

PART 1

Mapping how we make sense of life

As noted in the Introduction, the first goal in this book is to help provide a reliable picture of how Australians make sense of life and assess what is of ultimate significance.

In Chapter 1 we look more closely at contemporary life and, using data from the Wellbeing and Security Survey, identify some of the major perspectives on life in Australia today and the diversity that exists. The survey provides a solid base for this, including as it does a wide range of questions probing religion, spirituality and secularity.

Our research suggests a range of approaches in Australia to making sense of life and assessing its ultimate significance:

- *Religious approaches*, each drawing predominantly on a specific religious tradition, exploring and making sense of life through that tradition.
- *Alternative spiritual approaches* which involve the fashioning of a personal spirituality that may draw selectively from various spiritual perspectives and practices that may have previously been less evident, or less acknowledged, in Australia.
- *Mainly secular approaches*, interpreting and making sense of life with little or no reference to religious or spiritual perspectives.

Included in the mainly secular approaches are the outlooks of those Australians who appear to be quite uncertain about how they make sense of life or who choose to avoid such questions altogether.

Both within and between these different orientations there are diverse ways of addressing how to make sense of life. Some are unquestioning or even dogmatic in their approach; others highly reflective, seeing life as an on-going journey of discovery.

An obvious question of a national sample is to ask how many people are exploring life in these various ways. In Chapter 1 a simple typology is developed, and a summary picture supplied at the end of that chapter of the percentages of Australians in each category.

Chapters 2 to 4 examine in more detail each approach. Each chapter follows a similar pattern. At the start is a brief historical overview of the development of that strand in Australian life. In various eras, people in this country have made sense of life in a range of different ways. How we make sense of life today will be the product of our history and the intertwining of many cultures, philosophies and specific influences at different points in time.

This is followed by a summary of the kinds of people most likely to make sense of life in this way, and some exploration of their practices, beliefs and perspectives.

CHAPTER 1

Exploring the contours

Given the dramatic changes that have been taking place in Australian society in recent decades, a major concern that led to the present study was to explore the contours and impacts of religion, spirituality and secular approaches to life in Australia today.

To this end we designed the Wellbeing and Security Survey, which contained a total of 441 questions or sub-questions. Many of these dealt with salient aspects of religion, spirituality and other perspectives on life, and various measures of wellbeing at individual and community levels. As such it is one of the most wide-ranging and comprehensive national surveys ever undertaken in Australia on issues of wellbeing, religion, spirituality and how we make sense of life.

The Wellbeing and Security Survey was posted in 2002 to a random sample of adults selected from Australian electoral rolls. Approximately 1500 people completed and returned the survey, which represented a response rate of some 35%. Additional details about the survey are given in Appendix 1. The present book presents an in-depth analysis of this important database, carried out over a number of years.

Since the Wellbeing and Security Survey was completed, another important national survey has been undertaken: the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Evans 2009). This contained a module of questions about religion and spirituality, including a small number that were identical or similar to questions asked in the Wellbeing and Security Survey. It also contained a selection of questions about wellbeing, though far fewer than in the earlier survey.

This more recent survey has enabled the authors to explore the extent to which the scene has changed since 2002. These issues are discussed in Appendix 2. Comparison of the two datasets indicates that although there is some evidence of on-going decline in at least some religious beliefs and practices, in most other respects the two time-periods have much in common. In so far as the 2009 survey includes indicators of wellbeing, the impacts of the presence or absence of various religious or spiritual beliefs and practices appear to be broadly consistent with the impacts identified in the much more detailed Wellbeing and Security Survey.

EXPLORING HOW WE MAKE SENSE OF LIFE

It is now widely recognised by researchers that religion is a multi-dimensional concept. The classic writings of Glock and Stark (1965) and those that have followed explore religious orientation in terms of aspects such as:

1. *Beliefs* – for example, whether people believe in God or some other form of the supernatural or sacred, in Jesus as divine, in life after death.
2. *Public practices* – for example, how often people attend services of worship, religious festivals and other public religious events.

