



Bible Engagement among Young Australians: Patterns and Social Drivers

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Executive Summary

Who Reads the Bible?

This document summarises the findings of a range of studies of young people in relation to patterns and social drivers of Bible reading. The most comprehensive study of the religion and spirituality of young Australians is the *Spirit of Generation Y Project* (2002 to 2008) and the associated *Schools Spirituality Project* which involved a national random telephone survey, web-based surveys in schools, and hundreds of in-depth face-to-face interviews. Other surveys used include the *Search Institute Survey of Spiritual Development* (2008) and the *Wellbeing and Security Survey* conducted by Edith Cowan University, Deakin University, Anglicare and NCLS Research.

Conservatively interpreted, the surveys show that around 4 per cent of young people read the Bible daily, another 6 per cent read it weekly, and 15 to 20 per cent read it very occasionally. About 70 per cent never read it. The frequency of Bible reading is a little greater among older young people, although this is probably a result of changing history patterns over generations and not related to age.

Of those who read the Bible daily or weekly, most attend church services and youth activities, such as a Bible study group. Most also have parents and friends who attend church frequently. Those who read it frequently are mostly involved in Protestant Evangelical or Charismatic denominations, such as the Pentecostals, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Seventh-day Adventists.

Attitudes to Reading the Bible

Most of those who read the Bible frequently have made a personal commitment to God, feel close to God, and expect God to give definite answers to their prayers and specific guidance. They are reading the Bible as a means of communication, expecting God to speak to them through the Bible.

Those who see faith primarily as providing them with values for life, who do not put the same emphasis on access to God, or expect God to intervene in the daily events of life, read the Bible less frequently.

There is some evidence that a few young people turn to the Bible because life is not going well. They look for comfort and hope within the text when they are 'hurting deep inside'. About 1 per cent of young people who do not have a connection with a church turn to the Bible, often as part of a search for a resource to help them through the challenges of life.

When asked about barriers to reading the Bible, many young people said it was hard to understand, that it had contradictions in it, and did not fit well with their experience. When asked if "all the miracles stories in the Bible really happened", 8 per cent felt that it was definitely true and 12 per cent that it was generally true. Many find it difficult to believe in miracles.

Those who read the Bible have different values to those who do not. They place more importance on the spiritual life and less on excitement in life. They also place greater emphasis on helping

others and on social justice. It was also found that they contribute significantly more hours of voluntary work and community service.

Major Influences and Social Drivers of Young People's Attitudes to the Bible

Among most young people, religious faith is seen as having little significance to their thinking about life. Overall, about 9 per cent of students in church-run schools said it was a very important influence.

The generation that grew up in the late 1960s and 1970s had a very different worldview to previous generations. Many members of this generation rejected traditions, including the traditional authority of religion, and many institutions including the institution of the Church. It was influenced by many factors, including changed patterns of child-rearing and family life. It is likely that childhood experiences, influenced by television, new patterns of education, and living in a pluralistic world, were also significantly changed.

Technology is one of the drivers of social change. It has changed the nature of community, which is now largely based on electronic communications, with occasional face-to-face meeting rather than being dependent on face-to-face meetings. It has meant that young people network with people of common interests around the globe rather than join face-to-face organisations in their neighbourhood.

Knowledge has become accessible, but is accessed primarily in 'bite-sized' quantities, as needed to solve particular problems. Audio-visual media has, to a significant extent, replaced books as the main source of knowledge.

There has been increasing control over health outcomes, with people now living longer. Most people focus on this life, rather than on life after death. This sense of personal control is likely to develop further, and may have the consequence of people expecting that they can change whatever does not suit them, including their appearance and their relationships.

Threats to life and to an enjoyable future also have a major impact on social change. Recent terrorist attacks of civilians on Western countries have challenged the sense of security. While increasing people's awareness of religion, it has led to many seeing religious extremism as harmful.

However, the major threat to the world is currently seen as being environmental. Currently, solutions to this threat are seen primarily as coming through changes in technology, such as the development of renewable energy sources. However, if the human spirit and religious faith were also seen to provide part of the solution, there could be a renewed emphasis given to the place of religion in the Western world.

A third set of social drivers has to do with media, advertising and popular culture. Analysis of popular culture in Britain suggests that there is a common story-line in young people's view of the world, which the researchers described as a 'Happy Midi-narrative'. A similar picture of the personal world of Australian young people has been drawn using survey results. What most people want is an enjoyable life, including feeling good about themselves, having good friends and times of excitement. When life is not going well, most young people turn first to music. However,

religion remains a resource for some.

The major cause of distress and hurt among young people is breakdown in family relationships. There is some social data which suggests that there is a widening gap between well-functioning and dysfunctional families. While those in families which function well may feel little need to turn to the Bible or religion, many of those in dysfunctional families tend to see religion only as a source of welfare, and more likely to turn to alcohol and drugs to deal with the pain of life.

Implications

Bible reading is largely a product of communities which value the Bible as a means by which God speaks to the individual. If these communities are to be developed, then efforts need to be placed on the building of youth groups in which Bible study is a significant component. Providing materials or developing programs that encourage the formation and operation of such groups is likely to be a helpful strategy. This development will most likely occur in a theological context which stresses the interventions of God in the life of the individual.

For other young people who read the Bible occasionally, it is important to provide ways in which the 'message' of the Bible is shown to be relevant to life. Most young people will dismiss the Bible as irrelevant and out-dated, unless they are shown the enduring principles relevant to daily life. Materials focussed on themes, such as 'what the Bible says about relationships', may be helpful in these contexts.

More research is needed to understand more about the catalysts of Bible reading and the ways it is interpreted and applied to life among different groups of young people.

1. Sources of Information

The aim of this study is to contemporary research and literature for information that sheds light on patterns of engagement young people currently have with the Bible. No new data was collected for this study, but a range of data previously gathered was re-examined. Some of the data in this document has never been released before, although none of the studies are new.

The most comprehensive and reliable study of religious faith and spirituality among young people is provided by the *Spirit of Generation Y Project*. This study of the religion and spirituality of young people aged 13 to 24 was conducted by a team of researchers from Monash University, the Australian Catholic University, and the Christian Research Association between 2002 and 2008. It involved both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The study began with 80 in-depth interviews with a wide range of young people about life, values and their attitudes to religion and spirituality. In 2005, a national telephone survey of young Australians was conducted. Young people throughout Australia were randomly selected and asked a range of questions about life, values and religious faith. There were quotas of 400 young people in the 13 to 15 year age group, 400 in the 16 to 18 year group, and 400 who were aged between 19 and 24 years of age. In addition, a control group of 400 people aged between 25 and 59 years was asked the same set of questions.

The third stage of the study involved another 60 interviews in which a number of young people interviewed in the first stage were re-interviewed. A few additional people were also interviewed. These interviews took place two years after the earlier interviews, providing a longitudinal element to the study of young people, as well as allowing us to follow up in greater depth some of the questions that had arisen from earlier stages of the study.

Around the time this study was being carried out, several school systems commissioned the Christian Research Association to conduct studies with their students. The results could then be compared with the national picture being developed. Both interviews and surveys were conducted in Catholic schools in the Dioceses of Parramatta and Broken Bay, in Lutheran Schools in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and in a few government schools in Victoria where chaplains had been employed. A little later, similar surveys were also conducted in Catholic schools in the Rockhampton Diocese, and two other Salesian Catholic schools. These additional studies, in total, provided approximately 270 additional interviews and surveys of 5500 young people. These supplementary studies are referred to as the *Schools Spirituality Project*. While the sample is not representative of the Australian population, the data gathered in this project is immensely valuable in showing relationships and patterns between various attitudes, beliefs and practices.

While telephone surveys are one of the best means of obtaining responses from young people and are frequently used by government and universities, we suspect that many young people put their best side forward in interviews, even those conducted over the telephone. Web-based surveys tend to produce more honest answers. However, while it is easy to obtain web-based responses from school students, it is difficult to obtain random surveys of young people who have completed their schooling using this method.

In 2002, a survey was conducted by Edith Cowan University, Deakin University, Anglicare and NCLS

Research. This survey, known as the *Wellbeing and Security Survey*, also included about 80 questions relating to religion and spirituality. It surveyed about 1500 randomly selected Australian adults, including a random sample of young people in the 18 to 29 age group. While it provides some useful data about these young adults, it tells us nothing about younger teenagers.

Another recent study of the spirituality of young people was the Search Institute's *Study of Spiritual Development*, an international study conducted in eight countries. The Christian Research Association organised this study for Australia and Thailand. The study included about 150 questions many of which related to spiritual and religious practices and beliefs. A random sample was not required of this survey. Rather, the Christian Research Association ensured a wide range of young people completed the questionnaire. A number of Lutheran schools, a Uniting Church school, young people in youth groups and at university took part in 2008. The total sample of Australian students was just under 900. Again, it is not possible to generalise from this study to the Australian population, but it is possible to look at the relationships between responses to different questions in the study.

2. National Patterns of Bible Reading

The *National Telephone Survey* that was part of the Spirit of Generation Y study is the only accurate source of information about the national patterns of Bible reading among young Australians as it is the only study that examined the responses of a random selection of young Australians. As shown in Table 1 (below), it found that, among young people between the ages of 13 and 24, 5 per cent said they read the Bible daily, 7.6 per cent read it weekly, 14.8 per cent said they read it occasionally, and 23.8 per cent said they never read it. Unfortunately, 49 per cent of the respondents were not asked the question about how often they read the Bible. These young people had indicated that they did not believe in God, and a member of the research team felt it was inappropriate to ask them about religious practices if they had already rejected belief in God. It was likely, then, that of those 49 per cent who were not asked about their Bible reading habits most would not have read the Bible frequently if at all.

Table 1. Frequency of Bible Reading Among Young People 13 to 24

Frequency of Bible Reading	Percentage of Australians Aged 13 to 24
Daily	5.0%
Weekly	7.6%
Occasionally	14.8%
Never	23.8%
Not asked (because not believe in God)	49.0%

Source: National Telephone Survey for The Spirit of Gen Y, 2005.

Between 2005 and 2008, more than 5350 students completed spirituality surveys in their schools. Most of these students were in independent or Catholic schools. These web-based surveys also asked questions about Bible reading. Four per cent of the students indicated that they had read the Bible frequently within the last year. Another 6 per cent of students indicated that they read it occasionally and 19 per cent said they had read it once or twice.

These results from the *Schools Spirituality Project*, then, are similar to those from the *National Telephone Survey*. Conservatively interpreted, they indicate that about 4 per cent of young people read the Bible daily or very frequently. Another 6 or 7 per cent read it from time to time. In other words, about 10 per cent of young people read the Bible with some frequency. Between 15 and 20 per cent read it very occasionally, and around 70 per cent never read it.

Differences by Age

The *National Telephone Survey* suggests that young people between 19 and 24 read the Bible more frequently than young people of secondary school age as shown in Table 2. It is quite

possible that these differences are purely the result of the random selection of young people. On the other hand, they may be indicative of real trends. There are two possible reasons for the differences. The first could be that older young people take a greater interest in religion, and specifically Bible reading, than secondary school age children. If this is indeed correct, then we would expect an increase in Bible reading amongst those young people of secondary school age who were surveyed in their post-school years. A second possible reason is that there are differences by generation, due to the fact that they were born at a different period in history.

Table 2. The Frequency of Bible Reading Among Young People by Age Group

Frequency of Bible Reading	13 to 15 Year Olds	16 to 18 Year Olds	19 to 24 Year Olds
Daily	3.5%	3.1%	6.7%
Weekly	5.9%	8.5%	7.9%
Occasionally	15.9%	13.6%	14.8%
Never	24.5%	22.0%	24.3%
Not asked	50.2%	52.8%	46.3%

Source: National Telephone Survey, 2005.

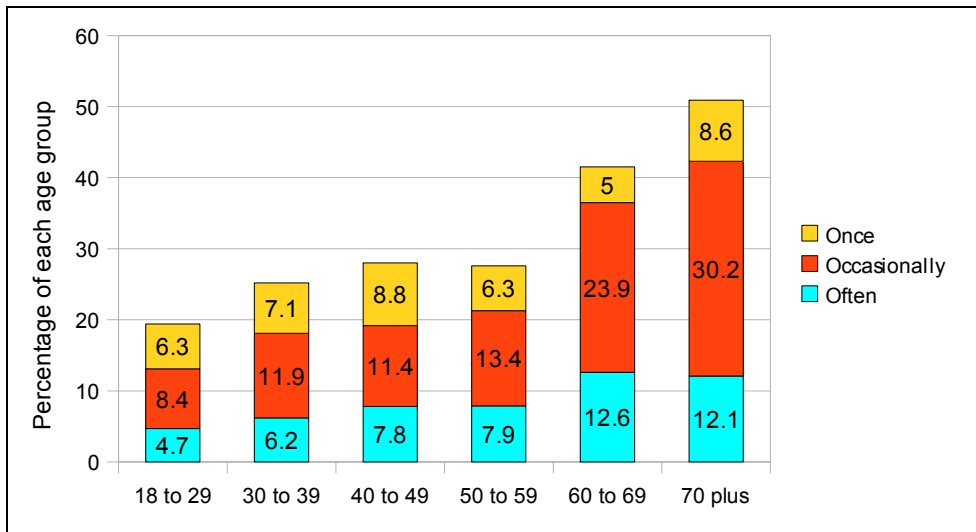
There is some evidence to support the idea that the differences are due to generation rather than age group. The most significant influence on religious practice among young people is the practice of their parents (Hughes 2007, p.178). In the control group of the *National Telephone Survey*, older people, aged between 45 and 59 years, read the Bible more frequently than those aged between 25 and 44 years. This suggests that the higher level of Bible reading among the 19 to 24 year group may be due to the higher levels of Bible reading among their parents who would be aged around 45 to 59 years. People who would be in the age group of parents of younger teenagers were reading the Bible less frequently, and hence, their children would also tend to read it less frequently.

The data suggests that there has been a decline in Bible reading over several generations. The decline is not evenly spread over time. Rather, there are 'waves' of encouragement to read the Bible that are passed from parents to children, and each 'wave' is smaller than the one before.

