

# **Opposition to assisted dying in Australia is largely religious**

Neil Francis

18<sup>th</sup> May 2017



Rocking the vote for law reform

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## Executive summary

In April 2017, a claim was made on the ABC's *QandA* television program about support for assisted dying (AD) amongst both the general Australian population (80%), and amongst Catholics and Anglicans (up to 70%). The claim was questioned. A scholarly review of available evidence was conducted and published as a FactCheck on *The Conversation*.

The scholarly review was excellent. This whitepaper extends insights by citing additional research and through further detailed analysis.

Question wording can profoundly affect survey results. Inclusion of contextual identifiers (e.g. 'unrelievable suffering') may be leading or appropriate, depending on content (e.g. 'incurable' vs 'terminal' illness).

A National Church Life Survey (NCLS) poll is rejected as a basis for judging attitudes to AD amongst Catholics and Anglicans overall. It included only or mostly regular and committed church attenders, and their attitudes toward AD are radically more opposed than are attitudes of non-regulars and non-attenders.

Extensive analysis of Australian Election Study (AES) 2016 data — a careful and scholarly study run from Australian National University — establishes that even of the most religiously committed, a minority oppose AD. Yet amongst those who oppose AD, almost all of them have a religious affiliation. In addition, those who attend religious services at least once a week are far more likely to oppose AD (46.1%) compared with once a month (24.2%), less often (less than 10%), or never (2.4%).

Variances in opposition to AD within demographics (e.g. age, religious denomination, rural/urban residence) are largely explained by religiosity.

The AES study found 77.4% of Australians support AD, close to the quoted 80% figure. It also found 74.3% support for AD amongst Catholics and 79.4% amongst Anglicans, somewhat lower than but generally consistent with other known poll results. The research evidence suggests that an appropriate statement is "at least 70% of Catholics and Anglicans support AD."

The research indicates that religion in Australia has fallen substantially and is likely to fall further in coming years.

## Table of contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....  | 6  |
| Question wording.....   | 6  |
| Sampling of religious denominations.....                            | 9  |
| The AES 2016 survey.....  | 10 |
| Statement of data use .....   | 10 |
| Only validated responses .....                                      | 10 |
| Defining ‘assisted dying’ (AD) .....                                | 10 |
| Defining ‘religiosity’ .....  | 11 |
| Australia’s religious profile in 2016 .....                         | 12 |
| ‘No religion’ the largest ‘denomination’ .....                      | 12 |
| The most religious are a small minority .....                       | 12 |
| Religious cohorts: attendance versus affiliation.....               | 13 |
| Attitudes toward AD overall .....                                   | 14 |
| ‘Strongly agree’ outnumber ‘strongly disagree’ nearly ten-fold..... | 14 |
| No significant difference by gender.....                            | 14 |
| Attitudes toward AD by any religious affiliation .....              | 15 |
| Most AD opposers are religiously affiliated .....                   | 15 |
| ...or attend religious services.....                                | 15 |
| Attitudes by religious cohort .....                                 | 16 |
| More evidence of the religious identity effect .....                | 16 |
| Attitudes toward AD by religiosity .....                            | 17 |
| Disagreement with AD correlates strongly with religiosity .....     | 17 |
| NCLS poll methodology unsuitable .....                              | 18 |
| Alignment and commitment.....                                       | 19 |
| Social class by religiosity .....                                   | 19 |
| The more religious far more likely to be ‘far right wing’ .....     | 19 |
| The less religious somewhat more likely to be ‘far left wing’ ..... | 20 |
| Religiosity by social class.....                                    | 21 |
| Religiosity correlates with conservative social attitudes.....      | 21 |
| Attitudes toward AD by religious denomination .....                 | 22 |
| Mostly explained by religiosity .....                               | 23 |
| Minor denominations the most opposed .....                          | 23 |
| Christians overall.....   | 24 |
| Q&A statement supported .....                                       | 24 |
| Attitudes toward AD by political party affinity.....                | 25 |
| Almost completely explained by religiosity .....                    | 25 |
| Attitudes toward AD by age.....                                     | 26 |
| Largely explained by religiosity .....                              | 26 |
| Attitudes toward AD by education.....                               | 27 |
| Largely explained by religiosity .....                              | 27 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Attitudes toward AD by rural/urban residence .....            | 28 |
| Mostly explained by religiosity.....                          | 28 |
| Attitudes toward AD by household income.....                  | 29 |
| Partly explained by religiosity .....                         | 29 |
| Attitudes toward AD by state of residence.....                | 30 |
| Not explained by religiosity alone.....                       | 30 |
| A secondary reason: personal experience .....                 | 30 |
| Summary of demographic correlations .....                     | 32 |
| Conclusions .....   | 33 |
| References.....   | 35 |
| Appendix A: The decline of religion in Australia .....        | 36 |
| Support for assisted dying has increased... ..                | 36 |
| ...as religious affiliation in Australia falls .....          | 36 |
| The fall is likely to continue .....                          | 37 |
| Mainstream religions losing relevance .....                   | 37 |
| Religious commitment lower among younger Australians .....    | 38 |
| Commitment amongst denominations .....                        | 39 |
| Church attendance is decreasing .....                         | 40 |
| Religion losing its attraction even for marriage.....         | 40 |
| Appendix B: Other social law reforms — individual charts..... | 42 |
| Attitudes toward abortion by religiosity .....                | 42 |
| Attitudes toward marijuana by religiosity .....               | 42 |
| Attitudes toward marriage equality by religiosity.....        | 43 |

## Introduction

On 10<sup>th</sup> April 2017, pro-assisted dying campaigner Ms Nikki Gemmell stated on ABC television program *Q&A* that 80% of the Australian population, and up to 70% of Anglican and Catholic Australians, support lawful assisted dying. Subsequently, a number of requests were made for a 'FactCheck' (a service of [The Conversation](#)), questioning particularly the rate of support amongst Australians of religious faith.

A FactCheck bulletin was prepared by Professor Colleen Cartwright of Southern Cross University, and reviewed by Dr Charles Douglas of the University of Newcastle.<sup>1</sup> It concluded that Ms Gemmell's statement "*is backed up by a number of surveys – but not all.*"

The FactCheck bulletin was of a high calibre, particularly within the constraints of a very tight timeframe and a strict word count that limited the breadth and depth of evidence and issues that could be covered.

Before conducting a detailed analysis of Australian religiosity and attitudes toward AD using recent, authoritative survey data, this whitepaper follows up two aspects of the bulletin: question wording and sampling of religious denominations.

### Question wording

Professor Cartwright rightly points out that question wording can make a significant difference to poll answers. In the polls she cites, questions differ in several important respects.

She refers to 'unrelievable suffering' appearing in some questions. This would be somewhat leading in certain contexts, but less so in others. For research particularly around wider qualification criteria such as an advanced incurable illness, 'unrelievable suffering' may be a more appropriate poll stimulus to ensure all respondents are answering the question with the same meaning. One kind of incurable illness may cause a low level of suffering while another may cause severe suffering, and respondents' answers may differ based on which they are thinking of.

Ensuring clarity of meaning is critical to properly informing public policy and potential law reform. Existing assisted dying statutes have different provisions, some requiring a terminal illness (e.g. Oregon, Washington, California), and others not (e.g. Benelux countries), yet all but Switzerland specifically refer to 'suffering.'

This then highlights the *rationale* for assisted dying: as the last option available to relieve unbearable suffering that cannot otherwise be relieved by any acceptable treatments.

Stating it the other way around, we can surmise that when asked about assisted dying in differing levels of illness, but without expressly mentioning

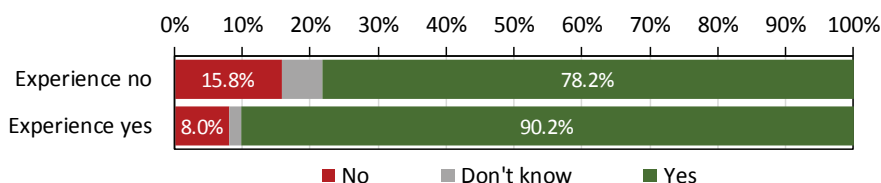
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*Before conducting a detailed analysis of Australian religiosity and attitudes toward AD, this whitepaper follows up on two aspects of the FactCheck bulletin: question wording and sampling of religious denominations.*

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'unrelievable suffering,' some responding in the negative may be doing so because they hold a lower association between the given nature of the illness (e.g. incurable chronic; terminal) and unbearable and unrelievable suffering.

This is somewhat borne out by Australian research which found that support for assisted dying was higher (90.2%) and opposition lower (8.0%) amongst those who had "a personal experience where a close relative or friend was hopelessly ill and wanted voluntary euthanasia," than amongst those who had not (78.2% and 15.8% respectively; all  $p < 0.001$ ) (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

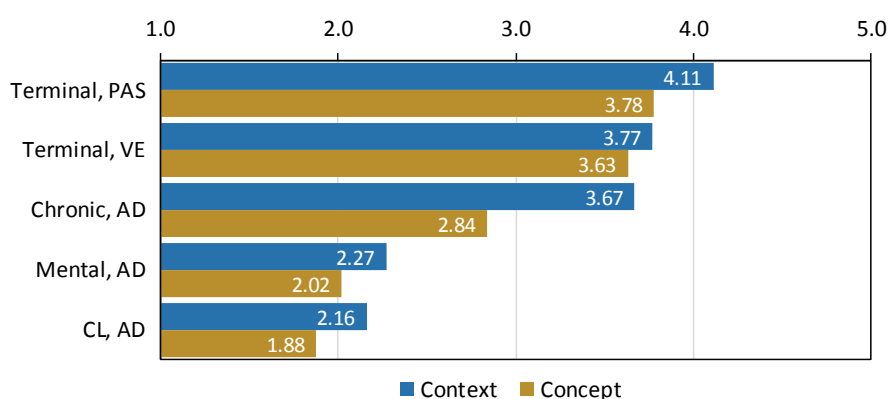


**Figure 1:** Attitudes towards AD by close personal experience of desire for AD in the face of 'hopeless illness'

Source: DWDV 2007<sup>2</sup>

A study of public attitudes in Norway found that support for AD was significantly higher from questions worded by *context* (e.g. mention of suffering, incurability) than merely by *content* (e.g. mention only of terminal illness, incurable chronic illness) (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>

The differences in results between context and content question types in Figure 2 are all highly statistically significant. Concept ambiguity in *chronic illness* (i.e. no mention of any type of 'suffering') resulted in the greatest differential reduction of support for assisted dying, while assisted dying in chronic illness *with* a context of 'suffering' had a similar level of public support as terminal illness.



**Figure 2:** Norwegian public attitudes toward AD by question construction (context v concept); illness type, method of administration

Source: Magelssen et al 2016.<sup>3</sup> Notes: PAS = patient self-administration, VE = doctor administration, AD = unspecified administration (could be PAS or VE), CL = completed life

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*The addition of **context** (e.g. suffering) makes a large difference to the response to questions with otherwise potentially ambiguous **content** (e.g. 'incurable illness').*

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Thus, mention of 'suffering' in survey questions can help reveal rationale and to inform legislatures of the level of public support for *forms* of AD (e.g. its

qualification criteria and methods of administration) for inclusion in public policy and legislation.

Further, the table of poll results provided to Professor Cartwright for analysis cites two Essential Media polls (2014, 2015). Essential media have asked the same question in not two but in five polls (2010–2016), finding a significant majority average of support for AD of 69% across its polls.<sup>4</sup> But its results are lower than all the other polls. The question they asked was:

*“When a person has a disease that cannot be cured and is living in severe pain, do you think doctors should or should not be allowed by law to assist the patient to commit suicide if the patient requests it?”*

The question contains a very leading clause, “to commit suicide.” It’s likely to lead some respondents to equate such a doctor-assisted death — an informed and carefully considered response to otherwise unbearable and incurable suffering — with irrational and impulsive acts of those failing to cope with situations that can be resolved: in other words, with ‘general’ suicide.

A 2005 Australian study described the effects of question wording on assisted dying support amongst cancer patients (Table 1):<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1:** Cancer patient question agreement as a function of question wording

| Question wording   | Agree |
|--|-------|
| Do you believe in a “right to die”?  | 83%   |
| Do you support the idea of <b>euthanasia</b> ?*  | 79%   |
| Do you think a person has the right to end their own life if they have a disease that cannot be cured?^  | 75%   |
| If a referendum were held in Australia, would you vote to legalise euthanasia?   | 75%   |
| Do you believe that a doctor should be able to assist a patient to die?#   | 70%   |
| Do you believe it is sometimes right for a doctor to take active steps to intentionally bring about the death of a patient who has requested it? | 68%   |
| If a referendum were held in Australia, would you vote to legalise doctor-assisted <b>suicide</b> ?  | 42%   |
| Do you think doctors should be able to <b>kill</b> their patients?   | 14%   |

Source: Parkinson *et al* 2005.<sup>5</sup> [Note: My emphases in bold.] \* Not further defined, but interpreted by many as ‘assisted death’. ^ Disease not defined. # No defined circumstances.