3. *Private practices* – for example, how often people do religious activities in private such as praying, reading sacred Scriptures or other religious literature, engaging in religious meditation.
4. *Experiences* – for example, whether people report that they have experienced some form of divine illumination or forgiveness, whether they feel that they are close to God or not.

All these different aspects can be extended to probe alternative forms of spirituality and non-religious, non-spiritual approaches to life. We can ask all people *what they believe*. For instance, do they believe that there are spiritual forces or not? Do people believe that science can solve all the problems of the world?

We can ask people about their *public practices*. For example, do they combine with others in exploring their approach to the world, whether that be in meditation groups or non-religious self-help groups? Do they seek direction from clairvoyants or do they turn to professional psychologists for assistance?

In terms of their *private practices*, we can ask whether people read New Age literature or seek direction from horoscopes or read non-religious, non-spiritual books on successful living. Do they practise Eastern meditation or make use of yoga or other religious or spiritual practices?

We can ask people also about their spiritual/mystical or related *experiences*, if any.

In this chapter we explore each of these in turn, using data from the Wellbeing and Security Survey. The survey data provides a rich picture of how people approach making sense of life across Australia today. Initial inspection displays rich diversity. Further examination reveals some important patterns.

Our more detailed analysis suggests a range of important contours shaping how Australians make sense of life – several different approaches to these questions, and some important style differences in how we engage such questions. Exploratory analysis was carried out using a range of statistical techniques. Various models were explored, particularly using factor analysis. Scales were then developed based on each factor.

In this chapter we look at both the surface diversity, and some underlying patterns, and develop a summary map of how Australians make sense of life today.

Australians have a wide range of beliefs about life

A first observation from our research is that nearly half (46%) of the adult population believe that 'there is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all', nearly one fifth (18%) disagree, and the remainder (36%) are unsure. Table 1.1 provides a sample of responses to a wide range of questions that explore what Australians believe about life.

For many Australians a *religious or spiritual quest* is part of how they may make sense of life. Large numbers of people believe in a personal God (35%), that the universe is unfolding in a meaningful way (35%), that there is much in the universe that cannot be explained by science (53%).

On the other hand, many Australians take a very '*here and now*' approach to life. Many believe that when they die they will cease to exist (37%), that there is no place for supernatural views of reality (25%), that we only live once so we should make the most of this life (64%), that the universe has no real meaning or purpose (13%), that there is no spirit, God or life force (15%). Furthermore, 60% of Australians say that they make sense of life largely in terms of the here and now.

Table 1.1 Making sense of life: Who believes what?

	Agree (%)	Don't know /unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
There is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all	46	36	18	100
There is life after death	44	32	24	100
There is much in the universe that cannot be explained by science	53	30	17	100
Whether or not it is always clear to us, the universe is unfolding in a meaningful, purposeful manner	35	48	17	100
When I die I will cease to exist	37	26	37	100
There are many, more important things in my life than my spiritual beliefs	47	26	27	100
I see no place for supernatural views of reality	25	34	41	100
We only live once so let's make the most of it	64	18	18	100
I make sense of life largely in terms of the here and now	60	23	17	100
The universe has no real meaning or purpose	13	32	55	100
Science explains everything that we need to know	15	30	55	100
Which of these statements comes closest to your belief?				
There is a personal God	35			
There is some sort of spirit or life force	34			
I don't really know what to think	16			
I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God or life force	15			
	100			

Source: *Wellbeing and Security Survey*

The data in Table 1.1 also suggests another important group in Australia. There are many Australians who are very uncertain when it comes to making sense of life. Over a third of the people in our sample are unsure whether 'there is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all'. Many Australians appear not able to, or not wishing to, resolve questions of ultimate meaning. Take a look at the 'don't know or unsure' column in Table 1.1: in response to question after question, many Australians responded with a 'don't know' or 'unsure'. So we can conclude that *being uncertain or unsure* is another orientation that many adopt.