There is some further evidence of this decline in Bible reading over generations in the *Wellbeing and Security Survey* (2002) as shown in Figure 1 (see next page). There is a large difference in the proportion of the population in their 60s compared with people in their 50s who read the Bible. This reflects the major cultural changes that took place among young people in the late 1960s and 1970s when many traditions and institutions were rejected by young people of that era, the Boomer generation, including church attendance and Bible reading. In 1993, these differences were evident between people under 50 and those over 50 as shown in Figure 2 in relation to church attendance. However, it is also notable that, in 1993, people in their 40s attended church a little more than people in their 50s in 2002. In other words, the overall frequency of church

attendance declined over the decade. Nevertheless, the generational differences remain, are passed on to their children, and may account for the differences between older and younger young people today.

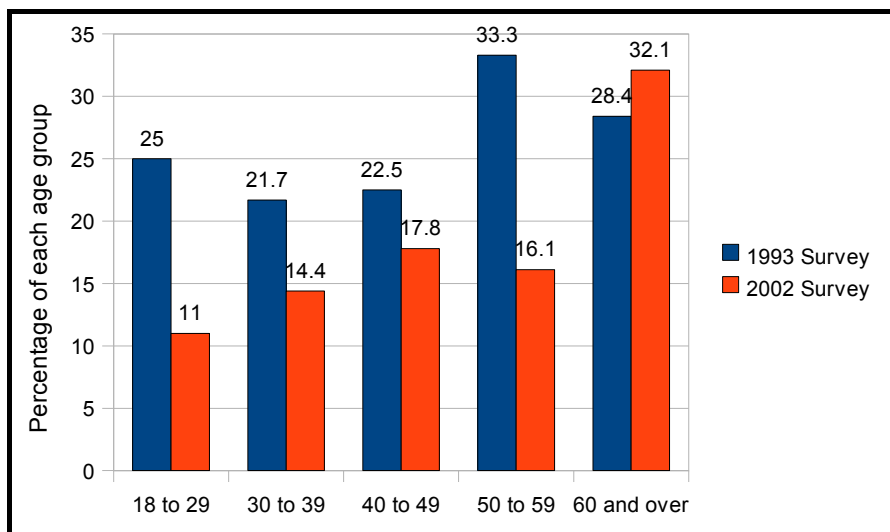
Figure 1. Responses to 'How often have you spent time reading the Bible?'



Source: Security and Wellbeing Survey, 2002.

Close to 40 per cent of all people over 60, compared with about 20 per cent of those under 60, said they read the Bible at least occasionally. Similar differences were found in levels of church attendance. Among people aged 60 years and over, more than 30 per cent attended church services at least monthly compared with about 15 per cent of those under 60. These differences are not, in fact, related to age: they are not the result of retired people having more time, or older people thinking more about religion. Rather, they reflect historical changes as shown in Figure 2 between the generations born prior to World War II and the generations born after the War.

Figure 2. Church Attendance among Australians by Age Group in 1993 and 2002



Source: International Social Science Survey (1993) and Wellbeing and Security Survey (2002).

In the first major sociological study of religion in Australia, conducted in 1966, Hans Mol found no

differences in church attendance by age group. However, he did note that a greater proportion of older people prayed on a daily basis: 46 per cent of those over 60, compared with 26 per cent of those under 40 (Mol 1985, p.78). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many people under 30, the Boomer generation, ceased attending church. Their levels of involvement have continued to decline and they now have half the level of involvement of the older generation born in the pre-World War II years.

Behind these changes is the fact that the Boomer generation began to see religion, and all traditions, in a different way. They had little of the sense of duty towards traditions that had motivated their parents. They saw traditions, and particularly religious traditions, as something they would adopt if they felt personal benefits warranted it. But if the personal benefits were not great, then the tradition would be dropped. The traditions of marriage and certainly of the prohibition of sex before marriage were challenged, as was church attendance. While many older people would have read the Bible daily out of a sense of duty towards God, this motivation meant little the following generation, who would read the Bible, or, for that matter go to church, only if they saw the benefits.

It could be argued that another factor in the differences between older people and younger people is that younger people read less than older people. Books have lost some of their importance to visual media such as television, film and computers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics study of time use in 2006, found that between 1992 and 2006 the amount of time per day spent in listening to or watching visual media rose from 1 hour 53 minutes to 2 hours 20 minutes. However, the study also reported that the time spent reading books had remained relatively constant at, on average, 23 minutes per day (ABS 2008, Table 1).

The *Wellbeing and Security Survey* asked whether respondents had read materials in eastern philosophy or religion within the last 12 months. The differences between age groups were insignificant. About 9 per cent of all Australian adults reported that they had done some reading in this area: 10 per cent among those aged under 30, and 8 per cent of people in their 60s. The changes in the frequency of Bible reading are likely to have much more to do with attitudes towards church and religion across the generations than the extent to which young people read books.

Gender differences

The *National Telephone Survey* of young people found slight differences between the Bible reading habits of males and females. Thirteen per cent of females claimed to read the Bible weekly or more often compared with 12 per cent of males. In addition, 17 per cent of females claimed to read it occasionally compared with 13 per cent of males.

Table 3 (next page) shows that the differences between males and females in the frequency of daily Bible reading are negligible. The only differences of note are that more females than males read the Bible occasionally and more males than females reject religion altogether. The lack of difference is a little surprising in the light of the long tradition that females have shown greater interest in religion than males.

Table 3. The Frequency of Bible Reading among Male and Female Young People Aged 13 to 24

Frequency of Bible Reading	Males	Females
Daily	5.1%	4.8%
Weekly	7.1%	8.1%
Occasionally	12.7%	16.9%
Never	23.4%	24.1%
Not asked	51.7%	46.1%

Source: National Telephone Survey (2005).

Higher levels of interest in religion are found among females in most societies. The most likely explanation is that religion is seen by females as being more closely aligned to their values and interests than it is for males. Females tend to be more interested in family life and in personal relationships, while males tend to be more orientated towards careers in technology, business and manufacturing. Religious faith is seen by some females as involving values and attitudes which are protective of family life and enhance personal relationships. Religious faith is not generally seen as having much to do with business or manufacturing. It is possible that young women in their school years in contemporary Australia are more likely to be thinking about careers than families and this may contribute to the lack of difference between males and females in the frequency of Bible reading.

Occupation and Education

Is Bible reading primarily a middle-class activity? That is not an easy question to answer as few surveys provide accurate means of measuring social class, although some indication of it is provided by people's occupation and levels of education. Most young people do not have an occupation, and thus the link between Bible reading and occupation cannot be examined among them. However, information from adults provides some clues. Table 4 demonstrates the differences in the levels of Bible reading among Australian adults of different occupational categories.

The group which stands out as the most frequent Bible readers is farmers. They also have a much higher level of church involvement than any other group. There are several reasons for this. One is their dependence on nature (and what are sometimes called 'acts of God'). Another is their dependence on each other and the local communities of which they are a part.

However, there are two other groups in which more than 9 per cent read the Bible often. These are professionals working with people and people in offices or shops who are not supervising. Both of these groups work predominantly with other people. Both have relatively high levels of church attendance. It is likely that their levels of religious involvement is related to the fact that religion provides the values on which their interactions with others are based. Indeed, doing the

job well is measured in terms of those interactions: how children learn, how the sick are healed, and how customers are satisfied.

Table 4. Frequency of Bible Reading among Australian Adults for Various Occupational Groups

Occupational Group	Read the Bible Often	Read the Bible Occasionally
Employer of 10 or more people	6.7%	12.4%
Employer of less than 10 people	5.7%	19.5%
Professional working with people	9.1%	16.4%
Professional working in technical fields	6.8%	9.3%
Office / business / shop supervising	6.0%	13.2%
Office / business / shop not supervising	9.2%	11.8%
Foreman and supervisor	6.7%	13.2%
Skilled trades or craft	6.9%	10.8%
Semi-skilled manual	4.6%	13.8%
Other manual worker	4.7%	12.9%
Farm owner	25.0%	31.3%

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey 2002.

Those working in technical professions or as managers, in creating things or as manual workers are not oriented to people in the same way. Their work is measured in terms of what products are made or the profit the company makes. Their focus is on the material world, a world about which religion is often thought to be somewhat negative.

However, there is a difference between those who have a diploma or higher level of education, among whom about 8 per cent or more read the Bible often, and the 4 per cent of manual workers who have a trade certificate who read it often (see Table 5 below).

Table 5. Frequency of Bible Reading by Highest Level of Education Attained

Highest Level of Education	Read the Bible Often	Read the Bible Occasionally
Primary school	16.2%	29.7%
Some secondary	7.4%	15.7%
Secondary	5.9%	11.6%
Trade certificate	3.8%	14.2%
Diploma or associate diploma	13.8%	14.7%
Bachelor degree	8.0%	15.0%
Postgraduate degree	9.0%	14.2%

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey, 2002.

The differences related to education are not even. There are very high levels of Bible reading among those with only primary school education – mostly because these people are aged over 60.

Bible reading rates for those who have a trade certificate or only secondary education are lowest. They reflect not only the importance of education but also its orientation. Those in trades and manual work are least likely to read the Bible frequently. Those with a diploma or associate diploma read the Bible more often than those with a degree. Again, this may reflect the fact that many of those with diplomas or associate diplomas are in people-related professions, such as nursing or teaching.

The *Search Institute Survey* asked students about the grades they earned at school. Among those who said they earned mostly grades at A level, 13 per cent said they read the Bible very often, compared with 9 per cent who said they earned grades at B level or less. However, the differences were not statistically different.

The *Search Institute Survey* also asked a question to roughly measure the economic situation of the family of the young person by asking them how easy it was to buy the things they needed. It found that those who struggled economically had the highest proportions of those who read the Bible 'very often', although there were higher numbers of people who had 'just enough' who read it occasionally.

Table 6. Frequency of Bible Reading among Students by Economic Situation

Economic Situation	Read the Bible very often	Read the Bible often
Hard time buying what is needed	12.8%	4.3%
Just enough for what we need	10.0%	20.4%
No problem buying what we need, and also special things	9.1%	11.1%

Source: Search Institute Survey (Australia), 2008.

When all the variables among Australian adults are examined using regression analysis, only two variables are significant. Age explains about 3 per cent of the variation in Bible reading and gender explains about 1 per cent. Bible reading is greater among older people and among females. However, these factors are overshadowed by church involvement which explains 42 per cent of the variation in the frequency of Bible reading.

Among young people, the overwhelming factor is the frequency of attendance of religious worship services. In the analysis of the *Search Institute Survey*, church attendance accounted for 43 per cent of the variation in Bible reading among young people. In the *National Telephone Survey*, the frequency of attendance at religious services accounted for 63 per cent of the variation in Bible reading and whether the person was Protestant or not another 3 per cent. Thus, we must turn our attention to the relationship between Bible reading and church involvement.

Bible reading and church involvement

The *National Telephone Survey* demonstrates that Bible reading is closely related to church attendance. Of those who attend a church monthly or more often, 19 per cent of young people said they read the Bible daily and 27 per cent said they read it at least once a week. In comparison, of those who attended church only occasionally, 2 per cent said they read it daily and 6 per cent read it weekly. Of those who never attended church, just 1 per cent said they read the Bible daily

and 2 per cent said they read it weekly as shown in Table 7. The 1 per cent who said that they did not attend church but read the Bible daily indicated that they had been raised in a religion. It is likely that they had developed the habit of reading the Bible while attending church. Although they were no longer attending at the time of the survey, they had continued to read the Bible.

Table 7. The Frequency of Bible Reading among Young People by Church Attendance

Frequency of Bible Reading	Never Attend Church	Attend Occasionally Church	Attend Church Monthly or More Often
Daily	1.0%	2.0%	19.2%
Weekly	2.0%	6.2%	26.9%
Occasionally	23.6%	33.7%	28.3%
Never	73.4%	58.1%	25.4%

Source: National Telephone Survey (2005)

Table 7 shows, then, that more than half of all the young people who attend a church read the Bible occasionally or never. On the other hand, there are very few young people who never attend, or even occasionally attend, who read the Bible frequently.

Church attendance influences the reading of the Bible in several ways. Church services remind people about the Bible, raise its importance, and encourage attenders to read it. It is very likely, that some people who read the Bible frequently do so in preparation for or following services of worship. Some young people, when asked about Bible reading, think of the reading that takes place in the context of services. Church services also help to develop skills in Bible reading and understanding.

Those who read the Bible are much more likely to be attending youth groups than those who do not read the Bible. Of those students who were surveyed in the *Schools Spirituality Project* who said they read the Bible often, 40 per cent said they attended a church-related youth group at least monthly, compared with just 14 per cent of the whole sample. Another 35 per cent of them attended a youth group occasionally. Among those who read the Bible occasionally, too, youth groups were a significant factor: 27 per cent attended monthly and another 56 per cent attended occasionally. Table 8 (next page) shows that data viewed in another way. It shows that there are many young people who attend church youth groups who never or rarely read the Bible. On the other hand, there are very few young people who do not attend youth group who read the Bible frequently.

There are different kinds of youth groups. Some are purely social. Others have a variety of activities. Some focus on devotional activities, such as prayer and Bible reading. Hence, not all youth groups encourage Bible reading, but there are many youth Bible study groups which play an important role in encouraging the practice of Bible reading.

Table 8. Frequency of Bible Reading among Young People by Attendance at Church Youth Groups

Frequency of Bible Reading	Never Church Youth Group	Occasionally Attend Church Youth Group	Attend Church Youth Group Monthly or More
Often	1.7%	3.0%	9.4%
Sometimes	4.0%	16.5%	21.2%
Once or twice	19.5%	35.5%	30.6%
Never	74.7%	44.6%	38.8%

Source: Schools Spirituality Project

Table 8 suggests that many young people read the Bible because they are involved in a group which encourages them to do so. Youth Bible study groups are places where the skills of reading and understanding are developed. There are few young people (around 1 per cent of the population of young people) who read the Bible frequently without the encouragement of a youth group.

Having a group of people around you who have similar habits and who hold similar beliefs is very important in maintaining those beliefs and habits. It is very likely that most of the young people who read the Bible frequently also have parents or friends who do. This question has not been asked in surveys. However, we do know that of those young people who read the Bible frequently:

- 61 per cent have parents who attend church monthly or more often;
- 42 per cent say that at least one of their three closest school friends attends church monthly or more; and
- 58 per cent say that at least one of their closest friends outside of school attends church monthly or more.

