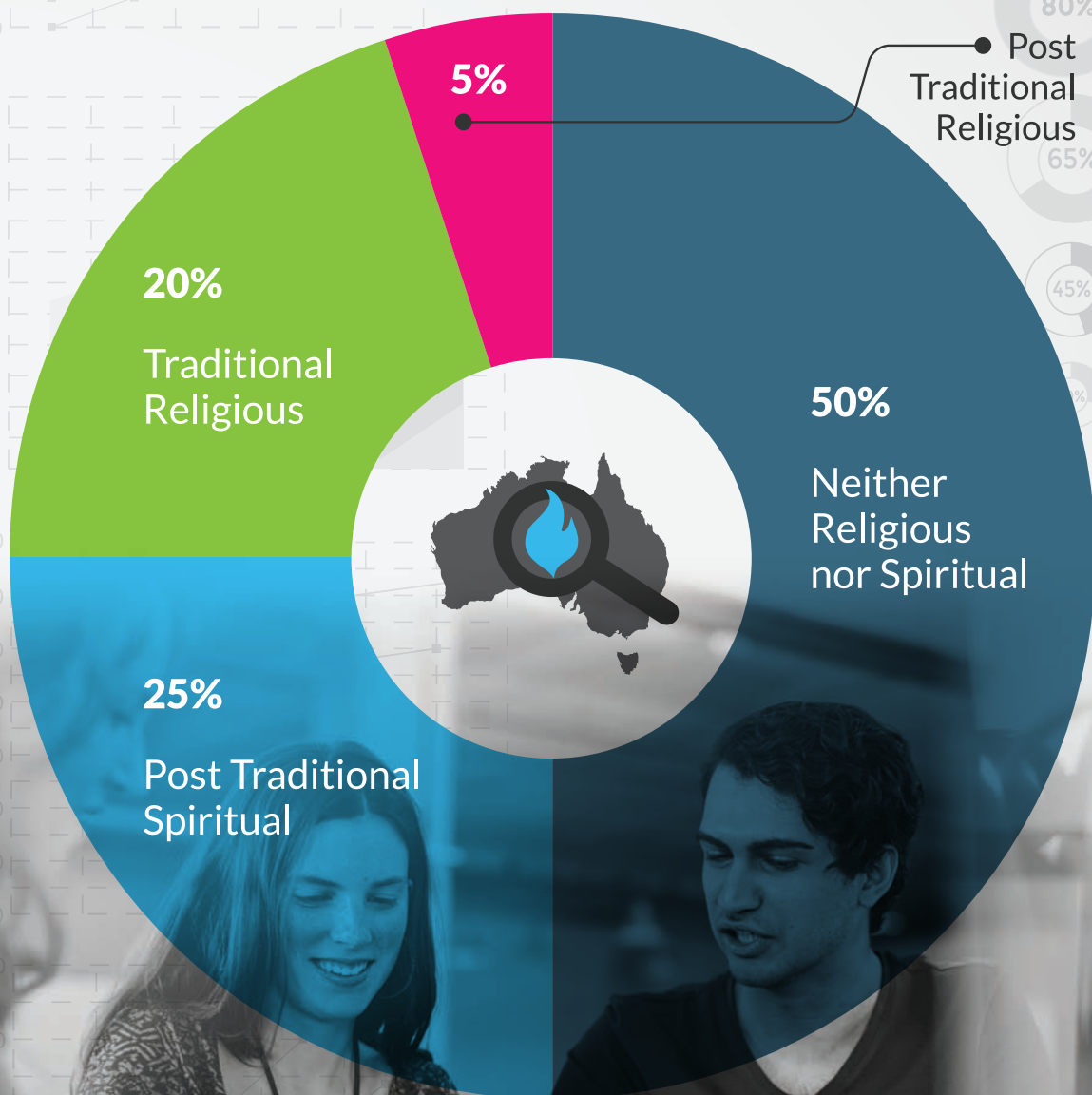


CHARTING THE FAITH OF AUSTRALIANS

Thirty Years in the Christian Research Association



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Charting the Faith of Australians:

Thirty Years in the Christian Research Association

by
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Christian Research Association

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Abbreviations

ACU - Australian Catholic University	LOTE - language other than English
CALD - culturally and linguistically diverse	LRIN - Lausanne Researchers International Network
CRA - Christian Research Association	NCLS - National Church Life Survey
ITIM - Interchurch Trade and Industry Mission	UCA - Uniting Church in Australia
	UKCH - <i>UK Christian Handbook</i>

Chapter 11.