Many spiritual pathways

Turning to those who feel there is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all, a second observation from our detailed research is that those who make sense of life in a religious or spiritual way do so by many very different pathways. The results in Table 1.1 suggest that, while over a third of Australians (35%) believe in a personal God, a similar number (34%) think more in terms of a spirit or life force. In Table 1.2 several different pathways can be seen.

Some of those making sense of life in a spiritual way find answers in the sphere of *religion*. As can be seen in Table 1.2, many feel loved and accepted by God (44%), believe that Jesus Christ was God in a full sense (31%), and that Jesus’ resurrection was an actual historical event (39%). Many identify with Christianity or another major world religion, finding meaning and a framework for living within that religious tradition.

The data in Table 1.2 also suggests that many Australians seek to make sense of life through a range of *alternative spiritualities*, travelling beyond some traditional religious frameworks in their quest for meaning. Some Australians (7%) are strongly influenced by Buddhism, including many not from a Buddhist background but making use of aspects of it as a philosophy. Others (6%) have been influenced by the New-Age movement. Nearly a fifth of Australians believe in reincarnation, while a significant number of Australians feel a strong spiritual connection to the land (22%) or are very aware of a common life force in the forests, oceans and global ecosystems (32%).

Table 1.2 Making sense of life: Who believes what?				
	Agree (%)	Don't know /unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
I am accepted and loved by God	44	36	20	100
Jesus Christ was God in a full sense	31	37	32	100
Jesus’ resurrection from the dead was an actual historical event	39	34	27	100
There is such a thing as reincarnation where people today have lived previous lives	19	38	42	100
God, the creator or life force, has a big influence on how I live	33	18	49	100
I am strongly influenced by Buddhist thought	7	9	84	100
I am strongly influenced by the thinking of those in the New Age movement	6	11	83	100
I feel a strong spiritual connection to the land	22	20	58	100
I am very aware of a common life force present in forests, oceans and other ecosystems	32	22	46	100
Being ‘in tune’ or ‘at one’ with nature is very important to me	42	23	35	100
I try hard to carry my spiritual beliefs into all other dealings in life	44	9	47	100

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

Drawing this together we can suggest that people in Australia make use of three main approaches to orienting their lives and assessing what is ultimately significant:

- A *religious approach*, drawing predominantly on a specific religious tradition, exploring and making sense of life through that tradition.
- An *alternative spiritual approach*, fashioning a personal spirituality that may draw on perspectives and practices that have hitherto been less evident, or less acknowledged, in Australia.
- *Mainly secular approaches*, often accepting uncertainty, and interpreting and living life with little or no affirmation of religious or spiritual perspectives. Being uncertain or unsure is a relatively common approach to such issues. For many people, questions about ultimate significance seem too difficult, and are therefore left in the ‘too hard’ basket.

Spiritual practices and experiences

A third observation from our exploration of how Australians make sense of life is that one's spiritual orientation has a much greater impact on some people than others. Some shape all aspects of their lives around their spiritual orientation; for others it is simply a very nominal affiliation.

Spiritual beliefs may be fervently held, or they may be quite casual or tentative. They may be an unconscious cultural inheritance. As can be seen in Table 1.2, carrying their spiritual beliefs into their daily life is extremely important for some (44%). Others (47%) maintain that their spiritual beliefs are of far less importance, that there are other more important things in their lives than such beliefs.

Spiritual practices – public or private – are one measure of intentionally placing some importance on one's spiritual journey. They are one way of doing something about exploring, expressing or developing it. The diversity of beliefs seen earlier is reflected in a wide variety of spiritual practices in which Australians become involved. As can be seen in Table 1.3, 39% of Australians attend religious services at least yearly, 47% spend time in private prayer occasionally or often, and 13% sometimes practise Eastern meditation. Around 6% consult a clairvoyant, tarot reader or fortune teller occasionally or often, and 20% seek direction from a horoscope from time to time.