Only 16 per cent of those who read the Bible frequently said that none of their friends attended at all. There was only one person in the *Schools Spiritual Project* surveys who said they read the Bible frequently, but that none of their friends nor their family attended church. In other words, almost all frequent Bible readers are part of a community in which family and/or peers, and in most cases both, are attending church and, most probably, are encouraging the practice of Bible reading.

While the support of a community is important in encouraging frequent Bible reading, involvement in a church community does not necessarily lead to frequent Bible reading. The patterns of reading in different denominations vary considerably. According to the *National Telephone Survey* 24 per cent of those who identified with a Protestant denomination read the Bible daily and another 23 per cent of them read it weekly. This compares with just 8 per cent of young Anglicans reading it daily and another 4 per cent weekly, and 1 per cent of Catholics reading the Bible daily and 9 per cent reading it weekly. These differences between the denominational groups are set out in Table 10.

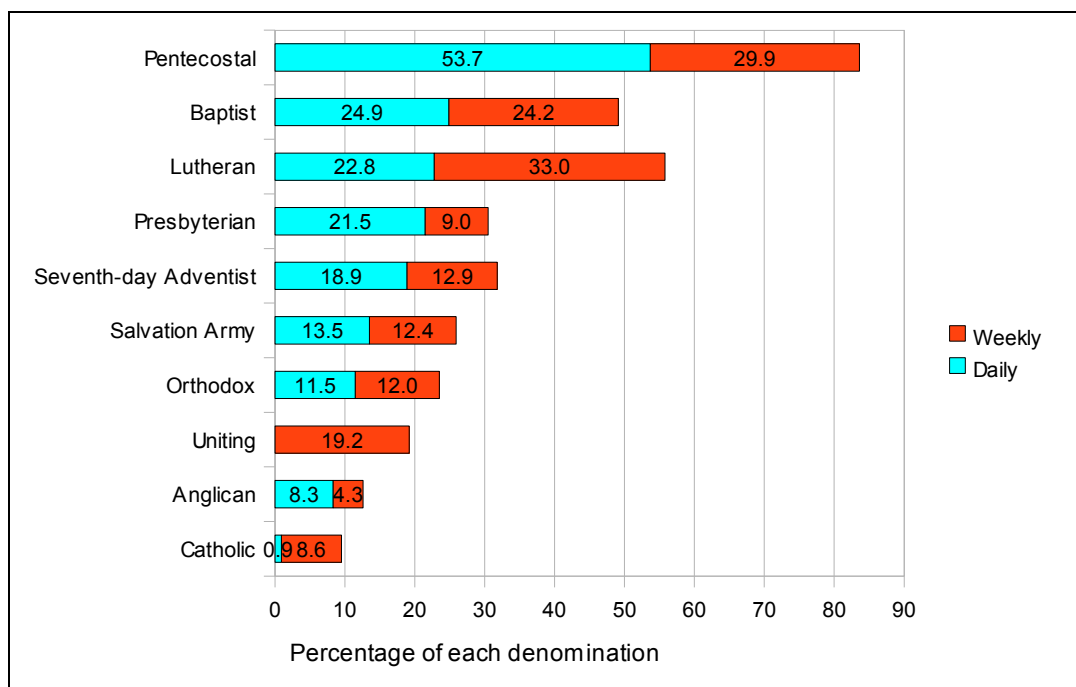
Table 10. Frequency of Bible Reading among Young People by Denominational Identification

Frequency of Bible Reading	Anglicans	Catholics	Orthodox	Protestants	No Religion	Don't Know
Daily	8.3%	0.9%	11.5%	24.1%	0.0%	5.1%
Weekly	4.3%	9.2%	12.0%	23.2%	0.5%	7.3%
Occasionally	15.3%	20.8%	33.9%	20.9%	7.6%	23.9%
Never	38.3%	40.8%	30.5%	21.7%	18.2%	21.2%
Not Asked	33.8%	28.4%	12.0%	10.1%	73.6%	42.4%

Source: National Telephone Survey

The different denominational traditions have quite different attitudes to the Bible and these are reflected in the practices of attenders. Catholics have always placed more importance on the Eucharist and on personal prayer rather than on the reading of the Scriptures. The Protestant Reformation centred on the personal use and interpretation of the Scriptures. Protestants have continued the tradition of reading the Bible since that time.

Figure 3. Frequency of Bible Reading amongst Young People by Denominational Affiliation



Source: National Telephone Survey (2005)

While data for individual denominations from the National Telephone Survey are not highly reliable, they are indicative of different attitudes in different denominational groups. Pentecostals

read the Bible most frequently, followed by Baptists, Lutherans and Presbyterians. These groups tend to emphasise the importance of God speaking to the individual directly through the Scriptures. In the Uniting Church no one said they read the Bible daily, although 19 per cent indicated they read it weekly.

Religious Faith and Bible Reading

As previously suggested the links between different denominational traditions and Bible reading, as well as the extent to which young people read the Bible depends on their theological understanding of the Bible, and, indeed, the ways they think about several key aspects of their beliefs.

The *National Telephone Survey* showed that almost all those who read the Bible daily (99%) see religious faith as very important in shaping how they live from day to day. Indeed, most of those who read the Bible weekly (77%) see religious faith as having a great influence on their daily lives. Even among those who read it occasionally, most (54%) see religious faith as being important in daily life. While there are few who read the Bible frequently who do not see religious faith as important (2%), there are many (29%) who see religious faith as important in daily life who never read the Bible.

Table 11. Frequency of Bible Reading among Young People by the Importance of Religious Faith in Shaping Daily Life

Importance of Religion on a Scale of 1 to 5	Never Read the Bible	Occasionally Read the Bible	Read the Bible Weekly	Read the Bible Daily
Religion is very important :5	10.3%	24.2%	53.2%	88.9%
Religion is important: 4	18.8%	29.8%	23.3%	10.0%
Religion is of moderate or little importance: 3 or less	70.9%	46.1%	23.7%	1.2%

Source: National Telephone Survey (2005)

The *National Telephone Survey* asked young people several other questions about their experiences of God. The accounts of experiences young people are willing to affirm demonstrate much about the nature of what they believe, for they are indicative of how they are interpreting their life experiences.

Of those who read the Bible daily or weekly more than 90 per cent believe that God relates to people in a personal way. Most of them also say God feels very close to them most of the time. (Daily: 88% score God's closeness at 4 or 5 on a scale of 5. Weekly: 71% score God's closeness at 4 or 5 on a scale of 5.)

Those who read the Bible frequently are generally people who have:

1. made a personal commitment to God;
2. have experienced a definite answer to prayer or specific guidance from God;
3. have had an experience of spiritual worship that was very moving and powerful;
4. have witnessed or experienced what they believed was a miracle from God; and
5. feel very close to God most of the time.

Table 12. The Frequency of Bible among Young People by Various Religious Experiences

Experiences and Beliefs	Never Read the Bible	Occasionally Read the Bible	Read the Bible Weekly	Read the Bible Daily
Feel close to God most of the time (4 or 5 on scale of 1 to 5)	31.4%	43.4%	69.3%	87.2%
Made a personal commitment to God	40.3%	57.7%	81.3%	96.4%
Definite answer to prayer or specific guidance	28.3%	47.3%	71.4%	94.5%
Experience of worship as powerful	22.1%	37.4%	62.6%	90.9%
Have witnessed a miracle	25.2%	40.7%	50.5%	76.4%

Source: The National Telephone Survey. Note: These questions were not asked of the 50 per cent of young people who said that they did not believe in God. If these people were included, the percentage of those who never read the Bible who had these experiences would be much smaller.

Table 12 shows that almost all those who read the Bible daily and most of those who read it weekly believe in a God who relates to them personally. They feel God to be very close and they have made a personal commitment to God. They believe that God answers prayer and gives specific guidance. They have not all experienced miracles, but most of them believe that miracles are possible, and that God intervenes in the daily events of life.

Most of those reading the Bible frequently are people who look for God's action in their lives and look for guidance on how to live. The Bible, then, is part of their communication with God.

There is little evidence here that people are reading the Bible frequently first and then making a commitment. Those who read it frequently have all made the commitment to God. It would seem that it is usually part of that whole evangelical Christian ethos that they have embraced. Commitment usually occurs in the context of a Christian community and is indicative of the

decision to be part of the community. Bible reading as a frequent activity, in almost all cases, follows that commitment rather than being a prelude to it.

There are other young people who experience God as close, who expect God to be involved in their lives, and who think religious faith is very important, but who do not read the Bible. Many of these people come from traditions which do not value Bible reading as much as the Evangelical groups such as the non-evangelical Anglican, Uniting Church and Catholic traditions.

This data would suggest that few young people read the Bible frequently to explore it or because they have questions. There may well be some who do so, who read it out of curiosity, for example, but most of these young people read it only occasionally.

Looking more closely at those young people who said they read the Bible or their Scriptures occasionally but who had not made a personal commitment to God, 79 per cent of them attended church at least occasionally and 45 per cent of them described themselves as Anglican, Catholic or Orthodox. Another 14 per cent of them belonged to non-Christian religions. However, there was a group of 19 young people who said they had no religion or did not know what religion they were who said they read the Bible occasionally. Of this group of 19 young people, 11 said they went to church at least occasionally and this may well have been the motive or the occasion for their occasional reading of the Bible. Eight young people out of a total sample of 1200 said they read the Bible occasionally but did not attend or identify with a church.

Bible Reading and the Functioning of Faith

In *Patterns of Faith in Australian Churches* (Hughes and Blombery 1990), two major orientations to the Christian faith were identified. One of these was the 'values' orientation. These people saw faith as important primarily because it encouraged certain values. A few people spoke of the importance of faith as giving them the Ten Commandments. Many others saw faith as being the foundation for the basic principles of care and compassion.

A second orientation saw faith as important primarily because faith involved access to God. Through the relationship with God, they found comfort and strength. This second orientation also had two components. On the one hand, there were those for whom faith was about evangelism: about telling others about the Good News of the power of God, of what God had to offer. Then there were others for whom the more personal, devotional aspect of faith was central: a trust demonstrated in reliance on God in the events of daily life.

This second group did not deny the importance of the values that arose from the Christian faith, but access to God was primary for them. Rather, obedience to the values which God requires were seen as secondary demonstrations of the primary relationship.

It was found that there was a strong relationship between the nature of faith and church attendance. Of those who said that faith was important in terms of access to God, close to 80 per cent attended a church monthly or more often. But, of those who said that faith was primarily about values, around 25 per cent went to church (Bentley and Hughes 1998, p.118). This second group often felt that it was important for their children to pick up the values through a church-run school or a Sunday school, but did not think that it was necessary for them to attend church in order to maintain a life that reflected those Christian values. Those who valued access to God saw the Church as one of the important ways in which that access could be maintained.

These orientations to faith also relate to the practice of Bible reading among young people. Of those who read the Bible frequently, 75 per cent say that access to God is most important aspect of faith. This compares with just 38 per cent of the total sample of young people.

Table 13. Frequency of Bible Reading among Young People by the Importance of Faith

Faith Dimension	Importance of Faith	Frequency of Bible Reading			
		Never	Once or twice	Several times	Often
Access	Time with God in worship and prayer	5.8%	22.2%	36.5%	44.1%
	Belonging to a faith community / telling others about faith	4.2%	11.9%	12.8%	23.7%
	Have someone / something I trust in	16.3%	15.2%	8.1%	7.6%
Values	Believing / doing the right things	26.8%	28.0%	23.6%	14.4%
	Being a caring and considerate person	21.3%	19.1%	17.6%	7.6%
	Religion is not important at all	25.6%	3.6%	1.4%	2.5%
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Schools Spirituality Project. (n = 1592).

Many of those who never read the Bible or who had read it only once or twice in the previous 12 months see faith as very important in giving them values. It encourages people to do the right thing, to be caring and considerate of others. Very few of those people who never read the Bible (10%) see faith primarily in terms of access to God, sharing one's faith with others, or belonging to a faith community.

It should be noted that the option of having someone or something to trust in is a weak version of 'access' to God. It does not imply that the person does trust in God, but rather it suggests a notion of being able to rely on God. The desire to spend time with God in prayer and worship is much more proactive, and reflects more accurately the attitude of those who read the Bible frequently. Nevertheless, the dominant attitude towards the Bible and to God among those who value worship and prayer is probably one of reliance, of seeing God as one who is able to help.

Turning the data around, we find that of those who say religion is important primarily in

encouraging people to be caring and considerate, just 2.9 per cent read the Bible often and 65 per cent say they never read it. In contrast, among those who see religion primarily about the relationship with God, 21 per cent read it often and 22 per cent never read it.

In other words, those who read the Bible often are not the only ones for whom faith is primarily about access to God. There are many Catholics, in particular, who place great importance on worship and prayer and who find access to God through the Mass, particularly in the Eucharist, but who do not place great importance on reading the Bible on a regular basis.

Religious Faith, Bible Reading and Consumeristic Attitudes

Many contemporary commentators on religion in Western society have noted the development and pervasive nature of consumeristic attitudes to religion among young people (for example, Miller 2004; Smith and Denton 2005). Such attitudes were reflected in the studies of the religiosity and spirituality of young Australians mentioned throughout this report. These attitudes are important in understanding the patterns of Bible reading.

The *Schools Spirituality Project* explored how students thought about God. The dominant picture of God among those who believed was of Someone loving, nice, friendly, forgiving and caring. 'Someone who is always there to listen to you and help you' said one student. 'Will forgive you for anything' said another. God was the sort of 'big daddy' to whom they could turn if something went wrong. Indeed, 'God is like a second Dad, he loves us so much' said one student.

The idea of God watching over everyone was also frequently mentioned. 'He's smart, a watcher, not a participant' said one student. 'A man always looking over us' said another. God was described as entirely benevolent and that God was there for us, not us for God. Most young people who believed in God thought of God in terms of a soft, warm, fuzzy image. The idea that God's love might be 'tough' or that God might be demanding did not appear in the students' descriptions.

Smith and Denton who did a large study of attitudes towards religion in the USA found very similar patterns there. They suggested that 'God is treated as something like a cosmic therapist or counsellor, a ready and competent helper who responds in times of trouble but who does not particularly ask for devotion or obedience' (Smith and Denton 2005, p.148). They go on to suggest that the dominant image of God among young people in the USA is that of a 'divine butler'.

For young people in Australia, 'butler' may not be the appropriate image. Rather God is the ideal parent: one who always helps out and who never makes any demands. The Bible, then, is seen as God's words of comfort, the reminder of God's love and care.