Support for assisted dying as ‘suicide’ was significantly lower than other forms of question, except for ‘killing’ patients, which scored lowest. Similar drops in support for ‘surgery’ would be obtained for leading questions with wording such as ‘slashing and wounding,’ technically correct as they may be.

In summary, question wording does make a difference to survey results. Not all polls are equal, as Professor Cartwright says. Some question wording can be leading, while other wording provides an appropriate level of context to help understand what the support is actually for.

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*Equating an informed and rational choice for a peaceful, doctor-assisted death in the face of unrelievable suffering, with a regrettable and often violent death by suicide, substantially lowers agreement with assisted dying.*

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## Sampling of religious denominations

Regarding the claim that “up to 70% of Australian Catholics and Anglicans support lawful AD,” Professor Cartwright mentions figures from a 2007 Newspoll study showing 74% support amongst Catholics and 81% amongst Anglicans; and a 2012 Newspoll study showing 77% support amongst Catholics and 88% amongst Anglicans.

She also cites a poll conducted by the National Church Life Survey (NCLS), a research alliance of major Christian faiths, sponsored by the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches, saying of it that “*some polls show Catholics and Christians are against euthanasia.*”

To explain the much more negative NCLS results of 50% of Catholics and 39% of Anglicans *opposed* to AD, Professor Cartwright mentions possible methodological bias — people answering what they are *expected* to answer (opposition to AD).

I’ve studied the NCLS poll in as much detail as is possible: as Professor Cartwright says, it’s somewhat opaque. It asks church (i.e. Christian) *service attenders* to complete a questionnaire during survey weeks when ‘special’ services are *not* being held, so as to capture the views largely of *regular* service attenders.<sup>6</sup>

As I shall demonstrate, regular religious service attenders comprise a small proportion of the Australian population and on average — as Professor Cartwright mentions — hold more negative views about assisted dying compared with the majority of Australians who identify with a religious denomination, including Catholic and Anglican.

Professor Cartwright also cites a 2010 Australia Institute study that found 75% support for AD overall, and 65% among Christians. As I shall also demonstrate, on average Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church respondents are significantly more in favour of AD than are, collectively, minor Christian denominations, which also helps explain the lower Australian Institute figure for ‘all Christians.’

In summary, the NCLS research was commissioned for a different purpose: for the churches to understand the more loyal amongst their congregations. It was *not* designed to answer questions about support for social policies amongst all those who are members of a religious denomination, and doesn’t do so.

Given the long-term decline of religion in Australia (see Appendix A), it’s curious that the churches have joined forces to focus most on those closest to their institutional bosoms, rather than the very substantial numbers of those who have left or are not joining.

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*Regular religious service attenders are very different from those affiliated with a religion but who do not regularly attend services. That made the NCLS study unsuitable to answer the “up to 70% of Catholics and Anglicans” question.*

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## The AES 2016 survey

Much of the analysis in this whitepaper uses [Australian Election Survey](#) (AES) data. AES is a scholarly research group headed by a distinguished team at Australian National University. It conducts a rigorous survey at each Australian federal election to provide a long-term perspective of the attitudes and behaviours of Australians. Respondents are Australian adults (18+) entitled to vote in parliamentary elections.

Its most recent published study was for the 2016 federal election,<sup>7</sup> and its careful methodology is explained in detail in its study documentation.<sup>8</sup> It collected data that is highly relevant to laws on a number of social issues including assisted dying, abortion, marriage equality and smoking marijuana.

## Statement of data use

The tabulations and analyses of raw AES survey data in this whitepaper have been conducted by me, not the original study authors. For quality control, I ensured I was able to exactly reproduce relevant original author tabulations, using professional statistical software, before conducting further tabulations.

References throughout this whitepaper to “AES 2016” refer to data analysis from this study.

## Only validated responses

AES results in this whitepaper are filtered to valid responses, i.e. exclusive of non-responses.

## Defining ‘assisted dying’ (AD)

As already discussed, the wording of a poll question can have a significant impact on responses, and different surveys use different question forms.

The AES 2016 study included the following assisted dying question:

*“Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement? Terminally ill patients should be able to end their own lives with medical assistance.”*

The answer choices included an option not expressly stated in the question, “neither agree nor disagree”:

*Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree*

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*‘Assisted dying’ in this whitepaper generally means assisting a peaceful death for someone who has expressed an informed, considered and persistent wish to die in response to a severe and incurable illness.*

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For general simplicity, we will use the expression ‘assisted dying’ (and its acronym ‘AD’) in discussion to mean:

*“The rendering of assistance whose intention is to bring about a peaceful death, to an individual who has expressed an informed, considered and persistent wish to die, in response to a severe and incurable illness.”*

Note that the definition itself doesn’t refer to assistance by medical doctors. While in most lawful jurisdictions assistance may only be rendered by doctors, this is not the case in Switzerland.

## Defining ‘religiosity’

There are a number of ways of defining personal religiosity: at the simplest level by identification with any religious denomination (or not), at the intermediate level by frequency of prayer or religious service attendance, and at the most complex level by psychological profiling, for example ‘intrinsic’ versus ‘extrinsic’ approaches to faith.<sup>9,10</sup>

The AES 2016 study included a religiosity question of intermediate complexity, the frequency of attending religious services:

*“Apart from weddings, funerals and baptisms, about how often do you attend religious services?”*

Attending weddings, funerals and baptisms were excluded so that attendance only for devotional purposes — rather than potentially social purposes — was recorded. Answer choices were:

*At least once a week | At least once a month | Several times a year |  
At least once a year | Less than once a year | Never*

Thus, ‘religiosity’ in this whitepaper is defined as *‘frequency of attending religious services excluding weddings, funerals and baptisms,’* measured using a six-point scale.

Further, for simplicity as well as sufficient sample sizes for statistical comparison, a condensed religiosity scale is used in some analyses, with the following meanings unless otherwise stated:

- **Regularly:** once a month or more often;
- **Occasionally:** less than once a year to several times a year; and
- **Never:** never attends religious services.

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*‘Religiosity’ in this whitepaper means ‘frequency of attending religious services, excluding weddings, funerals and baptisms.’*

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## Australia's religious profile in 2016

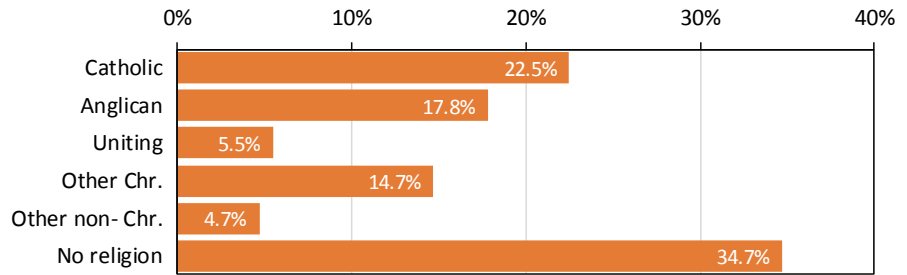
### 'No religion' the largest 'denomination'

In 2016, around two thirds (65.3%) of Australians identified with any religious denomination, and around a third (34.7%) with none. Figure 3 shows Australian population affiliation by religious denomination in 2016. Smaller denominations have been grouped together ('Other Christian' and 'Other non-Christian') for analysis since their small individual sample sizes preclude reporting their statistics separately.

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*The largest single 'religious' group in Australia is 'no religion' (34.7%), followed by Catholic (22.5%) and Anglican (17.8%).*

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**Figure 3:** Religious affiliation among Australians

Source: AES 2016. Note: Chr. = Christian

The proportion of Australians with no religion (34.7%) is significantly larger than any one religious denomination, including the largest: Catholic (22.5%) and Anglican (17.8%).

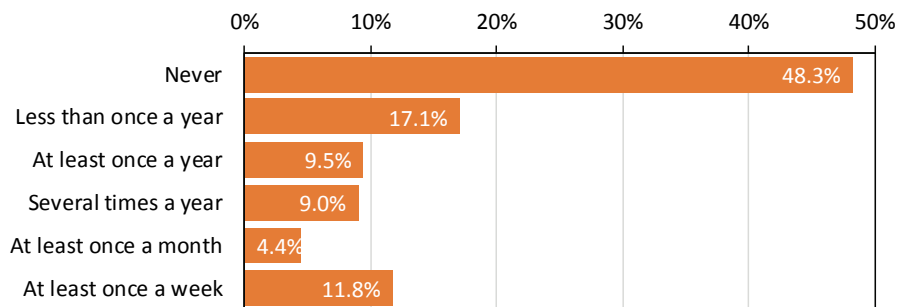
### The most religious are a small minority

The most religious represent a small minority of Australians (Figure 4).

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*Australians are not strongly religious: nearly half never attend religious services, two thirds attend less than once a year, and three quarters attend once a year or less.*

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**Figure 4:** Australian voter religiosity profile

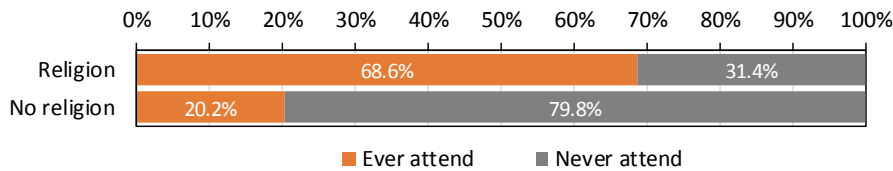
Source: AES 2016

The religious identity of Australians is, overall, not strong:

- Nearly half (48.3%) never attend;
- Two thirds (65.4%) attend less than once a year or never;
- Three quarters (74.8%) attend once a year or less, including never;
- A small minority (16.2%) are regular attenders (at least monthly); and
- A smaller minority (11.8%) are frequent attenders (at least weekly).

## Religious cohorts: attendance versus affiliation

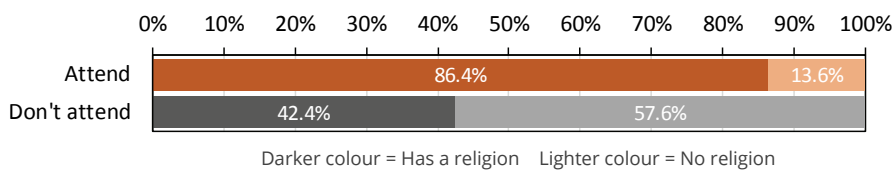
Not all Australians affiliated with any religious denomination attend religious services (besides weddings, funerals and baptisms), and some Australians with no religious affiliation do attend religious services (Figure 5).



**Figure 5:** Religious service attendance by has a religion (any religious affiliation)  
Source: AES 2016

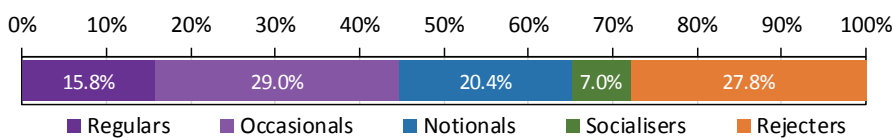
Around a fifth (20.2%) of non-affiliated Australians sometimes attend religious services, while almost a third of affiliated Australians (31.4%) never attend religious services, suggesting a weaker association with religion.

Conversely, a small but significant minority (13.6%) of Australians attending religious services have no religious affiliation, while a large minority (42.4%) not attending religious services do have a religious affiliation (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** Has a religion (any religious affiliation) by religious service attendance  
Source: AES 2016

Dividing up the population amongst has (65.1%) or has no (34.9%) religion [affiliation belief] by ever (51.7%) — divided into 16.2% regular and 35.5% occasional — or never (48.3%) attends religious services [behaviour], Australians fall into one of five religious cohorts (Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** Depth of religion by cohort in Australia in 2016  
Source: AES 2016

**Regulars (15.8%):** Have a religious affiliation and regularly attend religious services (once a month or more often).

**Occasionals (29.0%):** Have a religious affiliation but only attend religious services occasionally (less than once a year to several times a year).

**Notionals (20.4%):** Claim a religious affiliation but *never* attend services.

**Socialisers (7.0%):** Have 'no religion' but sometimes attend services, mostly likely for social rather than religious belief purposes.