The Christian Research Association in the Media

*Peter Bentley**

The CRA has achieved significant prominence over the last thirty years because of Philip's wide-ranging contacts and ability to connect with a range of media interests and speak on a voluminous number of research areas related to faith in Australia.

Broadcast Media

Philip has been a regular radio commentator on ABC Religion programs, including interviews and commentary on issues in conversation with John Cleary on Sunday Night. There have also been strong connections with Rachael Kohn's program, *The Spirit of Things* (linking into the Spirituality research that has been a centrepiece of CRA for over 30 years).

Following the 2013 Growing Youth Spirituality Conference at Tabor College in Melbourne at which Rachael Kohn spoke, a whole program was devoted to youth spirituality in which she interviewed Philip.

There have also been contemporary news reports on *The Religion Report*, often in relation to new CRA publications, as well as interviews in secular media outlets.

Philip has appeared on ABC's *Compass* program, notably on the three part series that examined the changing face of religion in Australia after the 20th century: *Secular Soul*.

In the first episode *Spiritual Market Place* (23 June 2002) he is introduced in the following way, and the excerpt and response illustrates Philip's status and ability to succinctly comment on questions.

Narrator: Philip Hughes is also a keen observer of these changes. As well as being a Uniting Church minister, he's Director of the Christian Research Association, the main church group crunching the numbers measuring spiritual practice and beliefs. He confirms the move away from organised religion to personalised belief.
[and then goes on to comment]

Philip Hughes: From the 60's and 70's partly because of the influence of globalisation, partly because of the great range of alternatives that the mass media opened people to, partly because of the decline in local community life, partly because of the waves of migration and so



Peter Bentley at a CRA Bookstall (Photo by Philip Hughes)

* Peter Bentley was first employed by the CRA in 1990. His work continued on a casual basis after 2000, writing for *Pointers* and assisting with research projects. He has recently been president of Australasian Religious Press Association (ARPA). He is also director of the Assembly of Confessing Congregations within the Uniting Church in Australia.

on, that culture became something that individuals made, and, to a much greater extent, created themselves.

Another significant Compass program was the 11th November 2007 episode on the 30th Anniversary of the Uniting Church, with Philip providing analysis and commentary throughout, following opinions and comments from a variety of UCA members.

A growing area of contact since the 1990s has been the Christian radio network, with interviews on a range of stations including the 'local' Melbourne station Light FM, with Philip being able to provide specialised comment in a more defined Christian context, often helping to broaden understanding of the role of religion in Australia.



Philip Hughes in an ABC radio studio

Print Media

By far the major reference media point for Philip has been in print, especially the major city and regional newspapers. Usually, one interview or report was featured in a variety of publications, syndicated through major city newspapers, as well as regional and local newspapers, and then related stories usually of more depth were provided in church magazines and religious publications.

It would be difficult to quantify the references and mentions in Church publications, as this was vast during the 1990s with publication of the Religious Community Profile series, and continued on a regular basis as publications sought to include statistics of relevance to their own denominational context or situation. The CRA studies on rural life and churches were especially used in Uniting Church newspapers, and spirituality studies reported in Anglican circles, including *The Melbourne Anglican* (TMA). Melbourne Anglican media also featured Philip in a significant look at youth spirituality as recently as this year via You Tube (February 11, 2016).

Secular newspapers which have reported on the work of the Christian Research Association include *The Courier Mail*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Advertiser*, *The West Australian*, and *The Australian*.

Prior to 2005, there were many regular links between the dedicated religious affairs reporters in newspapers and Philip as a key person to provide comment on contemporary religious matters. Sadly the specialist role of religion reporter quickly disappeared from most major city based newspapers, with Barney Zwartz, the last key writer retiring at the end of 2013.

The lack of specialist reporting in the wider secular media has meant that the role of the ABC religion department is even more significant now. One of the difficulties here is the increasing trend within the ABC to forgo specialised religious reporting in favour of a generalist orientation, thereby losing even more of a base for specialist commentators such as Philip to contribute; as opposed to more general public figures who have less detailed knowledge and understanding.

There is no doubt however, that there has been and continues to be, wide interest in Australian society about religion and spirituality. A sample trail of news stories, interviews and reports illustrates the many themes, projects and ideas that Philip has

explored, and the way Philip was often able to offer comment on areas of faith and life. Of special importance has been Philip's wider work of critique, helping to correct or challenge erroneous ideas and thoughts about religious practice in Australia.

Through the CRA's continuing and new work and Philip's own continuing research I hope that there will be sustained opportunity to provide thoughtful comment and reflection in the wider and now convergent media sphere, and I will offer further comment about this in the conclusion.