In one group of church-run schools, we talked with students about their images of God, and then turned the discussion to what they had actually been taught about God in school. At this point, the language changed. Students quite frequently referred to God as 'creator'. There were references to God sending Jesus to earth and calling us to be His disciples. The idea that God would judge us was mentioned a few times.

Many students have heard the demands of faith. But that is not what fits most readily into the structures of thinking that they use to make sense of religion. These structures are deeply embedded into the Australian culture and into the minds of young people. From a young age, they

have grown up seeing the world from the perspective of individuals who must decide for themselves what they want out of life. 'Individualism' and 'consumerism' are two major themes in the structure.

The individualistic and consumeristic ways of seeing the world arise from the child-rearing practices which predominate in the Western world. Parents see their role as seeking to meet the needs of their children. From the earliest years, children are asked what they would like ... to eat, to play with, to do. Hence, from the earliest years, the dominant question for children is 'What would I like?' That pattern of thinking is confirmed and strengthened by the consumer society, by advertising and the patterns of acquiring goods and services that dominate the Western world. This pattern of thinking is equally applied to religious faith (Miller 2004).

The primary story about the nature and meaning of life for young people in Australian culture is that life is about enjoyment. Enjoyment means feeling good about life, about having good friends, and some exciting experiences. While young people vary somewhat in regards to what counts as 'an exciting experience' and 'enjoyment', 93 per cent of young Australians affirm that 'the thing is to enjoy life and make the best of it here and now'. In this primary story about personal life, religion is seen as one of those resources to which one can turn if things go wrong. God is there to help with the challenges of life. It is also true that religion, for some, does extend the scope of enjoyment beyond the 'here and now', but, for most young people, it does not change the dominant orientation to life (Hughes 2007, p.45).

The Bible, then, is seen by young people with individualistic and consumeristic eyes – if it is within the line of sight at all – as one of the means by which God offers comfort, through which God reminds us that God is looking after us and that all will turn out okay in the end. It should be noted, however, that Bible reading is one of the minor resources.

In the *National Telephone Survey*, questions were asked about what assisted young people in finding peace and happiness. The first and most important response by young people between the ages of 13 and 24 was music. Most young people switch on their iPods when the world is troubling them. They find music helps to reflect their moods and emotions, and sometimes to change them (Hughes 2007, p.51). Most young people will turn also to their friends. It is good to have others to talk to when things are not going well.

Young teenagers will often turn to sport. They will go for a ride on their bikes or kick a football around. Older teenagers will often find somewhere quiet and peaceful. Some will go to the beach and others to the bush. Many young people say that they find a sense of peace and wellbeing in nature. Others enjoy doing craft work. Some go shopping when things are challenging. Many older teenagers turn to alcohol and drugs. Prayer (and presumably Bible reading) is close to the bottom of the list. In the *Schools Spirituality Project* surveys, 6 per cent of young people said prayer was very important to them as a way of seeking peace and wellbeing. In the *National Telephone Survey*, 3 per cent of school-aged young people said meditation was very important. This compares with 30 per cent or more who saw music as very important in such situations.

There is evidence that some of those who read the Bible do so in the search for comfort. Of those who read the Bible frequently, 12 per cent say it is definitely true and 10 per cent say it is generally true that they are hurting deep inside and nothing seems to help. This compares with just 7 per cent and 8 per cent respectively of those who never read the Bible. Twenty-five per cent of those who read the Bible frequently say they are not hurting inside at all, but this compares

with 41 per cent of those who never read the Bible.

Table 14. Frequency of Bible Reading among Young People by Extent to Which They are 'Hurting Deep Inside'

Extent to Which 'Hurting Deep Inside'	Never Read the Bible	Read the Bible Once or Twice	Read the Bible Several Times	Read the Bible Often
Not hurting at all	40.8%	35.7%	32.8%	25.2%
Generally not hurting	20.8%	21.2%	18.5%	20.4%
Sometimes hurting	20.4%	21.8%	24.9%	23.3%
Generally hurting	8.1%	10.7%	11.6%	9.7%
Definitely hurting	7.0%	6.7%	9.0%	11.7%

Source: Schools Spirituality Project (n=3679)

Summary of Analysis of Who Reads the Bible

The majority of young people who read the Bible frequently are part of Evangelical or Charismatic Christian communities. They attend church frequently and many of them also attend groups in which Bible study is encouraged. Most of them read the Bible because they believe that, through the Bible, God speaks to them personally and gives them guidance for daily life. For them, faith is more about having access to a loving God than about values.

They also find within the Bible, a sense of closeness to a God they believe cares about them as individuals and who will intervene in the activities in the world to care for them. Bible reading is closely allied to prayer. Through their Bible reading, they hear some of God's answers to their prayers. Some of them say they hurt deep inside. They look to the Bible as a source of comfort and strength in facing daily life.

Most of these young people have grown up in an Evangelical or Charismatic community. They have been encouraged in these beliefs and practices by their parents. They have around them a group of friends who hold similar beliefs.

Those who have grown up in other Christian communities, such as non-Evangelical Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox or liberal Protestant communities such as the Uniting Church, may read the Bible from time to time, but are less likely to read it frequently. Some of them have a strong sense of a personal God, but many of them believe that they find God more in the community of the Church rather than in frequent personal Bible reading. Nevertheless, for many of these young people, the Bible remains important.

There are also many young people who believe that the Christian values of care and compassion are important. But they do not see it as necessary to attend church or to read the Bible. They believe they know its basic message.

The data we have suggests that about one young person in a hundred will pick up the Bible out of

curiosity or interest. They do so, not because they go to church or have any affiliation, but because something has aroused their interest or curiosity.

Other Forms of Engagement with the Bible

Most young Australians do, in fact, come in contact with the Christian faith, and therefore the Bible, from time to time. A little more than one-third (34 per cent) of all students in Australian schools attend a Catholic or Independent school. The vast majority of these schools are church-run, and most students in these schools would experience some religious education and/or worship. In addition, approximately one-third of all government schools have chaplains and large numbers of schools, particularly at primary level, have some form of religious education. Thus, more than half, and perhaps closer to two-thirds, of all school students have some form of religious education at least for some years within their schooling.

In examining why people do not go to church, Bellamy et al. (2002) reported that 40 per cent of people who never attended church had at least some close friends who did attend church. Many others have family members, such as grandparents, who attended.

Others come into contact with the Christian faith through welfare programs. Many welfare programs, from nursing homes to employment centres, are run by church-related organisations. Many people come into contact with Christian organisations through such programs.

Another major source of Christian contact is through media. There are Christian radio stations in many parts of Australia. There are a vast number of Christian websites and social networking groups. There are some Christian services and programs about religious faith on television.

In popular culture, there are references from time to time to the Bible or to Biblical stories. Many of these are not made explicit in such films as *Lord of the Rings*. But at other times, such as in the carols that are played in the shops or at Carols by Candlelight functions at Christmas, there is explicit reference to Biblical stories.

The surveys tell us little about the extent or the consequences of this indirect engagement. As has been previously noted, a large proportion of Australians believe that religious faith is helpful in providing a basis for values. There is probably a general sense that these values are rooted in or explained in the Bible, but, in most cases, we suspect that there is little understanding of this. We suspect some people will know the story of the Good Samaritan, for example, and feel that it provides a good example for life, but it is hard to know how far that understanding goes beyond the idea that the Bible teaches that we should be kind to others.

There is information about the responses of students in church-run schools to religious education and to the various topics studied in religious education. This will be considered in the section on student attitudes to the Bible.

3. Attitudes among Young People to the Content of the Bible

As religions are seen as being neither true nor false, but are evaluated as helpful or unhelpful, so the content of the Bible is also seen in the same way. Many people evaluate the Bible in terms of helpfulness rather in terms of its truth or falsity. However, as with religion, there are a variety of feelings about the content of the Bible among young people.

In the Schools Spirituality Project,

- 30% of students agreed that 'the Bible is God's Word and all it says is true';
- 34% were neutral or unsure; and
- 36% disagreed with the statement.

However, when asked their response to 'All the miracle stories in the Bible really happened',

- 25% said it was not true at all;
- 15% said it was generally not true;
- 22% said it was sometimes true and sometimes not;
- 12% said it was generally true;
- 8% said it was definitely true; and
- 18% said they did not know.

In other words, there was greater doubt about the veracity of miracles than the general truth of the Bible.

In the Schools Spirituality Project, almost two thirds of the total number of students interviewed from church-run schools (Catholic and Independent) offered their views and perceptions of the Bible in response to specific questions. These questions addressed beliefs and the Bible (How do you feel, for example, about miracle stories in the Bible? How do you think people should regard the Bible? Is it okay to question one's beliefs?), and religious education in the school (What do you think about Religious Studies? What have been the most interesting or useful parts of the curriculum? How do you think it could be improved?).

Equal numbers of male and female students, between the ages of 11-18, provided a multiplicity of responses, highlighting factors and causes that encourage and/or hinder their engagement with and reading of the Bible. Overall, these responses addressed three main aspects: the nature of the Bible as a whole, the content within the Bible, and the value of the Bible in terms of its practical use and relevance.

Positive Attitudes to the Bible

A pivotal factor facilitating the constructive engagement of young people with the Bible concerns their perception of its nature overall. Several students commented on the 'special' nature of the Bible, identifying it as 'God's word', as a 'Holy text', as an 'ancient text, history', and as 'sacred'. Accordingly, three of these students and a large number of others emphasised its total or predominant believability and 'truth'. As commented by a 14-year-old male student: 'I believe everything that's in the Bible'.

The importance of treating the Bible 'with respect' was implied in some of these these responses and explicitly indicated by other students. Overall, not surprisingly, these students expressed belief in God and a literal approach to the Bible, and most identified as Christian or were affiliated

with a specific Christian community. (Among those interviewed, there were similar numbers of young people associated with the Baptist, Catholic and Lutheran churches, plus one or two young people who identified themselves as Anglican and Pentecostal.)

Whether terminology used by students to describe the nature of the Bible is derived directly from conversations and/or participation in their faith communities, such as through worship services and youth groups, or otherwise, the perceptions expressed in this language nevertheless comprise a central place in the belief system of some young people and underpin a positive approach to the Bible and engagement with religion. As explained by an 18-year-old female student:

It means that you don't just believe something for the sake of it, you know where that belief comes from and why you believe something, and the background for that belief.

The personal certainty and affirmation of the nature of the Bible by young people was equally evident in their positive views of the content within the Bible and the value of the Bible.

These students generally referred to the 'true' stories and miracles within the Bible as a group, rather than mentioning specific accounts, and described these as 'interesting', 'important', 'good', 'useful' and as 'wisdom'. An 18-year-old female student stated: "I believe the stories have meaning ... and that it really happened". These basic views about the content of the Bible acquired greater substance and significance when students reflected on the value of the Bible in terms of its practical use and relevance.

Decisions about the practical use and relevance of the Bible for young people are principally individual and internal, based on one's needs, thoughts, experiences and interests, rather than communal and public, based on allegiance, permission or instruction. The use and relevance of the Bible is thus approached, engaged with and determined from both a 'values' orientation and an 'access to God' orientation, and in personal life.

From a 'values' orientation, a large number of students acknowledged the communication of 'morals' and instructions through the Bible, and the importance of these as 'guidelines for life' and to 'show us how to live'. As expressed by a 15-year-old female student who attended a Lutheran church: "The Bible tells us how to live"; "it shows what's right and wrong ... it provides the opportunity to be a better person", as further explained by a 17-year-old male student who identified as Catholic.

From an 'access' orientation, several students commented on the Bible as leading to a deeper understanding of and relationship with God: "God's story is very important ... tells us stories about his life and how helpful he is". As affirmed by a 15-year-old female student with an eclectic approach to religious faith: "I see it as a long way of saying God loves us". This positive engagement then effects 'prayer' and acts to 'reinforce beliefs' as described by other students.

In personal life, a few students emphasised a link between the Bible and dealing with difficult circumstances or trying situations. For some young people, the Bible provided help 'when sad', to 'cope' or to 'calm down and apologise'. As explained by a 15-year-old male student who identified as Christian:

It's quite helpful to me, to clear my mind ... sometimes I work very hard and maybe

take out the Bible and have a read, and I feel good.

A further aspect that may underpin and contribute to these orientations and experiences of young people is their awareness of and gaining knowledge about the Bible. Several students with various religious affiliations (more Catholic responses, and equal Baptist, Lutheran and Pentecostal responses) and alternate positive approaches to the Bible (literal, non-literal and interpretive) commented on religious education in the school. They indicated a preference and a need to study the Bible more 'to increase familiarity', especially the 'history of it' and 'morals and information to make decisions'. As summarised by a 17-year-old male student with an eclectic approach: "there's a lot to be learned from the Bible".

Overall, these positive attitudes to the Bible, whether emphasising the nature of the Bible as a whole, the content within the Bible and/or the value of the Bible in terms of practical use and relevance, comprise less than half of the responses by students. As such, over half of the views and perceptions by students indicated a less constructive engagement with the Bible, including a wholly critical or mixed attitude, and identified specific barriers to reading the Bible.

Barriers to Reading the Bible

Perceptions of the nature of the Bible as a whole are similarly a pivotal barrier to engagement with the Bible for young people. Several students approached and referred to the Bible as a 'book': 'Just a book to me'; 'a book like any other'; 'a book that is not for me'. A few students accordingly indicated levels of uncertainty and disbelief in the Bible: 'some things are hard to believe'. As stated by a 12-year-old female student: "I don't know if it actually happened".

Other students indicated total distrust and unbelief: 'I don't believe'; 'a great read, but not history or to be trusted'; 'mostly fiction ... written up, and not written by God'. As expressed by a 17-year-old female student: "the Bible is the greatest work of fiction". Of interest, whilst the majority of these students expressed disbelief in God and a critical approach to the Bible, around half of them indicated they had no religion while the other half specified a religious affiliation, with similar numbers of Baptists, Catholics, Churches of Christ, Lutherans and Uniting Church responses.

A few students who expressed belief in God, a positive approach to the Bible and religious affiliation indicated a mixed attitude. Two students who commented on the Bible as offering morals/guidelines also affirmed that it is 'not all true'. Another student who emphasised the importance of learning from the Bible also asserted 'I don't believe it all'. A large number of students, however, acknowledged the rights of others and freedom of belief, and identified the Bible as 'important to Christians'; 'some find their centre in it'. As expressed by a 16-year-old female student: 'People can believe in it, if it helps them'. These responses also point to and affirm the primary perspective among young people, that decisions about religious affiliation, belief and the Bible are individual and internal.

