THE RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND INTERSEX AUSTRALIANS: A REPORT FROM THE PRIVATE LIVES SURVEY

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The authors find that most non-heterosexual people who were brought up as Christian have left the faith of their childhood. However this is not true of those brought up as Orthodox Christians and is more likely to be true of lesbians than it is of gay or bisexual men. While most of those who have left their faith describe themselves as having no religion, a proportion have adopted world religions or alternative spiritualities. This is particularly true of bisexual women, a small number of whom have embraced Wicca.

INTRODUCTION

Interactions between organised religion in Australia and people who identify as other than heterosexual (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex) are most often represented, in public and academic discourse, as fraught. We take, as examples, a controversy concerning the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) in 2006, and the positioning of sexuality in recent writings on religion and politics in Australia. Headlines, such as the following, concerning UCA appeared in Australian newspapers in July 2006:

> 'Church rift widens over gay priests', *The Advertiser*, 14 July 2006
>
> 'Gay clergy split Uniting Church', *The Age*, 14 July 2006
>
> 'Rebel clerics split over gay clergy', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 July 2006
>
> 'Church rebels split over gay priests', *The Australian*, 18 July 2006.

These headlines reflect the popularly recognised relationship between sexuality and religious organisations as being uneasy. The events reported concerned a group of evangelicals within the UCA who objected to the church's national assembly deciding not to overturn a 2003 decision that gave regional presbyteries the right to appoint homosexuals to the ministry.

As well as internal denominational debates that are reported in newspapers, other publications in Australia have contained discussions of the changing influence of organised religion on political life.[1] Warhurst points to a paradox in the relationship between the Howard government and Church leaders, pivoting around issues including same-sex relationships.

> In the traditional areas of personal morality the churches have generally supported government attempts to maintain the status quo, or at least to resist moves in alternative directions. This included not only opposition to euthanasia and abortion … but also to *same-sex marriages*. … Paradoxically, … the relationship between the Howard government and most major Christian leaders has been strained to breaking point (emphasis added).[2]

The most commonly used example of this frustrated criticism of Christian leadership is that from the then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's Sir Thomas Playford Lecture, which included this attack:

> Those clergy and theologians who have lost sight of the fundamentals have filled the vacuum with all manner of diversions. For some, social work has become the be all and end all. Environmental causes, feminist and *gay* agendas and indigenous rights provide constant grandstanding opportunities (emphasis added).[3]

whether in this paradoxical positioning, or in the internal deliberations of religious organisations, tension exists, and is commonly acknowledged, between religious forms and the position of people living their lives outside of the norms of the heterosexual. These tensions may continue to inflame, if, as Bates suggests in his account of homosexuality in Anglicanism, the issue of homosexuality has become the touchstone for the authority of the Bible for conservatives, and a way 'to unite their constituency in opposition to the shifting sands of belief and secular culture'.[4]

So, how do gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Australia position themselves in terms of religious affiliation?

In examining the religious affiliation of non-heterosexual Australians, it is important to note that they have experienced, side-by-side with other Australians, changes in the place of religion and religious affiliation in Australian cultural and political life.[5] The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), on the basis of the 2001 census, offers this commentary:

> The proportion of all Australians stating an affiliation to some type of religion remained relatively stable from 1933 until 1971, at slightly less than 90%. This proportion dropped to 80% in 1976, then slowly declined to 73% in 2001. This gradual fall occurred against a backdrop of change in social values and attitudes, particularly since the late 1960s, and an accompanied secularisation of society in the last three decades of the 20th century. It was accompanied by a rising tendency among all Australians to state that they did not affiliate with any religion—particularly since the 1970s (7% in 1971 and 16% in 2001).[6]

The slow decline in the reporting of religious affiliation continued in the 2006 census, and 18.7 per cent reported 'no religion'.[7] Affiliation to a Christian religion was also at the lowest level, with 63.9 per cent compared with 73.7 per cent in 1991.[8] Bouma[9] cites four reasons for the change in religious affiliation that has been seen over time in the Australian general population. One, a global shift in the form of Christianity from a rational and verbal form to a more experiential feeling-orientated form; two, a global move toward secularisation; three, the impact of migration into Australia; and four, the global movement of religious ideas and the accompanying emergence of new religious groups and spiritualities.