**Rejecters (27.8%):** Have 'no religion' and never attend religious services.

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*A small minority (15.8%) of Australians are regular religious service attenders, with nearly twice as many attending only occasionally (29.0%) or rejecting religion outright (27.8%). One in five (20.4%) are 'notionals' who claim a religious affiliation but never attend services.*

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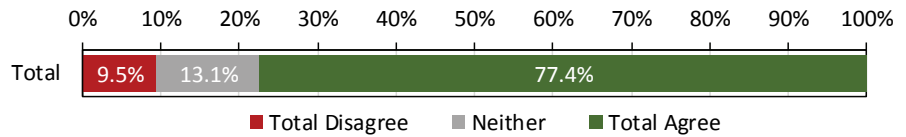
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*Other research indicates that religion in Australia is in long-term decline, a trend that seems set to continue. See Appendix A for further information.*

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## Attitudes toward AD overall

Figure 8 shows Australians' attitudes toward AD. The great majority (77.4%) agree with AD, while 9.5% don't.

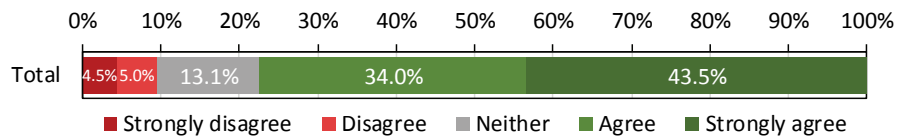


**Figure 8:** Attitudes toward AD – total Australian population

Source: AES 2016

## 'Strongly agree' outnumber 'strongly disagree' nearly ten-fold

Figure 9 shows attitude strength. Strong agreement with AD (43.5%) was nearly ten times greater than strong disagreement (4.5%).



**Figure 9:** Attitudes toward AD – total Australian population

Source: AES 2016

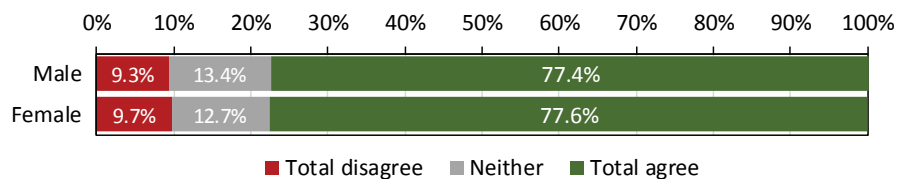
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*Most Australians (77.4%) support assisted dying, and strong supporters outnumber strong opposers nearly ten-to-one.*

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## No significant difference by gender

Figure 10 shows attitudes toward AD by gender. There is no statistically-significant difference in attitudes between genders.

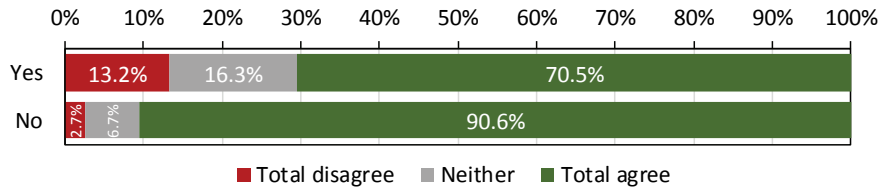


**Figure 10:** Attitudes toward AD by gender

Source: AES 2016

## Attitudes toward AD by any religious affiliation

Around two thirds (65.3%) of Australians self-identify with a religion, and one third (34.7%) don't (AES 2016). Figure 11 shows attitudes toward AD by having a religious affiliation or not. While disagreement with AD was higher in religious affiliation (13.2% versus 2.7%), still a considerable majority of Australians with a religious affiliation agree with AD (70.5% versus 90.6%).

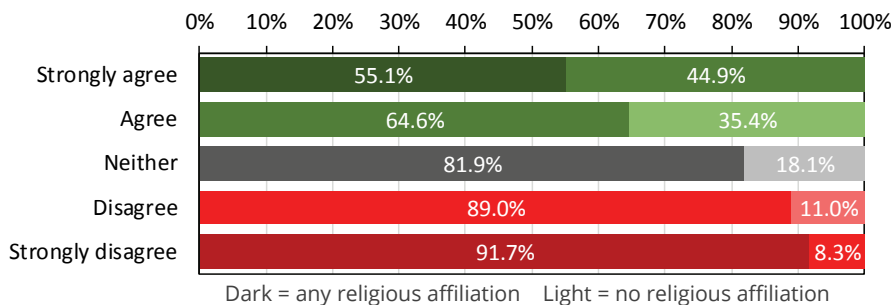


**Figure 11:** Attitudes toward AD by any religious affiliation (yes/no)  
Source: AES 2016

*While the great majority of religiously-affiliated and non-affiliated Australians alike agree with AD, more of the religiously-affiliated disagree.*

## Most AD opposers are religiously affiliated

Figure 12 shows religious affiliation (darker colours) or none (lighter colours) of respondents by strength of attitudes toward AD. Of those who disagree with AD, almost all of them are religiously affiliated (89.0% of disagree, 91.7% of strongly disagree).



**Figure 12:** Any religious affiliation by attitudes toward AD  
Source: AES 2016

## ...or attend religious services

For Australians who indicate religion either way (either 'have a religious affiliation' or 'attend religious services'), the religious proportion of those who disagree increases to 92.4% and of those who strongly disagree to 93.8%: that is, almost all of them.

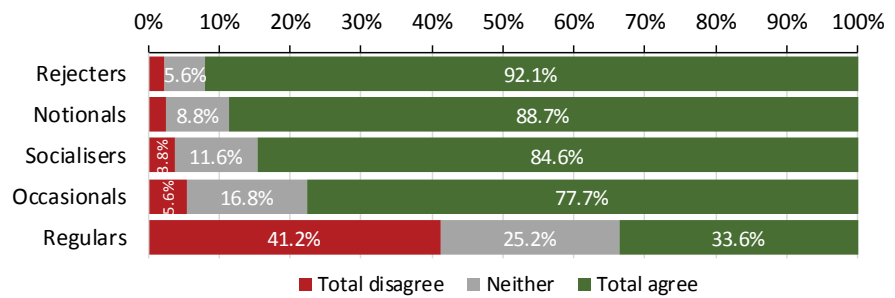
Thus, while a significant majority (70.5%) of Australians with any religious affiliation agree with assisted dying (Figure 11), those who disagree are Australia's most religious.

*Those who disagree with assisted dying are Australia's more religious: almost all of them having a religious affiliation or attending religious services.*

*Opposition to AD is very much higher (41.2%) amongst Regulars than all other religious cohorts (less than 6% each), and Regulars alone account for more than two thirds (68.0%) of opposition to AD.*

### Attitudes by religious cohort

Figure 13 shows attitudes toward AD by religious cohort (see page 13).



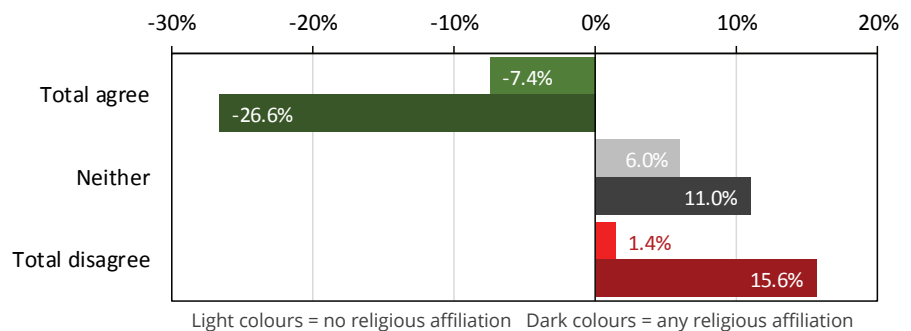
**Figure 13:** Attitudes toward AD by religious cohort

Source: AES 2016

Disagreement with AD is very low amongst Rejecters through Occasionals (2.4%, 2.5%, 3.8%, 5.6%), but much greater amongst Regulars (41.2%).

### More evidence of the religious identity effect

Figure 14 shows the net difference in attitudes toward AD of those attending religious services relative to those not attending, for each of the non-affiliated and religiously-affiliated groups.



**Figure 14:** Difference in attitudes toward AD by attendance of religious services relative to non-attendance, separately for no or any religious affiliation

Source: AES 2016

*Religious affiliation correlates strongly, but non-affiliation does not, with much higher in opposition to AD amongst those attending religious services (versus not attending).*

Amongst the non-affiliated, attending religious services diminishes agreement with AD by just -7.4% (relative to the rate of non-attenders), most of which shifts to neutrality (+6.1%) and very little to disagreement (+1.4%).

However, amongst the religiously affiliated, attending religious services diminishes agreement with AD more than three times as much (-26.6%), a minority of which shifts to neutrality (+11.0%), and a majority to disagreement (+15.6%).

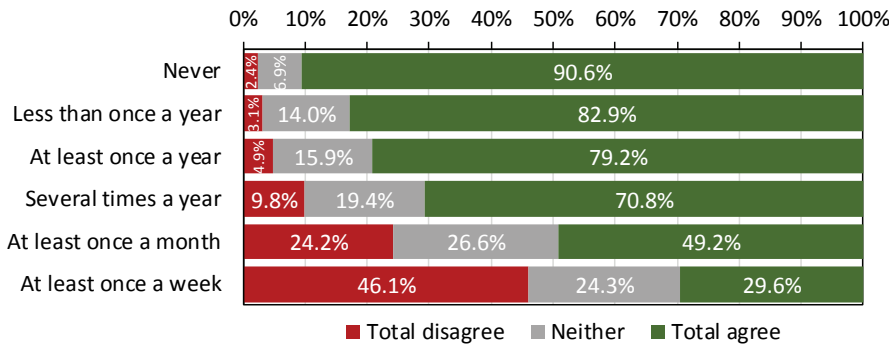
Thus, attending religious services *with* religious identity correlates with greatly increased disagreement with AD, while attending *without* a religious identity does not. The former increase (+15.6%) is more than eleven times the latter (+1.4%).



## Attitudes toward AD by religiosity

### Disagreement with AD correlates strongly with religiosity

Figure 15 shows attitudes toward AD by religiosity (frequency of attending religious services excluding weddings, funerals and baptisms). There is a strong, direct correlation between religiosity and disagreement with AD. While practically no religious service non-attenders disagree (2.4%), nearly half (46.1) of weekly attenders disagree (46.1%).



**Figure 15:** Attitudes toward AD by religiosity (frequency of attending religious services)

Source: AES 2016

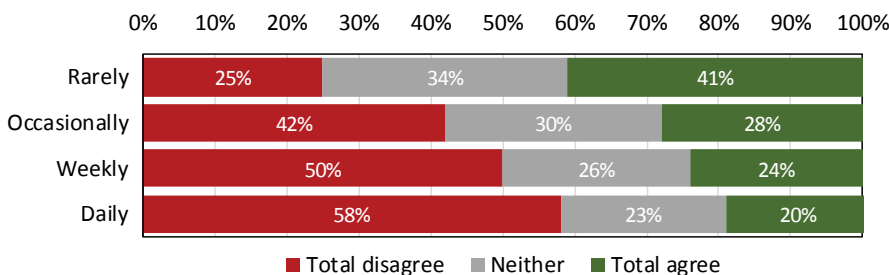
Even amongst the most religious (attend devotional services weekly or more often), less than half disagree with AD.

The 2011 NCLS survey found a similar pattern amongst their own (Christian) religious service attenders (Figure 16). Of those who rarely attend religious services, 25% disagreed with AD, while of those who attend daily, 58% disagreed.

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*While less than half of even the most frequent service attenders (at least weekly) disagree with AD, disagreement increases strongly with more frequent religious service attendance.*

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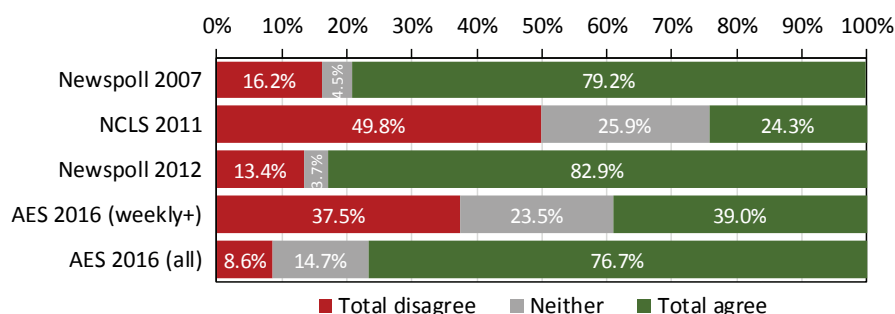
**Figure 16:** Attitudes toward AD by religiosity (frequency of attending devotional religious services)

Source: NCLS 2011<sup>11</sup>

While the trends are similar, reasons for the far more negative attitudes reported in the NCLS study are discussed later.

