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Spirit Matters

HOW MAKING SENSE OF
LIFE AFFECTS WELLBEING

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CHAPTER 3

Alternative spiritualities

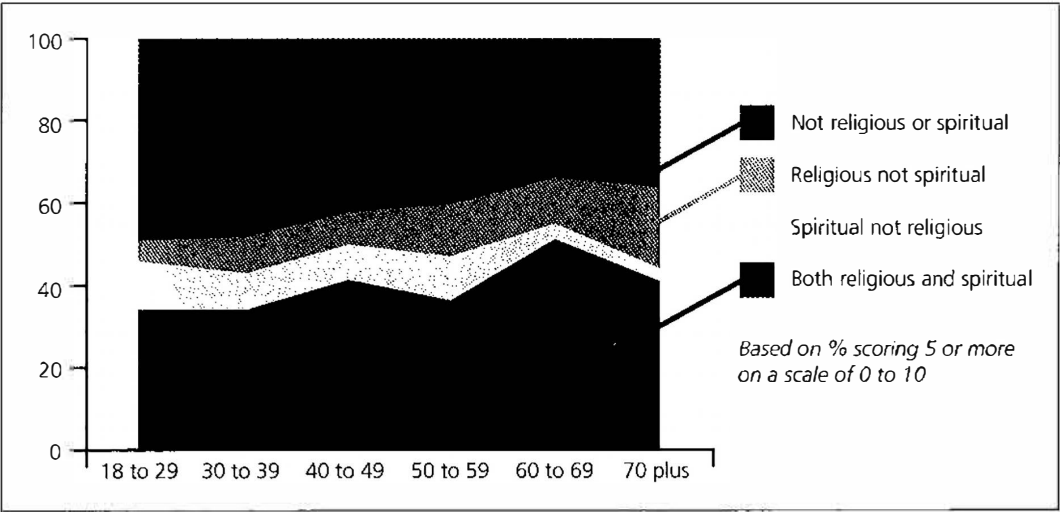
In the last 40 years a cultural revolution has been occurring in the Western world. Unlike the cultural revolution known as the Renaissance and the Reformation that followed, this revolution has occurred leaving no blood on the floor. And unlike the cultural revolution that occurred in China during the 1960s and 1970s, this revolution was neither organised nor administrated. Yet its impact has been profound.

A hint of this cultural revolution as it surfaces in relation to religion and spirituality can be seen in Figure 3.1. The figure summarises respondents' answers to two questions placed in different parts of the Wellbeing and Security Survey questionnaire:

To what extent do you see yourself as a religious person?
To what extent do you see yourself as a spiritual person?

For each question, respondents were asked to indicate their answer on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being not religious or spiritual at all, and 10 being very religious or very spiritual respectively.

Figure 3.1 Identification as religious or spiritual – by age group



Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

Figure 3.1 shows responses by age group. The majority of those who responded positively to the question about being a spiritual person also responded positively to the question about being a religious person.

Among older people (particularly over 60 years of age), there is a substantial number who see themselves as religious but not spiritual. This is much less so among younger age groups. On the other

hand the light grey area, representing those who see themselves as spiritual but not religious, is larger among young adults.

For most people, religion and spirituality are closely allied. But there has been a trend for the word '*religion*' to become less popular among younger people, and for '*spirituality*' to be the word to which younger people more readily relate.

This change in terminology is a significant shift in Australian culture. In the words of Gary Bouma (2006: 12):

As it is used in Australia today, the '*spiritual*' refers to an experiential journey of encounter and relationship with otherness, with powers, forces and beings beyond the scope of everyday life. To be spiritual is to be open to this '*more than*' in life, to expect to encounter it and to expect to relate to it.

Among older people, religion has been closely allied to going to church and being part of traditional religious organisations. As noted in the previous chapter, over 30% of all people aged 60 and over attend a church monthly or more often, compared with about half that proportion among the under-60s.

There are some younger people who call themselves religious and go to church. However, there is also a significant group of younger people who prefer to use the word 'spiritual'. One third of the under 60s who describe themselves as highly spiritual say that they never go to church. To this group, spirituality is not primarily about church or religious organisations; it has rather different connotations.

SPIRITUALITY: WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Clearly, what people mean by the term 'spirituality' varies greatly. For some it is largely about organised religion. For others it is a broader canvas that may or may not include such aspects as belief in God.

Given its wide range of meanings, some commentators have asked whether spirituality is a useful word (for example, Rose 2001). Others have sought to define it, arguing that religion refers to an institutional dimension whereas spirituality relates to more subjective personal perspectives (for example, Hill & Pargament 2003). However, religion can be as intensely personal as spirituality. And, as noted above and by overseas researchers such as Marler and Hadaway (2002), many experience spirituality in a religious context and do not draw such distinctions.