Table 1.3 Making sense of life: Who does what?	
	Occasionally or often (%)
Attend religious services (at least yearly)	39
Attend a Christian discussion group	12
Spend time reading the Bible	23
Spend time in private prayer	47
Practise Eastern meditation	13
Seek direction from a clairvoyant, tarot reader or fortune teller	6
Seek direction from a horoscope	20
Set aside time to reflect on life and its directions	68
	In the last 12 months (%)
Talked with a religious leader or minister	18
Read Christian literature other than Bible	19
Read Eastern religious philosophies	9
Participated in seminar on Eastern religions	4
Participated in New Age seminar	4
Read New Age material	8
Read other material on spirituality	14

Table 1.4 Making sense of life: Who experiences what?	
	Occasionally or often (%)
A sense that God or a supernatural power was taking charge of my life	17
Dramatic experience of God's energy or presence	13
Experienced a miraculous healing of body or mind not explainable by science	4
Experienced some other miraculous event	5
Experienced ghosts, angels or guiding spirits	7
Experienced communication with someone who has died	3
Experienced a supernatural gift of predicting the future	5
Experienced astral travel or an out-of-body experience	2
Experienced a sense of being outside all space and time	6
Experienced witchcraft	2
Experienced at least one of the above	27

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

When asked about their experiences of the supernatural, divine or out of the ordinary, small proportions of Australians report that they have occasionally or often had such experiences during the past two years. For example, Table 1.4 indicates that 13% of Australians report having had a dramatic experience of God’s energy or presence, 7% experiences with ghosts, angels or guiding spirits, and smaller percentages experiences of being outside of all space and time, a supernatural gift of predicting the future, a miraculous healing or another miraculous event not explainable by science, and various other experiences.

All in all, 27% of Australians say they have experienced one or more of these phenomena. This is not a small proportion: a significant number of Australians may have been influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by such experiences. This suggests a hidden vein of spiritual experience not commonly reported in the media, not discussed generally and not often explored by academia. More detailed research would be of interest. Certainly what people mean by such experiences would need a more nuanced approach than is possible in a social survey.

Different styles of addressing questions of meaning

Detailed exploration of the Wellbeing and Security Survey database suggests that not only do Australians have many different approaches to making sense of life, but they also have various styles of addressing questions of meaning. Some of these style differences can be seen in responses to the questions summarised in Table 1.5.

Table 1.5 Making sense of life: Styles of approach				
	Agree (%)	Don't know /unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
I think we should just believe and not question our beliefs	16	21	63	100
To question the authority of the Bible is wrong	16	28	56	100
To question the authority of the Church is wrong	9	24	67	100
There is a religion on this earth that teaches, without error, God's truth	22	35	43	100
The best way to develop spirituality these days is to take on board whatever is helpful from different spiritualities or religions	31	35	34	100
As I grow and change, I expect my religious or spiritual beliefs to grow and change as well	46	30	24	100
My life experiences have led me to refine, develop and sometimes rethink my religious or spiritual beliefs	45	22	33	100

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

Some approach questions of meaning in a very certain, dogmatic, or uncritical way. Around 16% of Australians feel that we should just believe and not question our beliefs. A significant number believe that it is wrong to question the authority of the Bible (16%), or the authority of the Church (9%).

On the other hand, many expect their religious or spiritual beliefs to grow and change (46%). A similar percentage (45%) report that they have refined and rethought their beliefs as a result of their life experiences. Some are highly eclectic in their spiritual journeys, taking on what is helpful from different religions and philosophies (31%). By contrast, just over one-fifth of the population (22%) believe that there is a religion on this earth that teaches, without error, God’s truth.

So a fourth observation from our detailed research is that it is not just what one believes that is significant, but also how one approaches these questions about ultimate meaning. One particular aspect of this is *the extent to which people are either reflective or uncritical/unquestioning/dogmatic in their approaches*.

Some will make thoughtful choices about how they make sense of life, approaching questions of meaning, spirituality and life orientation in a *highly reflective* way, considering issues and forming their own conclusions. Others may be quite *unquestioning*, simply accepting what they have been taught or inherited. Some may be quite *dogmatic*, seeking clear-cut answers, in order to identify something that they feel is known and safe in a complex world.