### NCLS poll methodology unsuitable

The NCLS 2011 poll asked church (i.e. Christian; and largely Catholic, Anglican and Uniting) attenders about their attitudes toward AD.<sup>11</sup> Attitudes amongst the major Christian denominations in Newspoll, AES and NCLS polls are compared in Figure 17.



**Figure 17:** Attitudes toward AD amongst major Christian denominations by poll  
Sources: Newspoll 2007,<sup>2</sup> NCLS 2011,<sup>11</sup> Newspoll 2012,<sup>12</sup> AES 2016. Notes: The NCLS poll doesn't provide a breakdown of denominations but suggests largely Catholic, Anglican and Uniting. Newspoll and AES base = Catholic, Anglican and Uniting, regardless of service attendance frequency, except "(weekly+)" which is attendance once a week or more often.

The NCLS study returned the most negative overall attitudes towards AD, with around half (49.8%) disagreeing, and a quarter (24.3%) agreeing. There are a number of potential sources of bias that may have led to this outcome:

- While organisers expected "500,000 church attenders in 7,000 local churches from 25 denominations" to participate,<sup>13</sup> the published survey report indicates only 1,381 did.<sup>11</sup>
- Surveys were collected at church services with a likely overrepresentation of the most religious: clerics and other church staff and volunteers.
- NCLS surveys are conducted only during non-special services to provide a "more regular and reliable sample of attenders,"<sup>6</sup> meaning only the strongest adherents were likely to participate in the survey.
- Survey forms were collected by churches and some participants may have felt obliged to give the prescribed answer: opposition to AD.
- Some church attenders who disagree with church policy on AD may have chosen not to participate in the survey.
- Through its design, the study *excluded* those who affiliate with a religious denomination but do not attend religious services.

The NCLS results with 49.8% disagree and 24.3% agree are far more negative than the rigorous AES 2016 poll results (major-Christian denominations<sup>a</sup> who frequently attend religious services – "weekly+" in Figure 17) at 37.5% disagree and 39.0% agree. They are also significantly more negative than the AES 2016 results for the religious cohort Regulars amongst major-Christian denominations at 41.2% disagree and 33.6% agree.

<sup>a</sup> Amongst the three largest denominations: Catholic, Anglican and Uniting.

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*The NCLS study suffered from significant sampling, procedural and non-response biases, making it an unsuitable source to inform the question to be answered: "attitudes of Australian Catholics and Anglicans toward AD."*

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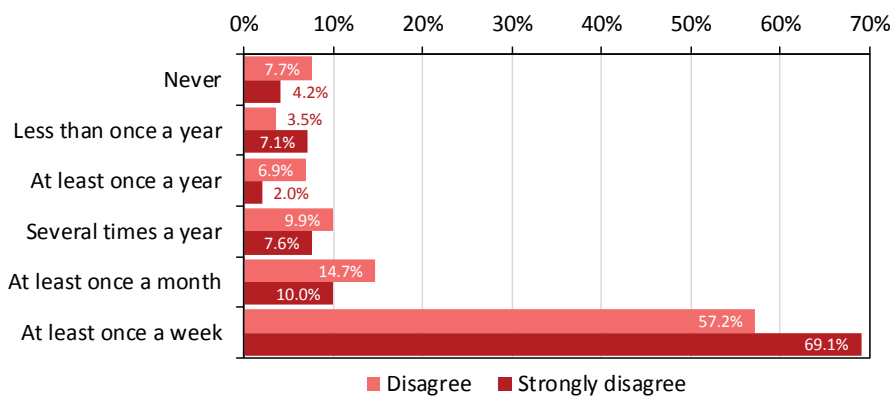
These substantial differences confirm that the NCLS study was unsuitable to answer the question of Catholic and Anglican support for AD.

For the major-Christian denominations (all attenders — not just frequent), the Newspoll and AES results are comparable, though very different from those of frequent attenders. The Newspoll surveys asked a Yes/No question, with ‘don’t know’ as a permitted but unprompted answer, while the AES poll offered a five-point Likert scale with ‘neither agree nor disagree’ in the centre. This in part accounts for just 4% “don’t know” in the Newspoll studies versus around 15% “Neither/nor” in the AES study.

### Alignment and commitment

According to the 2011 NCLS survey, members newer to church life (five years or less) were far more likely to agree with AD (39%) compared with members of church life for longer (23%). Also, a much higher proportion of 15–29 year-olds (40%) indicated they were neutral, compared with older age groups (24%).<sup>11</sup> (There is likely to be substantial overlap between the membership and age variables.) The study indicates that it is evolving alignment with or commitment towards agreeing with church teachings, that encourages opposition or neutrality to AD amongst the most religious Australians.

This is confirmed by AES data, which shows that it is those who attend religious services weekly who are very strongly more opposed (Figure 18).



**Figure 18:** Frequency of attending religious services amongst those with a religious affiliation and who disagree with AD

Source: AES 2016

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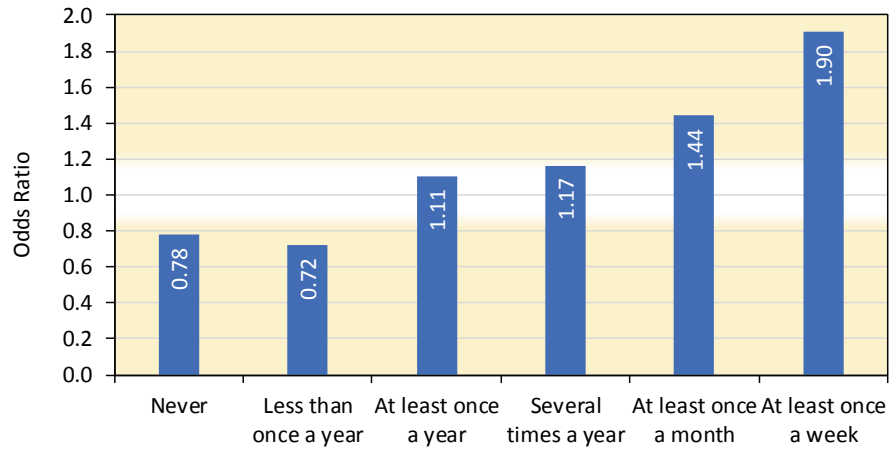
*Evolving and strong alignment with and commitment to church teachings encourages opposition to AD.*

---

### Social class by religiosity

#### The more religious far more likely to be ‘far right wing’

The AES 2016 study asked respondents to self-identify their social class: upper, middle, lower or none. Figure 19 shows the odds ratio (OR) of self-identifying as ‘far right wing’ (right-most three of an eleven-point left/right scale) by religiosity.

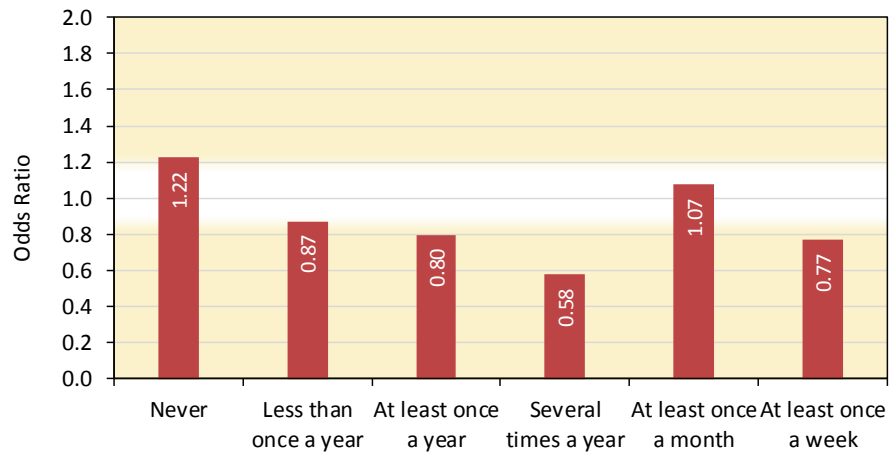


**Figure 19:** The odds ratio of religiosity and identifying as 'far right wing'  
Source: AES 2016

Those who attend religious services less than once a year or never were far less likely to self-identify as 'far right wing' (OR = 0.78 and 0.72 respectively), while monthly service attenders were 44% more likely to self-identify as 'far right wing' (OR = 1.44), and weekly attenders almost twice as likely (OR = 1.90).

**The less religious somewhat more likely to be 'far left wing'**

Figure 20 shows the odds ratio of self-identifying as 'far left wing' (left-most three of an eleven-point left/right scale) by religiosity.



**Figure 20:** The odds ratio of religiosity and identifying as 'far left wing'  
Source: AES 2016

There appear to be two trends here; one for 'regular' (at least monthly) attenders and one for non-regulars (occasional or never). Within each group there was a moderate trend towards 'far left wing' identification with less frequent service attendance.

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*Australia's most religious are far more likely to identify as 'far right wing', while the less religious are somewhat more likely to identify as 'far left wing.'*

---

## Religiosity by social class

The other way around (religiosity by class rather than class by religiosity), the statistically significant results include that self-declared:

- ‘Upper class’ were much more likely to attend religious services weekly (OR = 2.05);
- ‘Middle class’ were more likely to attend monthly (OR = 1.30);
- ‘Working class’ were much less likely to attend monthly (OR = 0.64) and slightly more likely to never attend (OR = 1.07); and
- ‘None’ (classless) were more likely to never attend (OR = 1.22).

Generally speaking, higher class correlated with more frequent religious service attendance and lower or no class affiliation with non-attendance.

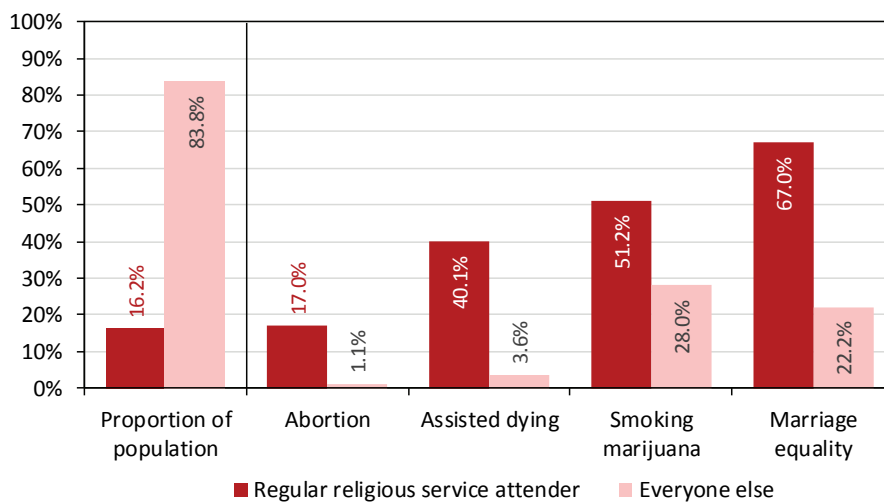
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*The self-declared upper class are more likely to attend religious services weekly, the middle class occasionally, and the lower class and classless not at all.*

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## Religiosity correlates with conservative social attitudes

Regular religious service attenders (once a month or more often) represent a small minority (16.2%) of Australians, and they disagree far more with ‘progressive’ social policies than do less religious Australians (Figure 21).



**Figure 21:** Opposition to social law reforms by religiosity

Source: AES 2016. Notes: ‘Regular’ is at least once a month. Abortion = ‘is never acceptable.’

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*Religiosity predicts a much higher opposition to ‘progressive’ social policies including abortion, assisted dying, smoking marijuana and marriage equality.*

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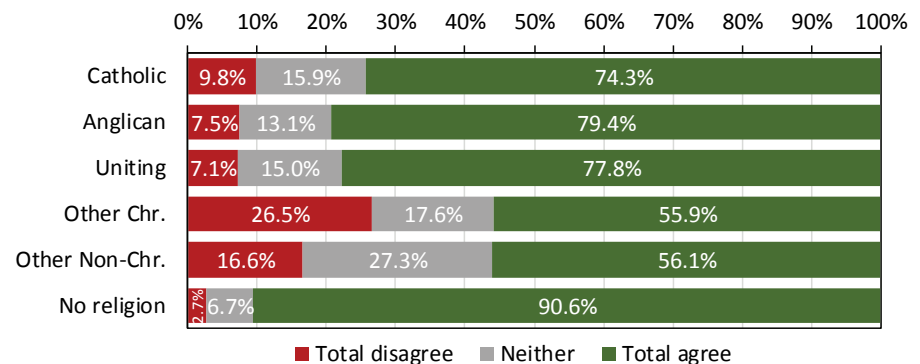
Differences in disagreement percentages between regular service attenders and others are 15.9% for abortion, 23.2% for marijuana smoking, 36.5% for assisted dying, and 44.8% for marriage equality.

More detail appears in Appendix B.