The major academic work on religious affiliation in Australia, for example Bouma,[10] and Evans and Kelly,[11] has not addressed the issue of the religious affiliation of sexual minorities, although a recent, and major, study has been conducted of 2,269 gay, lesbian, and bisexual New Zealanders.[12] This study reports that, although 72.8 per cent of participants had been raised within a Christian denomination, only 14.8 per cent were currently practicing Christians. At the same time, the rate of people with 'no religion' at the time of the survey (72.9 per cent) was much higher than the rate of those (22.5 per cent) raised with no religious affiliation. It was also found that the proportion of those with a non-Christian religious affiliation (for example Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish) at the time of the survey (10.9 per cent) was higher than those raised in these religions (four per cent). Analysis of qualitative data included in this study suggests that the tension between being gay, lesbian or bisexual, and being raised in a Christian religion was the catalyst for participants to leave the church. Hendrickson has made the following summation:

> In most cases the responses relate a history of difficulty with organised religion, and usually specifically Christianity. The experiences of respondents with religion almost universally expressed difficulties, disappointment, alienation from families

and social networks, and a lack of support from religious faiths. No respondents expressed an unreservedly positive view of religion.[13]

There is a literature, for example Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker,[14] Rodriguez and Ouellette,[15] Mahaffy,[16] and Sherkat,[17] that addresses questions of how people who identify as gay or bisexual negotiate and resolve tensions between their sexual identity and their religious beliefs. In an influential study Thumma describes a process of socialisation which involves the renegotiation of boundaries and definitions of religious identity, to include a positive valuation of homosexuality.

> This solution demands a negotiated settlement between the dual core identities. … These Christians accept a historical critical approach to the Bible [and] … the negotiated identity allows them to accept their homosexuality, while not requiring them to deny their faith.[18]

Schuck and Liddle,[19] on the basis of a qualitative and quantitative study of American lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents, constructed a set of possible responses to the dilemmas of conflicted religious and sexual identities. Resolutions included identifying oneself as spiritual rather than religious, reinterpreting religious teachings, changing affiliations, remaining religious but not attending, and abandoning religions altogether.

While conflict between sexuality and religion is common in Judeo-Christian religions, Alternate or Earth-Spirited faiths are considered to be open and accepting of non-heterosexuals. Smith and Horne report on the religious experiences of 166 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) respondents, from the United States and Canada, who completed an online survey, and who followed an Earth-Spirited faith (for example, Pagan, Wicca):

> Participants who came out in mainstream Judeo-Christian faiths reported significantly more conflict at time of coming out than those in Earth-spirited faiths. For GLBT individuals who feel rejected by their faith of origin, Earth-spirited faiths may offer the affirmation and spiritual connection that they seek. It also may be that those experiencing the most conflict between their sexual identity and faith are compelled to seek out more GLBT-affirmative faiths.[20]

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND PRIVATE LIVES

The data for this article came from the *Private Lives* study[21] which was conducted in Australia in 2005, and is one of the largest surveys of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people conducted anywhere. The study examined the impact of various positive and negative factors on health, wellbeing, and health service use. The online survey was completed by a total of 5,462 people and the distribution of participants was broadly representative from all states and territories.[22]

In relation to religion, the participants in *Private Lives* were asked two questions; 'what religion were you brought up in' and 'what is your current religion'. For both questions they could select from a list of eight major religions, and 'no religion', or they could select 'other religion' and specify a particular religion. The responses to these questions allow some comparison with responses to the question on religious affiliation used in the Australian Census.

RESULTS

Descriptive data

The average age of the sample (mean) was 34.1 years (standard deviation 11.2) and ranged between 16 to 85 years. The gender and sexuality of participants are shown in Table 1: there were almost twice as many males as females, and a small number of participants were transgender or intersex. In terms of sexuality, most participants iden-

tified as a 'gay man', 'lesbian' or 'bisexual'. A total of 5,345 participants (97.9 per cent of the total sample) provided valid answers to both questions on religion.

Religious affiliation

Compared to the general Australian population, the *Private Lives* sample was much more likely to have no religious affiliation, much less likely to have an affiliation with a Christian denomination, and more likely to be affiliated with a non-Christian religion. In particular, 71.6 per cent reported having no current religion (Table 2), compared to 18.7 per cent of the general Australian population.[23] The proportion of those affiliated with Christian denominations in the *Private Lives* sample was 17.2 per cent, compared with 63.9 per cent in the 2006 Census.[24] The proportion of the Australian population affiliating with a non-Christian religion in 2006 was 6.2 per cent, while in *Private Lives* the proportion was slightly higher, with 8.5 per cent affiliated to either a World Religion or Alternative Spirituality, including 2.7 per cent affiliated with Wicca (Witchcraft).