Some researchers have developed definitions of spirituality that refer to inner qualities such as peace or compassion. Paloutzian and Ellison (1982), for instance, conceive spirituality as having two dimensions: a vertical dimension referring to one's sense of wellbeing in relation to God/the transcendent, and a horizontal dimension concerned with more mundane wellbeing.

Some commentators see this horizontal dimension as primarily about perceptions of self, while others see it as about relationships with other people, with the community and with the environment (Fisher 1998).

While spirituality may in some cases be defined in terms of the ethics and values of relationships, these can also be seen as *consequences* of religion or spirituality. Whichever way you argue that question, it is clear that some people who do not profess to have a spiritual orientation may hold some values that are similar to those of people who do.

How, then, should we think of spirituality? For a start, spirituality may include, but is not confined to, religion. It is not necessarily organised, institutionalised or codified.

Some forms of spirituality conceive of a transcendent or sacred dimension beyond the realms of everyday existence – a God or supernatural force guiding and controlling the universe. For others, there is no transcendent dimension – rather, spirituality is something immanent, a way perhaps of seeking authenticity in human life.

Some people think of the sacred in terms of the land and connection with all other living things. Many find meaning in being part of the on-going journey of humanity; they belong to a place or a cultural or ethnic tribe. Various writers have been quick to pick up on this concept, describing football or rock concerts as forms of modern tribal religion.

Divorcing spirituality from institutional form raises important issues. Tacey (2003: 31) argues that spirit without form is free and spontaneous, but also invisible and of ambiguous social value, and that it is difficult to harness for the common good something that is invisible.

Moreover, research has consistently shown that people's religious beliefs tend to erode with time away from active involvement in religious practices (Bellamy et al. 2002). This raises the question of whether spirituality without an essence in institutional religion is ultimately sustainable.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES

Alternative forms of spirituality are not all recent in origin. Even where they have taken a new shape or expression, alternative spiritualities often draw on traditions that go back many hundreds of years. Indeed, indigenous spirituality in Australia goes back many thousands of years.

The spirituality of indigenous people

It is not possible to recover all the details of indigenous spirituality prior to European invasion and settlement. Non-indigenous understanding of indigenous spirituality always runs the risk of being coloured by the cultural lens through which we view it. That said, there are important elements of indigenous spirituality that can be identified.

Prior to European settlement, indigenous people lived in an essentially '*monistic*' world, acknowledging only one universe of being. Everything took place within that one universe, and the possibility of another realm of being, a non-material world of being, was not imagined. Nevertheless, within that one world, there were dimensions that were seen and others that were not.

The Aboriginal creative epoch is often described as The Dreaming. But this does not mean their spirituality is located in a dream world. Several different words are used in Aboriginal languages for 'The Dreaming' and some of those words have nothing to do with what happens while people are asleep. The Dreaming is about the fundamental reality of the world, not merely some reflections upon it.

Indigenous people looked at the world in which they lived with eyes very different from those of the Europeans. They saw stories, signs and symbols in their world and did not distinguish them from their material features. The contours of the rocks, the natural features of the landscape, watercourses and caves, the positions and shapes of trees, the birds and animals around them, were all seen as features carrying deeper meanings.

They saw in such features of their landscape meanings for their own identity and for their behaviour. They told stories of beings and events surrounding these features. Such stories embodied insights into the community's nature and identity. Some brought warnings, others explanations. Some stories suggested certain places were safe, other stories warned of danger.

Some features of the landscape were seen as the metamorphosed bodies of spirit beings. Others were seen as the tracks over which spirit beings travelled or signs of the activities in which they were engaged.

These dreamtime stories were not necessarily stories about the past, for the linear concept of European time did not exist for the first Australians. Often they were stories about the present that they could enter into through their rituals.

In some Aboriginal communities there was no concept of one 'first cause' or creator. Rather, there were various beings that intervened in the lives of human beings from time to time. These spirit beings were venerated, not worshipped. The spirit beings were considered to be associated with features of the landscape, and Aboriginal people treated them with appropriate respect.