## Attitudes toward AD by religious denomination

Figure 22 shows Australian attitudes toward AD by religious affiliation.

Although support of AD is in the majority across all faith groups, opposition to AD is much higher amongst minor Christian denominations, and somewhat higher amongst non-Christian faiths.'

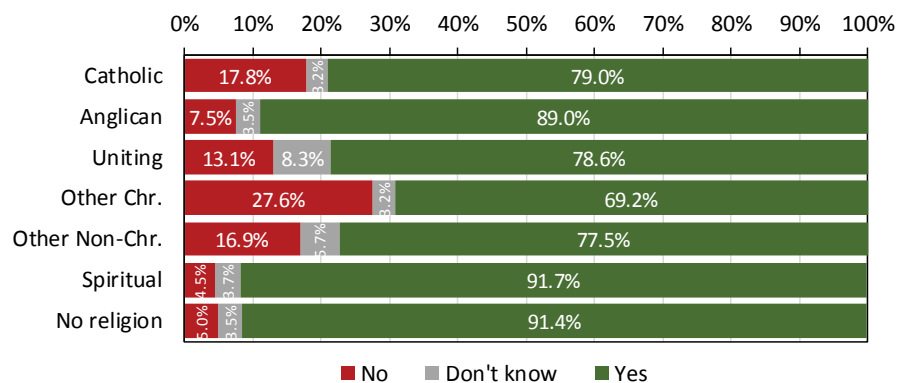


**Figure 22:** Attitudes toward AD by religious denomination

Source: AES 2016. Note: Respondent numbers are too small to validly report minor denominations individually. Chr. = Christian

The AES results are comparable to a 2012 Newspoll study, which asked:

*“Thinking now about voluntary euthanasia. If a hopelessly ill patient, experiencing unrelievable suffering, with absolutely no chance of recovering asks for a lethal dose, should a doctor be allowed to provide a lethal dose, or not?”<sup>12</sup>*



**Figure 23:** Attitudes toward AD by religious denomination 2012

Source: Newspoll 2012.<sup>12</sup> Note: Yes/no to ‘doctor can provide a lethal dose’. Spiritual = ‘Spiritual but no formal religion.’ Chr = Christian.

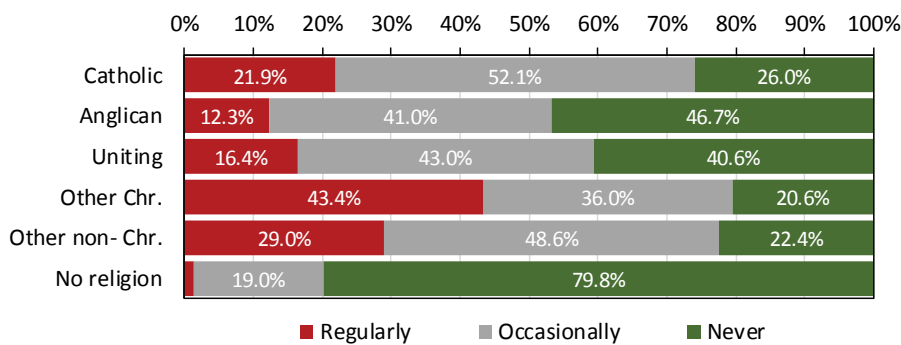
While the AES study offered “neither agree nor disagree” as a potential answer, the Newspoll study asked only a “yes/no” question. The comparison (Figure 23) suggests that when pressed on their attitudes toward AD, otherwise *undecided* Australians split as follows:

- A modest majority of Catholic undecideds to disagree and a minority to agree.
- Almost all Anglican undecideds to agree.
- Around half of Uniting Church undecideds to disagree, and half remaining undecided.
- Almost all Other Christian undecideds to agree.

- Most non-Christian undecideds to agree.
- No-religion undecideds split between agree and disagree (though very small in number).

### Mostly explained by religiosity

The variation amongst religious denominations' disagreement with AD is mostly explained by the difference in religiosity between denominations (Figure 24): correlation  $r^2 = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.001$ .<sup>b</sup>

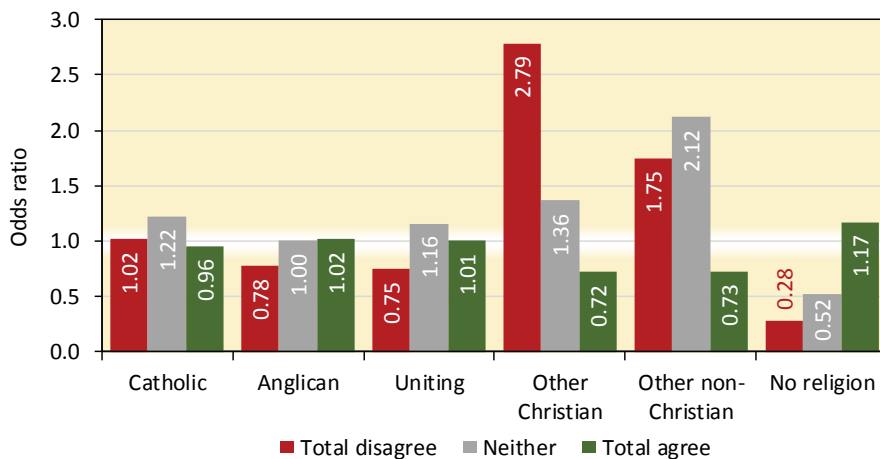


**Figure 24:** Religiosity (frequency of attending religious services) by religious denomination  
Source: AES 2016. Note: Chr. = Christian

*Variance of opposition to AD between religious denominations is mostly explained by differences in religiosity (frequency of attending religious services) between them.*

### Minor denominations the most opposed

Figure 25 shows the odds ratios of attitudes toward AD by religious denomination.



**Figure 25:** Odds ratios of attitudes toward AD by religious affiliation  
Source: AES 2016

*Minor Christian denominations are almost three times more likely, and non-Christian faiths nearly twice as likely, to oppose AD. Non-faith Australians are very much less likely to oppose AD.*

<sup>b</sup> All linear regression Pearson's correlation coefficient and p values calculated using PSPPP version 0.10.1.

Minor religious denominations were far more likely to disagree with AD: by a factor of almost three (OR = 2.79) amongst Other Christians and approaching two (OR = 1.75) amongst Other non-Christians. Other non-Christians were also more than twice as likely (OR = 2.12) to neither agree nor disagree with AD. The AES 2016 data also suggests that 'charismatic' Christian denominations may be the most opposed (not shown), but small sample size prevents firm statistical conclusions.

### Christians overall

The AES 2016 study found that, compared with 77.4% of Australians overall, 71.6% of Christians overall support AD. The gap of 5.8% is consistent with though somewhat smaller than that found in the 2010 Australia Institute study (10%). The difference may be explained by (1) natural statistical variance, (2) different methodologies including question wording, (3) different years during which attitudes may have changed, and (4) different proportions of minor Christian faiths in the samples.

### Q&A statement supported

This research data supports the statement made by Ms Gemmell on ABC Q&A that "*up to 70% of Catholics and Anglicans*" support lawful assisted dying. Indeed, with a 2007 Newspoll showing 75.1% of Catholics and 82.7% of Anglicans, a 2012 Newspoll showing 79.0% and 89.0% respectively, and the AES 2016 poll showing 74.3% and 79.4% respectively, Ms Gemmell's statement may have been conservative.

On the basis of these research results, it would be reasonable to state that "*at least 70% of Australian Catholics and Anglicans support lawful assisted dying.*"

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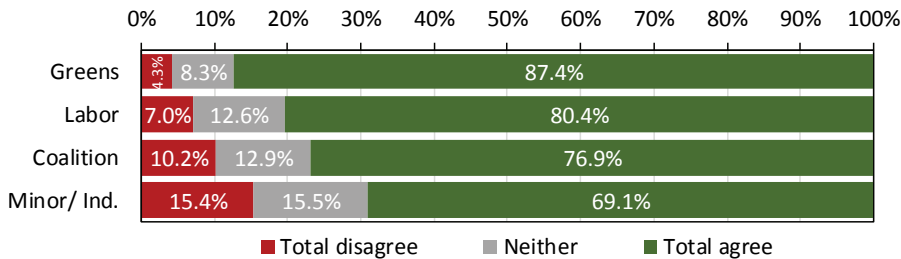
*The AES 2016 study confirms that "up to 70% of Australian Catholics and Anglicans support AD." Indeed, the study indicates "at least 70%."*

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## Attitudes toward AD by political party affinity

Figure 26 shows attitudes toward AD by political party affinity — the political party receiving the respondent’s first preference vote for the House of Representatives at the 2016 federal election.



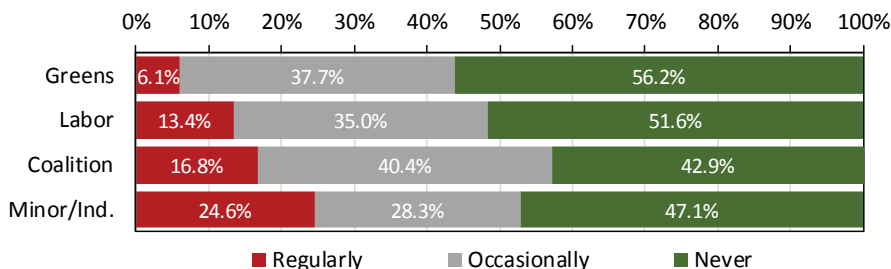
**Figure 26:** Attitudes toward AD by political party first preference

Source: AES 2016. Note: Coalition = Liberal Party and The Nationals.

Agreement with assisted dying is in the majority for all major groups, extremely high amongst Greens and Labor voters, very high amongst Coalition voters, and high amongst minor party and independent voters.

## Almost completely explained by religiosity

The variation amongst political party affiliates’ opposition to AD is almost completely explained by the difference in religiosity between party affiliations (Figure 27): correlation  $r^2 = 0.97$ ,  $p = 0.013$ .



**Figure 27:** Religiosity by political party first preference

Source: AES 2016. Note: Coalition = Liberal Party and The Nationals.

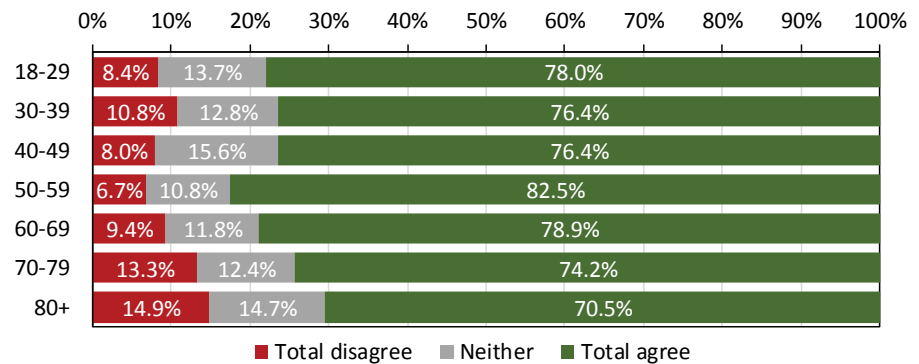
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*A considerable majority of Australian voters across the political spectrum support AD. Of the small minority who oppose, opposition is lower on the left and higher on the right, with the pattern almost completely explained by religiosity.*

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## Attitudes toward AD by age

Figure 28 shows attitudes toward AD by age group.



**Figure 28:** Attitudes toward legal AD by age

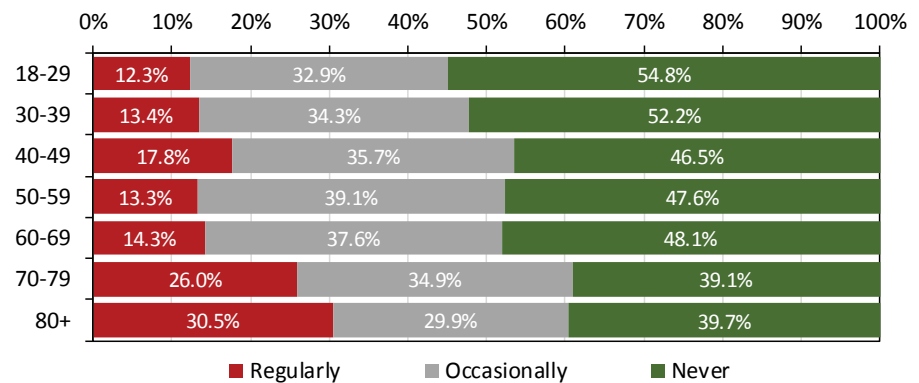
Source: AES 2016

Agreement with assisted dying is in the great majority across all age groups. Disagreement with assisted dying is highest amongst older Australians (70+).