Faith in Australia and the Faith of Australians

This is one of the main areas that Philip was called on to elucidate and provide a contemporary opinion and comment. Quite often it was related to a CRA publication, and any researcher or reader of religion in Australia would be aware of how influential and wide-spread CRA publications were, especially in the 1990s. It was during this time that the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research produced 12 books on the major religious communities in Australia: Anglican, Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Hindu and Sikh, Jewish, Lutheran, Muslim, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Uniting Church communities. The resulting newspaper coverage was extensive and also linked into more extensive reviews and material in the official religious publications of the profiled faith.

In the article 'Fewer priests have to make do on a wing and a prayer' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Kelly Burke, Religious Affairs Writer, April 10 2003) we learn of changes in the leadership of faiths in Australia.

Overall, however, the number of Australians working as religious leaders has risen by 4.5 per cent over the past six years, to a total of 14,245 clerics.

Dr Philip Hughes, the CRA's senior researcher, says this increase is attributable to the strengthening of religions other than Christianity during this time, largely through immigration. Christian leadership has risen less than 3 per cent, slower than the rate of population growth.

More recently, the Religion and Occupation study that highlighted lay context for occupation in connection with religious practice achieved wider attention as illustrated by the article "Why our bush is the soul of God's country" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 1, 2009). Andrew West extensively used Philip's comments to illustrate the spiritual dimension of country people, with the following illustrative of a succinct journalist's sentence gleaned from an interview: "FARMERS are the most religious folk in the country, with almost half attending church at least once a month, a new study of Australian spirituality reveals."

His role in analysis and critique was highlighted more recently in on-line coverage in relation to a recent study on religion and altruism. "New study claims religious children are judgmental" (November 7, 2015 News.com.au)

Christian Research Association's Reverend Dr Philip Hughes disputed the claims made in the report [Current Biology]. "Religion is very different and particularly in the United States, it's very different from Australia," he said.

Dr Hughes said there were two types of religion — intrinsic religion where somebody has made the commitment inside themselves and extrinsic religion where people are more focused on the social practices."

No Religion, Agnosticism and Atheism

A key area of interest for the secular media was the increase in 'no religion' and the increasing publicity given to the 'new atheism' and its high priests. Philip has helped, during the last 15 decade in particular, to give a fuller explanation to the religious census statistics. A full example is provided in the article: 'Faith no more – in the city of churches' (Andrew Fenton, *The Advertiser*, April 11, 2009)

Phillip Hughes, from the Christian Research Association, also says the data is flawed. "Some people who write 'no religion' are spiritual and religious; they just don't wish to identify with religious groups". Hughes says the rate of atheism hasn't changed much since the 1970s: what has occurred has been a "drift to secularisation". "People are adopting a non-religious approach to life, but that's different from atheism because they don't think there is no God, they just choose to live without regard to the question," he says.

Hughes says a large group of people don't know what to think and just try and muddle through without dwelling on the subject too much. "Secular by default, not atheist by commitment," is how he puts it. "Militant atheism is a product of the 1970s," he says. "(The AFA) are a group who formed in the 1970s and it was part of the rejection of religious traditions that happened then with a fair degree of passion and anger, and the feeling the church and faith had let people down and was misleading people." He says younger atheists - most of whom have never believed - don't have the same anger."

The Ageing of the Church and Patterns of Church Attendance and Changing Church Life

A major area of comment has been over many years has been related to the ageing of the traditional mainline denominations and the newer Christian groups.

Linda Morris' 2007 article headlined the general context and provides a good example as well as illustrating in the headline a certain form of church-speak to highlight a point: "Churches struggle as old guard promoted to glory" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 1, 2007).

The number of Australians identifying themselves as Christian will plummet over the next 20 years as an ageing generation of dedicated churchgoers dies out, analysis of census figures shows. Painting a bleak future for Christian faiths, the Christian Research Association predicts the ranks of non-believers will steadily grow while there will not be enough young converts to replace elderly congregations. The research also questions one of the few success stories of Christianity, the Pentecostal churches, challenging assertions that they are hotbeds of Christian recruitment.

Philip was well-known for comment on a variety of chaplaincy work and research over the last 30 years and recently he has received coverage (not all positive as well) for expressing opinions based around the research on school chaplaincy. He weighed into the debate about the helpfulness or otherwise of school chaplaincy as the following letter illustrates.

'Support for chaplaincy' (*SMH Letters*, June 24, 2014)

Samantha Chung (Letters, June 21) asks about research into chaplaincy. Professor Margaret Sims and I at Edith Cowan University conducted a major research project in 2009 on the effectiveness of chaplaincy through a national survey of principals and chaplains and 21 case studies where staff of schools, parents and students were interviewed.