The following is an example of an Aboriginal story:

Two Bell-bird brothers, *Panpanpalala*, were stalking an emu. It was disturbed and ran away to the north near Ayer's Rock (*Uluru*). Two blue tongue 'Lizard men' (*Lungkata* and *Mita*) killed it and cut it up with a stone axe. Slabs of sandstone rock near *Mutitjulu* represent some of the meat. The lizards buried the thigh at a spur of rock on the side of Uluru which is named *Kalaya Tjunta* (Emu thigh). When the Bell-bird brothers arrived looking for their quarry the lizard men gave them a skinny portion of meat. The hunters set fire to the lizards' camp. The lizards tried to climb the rock to escape, but fell back into the fire and were burned. A patch of lichen on the rock face is the smoke and two boulders at the base of the rock are the two lizard men. (Layton 1986: 9)

This story is built around a range of the features of Uluru. It is one of many stories associated with various features of that rock. It is said that this story is a reminder of people's rights to the resources of their own territory. It also has other moral implications. It reminds the listeners of the importance of sharing with others and warns that there may be dire consequences if one does not share.

Note that the story is about Bell-bird people and Lizard people. Each Aboriginal group is associated with a species that plays a central role in the stories of that area. For example, one group is said to be descended from ancestral spirit beings who also gave rise to the lizards. Thus, as William Edwards (2004) describes, they see themselves as sharing 'the same spiritual essence as that which inhabits the land, and other animal and plant species'. We see this difference in spiritual approach in the way Dreaming stories are described. To modern Australians they are myth, a word that implies they did not actually happen, while to indigenous people mythology is real because it is the way memories are stored and carried.

One thing that mystified many of the early white settlers in Australia was that Aboriginals had no distinct 'religious' leaders and no identifiable religious institutions. Aboriginal people saw the world through eyes very different from those of white settlers and did not separate the spiritual and material worlds. According to Aboriginal wisdom, older people were familiar with more of the knowledge of the group and therefore were recognised as having greater authority.

Aboriginal people did, however, have a range of what might be called religious or spiritual rituals. Through these they believed that they communicated with, or entered into, or manipulated the world in which they lived. Some of these rituals were designed to help individuals through the various stages of life, such as reaching puberty, marrying and dying. Other rituals were designed to ensure the maintenance of animal or plant species. Edwards (2004) notes, for example, that by extending or renewing some paintings believed to have been made by spirit beings themselves, the contemporary artist was ensuring the continuity of life and culture and empowering people for living.

While some of these rituals involved some separation from the affairs and events of daily life, Aboriginal spirituality saw no distinction between the activities of daily life and religious activities. Rather, there was one life, and a variety of forms of behaviour, appropriate on different occasions. If one did not share food, according to the rules of the tradition, one had broken the traditions themselves. In every aspect of life, there were various kinds of obligations towards others and taboos which prohibited certain forms of behaviour. All of life was governed by their way of seeing the world, their spirituality.

Alternative spiritualities in Australia after white settlement

As noted in Chapter 2, white settlement brought to Australia a predominantly Christian form of religion but with denominational variations. Religious diversity was increased somewhat by the arrival during the gold rush in the 1850s and in the second half of the nineteenth century of Chinese, Indians and Afghans, bringing blends of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Australia also received a small number of Jewish settlers from Britain.

Buddhism first established a presence in Australia through the Chinese miners who flocked to the goldfields from 1848 on. As most Chinese miners eventually returned to China, their religious influence in Australia did not endure long after the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901.

Another wave of Buddhists came from Sri Lanka in the 1870s, working on sugar plantations in northern Queensland. Again, they did not have a long-term impact on the wider Australian community.

The earliest known Buddhist society in Australia was 'The Little Circle of the Dharma', formed in Melbourne in 1925 by three Westerners – Max Tayler, Max Dunn and David Maurice, who wrote the first book on Buddhism published commercially in Australia. Following World War II, the Buddhist Society of New South Wales was formed and Buddhist societies were later established in the other states.

There was also a very small number of people interested in alternative spiritualities such as Spiritualism (Locke 1983). The first recorded meeting of spiritualists took place on the goldfields of Ballarat (Ward & Humphreys 1988: 260). In 1870, the Victorian Spiritualist Union was formed. It had no dogma or creed, but relied on continuing communication with spirits through mediums.

None of these developments dramatically affected how the majority of Australians made sense of life. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 2, the impact of non-Christian religions and spiritualities was muted as a result of the white Australia policy in the early twentieth century, which effectively reduced non-European migration to Australia. It was the flow of migrants since World War II from Eastern Europe and the Middle East and in the 1970s from Vietnam and East Asia, together with other social changes, that has significantly broadened the range of spiritualities through which Australians seek to make sense of life.

Social change since the 1960s and 1970s

In the 1960s and 1970s some Australians began to turn their back on the traditional religious organisations and began exploring spirituality in other ways, often drawing on indigenous spiritualities in Australia or elsewhere, on the beliefs and practices of the ancient Celts or North American Indians, and on other religions and philosophies such as Buddhism.