## Largely explained by religiosity

The variation amongst age groups' disagreement with AD is largely explained by the difference in religiosity between age groups (Figure 29): correlation  $r^2 = 0.75$ ,  $p = 0.012$ .

*A considerable majority of all Australian age groups support AD. Opposition is lowest amongst the young and highest amongst the elderly, with the pattern largely explained by religiosity.*



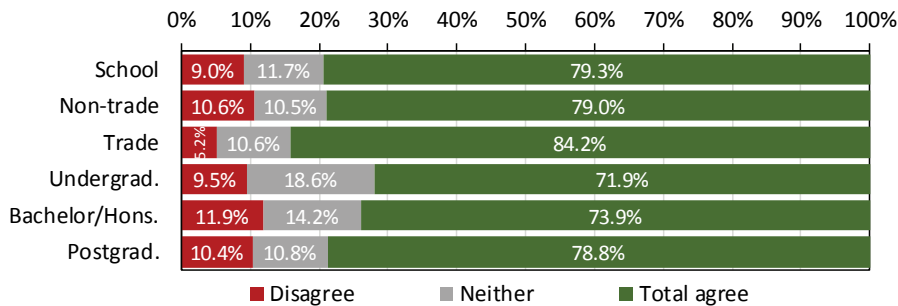
**Figure 29:** Religiosity by age

Source: AES 2016

In her FactCheck report, Professor Cartwright cites her own previous research which found that older Australians (75+) disagree with assisted dying more. The AES results confirm her research: older (70+) Australians agree with AD less and disagree more than all other age groups. The difference is explained by their significantly higher religiosity.

## Attitudes toward AD by education

Attitudes toward AD by highest attained educational qualification (school, non-trade, trade, undergraduate, bachelor with or without honours, postgraduate) are a little more complex (Figure 30). The most striking result is that tradespeople show the greatest agreement and least disagreement with AD.



**Figure 30:** Attitudes toward AD by highest education qualification

Source: AES 2016

The great majority of all education groups agreed with AD.

## Largely explained by religiosity

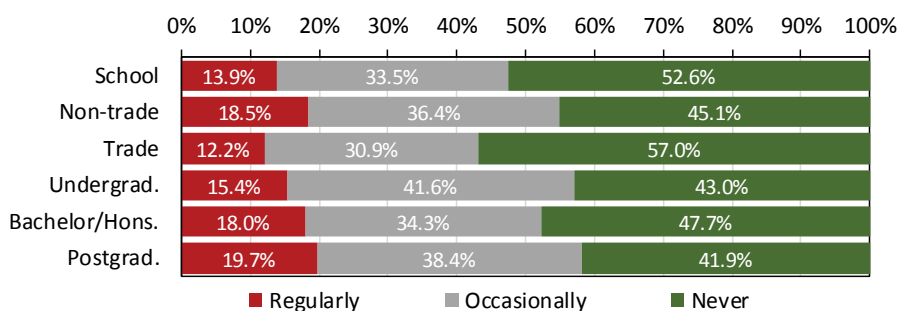
While the relationship between disagreement with AD and religiosity (Figure 31) explains much of the variance by education (correlation  $r^2 = 0.71$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ), the three most significant results are worth mentioning:

1. Tradespeople were significantly less likely to attend religious services, explaining their lower disagreement with AD;
2. Those with an undergraduate qualification were significantly more likely to have no opinion either way; and considerably more likely to occasionally attend religious services; and
3. While the most educated — postgraduates — were more likely to regularly attend religious services, they were not more likely to disagree with AD. An explanation may be that research and critical thinking skills learned in higher education act as a ‘counter’ to religiously-based disagreement with AD.

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*A considerable majority of Australians at all education levels support AD — and support is particularly high at the trade qualification level. Opposition to AD is largely explained by religiosity.*

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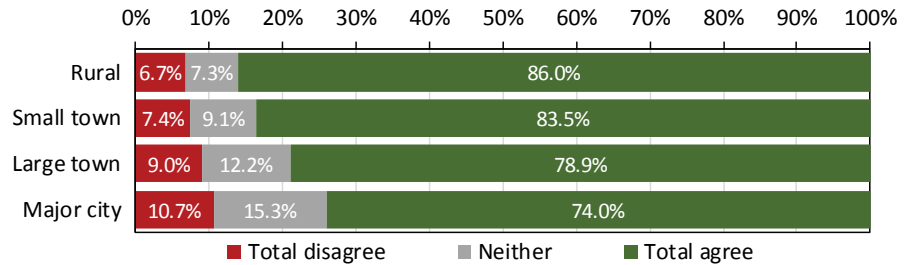


**Figure 31:** Religiosity by highest education qualification

Source: AES 2016

## Attitudes toward AD by rural/urban residence

Figure 32 shows attitudes toward AD by rural/urban residence (rural, small town, larger town, major city).



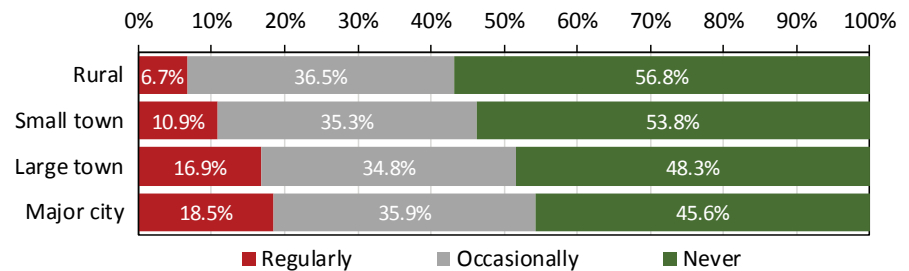
**Figure 32:** Attitudes toward AD by rural versus urban residence

Source: AES 2016

Most Australians in all rural/urban profiles agree with AD. Nevertheless, there is a distinct though small trend in disagreement with AD from rural to major city.

### Mostly explained by religiosity

The trend amongst rural/urban profiles' disagreement with AD is mostly explained by religiosity (Figure 33): correlation  $r^2 = 0.90$ ,  $p = 0.049$ .



**Figure 33:** Religiosity by rural versus urban residence

Source: AES 2016

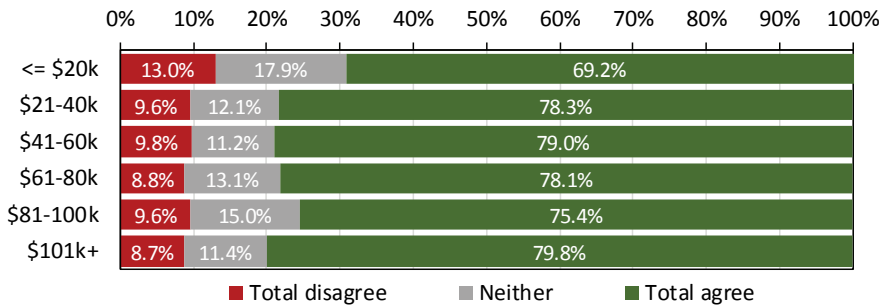
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*A considerable majority of Australians support AD regardless of rural or urban residence. Opposition is lowest amongst the rural and highest amongst the urban, with the pattern mostly explained by religiosity.*

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## Attitudes toward AD by household income

Figure 34 shows attitudes toward AD by gross annual household income in \$20k brackets.

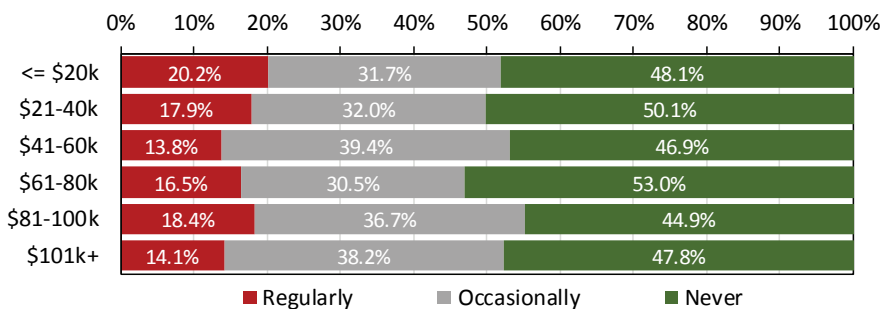


**Figure 34:** Attitudes toward AD by gross annual household income  
Source: AES 2016

## Partly explained by religiosity

While overall a linear regression between religiosity (Figure 35) and disagreement with AD by household income is *not* statistically significant (correlation  $r^2 = 0.47$ ,  $p = 0.516$ ), there are several explanatory factors.

1. There is little range in the values of either disagreement with AD or religious service attendance.
2. Household income reflects the position of potentially several people, while attitude to AD reflects the position of only the respondent — who may or may not be responsible for generating much of the income.
3. A higher household income might not be distributed equally between individuals, including the respondent. This is borne out somewhat by results for the lowest income group (<=\$20k), where limited income necessarily impact *all* persons in the household. These may also be smaller households where the respondent is likely to be the sole income-earner, meaning a closer link between *household* income and the *respondent's* attitudes and behaviours. Both religiosity and disagreement with AD are statistically very significantly higher in the lowest-income bracket.



**Figure 35:** Religiosity by gross annual household income  
Source: AES 2016

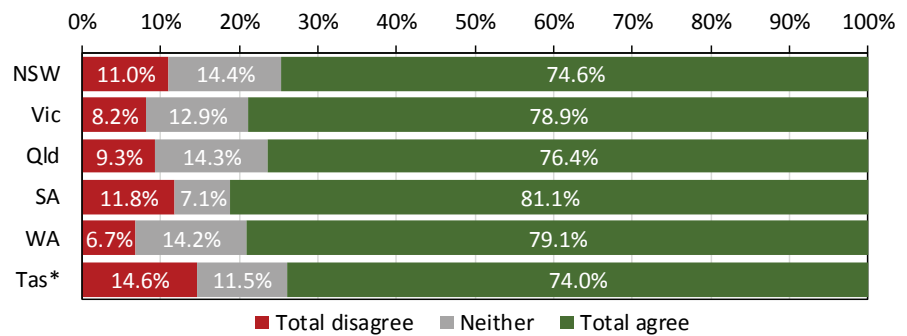
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*A considerable majority of Australians at all household income levels support AD. Households in the lowest income bracket were the most religious and the most opposed AD the most.*

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## Attitudes toward AD by state of residence

Figure 36 shows attitudes toward AD by state of residence. The figures for Tasmania are less reliable due to small sample size. The Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory have been omitted due to inadequate sample size.



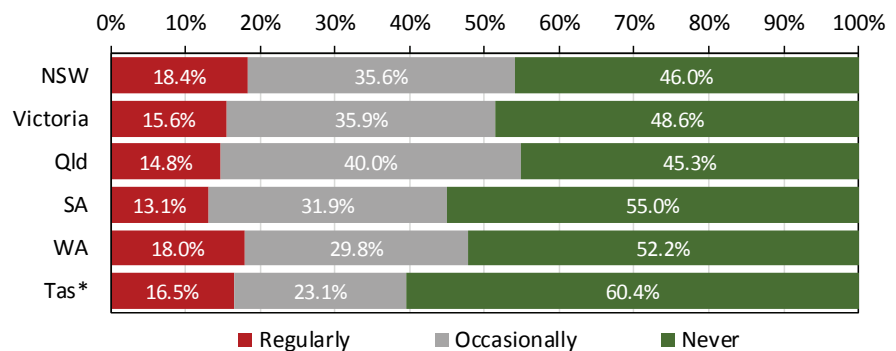
**Figure 36:** Attitudes toward AD by state of residence

Source: AES 2016. \* Tasmanian result less reliable due to small sample size

Agreement with AD is very high, and disagreement very low, in all States.

## Not explained by religiosity alone

Attitudes toward AD by state of residence are not explained by religiosity alone (Figure 37). There is no significant correlation:  $r^2 = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.241$ .



**Figure 37:** Religiosity by state of residence

Source: AES 2016. \* Tasmanian result less reliable due to small sample size

## A secondary reason: personal experience

A Newpoll survey in 2007<sup>2</sup> sheds some light on the matter. While it didn't ask respondents about their frequency of religious service attendance, it asked two other questions.