These perceptions of the nature of the Bible as a whole involve levels of scepticism, indifference and indecision, sometimes combining both affirmation and doubt. These forms of engagement thus comprise a central place in the belief system of young people and underpin their approach to religion. These wholly critical and mixed attitudes among students also shaped their reflections on the content within the Bible and the value of the Bible in terms of its practical use and relevance.

Several students described the content within the Bible as consisting of 'myths and legends', and 'fables' that are 'exaggerated'. One student who commented on the Bible as leading to a relationship with God also described the content as 'much exaggerated'. Another student who perceived the Bible as reinforcing beliefs also identified contradictions within the Bible and a difficulty with this:

There are certain parts of the Bible that I can't believe because I find it contradicts itself ... when it contradicts itself, I think how can this be right?

Other students explicitly questioned or doubted the validity of miracles within the Bible: 'I'm not sure about miracles'; 'I don't think miracles happened'. As asserted by a 15-year-old male student: 'I don't believe in miracles'. Two students who described stories and miracles within the Bible as interesting or good also commented that they are 'often far-fetched' and 'difficult to understand'. Of importance, the majority of these students expressed belief in God, over half indicated a positive, non-literal and interpretive approach to the Bible, and similar numbers expressed a specific religious affiliation (Catholic and a Baptist response) or no religion.

Several students focussed on and questioned the transmission, composition and completeness of the Bible. A 15-year-old female student who attended a Church of Christ church explained: "I just don't see sometimes how ... people pass books down for all those years".; 'like Chinese whispers'. Two female students, aged 15 and 17, who identified as Catholic wondered whether it was like 'Chinese whispers'. A 16-year-old male student and a 14-year-old female student, who identified as Catholic, especially wondered whether parts had been 'added to finish stories' or 'cut out' others. One student who indicated a preference to studying the Bible more in religious education also affirmed that the Bible is 'hard to interpret'.

These reflections on the content within the Bible indicate that a large number of young people have exegetical questions that remain unattended and unanswered, and thus become a barrier to their reading of the Bible. As such, their opportunity to engage with the stories and morals within the Bible, and make faith or belief decisions is seemingly hindered. As expressed by an 11-year-old male student who indicated unbelief and no religion:

The Bible is something we do in school. Each year we do different bits, year five was Moses, year six was about Jesus being born ... I believe some bits ... but God doesn't make sense. I ask questions, but don't get helpful answers.

Decisions and views about the practical use and relevance of the Bible, as individual and internal, were numerous and primarily framed by their immediate encounters and experiences. A large number of students expressed difficulties engaging with the Bible and its subsequent limited relevance in their lives: 'it's not relevant, and it's boring'; 'hard to read, boring'. The majority of these students expressed unbelief, a critical approach to the Bible as being just a book, and no religion. As explained by a 12-year-old female student who expressed belief in God and an interpretive approach: "the Bible is about the past: I care about the present and future". One student who commented on the Bible as leading to a deeper understanding of God also described the Bible as 'too long'.

Several students reflected on their experiences of the Bible in religious education at school, and described the teaching as 'boring' and 'limited', 'not interesting, relevant or provoking' with 'too much lecturing' and 'too much of the same thing each year, over and over'. Two students

described their experiences as ‘over-powering’ and ‘kind of brainwashing. I have stopped listening’. A 15-year-old male student explained: “We learn about the Bible and religious dates/events in RE, although I don’t think it’s very important”. “It hasn’t made me closer to God” said a 16-year-old female student.

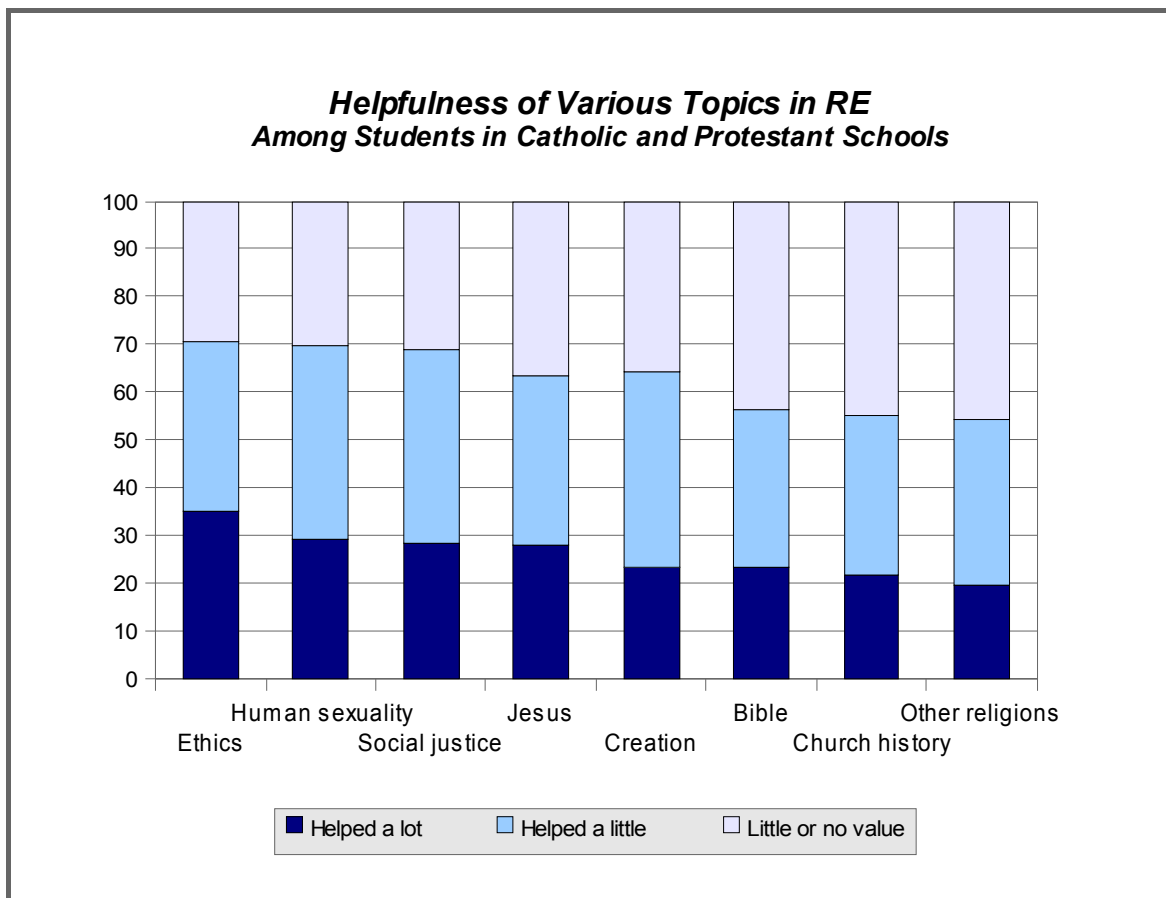
Several students commented on the importance of involvement and the need for more class or group discussion in religious education to express their own thoughts and hear other opinions: ‘more opportunity for people to discuss their own opinion’; ‘too much written work, not enough discussion’. One student who emphasised the ‘truth’ of the Bible also indicated a preference for ‘more discussion and conversation’. A few students also identified the need for more opportunity and space to ask questions. A 13-year-old female student explained:

When I sit there listening and am just writing down notes, it’s a bit boring ... if you don’t understand something, like in the Bible or something they’re saying, you don’t really have a chance to ask. You have to wait and then you forget your question.

The vast majority of these students expressed belief in God, indicated a positive approach to the Bible (literal, non-literal, interpretive) and identified as Christian or a specific religious affiliation (more Catholic responses, and equal Anglican, Pentecostal and Uniting Church responses).

An overall picture of religious education in church-run schools, in terms of the helpfulness of various topics covered, is presented in the Figure 4 (below). This data seemingly corresponds with the views and perceptions of students detailed here, especially regarding the value of the Bible in terms of its practical use and relevance.

Figure 4. Attitudes among Students in Catholic and Protestant Schools to Religious Education



Source: Schools Spirituality Project (2005 – 2008). The number of students who had studied particular subjects varied somewhat. Most responses represent about 4500 students.

As shown in Figure 4, the Bible and Church history recorded high percentages for 'little or no value', indicating that the content and teaching of these topics was perceived as primarily unhelpful for almost half of the students surveyed. This seemingly relates to various students' perceptions of the Bible as hard to read, interpret and understand, and the teaching of the Bible in religious education as boring, limited and irrelevant. A changed approach to the teaching of the Bible in religious education is perhaps needed in terms of more time for class discussion, and for students' questions to be engaged with in a meaningful way.

Figure 3 also shows that Ethics, Human sexuality and Social justice recorded higher percentages for 'Helped a lot', indicating that the content and teaching of these topics was perceived as principally important and helpful for around a third of the students surveyed. This suggests that students respond more positively when the emphasis is on topics which affect their lives and contemporary society. It suggests that an approach to religious education that focuses on these topics that are seen as relevant and which reflects on Biblical materials in relation to these may be regarded more positively by the students.

A few students also queried the incongruous behaviour of believers and their use of the Bible. An 18-year-old male student who expressed unbelief, no religion and a critical approach to the Bible, discussed the evangelistic practices of some people, and their extreme emphasis on faith and urging of others to believe, rather than necessarily living the values:

Some people care more about pushing it on people, like believing the stories is more important than the values. It's like believe this, believe this, read up on this, read up on this ... I think people should be going out there, if they really believe this stuff.

The context in which young people encounter and gain knowledge about the Bible, the way this is communicated and by whom, does affect their decisions about its value.

A few students identified a further barrier to engagement with the Bible in terms of broader pertinent academic and social issues. A specific academic issue of interest among young people concerns the relationship between creation and evolution, the discourse between Christian narratives and scientific theory. Some students emphasised the inherent 'conflict' and queried the existence of 'evidence'. A 14-year-old female student who indicated belief in God and a literal approach to the Bible asserted: 'Science has evidence whereas God says that's just how it is ... don't understand why it's more important than anything else'. 'What about dinosaurs? I just don't see sometimes how it all fits in' asked a 15-year-old female student who expressed belief in God and identified with the Churches of Christ. A 13-year-old male student who indicated uncertainty in belief and a critical approach to the Bible explained:

It's hard sometimes, there's no proof of it actually happening ... Like the Big Bang theory ... there are two different meanings or theories, the scientific one and the religious theory. It's kind of hard, they're both weird.

A 17-year-old male student, who indicated unbelief, no religion and a critical approach to the Bible, felt that the Bible was used inappropriately in relation to the Catholic attitudes to

contraception:

I don't like people justifying their answers for things and their interpretation of what a book said that is 2000 years old. I believe there is no relevance to today's society. Like watching 'Four Corners' the other week and seeing the church tell this dude that he shouldn't wear a condom while he's having sex with his wife even though he has Aids ... This dude is going to die in six years time and the chances are that if he doesn't use a condom then his wife will die too. It gets you angry, the crap, and they hide behind the Bible.

A large number of students commented on the contribution of religion and beliefs to 'hurt' and 'harm' on personal, local and global levels. These students particularly identified acts of discrimination, conflict and war, and the place of the Bible as directly or implicitly factoring in the reality of these: 'it can make people judgemental'; 'it's harmful when misinterpreted'; 'look what happened to the Jews'.

One student who described stories and miracles within the Bible as important and commented on the Bible as offering morals/guidelines also emphasised the personal harm that can occur 'when people punish themselves because they think it is the right thing to do'. Another student who emphasised the 'truth' of the Bible and commented on the Bible as offering morals/guidelines also identified the reality of 'fights because of religion'. Such pertinent academic and social issues are significant for young people, and can adversely influence their approach to and involvement in organised religion. As such, these thoughts, concerns and questions can become a barrier to their engagement with the Bible, particularly if not recognised or addressed.

In summary, based on the responses in interviews, it is clear that some young people have a positive attitude to the Bible based on their beliefs and affiliation with specific faith communities. These young people affirm the sacredness of the Bible, convey certainty in the believability and meaningfulness of the content, and emphasise the value of the Bible in terms of the guidance, experience of God and the comfort it contains and offers. These young people also indicate the importance of studying the Bible and the need for more of this to increase understanding and familiarity.

However, it is also evident that young people of various persuasions, whether they expressed belief in God or unbelief, whether they indicated a specific religious affiliation or no religion, and whether they expressed a positive or a critical approach to the Bible, see problems in reading the Bible and taking its teaching seriously. These barriers involve concerns and questions about the nature of the Bible as a whole (a book that is hard to believe), the content within the Bible (seeing the Bible as myths and fables that are exaggerated, contradictory and fragmented), and the value of the Bible (boring and difficult to understand, irrelevant and problematic in contemporary issues, a harmful tool).

Whatever these barriers are, a common thread and significant factor for young people is their desire to think about and pose critical questions. They want to share their personal opinions and beliefs within a space that is safe and receptive. And they want to make their own decisions about the value of religious faith and the Bible.

Why Do Many Young Australians Not Read the Bible?

Apart from the barriers noted above, the simple answer for most young Australians is that it is not something they have ever considered. It is not on their radar. The majority of Australians, and the majority of young people, do not think much about religion at all, and never have. They are no more likely to read the Bible than to read the Buddhist Tripitaka, despite the fact that many have been introduced to the Bible at school or in some other situation.

Although young people may have many different forms of contact with churches and their agencies, this does not necessarily translate into young people seriously considering the Christian faith as a personal option. Many of those who are directly exposed to the Christian faith through religious education in schools consider religious education as largely irrelevant to them. In terms of helping them to think about what life is about, most young people consider religious education in schools as unhelpful.

While there are many young people as noted above who question the veracity of the Bible or feel that it does not make sense, others reject it as unhelpful. For many young people, religion is a life-style option. Going to church is seen to be like a hobby or a sport – something you may choose if you want to. Just as some people like to go sailing on Sunday mornings, others go to church. As noted by Smith and Denton in their analysis of religion among young people in the USA, the attitude of most young people is 'whatever turns you on' is fine. There is no right answer. It is a matter of what works for you (2005, pp.144-5).