Contemporary western styles of Buddhism differ somewhat from the 'ethnic' Buddhism that arrived in a significant way in Australia in the 1970s through Vietnamese immigrants. For many of the Vietnamese, Buddhism was not so much a personal philosophy expressed through meditation, as a communal faith expressed particularly through colourful festivals. They gradually formed their own societies and institutions where they could celebrate their religious and cultural traditions. Much the same can be said of Cambodian, Laotian, Tibetan, Sri Lankan and Thai immigrants.

Among people born in Australia, the 1960s and 1970s also saw a considerable growth in interest in *Buddhism and Eastern forms of spirituality*. Younger people were increasingly disillusioned with many aspects of Western society, with its materialism and some of its other values. The Cold War and the Vietnam War exacerbated those feelings of disillusionment in many people. Moreover, many felt that the Christian churches had failed to respond to the changing times. As some young people looked for alternative forms of spirituality, Buddhism appealed because of its lack of rigid belief systems, its philosophy of rejection of the consumer culture of greed and competitive individual success, its emphasis on peace at both personal and social levels, and the importance within Buddhism of harmony with all parts of the natural world. Baby boomers in the 1960s and 70s dabbled in a wide range of Eastern philosophies, developing eclectic mixtures and styles of Buddhism quite different from those being brought to this country by new immigrants.

Eastern philosophies, and Buddhism in particular, have continued to fascinate some Westerners. Some have felt that Buddhism could be more readily developed intellectually in a way that was congruent with modern science than could Christianity. At the same time, various forms of Buddhism have offered ways of seeing the self and making sense of life, as well as methods that can contribute towards peace of mind and serenity in the midst of the bustle of contemporary life.

Various other people over the last 40 years have turned to what is often described as the *New Age movement*. 'New Age' is the rather amorphous term given to a wide range of spiritual beliefs and practices that do not fall within the realm of traditional religions in our society. The following are some examples of these beliefs and practices: astrology, numerology, clairvoyance, tarot reading, spirit guides, feng shui, psychic healing, and chakra balancing. Some popular magazines contain regular advertisements offering services such as these.

One cannot be precise about New Age spirituality because it does not have a clearly defined identity. To some extent, 'New Age spirituality' draws on Eastern philosophy and practices, particularly those of Buddhism, as well as on nature-based spiritualities. It is a general spiritual movement on which people draw for inspiration rather than an organisation offering clearly defined membership.

Some others have turned to the *neo-pagan religions or nature religions* such as Paganism and Wicca. The 2006 Census indicated that 28,000 Australians identified with these religious groups, a major increase since the 1996 Census. Such nature religions were in part a rebellion against Christianity (Pearson 2002: 144). Some women, in particular, have explored the nature religions because they find within them the opportunity to protest against the patriarchalism of many forms of traditional religion. Sexuality in general, rather than being suppressed, could be celebrated in fertility rites and as a connection with the natural world. Nevertheless, the number of people identifying with the more specific neo-pagan or nature religions remains relatively small.

Over the last few decades many have become very concerned about the natural environment and ecosystems on a fragile planet. Various people have developed *eco-spiritualities* around nature and living in harmony with the natural world. Some have done that through re-examining their religious perspectives and placing a renewed emphasis on coexisting with the planet rather than dominating or subduing it. At least as many have developed their spiritualities outside of established religious perspectives.

Within this context, there has been an increasing realisation, given impetus by the work of various ecologists, that human beings are as much part of the natural environment as are any other creatures. This implies that there is a unity of human beings with all other parts of nature. Yet, human beings have developed technological skills that enable them to modify parts of the natural environment, sometimes in ways that are relatively benign but sometimes in ways that have the potential to poison the environment, disrupt various ecosystems, eliminate various species and even end human life itself.

As contemporary people have looked for solutions to these problems, some have noted the extraordinary relationship that many indigenous peoples have had with nature. In places like the Australian desert areas and the Canadian tundra, indigenous peoples have lived in ecologically sensitive areas in ways that maintain the balance between human use and the continued health of the environment. Traditionally, indigenous peoples imposed limitations the ways in which their people could take from the land, helping to ensure its sustainability.

For some Australians, a spiritual connection with nature is experienced as they find a sense of peace holidaying by the sea or walking in the bush. City dwellers feel renewed as they take time away from the bustle of city life and enjoy the rhythms of nature, even if just for a short holiday. They capture a new vision of what the world is like as they enjoy the long horizons of the desert country, the great vistas of the mountain ranges, or the rhythms of the waves upon the shore.