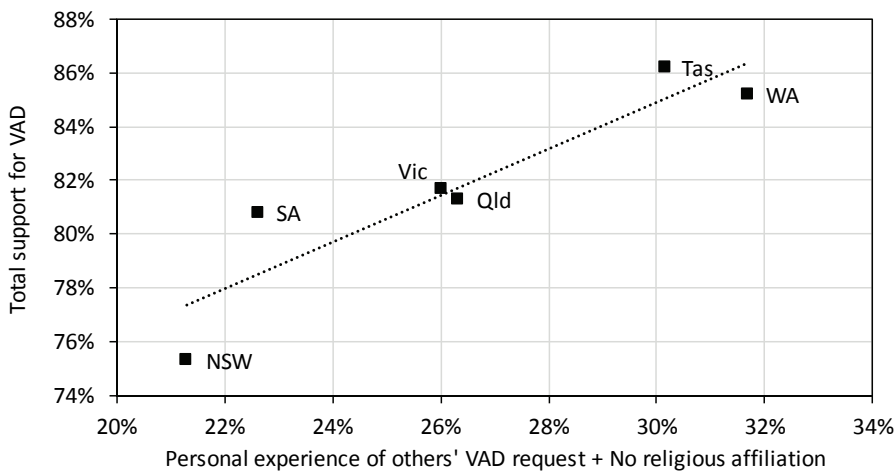
Firstly, respondents were asked about religious affiliation (e.g. Catholic, Jewish, none). This was condensed for analysis into those with an affiliation ('religious') and no affiliation ('not religious'). While the question is a weaker indication of religiosity than frequency of service attendance, it is nevertheless a useful measure.

Secondly, respondents were asked if they had personal experience of someone close who was seriously ill and wanted AD:

*“Have you yourself had personal experience where a close relative or friend was hopelessly ill and wanted voluntary euthanasia?”*

Those from NSW had the lowest personal experience (19.6%), and those from Western Australia the highest (26.7%,  $p = 0.001$ ).

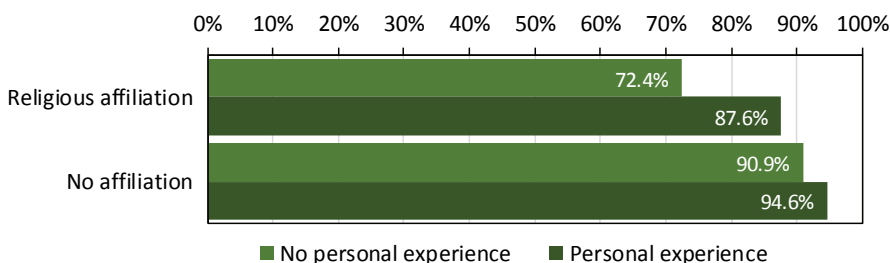
A combined statistic was calculated, weighting ‘no religious affiliation’ and ‘personal experience of someone close wanting AD’ at 50% each. This analysis by state of residence explains most of the state variation in agreement with AD (Figure 38): correlation  $r^2 = 0.83$ ,  $p = 0.012$ .



**Figure 38:** Support for AD by ‘no religious affiliation’ and ‘personal experience of someone close wanting AD’

Source: Newspoll 2007.<sup>2</sup> Note: Affiliation and experience weighted 50% each.

The 2007 Newspoll study also indicates that personal experience of someone close asking for AD significantly lifted support for AD amongst those with a religious affiliation (87.6% - 72.4% = 15.2%), but lifted support much less amongst those with no religious affiliation because support was very high in any case (94.6% - 90.9% = 3.7%) (Figure 39).



**Figure 39:** Support for AD by personal experience of someone close and hopelessly ill wanting AD

Source: AES 2016

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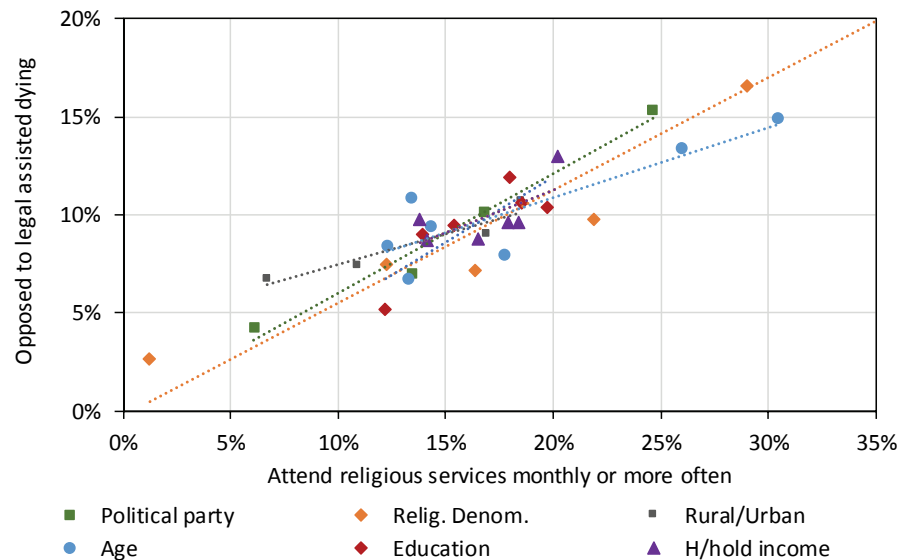
*A considerable majority of voters in all states support AD. Differences were not explained by religiosity alone, but mostly explained by a combination of no religious affiliation & personal experience of someone close and hopelessly ill wanting AD.*

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## Summary of demographic correlations

Correlations between religiosity (frequency of attending religious services excluding weddings, funerals and baptisms) and disagreement with AD are summarised by demographic in Figure 40.

*Variation of opposition to AD within the demographics of age, education, political affinity, rural/urban residence and political party affinity is largely to almost completely explained by religiosity.*



**Figure 40:** Religiosity and opposition to AD by demographic

Source: AES 2016

*Opposition to AD by household income was only partly explained by religiosity due to several methodological limitations.*

*State variance was mostly explained by a combination of any religious affiliation and personal experience of someone close and hopelessly ill wanting AD.*

The degree to which disagreement with AD by demographic variable is explained by religiosity are:

- *Political party:* almost completely explained by religiosity ( $r^2 = 0.97$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ).
- *Religious denomination:* mostly explained by religiosity ( $r^2 = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).
- *Rural/urban:* mostly explained by religiosity ( $r^2 = 0.90$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ).
- *Age:* largely explained by religiosity ( $r^2 = 0.75$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ).
- *Education:* largely explained by religiosity ( $r^2 = 0.71$ ,  $p = 0.035$ ).
- *Household income:* partly explained by religiosity. The variances are small and the measure indirect (income by household but AD attitude by individual). The lowest income bracket is the most religious and most opposed to assisted dying.
- *State:* not explained by religiosity alone, but by a combination of religiosity and close personal experience of an AD request ( $r^2 = 0.83$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ).



## Conclusions

A statement was made on national television claiming that 80% of Australians support AD, including “up to 70% of Catholics and Anglicans.” The Conversation’s FactCheck bulletin testing the claim was excellent. This whitepaper extends insights through citing additional research and through further detailed analysis.

References to ‘unrelievable suffering’ in research questions about AD may be leading, or appropriate, depending on the nature of the question. Including the prompt can provide an important form of context to inform legislative options, particularly for attitudes in cases of non-terminal illness.

A careful (AES) university study of Australian voter attitudes in 2016 found 77.4% support for assisted dying, close to the claim of 80%. Other polls have returned somewhat higher or lower results depending on the methodology, including variations in the questions asked.

Overall, Australian voters who strongly agree with assisted dying outnumber those who strongly disagree by nearly ten to one: 43.5% vs 4.5%.

An NCLS study cited in the FactCheck bulletin was unsuitable to answer the question about support for AD amongst Catholics and Anglicans. It polled only those who attend religious services, mostly often, and their attitudes are much more negative — unrepresentative of all Catholics and Anglicans.

The careful AES study in 2016 found 74.3% of Catholics and 79.4% of Anglicans agree with AD: supporting the claim that “up to 70%” of them do. Indeed, it is appropriate to say on the basis of the AES data (and other relevant polls) that “*at least* 70% of Catholics and Anglicans support AD.” In opposing AD, the bishops of these denominations do not reflect the views of the overwhelming majority of their flocks.

Most opposition to AD is linked to religion, with almost all (93.7% of) the small minority opposing AD being people who self-identify with a religion or attend religious services. Additionally, opposition to AD increases strongly with religiosity (frequency of attending religious services), and with length of church membership.

While a majority within all major faith groups support AD and a minority oppose (e.g. 9.8% of Catholics and 7.5% of Anglicans), minor Christian denominations are much more likely (26.5%) to oppose, and non-Christian faiths more likely (16.6%) to oppose AD, than other denominations or none. Just 2.7% with no religion disagree with AD.

Most variances in opposition to AD within demographics (e.g. religious denomination, age, political affiliation, rural/urban residence) are explained by matching variances in religiosity.

Having experience of someone close with a hopeless illness significantly lifts support for AD (15.6%) amongst religious service attenders, (though not

much amongst non-attenders (1.4%) because their support is already very high).

Higher religiosity also correlates with significantly increased opposition to abortion, marriage equality and the legalisation of smoking marijuana.

A small minority (16.2%) of Australians are regular service attenders (at least monthly), while nearly half (48.3%) never attend, and three quarters (74.8%) attend once a year or less. Of those affiliated with a religious denomination, nearly half of them (48.2%) never attend religious services outside of weddings, funerals and baptisms, suggesting that their religious identity is more notional than practical.

Religious affiliation amongst Australians is decreasing over time, particularly since the 1970s. The trend is likely to continue, with younger Australians the most likely to reject religion outright, to not identify with any religious denomination, and to attend religious services for social rather than religious affiliation reasons. Religious commitment (has a religion and ever attends religious services) trends downwards from amongst older Australians (58%) to the youngest (34%).

Multiple measures of religious affiliation and religiosity suggest that opposition to AD is almost entirely linked to religion. As religious affiliation and commitment decrease in Australia, support for AD is likely to increase somewhat from current already high levels.

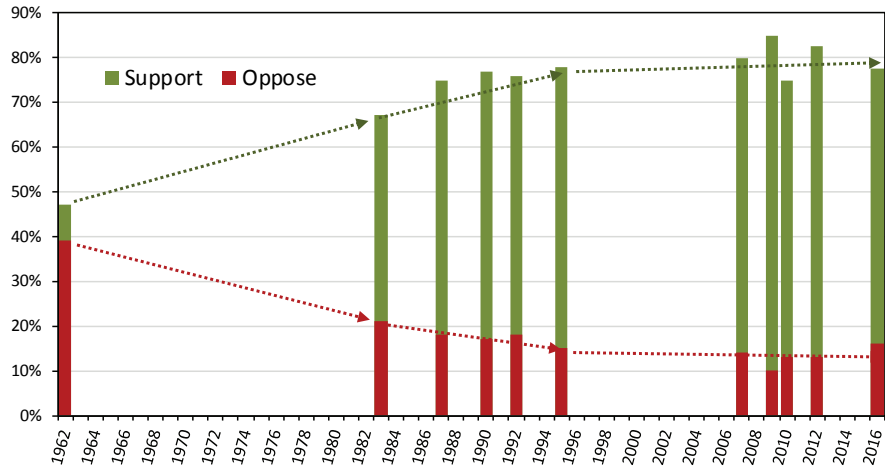
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## Appendix A: The decline of religion in Australia

### Support for assisted dying has increased...

Support for AD in Australia increased markedly from near parity in the 1960s to a great majority from the 1990s onwards (Figure A1).



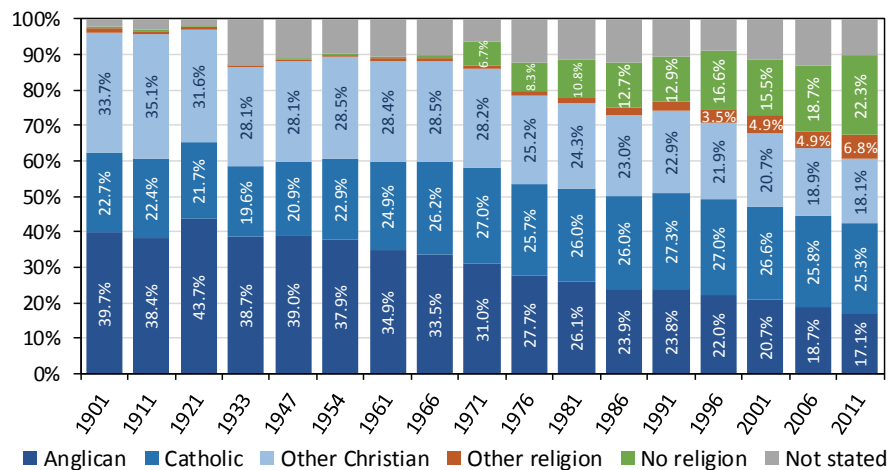
**Figure A1:** Australian public attitudes towards assisted dying over 55 years

Sources: Roy Morgan, ASRB, Newspoll, Australia Institute, AES

### ...as religious affiliation in Australia falls

Religious affiliation amongst Australians is falling (Figure A2).

