a case study of the Canberra parishes in the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn was undertaken to examine the particular impact that these changes had on a particular religious grouping.

In studying these indicators it is believed that the change in patterns of Australian religious attendance and affiliation while influenced by life course events has also been substantially affected by issues of generational change. These changes
not only produce lower levels of religious attendance but also have significant impact on aspects of society which have sustained communal life.
Preface

In a time of great change often the starting point for reflection is on how a person changes in his life. My initial interest in this topic reflects some of my own spiritual journey. When I was born my parents made the decision that none of their children would be baptised. Part of this decision arose from some disillusionment with the Church of England, which they saw as being particularly partisan in its approach to the Second World War, and also the belief that as children we should be able to make our own choices about religion when we reached maturity. This was the first significant event in my spiritual life that my parents allowed me the choice of how I would make my own religious commitment.

As I grew up in England, I came under the influence of various religious traditions. My grandmother and older sister took me to Baptist Sunday school. I went to the local Church of England Primary School and became involved in the local Scouting movement. At Grammar school, the headmaster was a lay preacher for the local Methodist Church and my close friends were Jewish, Catholic, Hindu and Atheist.

I witnessed the conversion of my sister to Catholicism and this had a profound effect on my own conversion. This was probably the second significant event in the desire to belong to a religious organisation and to define my religious belief. Subsequent to this decision came the first thought of issues of vocation and priesthood which I shared with a Muslim friend, a Ugandan Asian who had escaped the murderous regime of Idi Amin, who suggested that I could always become an Imam!
The third significant event in my spiritual life was the migration to Australia where I found that the Catholic Church in Australia and the attitude to religion was quite different from that in England. During that time I lapsed from regular practice but still maintained a strong sense of Catholic principles. In most cases it was the Eucharist and Reconciliation which allowed me to remain connected with the church during that time. Also it was a period in which I was called to reflect upon what my faith meant. This was influenced by living with people from diverse religious backgrounds and experience. The influence of meditation, introduced to me by an atheist friend, allowed me to reflect on what way my life was going. Also his further challenge as a result of the 1981 Census that I was not really a Catholic if I did not practice caused me to consider what my faith meant to me. At the same time my parents made the choice to become Catholic and this made the consideration of discovering what they had found more engaging for myself.

The fourth significant event in my spiritual life was the decision about my own life choices in my commitment towards others. The choice of entering seminary followed a realisation of what I considered important and also how I could best help others. This choice far from removing me from the life of the world engaged me deeper in trying to understand the religious and social issues of our time. The choice in seminary allowed me to make a decision in my life, which would allow me to experience both satisfaction and joy. What would be the wellspring and life source that I could draw on for others and myself?

The fifth significant choice is the living out of that commitment as a priest. This is still a work in progress but it is a reflection that in my life there is a struggle not just to be a cipher for an organisation but to be a person who is authentic in my
own spiritual life. The question does not seem to be defined by terms that label my religious identity but what I bring as person to give substance to that identity.

While this study reflects on the two important expressions of religious identity and practice it also points to a time of great religious change as people grow in their understanding of what it means to be who they are. In a time of change these can be important indicators of how people see themselves and their connection to institutions of religious thought. However, as in all studies they are limited by their ability to define a person’s relationship to those institutions. It appears evident that as I conclude this study there would also be great value in undertaking a study of people’s religious history to gain an understanding of how their life has changed and continues to change.
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