Some surfers have spoken of the unity with nature that they feel as they surf. Inside the wave, they become caught up in a different world which seems to them to be timeless and where nature is predominant.

Environmentalists are likewise often driven by a spiritual perspective and way of seeing the world as an integrated whole. The majestic complexity of unspoilt nature provides a positive impetus, the danger of its destruction and fear of its loss the negative driver for action and priorities in life.

The increasing emphasis on choice

Those involved in alternative spiritualities are often lumped together in one group but that does not do justice to the diversity. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the exploration of alternative spiritualities has been the emphasis on choice. While Christianity and some other major religions each have a relatively coherent system of belief and practice, overseen by religious professionals and organisations, making sense of life through the range of alternative spiritualities tends to be much more fluid and eclectic. People are encouraged to experiment and to incorporate into their lives things that 'work' for them or 'appeal' to them. In so doing, people may draw on a narrow or a wide range of religious and spiritual resources. They may find a combination of beliefs and practices that together provide on-going stability in their lives or they may be spiritual explorers who move from one option to another. They pick and choose, incorporating elements of different spiritualities into their lives in much the same way they might choose fillings for a sandwich. People are choosing, sometimes systematically, sometimes eclectically, to explore different spiritual strands. Rather than having arrived at a settled position, people may be journeying, valuing the search, the questioning, the paradoxes.

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES IN THE WELLBEING AND SECURITY SURVEY

Around 8% of Wellbeing and Security Survey respondents said they were strongly influenced by *Buddhist thought and/or the New Age movement* and had practised some meditation or attended lectures or read books about such matters within the last 12 months. New Age retreats, therapies and teachings are mostly Eastern in origin, with some indigenous influences also present (alongside many other less dominant influences). It should be noted that about a quarter of this group also described themselves as Christian and had been involved in some Christian practices as well. However, the fact that they were drawing on a range of spiritual resources and traditions leads us to describe them as also exploring alternative spiritualities.

Another 9% of our sample did not fit our definitions of the 'reflectively Christian', the 'uncritically Christian' or the 'New Age and/or Buddhist' but said that they felt a *strong spiritual connection to the land*. Many religions and spiritualities see strong spiritual connections with the land, but the focus here is on the 9% of the adult population for whom this seems to be a core belief but who do not fit into any of the three groupings named at the beginning of this paragraph.

Thus, while one has to be careful not to draw too strong a distinction, our research suggests at least two distinct emphases in alternative forms of spirituality in Australia. We look now at each in turn. For comparative purposes, we provide information on responses to the same sets of survey questions as were used in the previous chapter.

GROUP 3: NEW AGE AND/OR BUDDHIST SPIRITUALITY

Table 3.1 Those influenced by New Age/Buddhist spiritualities – beliefs, practices, experiences

	New Age and/or Buddhist	Australian population
Beliefs (% affirming belief)		
In a personal God	17	35
In a spirit or life-force	69	34
Don't know what to think	7	16
No spirit, God or life-force	7	15
Jesus was God in a full sense	25	31
There is life after death	64	44
Science explains everything we need to know	12	15
Religious identification (% identifying)		
Anglican	14	22
Catholic	10	26
Other Protestant	27	24
Other Religion	14	4
No Religion	34	24
Attendance at religious services (% attending)		
Never attend	65	53
Occasionally attend	27	28
Attend monthly or more often	8	19
Private prayer/reflection (% practising occasionally or often)		
Spend time in private prayer	59	47
Practise Eastern meditation	58	13
Set aside time to reflect on life and its directions	89	68
Experiences (% experiencing occasionally or often)		
Experience sense of unity with earth/all living things	63	22
Experience/witness miraculous healing or event	25	6
Experience psychic phenomena	36	11

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

Beliefs, practices and experiences

Not surprisingly, only a minority of the people in this combined group affirmed traditional Christian beliefs. Most of them (69%) believed there is a spirit or life-force rather a personal God. Around a quarter saw Jesus as God in a full sense, not surprising given that a quarter were also involved in Christianity. Interestingly, there were more who affirmed that Jesus was God than affirmed belief in a personal God. For over a quarter of Group 3, the Christian faith remained important alongside New Age and Buddhist ideas.

Most of the people in this group believed that there was life after death, with just over half of them interpreting that in terms of reincarnation. Another 27% were not sure whether reincarnation occurs or not.

Just over half of this group were continuing to identify with one Christian denomination or another despite the influence on them of Buddhism or New Age ideas. One third said they had 'no religion', while a smaller number specifically identified with a religion other than Christianity, such as Buddhism.