HOW WE MAKE SENSE OF LIFE – A SUMMARY MAP

Different systems of classification may serve different purposes. For example, one could classify plants according to the colour of their flowers, or the types of soil in which they thrive, or the climatic conditions that are best for them, or the price for which they are currently sold, or some other characteristic. The adequacy of each system of classification depends upon the objectives for which that system is used.

Much the same can be said of systems for classifying people on the basis of their beliefs and practices. The present study arose from a desire to assess the impacts of religion, spirituality and secularity on the wellbeing of individuals and society at large. Having explored various possibilities, we concluded from our analysis of the Wellbeing and Security Survey data that the schema below was the most useful way of classifying Australian adults for the purposes of this study. Under this system of classification, people were divided into the following groupings:

1. *Those who professed an active Christian religious orientation:* people who affirmed as definitely or probably true of themselves that 'God, the creator or life-force, has a big influence on how I live', and who also attended a church or a Christian group at least once a year.

These people were then sub-divided into two categories according to whether they said it was right to question one's beliefs (the '*reflectively Christian*') or not right to do so (the '*uncritically Christian*').

It should be noted that the majority of people in these two categories actually attended religious services monthly or more often – a very much higher rate of attendance than was found among other categories of respondents.

2. *Those strongly influenced by Buddhist and/or New Age thinking:* people who affirmed as definitely or probably true that they were strongly influenced by Buddhist and/or New Age thought and were involved, at least occasionally, in Buddhist or New Age practices.

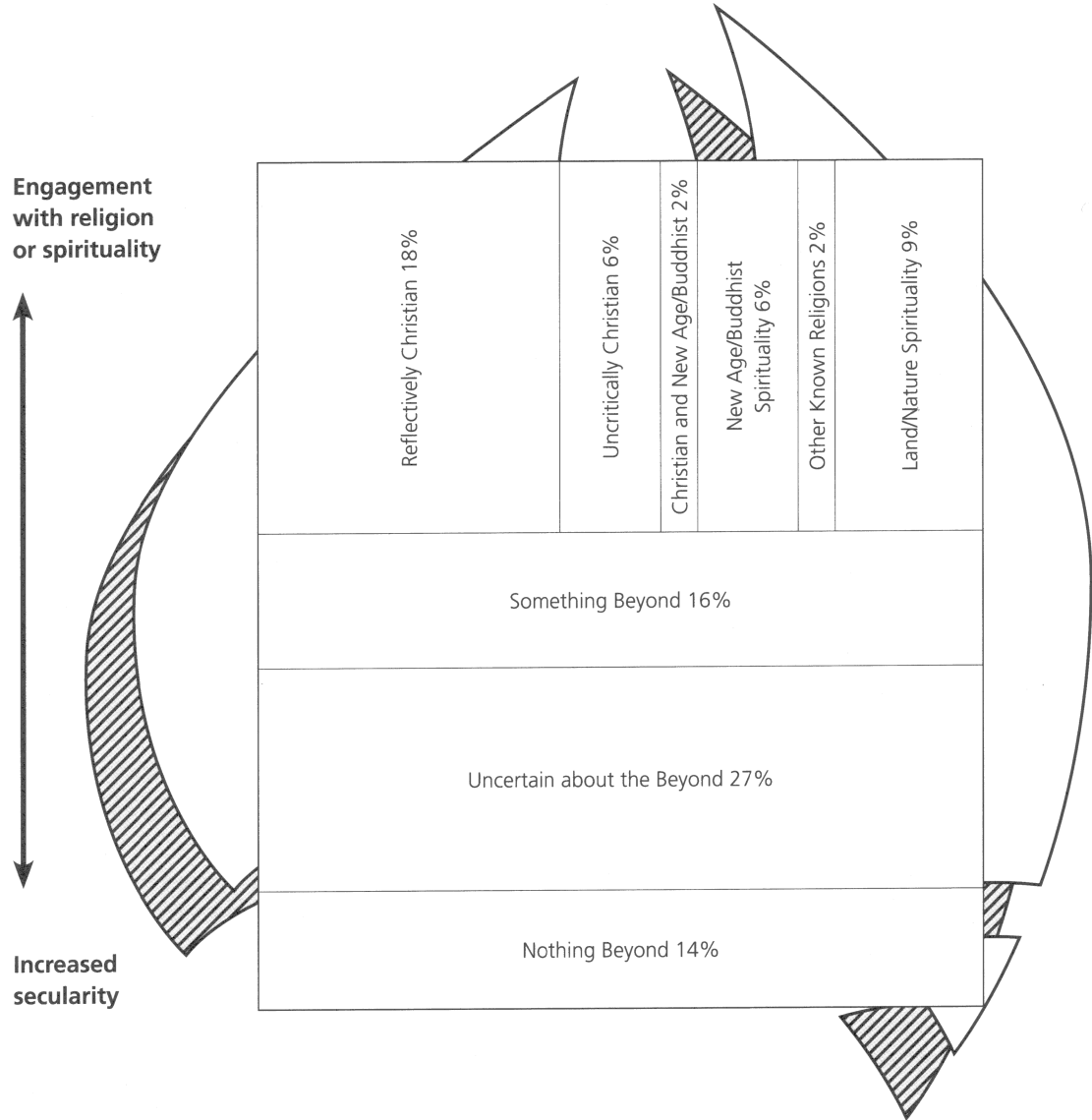
Some people (around 2% of Australians) felt they were significantly influenced by both Christian and New Age/Buddhist thinking. For the analysis in this book, these people have been included in the '*New Age/Buddhist*' group.