There is a concern among young Australians about taking religion too seriously, or being too enthusiastic about it. Most young people think that being 'too religious' is dangerous. Religion is fine in small doses, but being too religious can make you into a terrorist. When 1653 students were asked about this in the *Schools Spirituality Project*,

- 53% agreed 'religion is harmful if taken to extremes';
- 30% were not sure or neutral; and
- 17% disagreed that 'religion is harmful if taken to extremes'.

This sense of religion as something that is neither true nor false, but which or may not be helpful, arises out of a post-traditional society. Since the 1970s, the attitude that religious traditions are not binding or cannot impose duties has gradually become commonplace through Australian society. In contemporary Australia, that attitude is rejected mostly by people aged over 65 years and by some migrants who have come from countries where ethnicity remains closely tied to religious heritage. However, most young Australians do not see religious traditions as binding in any way. They are a matter of personal preference.

The relativist attitude to religions is seen in responses from students when asked whether it was important to pick and choose beliefs from all religions and ideas. Thirty-nine per cent of students said they thought it was important to do that, 44 per cent were not sure, and just 17 per cent opposed the idea.

This does not mean that all knowledge is seen as relative, as some people claim is true of post-modernity. Certainly, not all knowledge, or even all ethics is seen as a matter of personal preference. Many subjects at school are respected as providing non-relative knowledge. Most young people feel that history and geography, science and mathematics, and many other disciplines do provide them with knowledge. However, religion is seen as an area in which there is

a diversity of opinion, where there is no right or wrong answers, and which is, then, a matter of personal preference. It is seen as being on a similar level to claims about astrology or psychic powers.

At the same time, according to the sociologist, Anthony Giddens, the post-traditional society has led to the rise of a group of people who, in the midst of uncertainty, latch onto something that they arbitrarily take as certain. In other words, it has led to a rise in fundamentalism as a reaction to the dominant relativism (Giddens 1994). Thus, there is a group of people, often people with a certain type of personality, who hold that religion is right (or wrong) and who have very strong views about it.

Consequences of Reading the Bible

The various surveys allow one to correlate Bible reading with a range of other responses about the wellbeing of the self and values of the person.

In terms of personal wellbeing, it has been noted that there are quite a few people who say they are hurting deep inside who read the Bible. Indeed, it has been suggested that some people may read the Bible because they are hurting and are looking for comfort in religious faith.

The National Telephone survey indicates that those who read the Bible more tend to have a stronger sense of purpose.

- 86% of those who read the Bible daily have a strong sense of purpose, compared with
- 65% of those who read it weekly;
- 60% of those who read in occasionally; and
- 65% of those who never read it.

However, regression analysis shows that Bible reading itself is not the factor that determines the level of Bible reading. Rather, the major factor is believing religious faith is important in shaping daily life, and secondarily, believing that God provides specific guidance and answers to prayers. Bible reading, then, is indicative of those beliefs. It certainly provides a means whereby people feel they are communicating with God. In itself, however, it does not produce the strong sense of purpose.

The *National Telephone Survey* asked people about the importance of a variety of values. These values were chosen to represent the major areas of human values identified by S. Schwartz in his refinement of the work of M. Rokeach (Hughes and Bond 2003). Table 15 (next page) illustrates the value priorities (on a scale of 1 to 5) for the nine values included in the study.

Two values have very different scores in the different categories for the frequency of Bible reading. 'Spiritual life' is scored more highly by those who read the Bible more, but 'excitement' is given a lower score. It has been noted in other research on values that about 10 per cent of the Australian population emphasise the importance of a spiritual orientation to life. Most of these people attend church frequently, believe in a personal God, and many believe the Bible to be literally true (Hughes and Bond 2005, p.21). The 'spiritual life' contrasts with 'excitement', which is primarily a value about personal experiences and self-enhancement. It also contrasts with 'money'. While having a lot of money was at the bottom of the list for all groups, it received significantly less affirmation from those who read the Bible frequently.

While Bible reading may be more the product of valuing a 'spiritual life' than the cause of it, statistical analysis indicated that it was one of the strongest markers of a spiritual life: stronger than church attendance, a personal commitment to faith, and several other factors.

Bible reading also correlated with a positive attitude towards helping others and to social justice. Both values were affirmed more strongly by those who read the Bible frequently, even though their position on the list of values was not necessarily higher among those who read the Bible daily. In fact, a range of positive values are affirmed more by those who read the Bible. They tend to take life a little more seriously than those who do not read the Bible as frequently.

Bible reading is not a major factor in attitudes to world peace, care for the environment, or national security. It is more closely related to the personal values and attitudes which have to do with the inner life and people's relationships to others close to them.

Table 15. The Rank Ordering of the Affirmation of a Range of Values by Young Australians by Frequency of Bible Reading (on a Scale of 1 to 5)

		<i>Frequency of Bible Reading</i>			
		Never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily
1.	Friendship 4.60	Helping Others 4.56	Friendship 4.69	Spiritual Life 4.76	
2.	Excitement 4.45	World Peace 4.56	Helping Others 4.59	Helping Others 4.76	
3.	Helping Others 4.42	Friendship 4.53	World Peace 4.43	Friendship 4.56	
4.	World peace 4.38	Excitement 4.39	Spiritual Life 4.27	World Peace 4.29	
5.	Social justice 4.03	Social Justice 4.18	Excitement 4.16	Social Justice 4.26	
6.	Environment 3.92	Environment 4.15	Social Justice 4.10	Excitement 3.93	
7.	National Security 3.83	National Security 3.98	Environment 3.91	Environment 3.78	
8.	Spiritual Life 3.30	Spiritual Life 3.74	National Security 3.89	National Security 3.61	
9.	Money 3.13	Money 3.13	Money 2.93	Money 2.36	

Source: National Telephone Survey, Spirit of Gen Y Project, 2005.

Note: In Table 15, values correlating positively with Bible reading have been coloured blue and those correlating negatively, grey.

Does it make a difference to voluntary contributions to society? The *National Telephone Survey* indicated that those who read the Bible more are more involved in volunteer work and community service as shown in Table 16.

Table 16. Hours of Voluntary Work and Community Service Per Month among Young People by Frequency of Bible Reading

Frequency of Bible Reading	Hours of Voluntary Work / Community Service Per Month
Daily	2.31 hours
Weekly	1.89 hours
Occasionally	1.62 hours
Never	1.54 hours

Source: National Telephone Survey (2005).

It has been argued elsewhere that church attendance is a major factor in predicting the levels of voluntary work (Hughes and Black 2002). Churches contribute to several factors that lead to higher voluntary activities. Churches speak about the values of contributing to others, and thus help motivate people. They also give people skills in civic activities and actively engage people by inviting them to participate in voluntary activities.

However, for young people, Bible reading is a more important factor than church attendance. Possibly this occurs because many young people go with their families to church and are not necessarily personally motivated. It may also be that those who take Bible reading seriously also tend to take life seriously. They are reminded, as they read the Scriptures, of the importance of contributing to the wellbeing of others.

It is not easy within quantitative cross-sectional research to draw causal links. However, it would appear that Bible reading is associated strongly in a positive way with the values of spirituality, helping others and social justice, and that this is borne out in practice by the involvement of people in voluntary activities in the community. Bible reading is negatively associated with values that have to do with personal pleasure and gain: excitement and having lots of money.

4. What Are the Major Influences and Social Drivers of Young People's Attitudes to the Bible?

In the research literature, most references to social drivers are references to particular social factors influencing attitudes. Thus, people are asking what are the social drivers that impact the use of water, or those which can inhibit or enhance the spread of AIDS, or which influence attitudes to the environment?

There are two ways to approach the issue of major social drivers and influences in contemporary society on young people. One is to ask young people themselves what they think influences them. This provides us with a picture of the influences of which young people are conscious. It may also be indicative of the sorts of places where young people go for counselling and advice. On the other hand, it does not provide information about those influences and drivers in society which work on us subconsciously. The influences and drivers which operate subconsciously can be divided into two types: those which help form the structures of thinking; and those influencing us in terms of specific content from time to time.

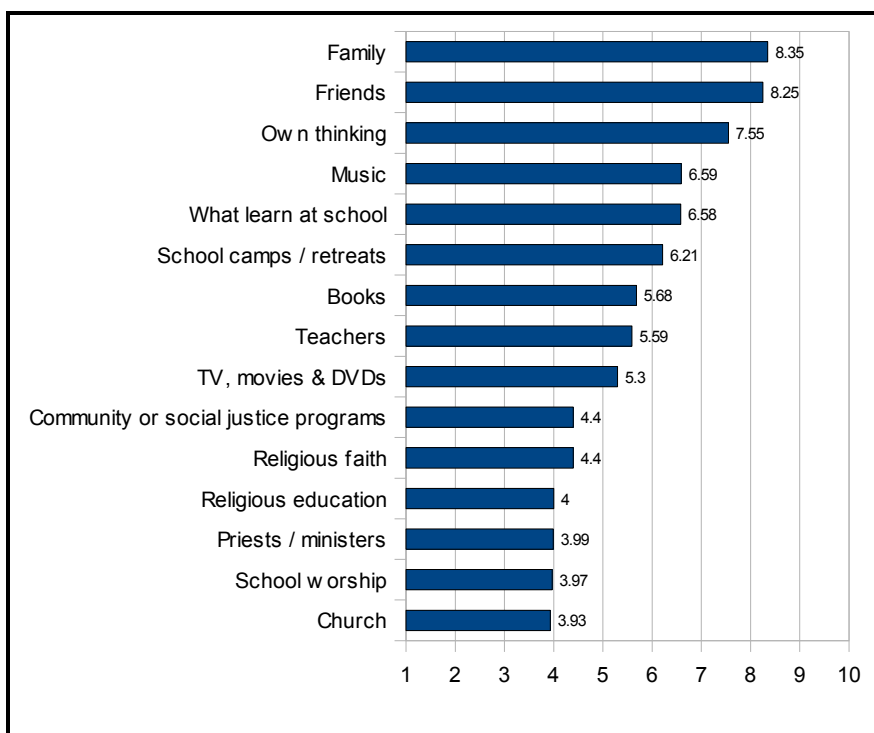
Influences on Young People – Young People's Perspectives

In the *Schools Spirituality Project*, a question was asked 'How important are the following in helping you to think about the nature of life?' A range of options was given, mainly relating to school and religion. Students were asked to score each option on a scale between 1 and 10. In previous open-ended interviews, the most common response had been 'family and friends'. So these were added to the question to give some perspectives on how important was the influence of various aspects of school life in the thinking of the students. Figure 5 (next page) shows the responses of more than 5000 students from a wide range of church-run schools.

It is evident from Figure 5 that religion plays a comparatively small role in the minds of most students in their thinking about life. Family and friends are very high on the list. Music and what they learn at school is important. We believe that school camps and retreats are important because they provide opportunities for young people to think about the bigger questions of life and to respond to those questions in their own way. Religious education should be dealing with these same questions. Yet, the responses of many young people indicated that religious education was seen as 'content', and was not delivered in a way which made its relevance to them apparent.

Overall, 9 per cent of the students in these church-run schools said that religious faith or spirituality was a very important influence on their thinking about life. About half the students scored it as having an importance of less than 5 out of 10, indicating that it had very little importance. We did not ask specifically about the influence of the Bible, but we would expect that a portion of those who said that religious faith was important to them would also indicate the importance of the Bible.

Figure 5. The Importance Students Assign to Various Influences on How They Think about Life (Mean Scores on a Scale of 1 to 10)



Source: Schools Spirituality Project (2005 to 2008).

Child-Rearing Practices and Early Childhood Experiences

Students are correct in describing the influence their families have on them. As has been noted already, some of the basic ways of seeing the world are constructed in early childhood and influenced by the earliest child-rearing practices and childhood experiences. In some cultures, for example, the patterns of authority and obedience are laid down. In the Western world, the patterns of individuality and consumerism are reinforced.

In *A Maze or a System? Changes in the Worldview of Australian People*, it is argued that in the 1960s and 1970s there were some major changes in the ways young people conceived of the world. Many children raised in the 1950s grew up, seeing the world as basically a stable and predictable place. The world ran according to rules. They experienced this within their homes and this was reinforced in the wider world. Sometimes people broke the rules, but it was seen as contributing to chaos. If people kept to the moral rules of society, then life would run smoothly. The liturgical nature of church worship was a reaffirmation of that ordered world and the fact that God was ultimately in control of it (Hughes 1994).

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the development of the conception of the world as a huge, multi-dimensional web, rather than as a closed system. There was rebellion against the rules, which were often seen to be unproductive and unhelpful. The rules which surrounded sexuality were seen to be inhibiting as were many past patterns of relationships. People valued new experiences and turned to drug culture and rock music because they broke all the rules of order. The world was seen much more in terms of an arena of competing powers: the evil powers inhibiting the path of people to authenticity, the good powers enhancing the path.

One of the influences on this new picture of the world was television. In the late 1950s and through the 1960s, it began beaming into people's rooms pictures of a world not ordered, but one in which the unexpected, the spectacular, and even the bizarre was happening on a daily basis.

The increased mobility of people for travel and immigration meant that young people began to see the world as being much more pluralistic. Not everyone lived the same way, bound by the same rules. The opportunity for the average person to travel the world and experience different cultures confirmed television's presentation of the world as one of plurality and chaos rather than homogeneity and stability.

In the 1970s, many social institutions began to experience the impact of 'de-institutionalisation'. Political parties, labour unions, civic societies and the church all began to lose members. Young people were less interested in having stable civic societies. They were more interested in causes and social concerns. They might become part of a movement for a time. They were passionate about political issues such as the Vietnam War. But this did not mean joining a society which would meet regularly face-to-face. The focus was on the task rather than the institution.

It has been difficult to identify what were the major drivers of such changes in the ways of thinking. Certainly, child-rearing patterns and the early experiences of childhood had an impact. The sociologist, Peter Berger, has argued that one of the factors was the change in family size. Smaller families of one, two or three children made it possible for families to focus on the needs of the individual child. In larger families, it had been necessary to operate according to rules which were justified in terms of what was best for the family as a whole.