Few were frequently involved in a church. The majority (58%) of people in this group practised Eastern meditation occasionally or often, compared to 13% in the total population. A similar percentage spent time in prayer, while most (89%) set aside time periodically to reflect on their lives.

People in this group were the most likely to affirm that they experienced a strong sense of unity with the earth and/or all living things. They were also most likely to report having personally experienced psychic phenomena, with more than a third (36%) having done so. One in four reported having experienced or witnessed a miraculous healing or event.

Table 3.2 Those influenced by New Age/Buddhist spiritualities – a demographic profile

	New Age and/or Buddhist (%)	Australian population (%)
Gender		
Female	64	52
Male	36	48
Age		
Under 40	42	40
40 to 59	47	37
60 and over	11	23
Place of birth		
In Australia	73	80
Overseas	27	20
Marital status		
Never	23	16
Married	51	60
De facto	10	9
Separated / divorced	13	9
Widowed	3	5
Household type		
Live alone	18	15
Single parent with children	7	5
Couple with children	44	44
Couple without children	17	23
Other	15	13
Education		
No post-secondary	37	42
Certificate or diploma	36	34
Degree	27	24
Employment		
Working	64	63
Unemployed	8	3
Retired	8	19
Home duties	9	9
Studying	4	2
Other	7	4

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

About this group

Most in this group were under the age of 60, reflecting the historical period when this movement emerged in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. Some young people have continued to be attracted to the practices and philosophy of the East and the New Age.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) were women, a significantly higher percentage than for the adult population as a whole, where 52% were women. A slightly higher proportion compared to the adult population as a whole had never been married (23% compared to 16%). About two-thirds were engaged in the paid workforce – much the same proportion as in the adult population as a whole.

In keeping with the above observations, it is interesting to note that the gender profile of the Buddhist/New Age group is very similar to that of the uncritically Christian, being disproportionately female. The age profile of these two groups is, however, very different, with the Buddhist/New Age group being slanted much more toward younger ages. The reflectively Christian group is also disproportionately female, but its age profile lies in between those of the uncritically Christian and the Buddhist/New Age groupings respectively.

GROUP 4: LAND/NATURE SPIRITUALITY

Table 3.3 Those influenced by land/nature spiritualities – beliefs, practices, experiences

	Land/nature spirituality	Australian population
Beliefs (% affirming belief)		
In a personal God	21	35
In a spirit or life-force	53	34
Don't know what to think	14	16
No spirit, God or life-force	12	15
Jesus was God in a full sense	18	31
There is life after death	38	44
Science explains everything we need to know	15	15
Religious identification (% identifying)		
Anglican	22	22
Catholic	20	26
Other Protestant	28	24
Other Religion	0	4
No Religion	30	24
Attendance at religious services (% attending)		
Never attend	71	53
Occasionally attend	25	28
Attend monthly or more often	4	19
Private prayer/reflection (% practising occasionally or often)		
Spend time in private prayer	48	47
Practise Eastern meditation	15	13
Set aside time to reflect on life and its directions	77	68
Experiences (% experiencing occasionally or often)		
Experience sense of unity with earth/all living things	34	22
Experience/witness miraculous healing or event	6	6
Experience psychic phenomena	15	11

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

All in all, 22% of respondents to the Wellbeing and Security Survey reported feeling a strong spiritual connection with the land. About a third of these (7% of all respondents) fell into one or other of the two Christian categories identified in Chapter 2. Nearly another third (6% of all respondents) fell into the New Age and/or Buddhist category. Here we consider only those with a strong spiritual connection with the land who did not fit into any of the previous groups. They constitute 9% of all respondents.

Compared to the population at large, these people were much less likely to affirm traditional Christian beliefs, with only 21% seeing God as personal. About half affirmed belief in a spirit or life-force, while others were not sure what to think. Around 38% believed in life after death, but relatively few (18%) believed that Jesus was God in a full sense.

Many (70%) of those involved in nature spiritualities but not actively involved in a church nevertheless claimed a nominal affiliation with a Christian denomination. Anglicans and Catholics each made up about one-fifth of the group, and a further 28% identified with some other Protestant denomination. Around 30% said they had no religion.

Although the majority identified with a Christian denomination, few (4%) attended religious services monthly or more often. About half spent time occasionally or often in private prayer – a much lower proportion than in the Christian groups, but a much higher proportion than in the most secular groups.

Despite all affirming that they felt a strong spiritual connection with the land, people in the land/nature spirituality group were only about half as likely as people in the New Age/Buddhist group to report that they had occasionally or often experienced a sense of unity with the earth and/or all living things during the previous two years.