This pattern of religious affiliation among the *Private Lives* sample cannot be explained by differences in the religious affiliation with which participants were raised, as the distribution of religious affiliation is similar to the rates of current religious affiliation in the general population. In particular, a majority of participants were brought up in Christian denominations (66.8 per cent), a minority in other non-Christian religions, although there is slightly higher rate of those brought up with 'no religion' (29.3 per cent) than in the general population. These results suggest that the differences in current religious affiliation observed in the *Private Lives* sample, compared with the general population, result from participants having changed their religious affiliation from that in which they were raised.

Change in religious affiliation

It is possible to determine the holding power or retention rate of a religious denomination by comparing current religious affiliation with the religion in which people were raised.[25] Using this approach, Bouma and Mason[26] in their analysis of Australian data from the 1989 National Social Science Survey, found that retention rates were highest among Catholics (91.9 per cent), followed by Anglicans (89.9 per cent) and Protestants (83.9 per cent). Also using this approach, and employing data as at 2002, Evans and Kelley[27] report retention rates of: 64 per cent for Catholics; 80 per cent for Orthodox—the highest rate;

Table 1: Gender and sexuality of participants

Gender	N	per cent
Male	3367	63.0
Female	1878	35.1
Transgender (MtF)	58	1.1
Transgender (FtM)	28	0.5
Intersex males	7	0.1
Intersex females	7	0.1
Total	5345	100.0
Sexual identity		
Gay man	2830	53.0
Lesbian	966	18.1
Dyke	137	2.6
Gay woman	280	5.2
Bisexual	547	10.2
Queer	208	3.9
Not sure	75	1.4
No label	263	4.9
Other	39	0.7
Total	5345	100.0

Anglicans only 40 per cent; and 'no religion' 77 per cent.

In the *Private Lives* sample, most of the movement in religious affiliation was to 'no religion'. Retention rates and change in affiliation were examined to explore whether this observed drift away from religion was uniform across different denominations and religions. For those who were brought up in a Christian denomination or in a non-Christian religion, change in affiliation was classified in one of three ways: 'moved to no religion', 'moved to different denomination or religion' or 'no change'. For participants brought up with no religious affiliation, change in affiliation was classified as either 'moved to a religion' or 'no change'. Results for participants brought up in the five major religious categories are presented in Table 3 (those affiliated to 'other' and 'uncodeable' religions were excluded due to inconsistency in responses).

About two thirds of participants brought up as Catholic moved to 'no religion', as did a similar proportion of those brought up Anglican, Protestant or Other Christian. In comparison, about half of participants raised as Orthodox or in a World Religion moved to 'no religion'. Very few participants raised in an Alternate spirituality moved away from their religion.

Table 2: Religion brought up in and current religion

Religion	Religion brought up in		Current religion	
	N	per cent	N	per cent
No Religion	1,566	29.3	3,826	71.6
Christian				
Catholic	1,640	30.7	435	8.1
Anglican, Protestant or other Christian	1,875	35.1	464	8.7
Orthodox	55	1.0	24	0.4
Other world religions				
Buddhist	38	0.7	166	3.1
Hindu	12	0.2	7	0.1
Judaism	68	1.3	46	0.9
Islam	20	0.4	14	0.3
Sikhism	1	0.0	0	0.0
Bahai	1	0.0	1	0.0
Taoism	3	0.1	4	0.1
Alternative spiritualities				
Wicca	21	0.4	146	2.7
Pagan	3	0.1	34	0.6
Spiritualism	3	0.1	35	0.7
Other	9	0.2	69	1.3
Uncodeable	30	0.6	74	1.4
Total	5,345	100.0	5,345	100.0

In summary, mainstream Christian religions were much less likely to retain individuals than Orthodox, World or Alternate Religions. Despite these differences, it should be noted that the majority of participants (with the exception of those raised in Alternative religions) moved away from their religion to 'no religion'. For those raised with 'no religion', the majority (90.7 per cent) reported no current religious affiliation (that is, no change) and only a small number (9.3 per cent) moved to a new religion (these data are not shown in Table 3). In fact, the proportion of participants who moved from one religion to another was remarkably similar across all categories of affiliation, ranging from five to 10 per cent of participants.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The results so far indicate that movements of religious affiliation among this gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex sample differ from those of the general population, in that a majority have moved from a Christian religious affiliation to 'no religion' or to another non-Christian religion. This analysis, however, has not so far taken account of any variation within the study population, in particular, whether gender and sexuality have any effect on the religious affiliation of non-heterosexual people.