3. *Those identifying with other major world religions:* people connected with other religions, such as Islam, Hinduism or Judaism, who were involved, at least occasionally, in related religious or spiritual practices.
4. *A land/nature spirituality grouping:* people who did not meet any of the definitions above but who said that they felt a strong spiritual connection to the land.
5. *People falling into other categories.* The rest of the population was divided into three groups based on their beliefs about whether 'there is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all'. Those agreeing with this statement, but not fitting into any of the previous categories, made up the '*Something beyond*' group. Those who were uncertain about whether 'there is something

beyond this life that makes sense of it all' were included in the 'Uncertain about the beyond' group, while those who disagreed were included in the 'Nothing beyond' group.

The percentages of respondents to the Wellbeing and Security Survey who fell into the above categories are given in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Religion, spirituality and secularity in Australia: A summary



Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

HOW WE MAKE SENSE OF LIFE – SOME REFLECTIONS

No doubt a classificatory schema such as this will raise various questions for readers, particularly those who think that their own orientation is not adequately represented in it. Undoubtedly the schema can be improved and extended in further research. Other variables can add nuances and further detail.

Nevertheless it is a useful starting point for discussion about religion, spirituality and secularity in contemporary Australia. Commentators sometimes ask whether Australians are secular or religious, whether religiosity is declining, whether the New Age movement is taking over as the dominant spiritual approach in Australia. There is much noise and heat generated by such discussions. There is also much heat generated by discussions of fundamentalism in this country and beyond.

It is our hope that the typology outlined above can provide at least a start towards a more solid basis for assessing the place of religion, spirituality and secularity in contemporary Australia.

This simple classification of how we make sense of life can provide us with a more complete picture than simply making use of a denominational and religious affiliation question such as that used in the Census and in many social surveys. Such a religious affiliation question can tell us something about people's identification with religious groups but it falls far short of the broad picture of how we make sense of life provided by the classification used in this book.

This classification is important in that it presents a picture not only of religious influence, but also of the influence of other spiritualities. And, by including several distinct categories for those who are more secular in orientation, it is more truly reflective of the range of pathways for making sense of life that exist among Australians.

The distribution of Australians into each of these categories is of interest. There are significant numbers of people making sense of life in each way. See also Appendix 2 for a comparison with data from the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes.

Religious ways of making sense of life

Even for the churches, this classification recognises important shifts in the Australian population and their attitudes to meaning-making. The churches need to think quite differently about the Australian population than hitherto. It is important that they do not simply think they can divide the population into a series of denominational paddocks, given the increasing emphasis on individual decision-making about how to make sense of life.