Table 3.4 Those influenced by land/nature spiritualites – a demographic profile

	Land/ nature spirituality (%)	Australian population (%)
Gender		
Female	54	52
Male	46	48
Age		
Under 40	29	40
40 to 59	43	37
60 and over	27	23
Place of birth		
In Australia	88	80
Overseas	12	20
Marital status		
Never	10	16
Married	59	60
De facto	13	9
Separated / divorced	11	9
Widowed	7	5
Household type		
Live alone	16	15
Single parent with children	6	5
Couple with children	41	44
Couple without children	28	23
Other	8	13
Education		
No post-secondary	38	42
Certificate or diploma	35	34
Degree	27	24
Employment		
Working	62	63
Unemployed	5	3
Retired	23	19
Home duties	6	9
Studying	2	2
Other	2	4

Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

About this group

'Nature and land spirituality' was found among people of all ages, although most strongly among people between the ages of 40 and 59.

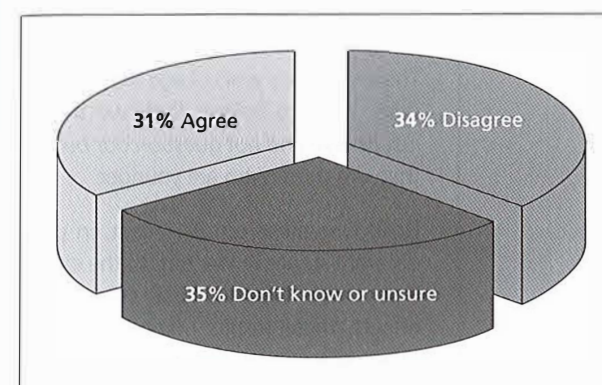
Why is this type of spirituality not as strong among much younger and much older people? The feeling that globally we are sitting on an ecological time bomb that could destroy the world grew during the 1970s, alongside the importance of ecology and preserving natural ecosystems, certainly giving some impetus to the rise of nature spirituality. For younger people, the vulnerability of the world's environment is almost a given. Perhaps there is less sense of surprise about it, and the mystical response may not be as strong.

EMERGING PATTERNS

Many spiritual pathways

As has been noted throughout this chapter, there is a great deal of eclecticism in alternative spiritualities. In the Wellbeing and Security Survey, around 31% of adult Australians affirmed that '*the best way to develop spirituality these days is to take on board whatever is helpful from different spiritualities or religions*' (see Figure 3.2). Among those involved in alternative spiritualities, over 65% affirmed this. While the origins of various alternative spiritualities may be quite diverse, in the beliefs and practices of contemporary Australians the boundaries between them are often blurred.

Figure 3.2 'I take on whatever is helpful from different spiritualities or religions'



Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

For many, spiritual journeying can lead to eclecticism and an openness to a range of ideas about the world and about life. Rather than settling with one tradition, one set of resources or views of the world, these people gather ideas and views, practices and experiences from a variety of places.

People are putting their lives together as best they can. They are trying to make sense of their lives, their experiences, their misfortunes and their pleasures. A wide range of views of the world and many philosophies or techniques are on offer for achieving fulfilment and wellbeing. For many, it is a matter of finding what works.

There is also a wide range of ways of exploring and nurturing one's spiritual life. Some do it through art or music, others through myths and symbols. Some people focus on processes for personal growth. Others find themselves struggling with the 'dark night of the soul'.