The Impact of Changes in Technology

Behind many of the major social changes are changes in technology which have led to changes in what ordinary human beings have been able to do and in the ways they have done them. It has frequently been argued that the Protestant Reformation of the 15th and 16th centuries was dependent on the development of the technology of printing. Suddenly, vast numbers of people had access to documents and, consequently, to thinking occurring in the wider society. They were no longer dependent on priests who had exclusive access to the few written manuscripts. Instead, the Bible became accessible as a printed document to the majority of people allowing them to read and interpret it for themselves. The Catholic Church laity were largely by-passed in that process. The Bible reading habits of the individual, therefore, have roots in the Reformation and in the technology of printing.

The technology of the agricultural and industrial revolutions changed the nature of human society profoundly. The rural villages in which the majority of people had lived and which had dominated life, gave way to industrial towns where the majority of people worked long hours on mindless tasks in factories. In this context, the Methodist focus on small groups and on the personal experience of God took root. At the same time, the scientific and engineering methods which developed the steam engines that powered the industrial revolution also were used to ask questions about the wider world, about geological and evolutionary history, for example, and how the Bible had come to be written. This questioning raised doubts about the veracity of the Bible.

Behind the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s were a range of technological innovations. The development of the contraceptive pill had a revolutionary impact on society, particularly women.

Not only did it make small families possible, as it gave control over the consequences of sex, but it allowed people to make the distinction between sex for procreation and sex for pleasure.

The development of the television (colour arriving in the late 1960s) had a profound affect on what people did of an evening. It is often credited with the demise of Sunday evening services. The impact on the ways people saw the wider world as being more chaotic and less secure has been outlined.

The development of the computer has had far reaching impacts still being worked out in contemporary society. One of the most important technological developments has been the Internet. People now have access to a huge variety of information at their finger tips. Knowledge has become accessible in ways never previously imagined. Perhaps more significantly are the new ways in which people are making contact with each other: through email, and most recently through social networking sites, such as Facebook, and through Twitter. It does not matter where people are geographically, the Internet has meant that people can be in contact with each other irrespective of their physical location. Mobile phones have also played a major role in the ability to contact people wherever they are. It has meant that friendships may be carried on throughout the world, while neighbours may be barely known. People engage with each other on the basis of common interests rather than on the basis of a common locality.

The development of computer and telecommunications technology also means that knowledge is being sought in small bites, as needed, rather than knowledge being built through the development of conceptual structures and through reading long and systematically constructed books. It probably means that the Bible is read less for an understanding of its overall themes, but more as a source of 'gems', of promises and ideas, which are taken out of their original contexts. However, that is conjecture and would need to be tested in further research.

As the means of communication become increasingly diverse, people are turning to a wider range of media. Books no longer dominate. The Australian Bureau of Statistics found in their time-use study that, while the average person spends 2 hours 20 minutes per day with audio visual media, they read for just 23 minutes a day. Audio visual media, such as the television, the DVD, the computer screen dominate. Books have not disappeared, but are a minor form of the provision of information and entertainment. It is in this new world of information technology that many people have become more familiar with the scenes of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* than the images described in the Book of Revelation, notwithstanding the fact that Tolkien was highly dependent on the Book of Revelation for his inspiration.

Over the last 50 years, there have been huge changes in medicine and control over disease. People are now living much longer than they did previously. This has contributed to a greater focus on this life rather than on the life to come. In previous generations, life was shorter and more precarious. Even in London in the early 19th century, epidemics such as cholera were common and quite unpredictable. The causes were not known and there was no control. Many of these diseases have been brought largely under control. The deterioration or damage to human organs is now much more controlled. Advances are being made in finding cures for cancer. As people live longer and have more control over their health, so there has been a greater focus on this life rather than a future life (in heaven or hell). Increasingly, religious faith has been seen as contributing to a better life here rather than giving hope for a life to come.

Changes in technology are likely to continue to be a major driver of social change. However, it is

unclear whether changes in the ways we live our lives will be incremental or paradigmatic. Some of the areas where there are likely to be major developments in the near future include:

- genetic engineering – likely to change the foods we eat and our control over certain diseases;
- artificial intelligence – likely to increase the capacity for computers and robots to take on more complex tasks, such as the building of houses and caring for the elderly;
- biotechnology, including some uses of nanotechnology – will give greater control over diseases and increased capacity to replace internal organs with synthetically-made products;
- communications – increased dependence on digital electronic social networking for social contacts, including dating;
- 3-D video conferencing widely available in homes;
- space travel – increasingly available;
- portable translation devices – giving the ability to cross language barriers when travelling. On the other hand, a simplified form of English is likely to become almost universal.
- GPS systems allow some aspects of travel and some forms of work, such as farming, to be done automatically.

Social networking is likely to increase in the near future. It is likely there will be greater flexibility of work associated with the ability to work anywhere. We are on the verge of a merging to two technologies: GPS and social networking. It will soon be possible for our phones to tell us which of our friends are close by. If we attend a festival, for example, or even if we are in a shopping centre, using the GPS in our phones will enable us to determine who, in our social networking lists, is in the vicinity.

This development will probably enhance the pattern that has developed over recent years that young people meet with each other informally and spontaneously. Contemporary young Australians rarely become members of groups which meet in an organised fashion at particular times and in static locations (such as church congregations which have traditionally met weekly). Rather, they tend to go to particular activities and events which look interesting to them, such as festivals or particular sporting events, or shows, and alert their friends about the event by mobile phone (or SMS) . The new technology means that young people can go individually or in pairs and meet friends who happen to be at the occasion rather than arranging the meeting prior to attending.

Churches are finding it very difficult to gather congregations of young people (under 35 years of age), partly because of the spontaneity of attending particular activities and events, rather than committing themselves to regular involvements. It is likely that, in the future, young people will increasingly look for special events, festivals, discussions, one-off events such as pilgrimages or meditation, or courses of Bible study or spiritual development, rather than congregations as the major way in which they seek to develop their spirituality.

We are already finding that most young people who attend groups in a church, apart from church services, do so occasionally. In the Schools Spirituality Project, 5373 young people were asked about their involvement in church activities apart from services of worship.

- 4% said they were involved every week;
- 4% said most weeks;

- 4% said sometimes (6 to 12 times in the year);
- 8% said three to six times in the past year;
- 22% said once or twice; and
- 57% said not at all.

In other words, around 8 per cent were regularly involved in church activities apart from services, 34 per cent were involved occasionally, and 57 per cent not involved at all. We would expect that, influenced by technological developments which mean that meeting one's friends does not need to be planned in advance, that occasional involvement might grow as the expense of regular involvement.

In general, the increasing power of computers and mobile phones will probably also increase the sense of control over certain aspects of life. This 'control' will be felt as immediate, not requiring us to plan ahead.

Computers have given people unprecedented access to huge amounts of knowledge, together with the ability to communicate almost instantly with others. This technology has also afforded people the opportunity to do many new things, such as manipulating photos and creating films – activities which were once available only to experts using expensive equipment – and has provided means of making this material accessible to a wide, even global, audience.

This sense of control over life may mean that people will be even more open to change. The rate of divorce has increased dramatically over the last forty years. It is quite likely that in the future, more people will move in and out of relationships depending upon whether or not they are satisfying and fulfilling. They will more readily change their appearance, not just in terms of clothes but in terms of their physical selves as plastic surgery becomes easier and cheaper. They will possibly be more ready to change their occupations when they become dissatisfied with them.

Major Threats and Challenges in Life

Another set of factors also has a considerable influence on how life is seen, and can be described as 'social drivers'. These are the challenges in life and the problems we face from day-to-day. The increased power available through nuclear and other forms of concentrated power produces a situation in which there is an increased risk that it could be used in ways to destroy human life and societies rather than to enhance them. For some years, through the 1950s and 1960s, particularly at the height of the Cold War, there was a real danger of nations fighting each other with nuclear weapons. The greater risk today is that some small groups determined to destroy a significant part of the world may be able to obtain access to nuclear or other forms of power which enable them to do this.

The terrorist attack of 11th September 2001 deeply challenged the world's sense of security. A means of everyday transport was turned into something which destroyed thousands of lives and unleashed wars that have continued for the last decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, and which may still spread to other parts of the world.

The link of terrorism to Islam has reignited people's awareness of religion as a present and potent force in the world. It has been noted that most students believe that 'religion is harmful if taken to extremes'. There is probably a greater wariness about extreme positions in regards to religion than was held in previous generations. In interviews with young people, the example commonly given

when discussing this matter was terrorism.

In terms of future social drivers, the major challenge to human existence is likely to be seen as the degradation of the environment. When asked about the greatest threat to the future of the world, the most common response among young people surveyed in Australia, United Kingdom and Thailand was environmental problems, such as pollution and global warming. At the popular level, awareness of the environmental threat has grown and there is widespread awareness that this threat is the most critical ever faced by human beings.

The Search Institute Survey (2008) asked young people what were the two greatest threats to the future of the world. The data that from Australia, Thailand and the United Kingdom shows there are considerable differences between the countries on some issues, but close agreement on the major threats. The top concern in each of the three countries was environmental problems, such as pollution and global warming. The second or third item was religious and ethnic hatred, violence and war, as shown in Table 17.

Table 17. What Young People in Australia, Thailand and the United Kingdom See as the Greatest Threats to the Future of the World (in Rank Order of the Percentage Identifying the Threat as One of the Two Greatest Threats to the Future)

	Australia	Thailand	United Kingdom
1.	Environment	Environment	Environment
2.	Hunger & poverty	Religious & ethnic hatred	Religious & ethnic hatred
3.	Religious & ethnic hatred	Terrorism	Hunger & poverty
4.	Terrorism	Lack of jobs & economic options	Gap between rich & poor
5.	AIDS & infectious diseases	AIDS & infectious diseases	AIDS & infectious diseases
6.	Nuclear weapons	Nuclear weapons	Terrorism
7.	Gap between rich & poor	Hunger & poverty	Nuclear weapons
8.	Lack of jobs & economic options	Gap between rich & poor	Lack of jobs & economic options

Source: Search Institute Inventory of Youth Spiritual Development

Among young Australians, the threat of environmental problems was rated higher by those who were doing better at school, and by girls. It has been found in other studies that those people whose life focus is on relationships are more attuned to environmental concerns than those

people whose lives focus on technology and material goods, and this is why females tend to be more attuned to environmental issues than males (Hughes 1997, p.12). Environmental concerns were similarly affirmed by young people of all age groups (12 to 24 years).

At the moment, most young people do not see the issue of the environment as related to religious faith. Many see it as something that will be resolved primarily by changes in technology as we move to solar, wind and other more sustainable sources of power. On the other hand, many people argue that the issue of the environment is rooted in the human spirit and is ultimately a spiritual issue. Only as we develop a new economy, that is not based on human greed, that is not dependent on ever increasing consumerism, will human beings be able to avert the destruction of the environment and perhaps the end of the human species.

If religious faith becomes part of the human story about to change the ways we live so that the human species (and many other species of animals and plants also) survive, then it may become very significant to people. While the Bible does not speak directly about the environmental problems we are facing, there are some deeply embedded principles about the care of the earth that may underpin a new approach to living.

The way that religious faith fits into the national (or in the case of the environmental challenges, the human) story is critical to large scale movements in religious interest and observance, as has been shown in the work of the British sociologist, David Martin (1978; 2005). The fall of Communism and the break-up of some of the Communist conglomerations, such as the USSR and Yugoslavia, have led to rapid rises in religious belief and observance in such places as Georgia, Croatia and Poland. In these places, religion has become part of the national story in the overthrow of Communism and the independence of these nations. Thus, there is a high level of religious interest and activity. In these places, the major religious orientation is Catholic or Orthodox, which does not necessarily mean a great rise in Bible reading. If the religious orientation was Protestant, we would expect it would have that impact.

Media, Advertising and Popular Culture

There is a third set of 'social drivers', which do not seek to change thinking so much as to change the ways in which basic human needs are met and challenges fulfilled. These are those engaged in advertising and in the media. Through art and theatre, music and dance, through film-clips and photographs, people are seeking to have an influence on the actions and activities of others.

Successful advertising does not usually establish new needs, but provides new means to fulfil old needs. Much of it seeks to change choices, say from one brand of car to another, or from one university to another. Films go further than that in encouraging people to see the world in a new way. A powerful film will introduce new language or symbols, or suggest new ways of evaluating what is good and what is evil. The Harry Potter films, for example, have had a wide appeal, perhaps partly because of the fantasy world in which the person with whom one identifies in the film has special powers and is able to use them to overcome challenges (Savage et al. 2006, p.61).

A major study in the United Kingdom, commissioned by the Church of England, looked closely at youth, popular culture and religion and conducted a wide range of interviews with young people to examine the inter-relationships. The study noted that there are three ways in which popular culture and religion can inter-relate.

The first is that popular culture can be seen as enhancing religion. Modern styles of worship have been inspired by popular culture (Savage et al. 2006, p.23). The musical instruments and styles of popular culture are frequently used. In some contexts, music is provided to serve the same purpose as a 'movie-style soundtrack'; to comment on or highlight what is going on and set the appropriate mood (Savage et al., p.24).

However, the study also noted that popular culture can become 'religion' for people. Classically, they note, this can happen in the field of sport. They note that sports can:

... provide a basis for community, identity and history. Sports can be said to have their own liturgy with rituals and ceremonies and foci for devotion in the form of top sportsmen and women. (Savage et al., p.25)

However, quasi-religious movements can also develop around the imaginary worlds and ideologies developed in series of feature films. The cult movements around *Star Wars* are one example. The fact that 70,000 Australians cited their religion as 'Jedi' in 2001 may have been a joke at one level, but was indicative of the fact that such movements can act like religions at another level.

A third relationship between popular culture and religion is that popular culture can be a 'resource' for religion. Sometimes it has been used to promote the Christian faith, for example, in Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of Christ*. At other times, it can be seen as introducing alternative religious ideas, symbols and practices. *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* have been seen as suggesting occult ideas. The television series *Charmed* presents Wiccan and neo-Pagan religious ideas.

However, a study of teenagers' relationship with the supernatural through film and television suggests that most young people see these films primarily as entertainment. They are not taken seriously, and young people do not transfer what they see into every-day life (Savage et al., p.27). Some young people find the ideas fun to play with, and these films may encourage people not to 'close down' the possibility of the supernatural. It actually helps young people to retain the possibility of there being something beyond the material world (Savage et al., p.28).