Table 4 shows current religious affiliation according to the gender and sexuality of males and females in the sample (transgender and intersex participants were excluded due to low numbers). A number of differences were observed between the four groups (χ^2 [21, N = 4718] = 143.75, $p < .0005$). Bisexual men were the group most likely to report religious affiliation of some kind, particularly Christian affiliation (that is, bisexual men had the lowest proportion in 'no religion'). In fact, men, regardless of sexual identity, were more likely than women to have a Christian affiliation. In

Table 3: Change in religious affiliation

Christian denomination or non-Christian religion brought up in	Change in religious affiliation							
	Moved to 'No religion'		Moved to different Christian denomination or non–Christian religion		No change		Total	
	N	per cent	N	per cent	N	per cent	N	per cent
Catholic	1071	66.7	126	7.8	409	25.5	1606	100.0
A.P.O.C.	1243	68.6	191	10.5	378	20.9	1812	100.0
Orthodox	26	50.0	3	5.8	23	44.2	52	100.0
World religion	64	46.0	7	5.0	68	48.9	139	100.0
Alternative	4	15.4	0.0	0.0	22	84.6	26	100.0

Note: A.P.O.C = Anglican, Protestant or Other Christian; participants were excluded if raised with 'no religion' or in a denomination that was 'uncodeable' or in 'other'.

comparison to the other three groups, bisexual women had the highest rates of affiliation to 'Alternate' and 'Uncodeable' religions.

When change in religion was examined (Table 5), a number of differences were also observed according to gender and sexuality (χ^2 (12, N = 4570) = 127.76, p < .0005). In particular, bisexual women were more likely to become affiliated with a religion if they had not been brought up in a religion. Women were more likely than men to have changed religion, while lesbians were most likely to have moved from a religion to 'no religion'. Men, and in particular bisexual men, were more likely than women to have stayed in the same religion that they had been brought up in.

DISCUSSION

How do gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Australia position themselves in terms of religious affiliation? This is the focal question for this article. A summary reply is that they position themselves in a markedly different way from the general population. Factors such as denomination, gender, and sexuality influence religious affiliation and its changes. The most dramatic difference observed was that non-heterosexual people are much more likely to report 'no religion' and much less likely to report affiliation with Christian religions than are the general Australian population. By comparing current religious affiliation with the religion participants were raised in, we learned that the majority of *Private Lives* participants had moved from the religion they were raised in to having no religious affiliation. In most cases this was a move from a Christian religion to 'no religion'. At the same time, the proportion of participants affiliated to a World or Alternate religion increased, due in part

Table 4: Sexuality and current religion

Current religion	Gay man		Bisexual man		Lesbian		Bisexual woman	
	n	per cent	n	per cent	n	per cent	n	per cent
No Religion	2025	71.6	185	61.3	1044	76.7	154	68.4
Catholic	270	9.5	50	16.6	59	4.3	12	5.3
A.P.O.C.	272	9.6	35	11.6	97	7.1	17	7.6
Orthodox	19	0.7	2	0.7	2	0.1	0	0.0
World religions	106	3.7	10	3.3	69	5.1	9	4.0
Alternate	74	2.6	10	3.3	54	4.0	24	10.7
Other	39	1.4	5	1.7	13	1.0	2	0.9
Uncodeable	24	0.8	5	1.7	24	1.8	7	3.1
Total	2829	100.0	302	100.0	1362	100.0	225	100.0

Note: A.P.O.C = Anglican, Protestant or Other Christian. Transgender and intersex participants have been excluded due to low numbers; consequently N = 4718

to migration from other (mainly Christian) religions.

Overall, these findings are consistent with elements in other research, particularly from North America, which has found that religious affiliation is lower among non-heterosexuals than heterosexuals.[28] Furthermore, the findings are very consistent with those of the New Zealand study referred to above.[29] In that study, 72.9 per cent of participants were not religiously affiliated and only 14.8 per cent were currently affiliated with Christianity, despite the majority (72.8 per cent) having been raised as Christian. The *Private Lives* results, however, go beyond the work of previous research by including affiliation to non-Christian religions, and by looking at the impact of gender and sexuality on religious affiliation.