The research found that chaplaincy provided opportunities and support for students to talk through issues or deal with problems. It encouraged moral values and responsible behaviour

and contributed to the morale of the school. It was effective because chaplains proactively built relationships, did not have teaching or disciplinary roles, and worked holistically, connecting with families and communities. Chaplains referred students to counsellors for psychological assistance where needed. Ninety-eight per cent of principals who had had chaplains at their school said chaplaincy was important and wanted government funding to continue.

Another area of comment has been in relation to immigration. In an article entitled 'Asian followers give life to Christian church' Barney Zwartz and Peter Cai wrote:

AUSTRALIA'S churches have been transformed over the past decade or two and increasingly it is Christians with Asian heritage who are keeping them vibrant.

The Christian Research Association director, Philip Hughes, said second-generation Asian-Australian Christians were increasingly moving to mainstream churches.

"They are far more willing than most Anglos to accept the strong authority system they find in Pentecostal and other charismatic churches, which are a good stepping point away from traditional Chinese churches," Dr Hughes said (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 9, 2012).

Non-traditional Religion

It is certainly worth highlighting that Philip did not stop at being able to comment on traditional Christian groups. In these two examples of the 'play on words' headline, Philip achieved wide coverage in Australia, and also an interview in the *Financial Times* (UK): 'No rest for the Wicca' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Kelly Burke, June 30 2003).

Peter Jensen pities them, George Pell loathes them and Fred Nile curses them. But the neo-Pagans continue to move from strength to strength. The last census proved nature religions, and primarily Wicca and Paganism, were among the fastest growing in Australia. And now the Melbourne-based Christian Research Association (CRA) has carried out the first in-depth analysis of the religious group that accounts for more than 24,000 Australians. According to that study, the profile of the modern Australian Pagan is a female Melburnian under the age of 35, Australian-born, living in a de facto relationship, with a university degree. What is harder to analyse is the rising political force of Paganism...

The Reverend Philip Hughes, a researcher with the CRA, believes it may be linked to Melbourne's less materialistic ethos. "For many, Wicca involves a protest against the material world, against powerlessness, against the oppression of women, and against repressive attitudes to sexuality. And Wicca can be a protest specifically against Christianity, which is seen as having failed women in particular.

The article, 'Having a spell with witchcraft proves popular for women' (Barney Zwartz, October 16, 2005, *The Sun-Herald*), included the following comment:

Dr Philip Hughes of the Christian Research Association said the numbers of people participating in nature religions - mostly witchcraft and paganism - rose by 140 per cent between 1996 and 2001. Agnostics were on the rise too, he said. For many, nature religions were seen as environmentally friendly.

The Changing Future

One of the strengths of CRA's media connection has been its non-denominational base, and Philip's wide understanding of the church in general has been a centre-piece of this. To date, this has meant that he has often been seen as a source of factual analysis and comment. It has been evident though that over the last few years, there have been an

increasing number of organisations that have had input into the diverse media scene in Australia on religious matters (See P. Bentley, *The Search for a Public Christianity, Pointers*, Volume 25, No. 4, December 2015). This has also reflected a change in the orientation of the media from religious news reporting toward finding opinion and comment, often on more controversial and contemporary issues. One of the challenges for all Christian organisations will be trying to provide serious and grounded factual comment in a more ‘reality TV’ environment.

This certainly links to an area that is needing more attention and will undoubtedly receive attention, namely the provision of religious commentary through social media. At present the CRA has not connected here as much as it has done with traditional media, but the field is ripe.

Philip has done the CRA and the wider church a service by producing a wealth of material, including short reports and items that are tailor-made for transmission by Facebook and Twitter. I can see a daily Tweet with an interesting religious statistic provided by CRA, connecting with a Facebook story, photos and links to more substantial research pieces. In particular, I envisage a regular *Pointers* article series, helping to outline in a current historical way how the faith of Australians has changed over these years of the CRA’s existence.

Conclusion

One can never underestimate the impact of Philip’s media ministry as probably millions of people, including people in overseas countries through conferences and seminars have read a comment, heard him on radio or seen him on a panel on TV. Philip has provided a service to the whole of the church, as well as other faiths, by presenting an academic reasoned approach, always within a pastoral understanding, and at all times in a way that a lay person in the field of religion could understand. Religious academia was never for Philip a disconnected discourse, but a profound way to network and relate to contemporary life and I have no doubt this living networking will continue for Philip for many years to come.