That 26%¹ of Australians are significantly influenced by Christianity and attend religious services at least yearly suggests that religious ways of making sense of life are far from dead in contemporary Australia. Despite what some commentators may wish us to think, a religious orientation significantly shapes the attitudes and behaviour of a very large number of Australians.

Adding in the extra few percent of those influenced by other religions and attending religious services at least yearly, we can suggest that close to 3 out of 10 Australians are significantly influenced by religious thinking as they seek to make sense of life.

The fact that the *reflectively Christian* group outnumbers the *uncritically Christian* group by a factor of three to one suggests that we may be emerging from an era where beliefs and affiliations were just handed on from one generation to the next, and moving more and more into an era where how we

¹ Including both the *reflectively* and the *uncritically Christian*, together with the 2% of Australians who state that they are significantly influenced by both *Christian* and *Buddhist/New Age* thinking.

make sense of life is a matter of personal choice. Potentially Australians are becoming more intentional about their religion or spirituality (or the rejection of it).

Alternative spiritualities

Around 8% of Australians are significantly influenced by Buddhist or New Age spiritualities. Some people may be surprised that the percentage is not higher. The New Age movement and Eastern philosophies get a great deal of publicity and are often significant in discussions of health and wellbeing in both intellectual and popular circles. Perhaps it is more a case that the New Age movement generates curiosity and interest due to its freethinking and exploratory nature, rather than building long-term commitment and belonging. More research is needed on this.

A similar percentage (9%) feel a strong spiritual connection to the land but do not fall into the reflectively Christian, the uncritically Christian or the New Age/Buddhist categories as defined above. Combining this 9% with the 8% mentioned in the previous paragraph, one can conclude that around 17% of Australians intentionally seek to make sense of life through such alternative spiritualities. While this percentage is certainly substantial, it is important to keep it in perspective. As we shall see in Chapter 3, it is people aged between 40 and 60 years that are most likely to be over-represented in the New Age/Buddhist group. Those under 40 are no more likely to be in this group, and are under-represented in the land/nature spiritualities group.

At the same time we should not underestimate how widespread a spiritual connection with the land is. As well as the 9% of Australians who feel a strong spiritual connection to the land but who do not fall into the reflectively Christian, the uncritically Christian or the new Age/Buddhist categories, there are others in these latter three categories who also feel a strong spiritual connection to the land. Overall, around 22% of Australians feel a strong spiritual connection to the land.

While no doubt this means different things to different people, it points to the wide influence of land and nature on our thinking about life, sustainability, meaning and our place in the universe. In these times of increasing concern about the environment, about the sustainability of life in the face of global warming, about environmental values, it would seem that religions or spiritualities which have environmental reference points may connect with deep concerns in our country.

Mainly secular approaches

Although 46% of adults in Australia believe that 'there is something beyond this life that makes sense of it all', 18% of the population disagree with this proposition and a further 36% are uncertain (see Table 1.1). Most of those who agree with the proposition fall into one of the religious or alternative spiritual categories identified above, but others do not. These latter people are, to that extent, more secular in orientation than are people in the religious or alternative spiritual categories.

Compared to those who affirm the above proposition, people who are uncertain about it are somewhat more secular in orientation though not as secular as people who disagree with it. Interestingly, far more people (about twice as many) are uncertain than are sure that there is nothing beyond this life that makes sense of it all. Thus there is a range of orientations among people who do not fall into the religious or alternative spiritual categories identified above, but the largest single category is those who are uncertain about what to believe.

* * *

For those interested, in Chapters 2 to 4 we will explore each of these categories in more detail.

Those more interested in the overall picture will find in Chapter 5 some reflections on general trends and patterns in how Australians make sense of life today.

Unfortunately, in the Wellbeing and Security Survey there were only relatively small numbers of respondents who were involved in major world religions other than Christianity or Buddhism, such as Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. Because respondents associated with one or other of these last three religions were few in number and quite diverse in their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices, we are unable to make meaningful generalisations about them in the survey-based analysis presented in this book.