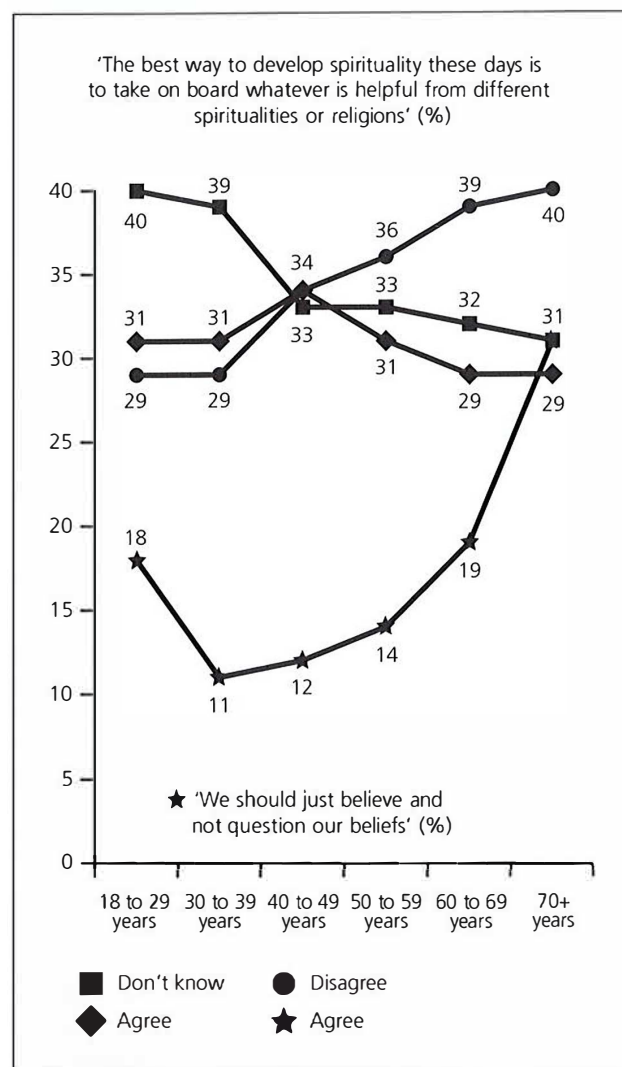
When people find that their approach to life is not working, many try another avenue. When the medical practitioner fails to provide a solution to a physical illness, for example, they may turn to other possible remedies. They may entertain the hope that there will be something there that will work for them.

Eclectic journeying

Although exploration using social surveys of the vast range of alternative spiritualities is far from straightforward, the results here provide some important insights into this growing aspect of how people seek to make sense of life in Australia today.

Underneath this avenue for exploring meaning lies an approach that is becoming more acceptable in contemporary society – that of individually constructing our understanding of life, potentially making use of diverse spiritual and philosophical traditions. As can be seen in Figure 3.2, this is the approach adopted by around a third of adult Australians.

Figure 3.3 Making sense of life: Age differences in belief



Source: Wellbeing and Security Survey

Figure 3.3 summarises some age differences in people's approaches to meaning-making. Those disagreeing with the statement that *'the best way to develop spirituality these days is to take on board whatever is helpful from different spiritualities or religions'* are more likely to be older. Those who are younger are not necessarily more likely to approach making sense of life by taking on board whatever is helpful from different spiritualities or religions. Rather they are more likely not to know what to think.

Those over sixty years of age are generally more likely to believe that *'we should just believe and not question our beliefs'* than are those who are younger.

No doubt these results reflect, in part, different stages in life. But, to the extent that these are not just stage-in-life effects, these results point to changes taking place in contemporary Australia.

Various approaches

This 'eclectic journeying' can take place in several ways, depending partly on people's personalities, and partly on their general approaches to life. For a significant proportion of people, spiritual journeying is a reflective experience, characterised by introspection and tranquillity (Rose 2001). These people may seek teachers, beliefs or disciplines to help them make needed transformations or achieve

understandings of themselves that they find illuminating (Mahoney 1987). This *placid lake approach* is an integrated and careful journey, where frameworks for living, purpose and values can be developed and where, in the moments of reflection, one gains integration, perspective and glimpses of ultimate order.

Others may take a quite different approach – more akin to *spiritual bungee jumping* – where people are drawn to the transcendent by a sense of adventure or curiosity. Motivated by a desire for choice, exploration and even excitement, they may be drawn less by a desire to hold together their own centre than by a desire to go to the edges of life. The same motivation that takes somebody up Mt Everest may take another to explore psychic powers and experiences. The same impulses that might lead somebody to go scuba-diving today, abseiling tomorrow and white-water rafting the next might encourage another to talk with a fortune teller today, consult a spiritual faith-healer tomorrow and attend a Mind-Body-Spirit festival the next day.

The above description may make such spiritual journeying sound trivial, shallow or crass. For some it may be, somewhat akin to insensitive voyeuristic third world tourism. Some may water-ski on the placid lake not stopping to appreciate its beauty. Yet it would be wrong to write off spiritual bungee jumping in such a way. While superficial for some, for others it may be an important source of growth. Some people do not grow primarily through reflection, intellectualising or developing conceptual frameworks, but rather through actions and experiences. Spiritual adventuring can provide experiences that help mould and shape identity and sense of place in the universe, whether intentionally or subconsciously. Spiritual bungee jumping is about growing from the experience of journeying to the edges of human understanding without being overwhelmed. In the vulnerability of going to the edges, some people may become clearer about who they are and how they fit into the larger scheme of things.

Whether people explore options through reflection and introspection, or through adventure, jumping into and experiencing many options, both of these approaches may involve continuing eclectic exploration. For many younger people, religion or spirituality is not something given by birth or by culture. It is something the individual explores and constructs, experiments with and develops.