While the majority of participants who were raised in a Christian, World or Orthodox faith moved to 'no religion', the rates at which participants moved away from the religion they were brought up in differed by denomination. The mainstream Christian denominations shared similar retention rates, and were much poorer at retaining members than Orthodox and World religions. One possible reason for the disparity between religions comes from Bouma,[30] who suggests that religions which are stricter in terms of membership, belief and conduct (that is, Orthodox and World religions) are likely to have higher retention rates.

Although numbers are low, those affiliated to Alternate spiritualities (Wicca, Pagan, Spiritualism) provide an interesting comparison to the mainstream religions. Few raised in Alternative spiritualities left the religion and a disproportionately large number of participants moved into this group. Only 0.6 per cent of the sample were raised in an Alternative Religion. However, affiliation to this group increased to four per cent, including 2.7 per cent of the overall sample being affiliated to Wicca. These shifts towards alternative spiritualities are likely to reflect the fact that these forms of religion are open to and accepting of sexual diversity and so provide an opportunity to fulfil spiritual needs in a supportive environment not available in

Table 5: Sexuality and change in religious affiliation

Change in religion	Gay man		Bisexual man		Lesbian		Bisexual woman	
	N	per cent	N	per cent	N	per cent	N	per cent
No religion to a religion	54	2.0	9	3.1	30	2.3	19	8.9
Changed religion	134	4.9	16	5.9	103	7.8	16	7.5
Religion to no religion	1262	45.9	114	39.7	683	51.8	89	41.6
No change (no religion)	754	27.4	68	23.7	355	26.9	64	29.9
No change (same religion)	547	19.9	80	27.9	147	11.2	26	12.1
Total	2751	100.0	287	100.0	1318	100.0	214	100.0

Note: Transgender and intersex participants have been excluded due to low numbers, and participants also excluded if raised with 'no religion' or in a denomination that was 'uncodeable' or in 'other'. Consequently N = 4570.

more mainstream settings.[31] This may particularly be the case with some bisexual women, 10.7 per cent of whom were affiliated to an Alternative spirituality, compared with 4.0 per cent of lesbians, and 2.6 per cent and 3.3 per cent of gay and bisexual men respectively (a similar pattern was found with 'uncodeable' religions). These findings are in line with previous authors[32] who have recognised a link between female non-heterosexuality and Alternative spiritual beliefs.

An important aspect of the findings in this study is that religious affiliations of this non-heterosexual sample vary on the basis of gender and sexuality. In this study, men (regardless of sexuality) were more likely to have a Christian affiliation than women, while women were more likely to have changed to a new religion. Further, lesbians were the group most likely to have left religion completely.

CONCLUSION

This article has reported on a small sub-set of data collected as part of a wider survey of the health and well-being of non-heterosexual people in Australia. The results are powerful and suggest issues for further investigation. What lines of future inquiry does this analysis of *Private Lives* data on religious affiliation suggest? Future social inquiry into religious affiliation and, more generally, the experience of religion in the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people, would most usefully be designed using a mixed methods approach, so that accounts of meaning could complement reports of frequencies. Such research could examine more closely motivations for the changing of religious affiliation, or for the transition to a state of 'no religion'. It would also be of interest to find out at what point non-heterosexual people leave their religion, and whether this coincides with the resolution of issues of sexual identity, and/or current and ongoing adverse changes in internal denominational culture in relation to the non-heterosexual.

Another question which warrants further consideration, and which applies to other surveys of religious affiliation, including census collections, is: what does a response of 'no religion' imply? There is no reason not to believe that, for many respondents, it means exactly what it says. But some lines of future enquiry to amplify what 'no religion' means, suggest themselves. There are some uncodable responses in *Private Lives*—for example 'my own beliefs', 'my own personal religion', 'own women's spiritualism'—which open the question of whether 'no religion' might also, in some cases, have been the response of those whose religious or spiritual practice is in some sense idiosyncratic, perhaps related to their sexuality,[33] and through which, in some sense, they are constructing a sense of self.[34]

While transgender and intersex participants were included in the initial analyses of religious affiliation, their low numbers in the study precluded their inclusion in anything other than the most preliminary analysis. Future research could well examine religious affiliation, and associated religious experience issues, of these two groups, as in many other respects their experiences are considerably different from heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual populations.

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