Savage et al argue that young people approach popular culture as something they construct. The messages of popular culture, they suggest, are *made* in the reception of them. They suggest that they use:

... film, television soap operas, popular music, clubbing, cultural icons and advertising images for their *own purposes*: to resource a world view in which happiness for themselves, their friends, and their families is the bedrock. (Savage et al., p.35)

They suggest there is a common story-line in young people's views of the world, which they have described as 'Happy midi-narrative'. It is not a story about the world as a whole, such as the Christian meta-narrative about sin and salvation and the coming of Christ. Rather, it is a more modest picture of what life is about in the here and now (Savage et al., p.38).

Using quite a different methodology, based on surveys as well as interviews, Australian research came to similar conclusions about the fundamental story-line of young Australians. Approximately 93 per cent of young people affirm that 'the thing is to enjoy life and to make the best of it here and now' (Hughes 2007, p.45). Enjoyment consists of feeling good about the self, having good

friends and having some excitement in life.

Young people are well aware that this life will be achieved in the right sort of context. They want a world which is peaceful, where everyone gets a fair go (i.e. is socially just), where people are cooperative and helpful to each other, a world which is secure and sustainable.

Most young people see the means to achieving this life as doing their best in their studies and getting an interesting job. Developing enjoyable relationships is also an important part of the process.

This is the picture that is reflected in the list of values in Table 15 (p. 35). While some of the values reflect what young people want because of their inherent value of themselves, such as good friends and excitement, there are other values which describe the sort of world in which they want to live: world peace, social justice, national security, and so on. 'Helpfulness' is probably more a value they want to see in the world they live in than one which constitutes the nature of an enjoyable life.

It should be noted that the differences between those who read the Bible frequently and those who do not has to do with the make-up of what is seen as an enjoyable life. The frequent Bible readers say that 'a spiritual life' is an important component, but excitement is not so important. Most of these people are saying that the inner peace and sense of wellbeing which comes from a relationship with God is part of their understanding of 'an enjoyable life'. The transient pleasures of excitement are of less importance to them.

There are a wide range of resources to which they turn if life does not go well. Some of these involve the entertainment of popular culture. Most young people take music very seriously. But it is in this context that, for some, 'God' may be seen as a resource to which they can also turn. The Bible may also be seen as a resource through which God's help and comfort become available to them.

Young people, then, are not products of popular culture. Rather, they take bits and pieces of it in constructing their own worlds as they see appropriate. Nevertheless, popular culture has its impact on the structure of the way in which young people put their worlds together. It has shaped the consumeristic approach which sees the basic question in life as: 'How can I enjoy life?'

Popular culture then provides some of the responses. Savage et al suggest that popular culture 'seemed to mediate between young people's experience of the Actual and the Ideal'. They suggest that sometimes, popular culture offers more experience of the actual, and other times opens the door to the ideal.

How popular culture will develop and influence young people in the future is hard to say. To some extent there is necessarily a balance between what is possible for young people and the ideals that popular culture can present. In a rapidly globalising world, it is likely that young people will increasingly develop relationships with others across the globe who have similar, specialised interests to themselves. This could mean some fragmentation of popular culture, which might take a great variety of forms with different groups of young people. We have already seen the development of Christian expressions of popular culture, but these tend to appeal to a particular sub-group.

Free-to-air television has tended to provide some commonalities in popular culture for young people. The advent of cable television and the increased use of the Internet for popular culture, means there will be less commonality in the future. Young people will form their own groups around their own popular culture themes or expressions. Just as the sporting world has fragmented because young people are engaged in a much wider range of sports than their parents, so there will also be an increased fragmentation of popular culture.

Family and Social Inclusion and Exclusion

In our interviews with young people for the Spirit of Generation Y project, we asked them who they most admired. We expected young people to talk about the stars of popular culture, about singers and actors, about television personalities and about sporting stars. We were most surprised that these people were rarely mentioned. There may be a fascination with the lives of celebrities, as indicated by their prominence in popular magazines, but it does not mean that these people are admired.

More than 50 per cent of young people (aged between 13 and 24 years) spoke of their mothers, their fathers, or, jointly, their parents. Some others spoke of older siblings, some of grandparents and other of members of the wider family circle. Occasionally, they spoke of special friends.

We asked them the reasons for their admiration. Most of their responses reflected on the love and care shown to them. In many instances, they went on to say that that love had been there in difficult times and under trying circumstances. They admired the persistence of their parents.

Very occasionally, mention was made of a singer or sportsperson. Almost always, it was a person who had been through a time of hardship, such as ill health or a debilitating accident, and how the person had persisted through that challenging time.

While popular culture is very much part of the context in which young people put their lives together, they are influenced more by those who are close to them. They respond positively to those who stick by them, in the ups and downs of life.

While the aim of life is its enjoyment, many young people do not feel they are achieving that. In the National Telephone Survey, 17 per cent of young people said that they were hurting deep inside and nothing seemed to help. They are hurting because of the break-down of family relationships and friendships. Some are hurting because they are caught between the values and way of life of a migrant culture and that of the Australian culture. Some young rural people are hurting because of the uncertain future, because they know the future does not lie in the present declining rural situation. Some are hurting because they feel alienated from society, within which they feel they have no place, no recognition, no voice.

On the other hand, there are many young people for whom life is good. They enjoy their family and friends, their activities and their social context. They feel positive about the future. Life is full of possibilities.

It is possible that, in the future, these two groups of young people will separate further. There will be a large group of young people who feel socially alienated, often from families in which the parents are separated, in which parental care is weak, and where there is little opportunity to focus on getting a good education and, ultimately, little hope of enjoyable work. Often, in these

families, people turn to alcohol and other drugs in order to cope with the distress of life.

On the other hand, there will be many other stable families in which there are strong relationships between children and parents, where there is encouragement to study and the hope that a well-paying and enjoyable employment can be attained.

It is likely that the way to engage these two groups of people will be quite different. In the first group, levels of literacy will probably be low. The church is likely to be seen as a source of welfare rather than as something they could actively join. However, the second group may feel that life is okay, that there is no need for religion.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

General Patterns of Bible Reading among Young People

In Australia, frequent Bible reading is the practice of a small group (between 3% and 5%) of young people. This is predominantly a sub-group of those who are involved in Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and youth groups, and those who come from families which encourage the practice. According to the National Telephone Survey (2005), young people attending Evangelical (Baptist, Churches of Christ, Evangelical Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Salvation Army, Seventh-day Adventist) or Pentecostal churches in Australia monthly, or more often, constitute about 7 per cent of all youth. Judging by Census identification, this group is probably maintaining its numbers, but decreasing gradually as a portion of the population. This group sees the Bible as the way God speaks to them personally, giving them both guidance and comfort.

A group of between 6 and 7 per cent read the Bible from time to time. This group is more diverse theologically. Most members of the group are involved in churches, but not necessarily Evangelical or charismatic churches. Some are Catholics, others Orthodox, and some are involved in more liberal denominations, such as the Uniting Church. It is likely that many of these young people attend church-run schools, and some would read the Bible for their studies at school.

There is a small group of about 1 per cent of young Australians, who pick up the Bible occasionally out of curiosity, or because they wonder whether there is anything in it which might be helpful when they are feeling down. Many members of this small group do not attend church, nor do they have families who attend.

For the majority of young people, the Bible is not 'on their radar'. It is not something they think about. Many do have religious education at school, or have friends or family members who attend a church, or have connection with church-run welfare, health or media. They see religion as an optional personal preference for those others who like it, and see no reason to even explore it for themselves. If they do go to church or have religious education, they feel it is all irrelevant to them.

Many of these young people feel the stories in the Bible are 'unbelievable'. They are not sure about there being a God, let alone the possibility of God acting within the world. They find the Bible difficult to understand, and sometimes contradictory. They experience it as not engaging with the questions of life that they find significant.

There are a range of social factors which are likely to drive changes in society in the future. One of these is technology. Electronic forms of communication are becoming more ubiquitous. Much social interaction is taking place in electronic forms such as through email, Twitter, Facebook, and so on. It is likely that electronic forms of communication and positioning technology will soon merge so that you will be alerted to 'the friends' who are close to you on a particular occasion.

In general, the development of technology is likely to give people an increased sense of control over their lives. It may also give them a greater sense that they can change their lives: their appearance, their relationships, their quality of health, their work and so on.

A major factor in the future will be developing issues of concern. The potential collapse of

environmental systems as we now experience them is likely to be an increasing concern over coming decades. If spirituality is seen as a key to changing life-styles in such ways that will lead to a sustainable future, then spirituality may be back on the national, even the global, agenda. If, however, the focus remains on technological and economic means of solving the problems, then the spiritual dimension may well remain unexplored.

It is quite likely there will be a growing disjunction between those who feel socially included and have the hope of an enjoyable life and those who feel socially excluded. Some in the former group may continue to look to religious faith as one resource to deal with the occasional challenges in life, although the majority group will not feel a need for religion.

The latter group will be a product of dysfunctional families, of economic hardship, sub-cultures of disadvantage peripheral to the mainstream, and in which there is little hope for interesting employment and an enjoyable life. It is likely this latter group will struggle with literacy. While many in the group will see religion as part of the world from which they feel excluded, there may be some who turn to religion or spirituality as a life-line.

Recommendations for the Bible Society

There are several recommendations that can be made on the basis of the research covered in this report.

1. Focus on building youth groups and Bible study groups

It is evident that most young people who read the Bible frequently do so because they are participants in communities which encourage them to do so. Many of them belong to Bible study groups. They have families and friends who practise regular Bible reading.

Developing such groups should lead to more people reading the Bible frequently in this way. Hence, providing resources for groups and assisting in leadership development should have a positive impact. It is likely to have a much greater impact that focussing on resources for the individual. Such groups will not only encourage Bible reading and assist in the interpretation of the Bible, but will also help to maintain the habits over time.

For many of these young people, the central question is: 'What is God saying to me in my situation?'. It is appropriate, then, that materials should assist young people in finding a response to their question, to hear what God is saying to them.

2. Develop materials for occasional readers and the curious

It has been noted that many young people, including many who read the Bible occasionally, or encounter it through school or youth group, find the Bible difficult to read. While some feel there is some good teaching in it, they find its stories hard to believe and the teaching hard to understand. Most young people look for information that is immediately relevant to their lives and situation and expect to find it in 'bite-sized' segments.

Providing materials that highlight the enduring principles, values and wisdom of the Bible and its essential message may assist these young readers to find in the Bible what is relevant and helpful to their lives. It may be possible, for example, to orient such materials around themes which are pertinent to contemporary young people, such as relationships and social issues. It may assist in

presenting the Bible as a book which continues to be relevant to contemporary life.

In this consumeristic age, 'relevance' is a key to engaging young people. Most dismiss the Bible as irrelevant. Therefore, the future of the Bible for young people lies in being able to demonstrate its relevance to their lives, to showing that it contains 'answers' to the questions they are asking. There are at least two areas in which this relevance could be demonstrated:

1. the Bible and religious faith, as a resource for coping with the challenges of personal life; and
2. the Bible, and religious faith, as a key resource in solving the threats of climate change and the unsustainability of contemporary economic systems.

Spiritual leaders around the world are beginning to say that there is a spiritual dimension to the crisis facing the world in that our current consumeristic ways of life are totally unsustainable, particularly if all the world's peoples strive to equal the Western world's rate of consumption (Hughes 2010). New ways of living founded on an economic system, not predicated on continuous growth and motivated by human greed, must be developed for a sustainable future. If young people saw the answers as contained in the Biblical principles, it could re-write the Bible back into the overarching story of humanity.

3. Work with families in encouraging Bible engagement

While there are no particular social drivers that have a major influence on young people's attitudes to religious faith and the Bible, it is noteworthy that parents continue to have a major influence. Therefore, working with parents to encourage positive attitudes towards religious faith and to Bible reading should be productive.

4. Explore relevant forms of communication and community for encouraging Bible engagement

Recent social changes have had major impacts on communication, the formation of communities and on the accessibility of information. These changes need to be taken into account in developing strategies for marketing the Bible, and, at a deeper level, at looking at the variety of forms that Christian communities might take in the future.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research conducted so far on youth spirituality and Bible engagement leaves several questions unanswered. These questions would be important in future research.

1. What are the 'catalysts' for Bible reading?

Some young people, mostly members of Evangelical or Charismatic churches and youth groups, read the Bible daily. We can assume that these young people have developed this as a regular habit. It would be interesting to know what or who maintains the habit: parents, school, church or youth group? We suspect that, for many of these young people, it is involvement in a regular Bible study group. We do not know whether groups simply set the expectation of daily Bible reading or, in most cases, do they actually set Bible reading? Nor do we know what people read: is it systematically working through books, or reading with some kind of guide? Nor do we know how long such practices are maintained: do many of these young people read regularly for some months, or do they read regularly over periods of years?

A group of young people about twice the size of the first group, described above, read the Bible at

least weekly. Again, it would be helpful to know what is the catalyst for their reading. Is it mostly church and youth groups? Are they reading passages that have been set for them? Who sets those passages? Do they have written guides which assist them in choosing the readings and which explain what they are reading?

The data suggests that the Bible is regarded by some young people as a source of comfort and guidance. Some young people pick it up from time to time looking for help. It would be helpful to know whether they find the help for which they are looking. How do they pick passages to read? And how do they interpret them?

Some young people, who do not have church connections, read the Bible occasionally. Again, it would be helpful to know what prompts them to do this. Does it happen in a hotel room when there is nothing more to read than the Gideons' Bible? Do they come across a question through discussion with others or in the media which prompts them? It would be helpful to know when such reading occurs and which version of the Bible is read.

2. How is the Bible interpreted?

We have some general information about the interpretation of the Bible, particularly from the small group that reads the Bible daily. We do not know how the larger group of young people interpret the Bible. Nor do we know if the patterns of interpretation and application are different for young people from different theological traditions. Are Catholics, non-Evangelical Anglicans, Orthodox and liberal Christians interpreting and applying the Bible to life in different ways? Are they using different resources in those processes? Do they feel their churches are helping them understand and make sense of the Bible for their own lives?

We do know that many young people find the Bible hard to understand. They find its stories unbelievable and find contradictions in its teaching. Some young people note that they are taught in primary school to take the Bible literally, and then in secondary school to understand it in terms of its mythical meaning. How widespread are such issues? What helps young people to work through these problems in understanding?

Most of these questions could be answered through in-depth discussions with young people in youth groups or Bible study groups. We recommend that such questions should form the basis of a second stage of research. It will be important to speak to a wide range of young people involved in churches of different denominations and theological orientations.

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