*Religious affiliation in Australia is declining, and the fall is likely to continue. Nearly half of Australians with a religious affiliation never attend religious services.*



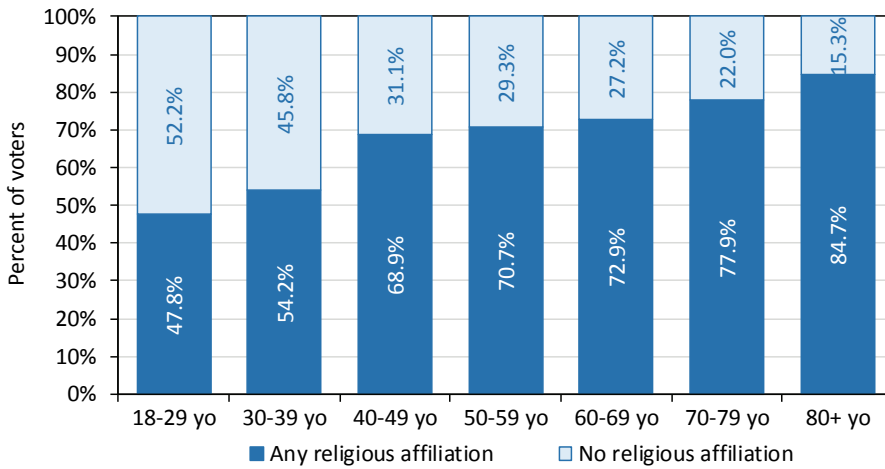
**Figure A2:** Religious affiliation in Australia by census year since Federation

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Notes: Up to the 1921 census, "no religion" was not expressly stated as an option; from 1933, "no religion" was an option to be written in the "Other" box; from 1991, "no religion" was changed to its own tickbox. (In 2016, the "no religion" option was moved to the top of the tickbox list: results not yet available.)

Anglican affiliation has been falling since the 1920s, while Other Christian affiliation has declined steadily since the 1970s. Religious non-affiliation has increased markedly since the 1970s, at the same time as a small rise in non-Christian faith affiliation. And in 2016, nearly half (48.2%) of Australians with a religious affiliation never attend religious services (AES 2016).

## The fall is likely to continue

Figure A3 shows any religious affiliation in 2016 by age group.



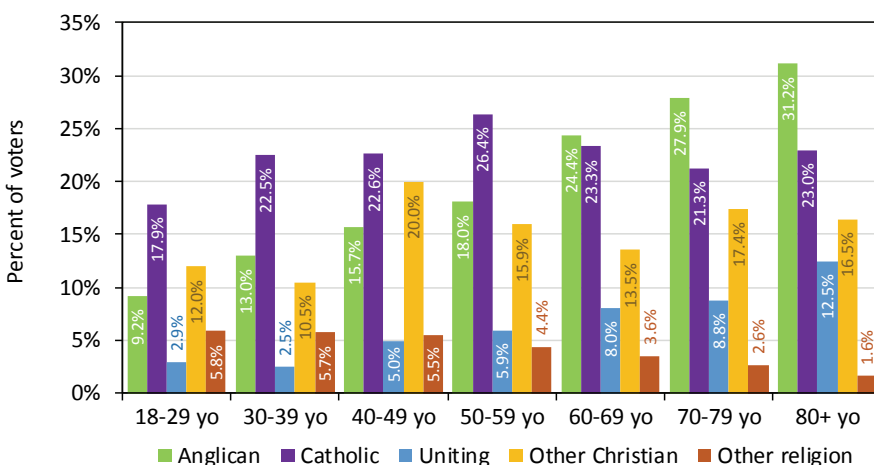
**Figure A3:** Any religious affiliation in Australia by age in 2016

Source: AES 2016

Religious affiliation correlates strongly with age. More than half (52.2%) of 18–29 year-olds and almost half (45.8%) of 30–39 year-olds had no religious affiliation in 2016. While Australians may acquire, change or divest a religious affiliation over a lifetime, the data suggests that religious affiliation in Australia is likely to continue to fall, with younger ages less likely to adopt or retain an affiliation.

## Mainstream religions losing relevance

Figure A4 shows religious affiliation for major denominations by age.



**Figure A4:** Religious affiliation in Australia by age in 2016

Source: AES 2016

The Anglican and Uniting churches are at considerable risk of irrelevancy in future decades as younger Australians abandon them. Younger (18–29yo) Australians affiliate with the Anglican Church at less than a third (29.5%) of

*Mainstream religions are losing relevance, especially the Anglican and Uniting churches, but also the Catholic Church, amongst younger Australians.*

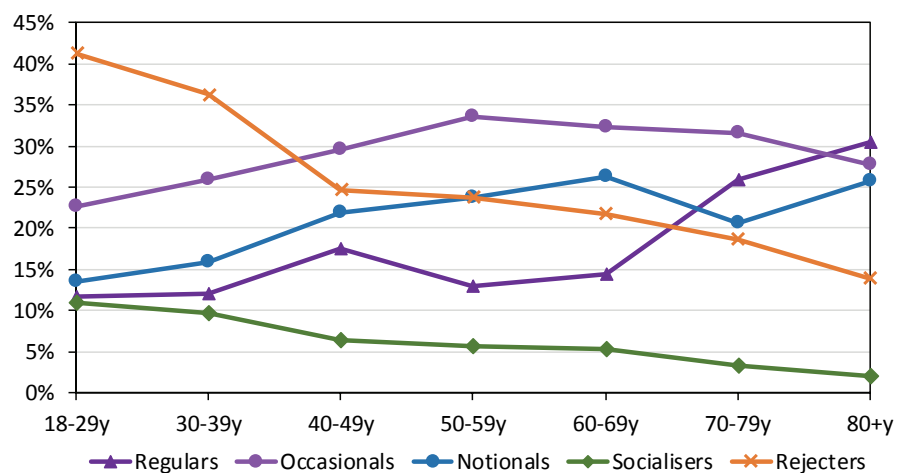
the rate of older (80+yo) Australians, with the ratio for the Uniting Church at just 23.2%. Affiliation amongst minor Christian denominations is also diminished amongst 18–39 year-olds.

Despite a heavy investment and presence in Australia’s primary and secondary school sector by the Catholic Church, Catholic affiliation amongst younger (18–29yo) Australians is also down.

The only faith sector without weakness at younger ages is non-Christian, which has higher affiliations at younger ages. This may reflect Australia’s immigration profile.

### Religious commitment lower among younger Australians

Figure A5 shows the religious cohort (see page 13) makeup by age group.



**Figure A5:** Australian religious cohort proportions by age group in 2016  
Source: AES 2016

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*Religious commitment amongst younger Australians is significantly lower than amongst their elders. For the first time, amongst 18–29 year-olds, Rejecters now outnumber the other three religious cohorts.*

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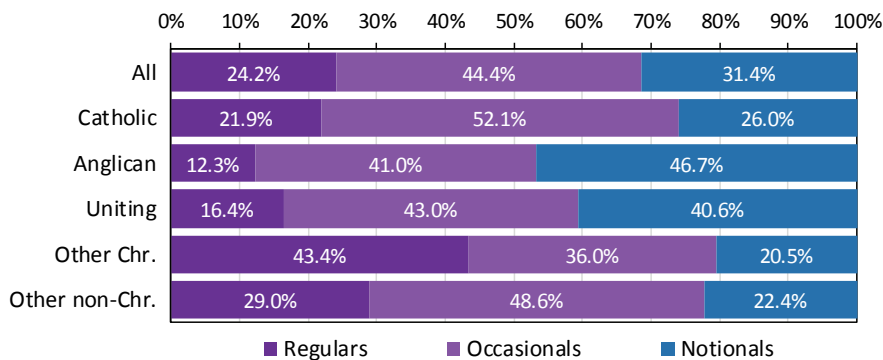
Amongst the oldest age groups (70+ year olds), Regulars and Occasionals are in the majority (around 28% each), with around a quarter (24%) being Notionals, almost no Socialisers (3%), and the lowest level of (16%) of Rejecters.

Highly significant trends away from religious alignment occur through decreasing ages. The youngest (18–39 year olds) are: the first where Rejecters (39%) outnumber Regulars (12%) and Committeds (15%); the least likely to notionally identify with a specific religion (15%); and the most likely (10%) to be Socialisers (attend religious services for social rather than religious affiliation reasons).

These trends suggest that religious institutions face a challenging future in engaging and attracting Australians to their faiths.

## Commitment amongst denominations

Figure A6 shows the religious commitment of Australians by religious denomination.



**Figure A6:** Religious commitment by denomination in 2016

Source: AES 2016

A little more than one in five Catholics are Regulars (21.9%); more than half (52.1%) are Occasional attenders and a quarter (26.0%) are Notionals: never attend services.

The Anglican and Uniting churches are particularly vulnerable to substantial contraction due to diminished engagement of their members: they have by far the smallest proportions of Regulars (12.3% and 16.4% respectively) and the largest proportions of Notionals (46.7% and 40.6%).

Other Christian denominations enjoy the highest engagement with 43.4% Regulars, and the lowest proportion of Occasionals (36.0%) and Notionals (20.5%).

Non-Christian faiths have a relatively high proportion (29.0%) of regulars; nearly half (48.6%) are Occasionals, and slightly more than one in five are Notionals.

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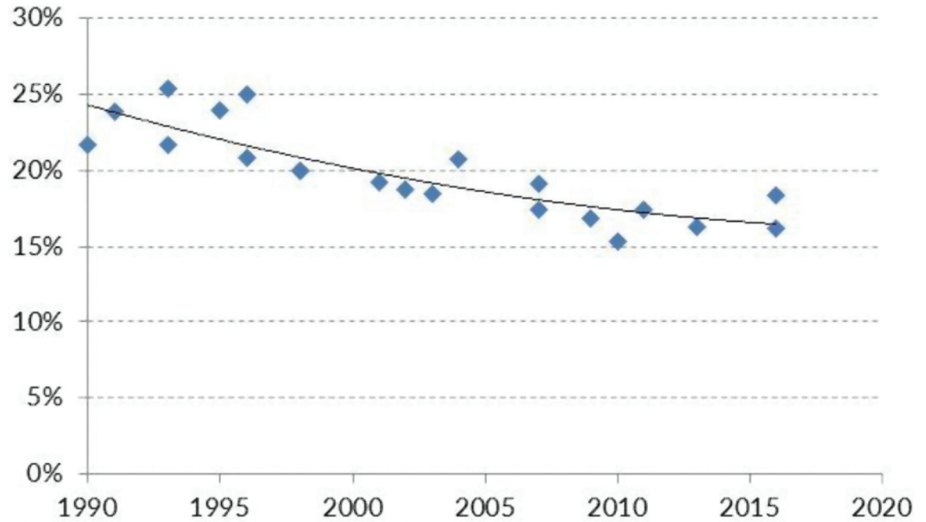
*Minor Christian denominations (collectively) are the most religiously committed Australians, while Anglicans and Uniting Church members are the least committed.*

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### Church attendance is decreasing

Confirming the AES data, NCLS research shows that, at least amongst Christian faiths, religious service attendance has declined over the last 25 years (Figure A7).

*Christian denominations have identified a significant downward trend in church attendance over the last quarter century.*

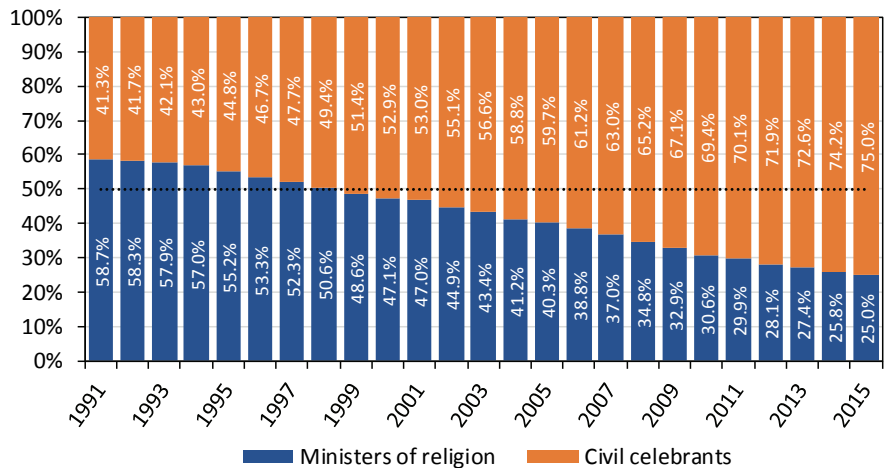


**Figure A7:** Self-reported religious service attendance by year  
 Source: NCLS Research 2017, *Local Churches in Australia: Research findings from NCLS Research*.

### Religion losing its attraction even for marriage

Religion in Australia is even losing its attraction for a traditionally-associated life event: marriage. Figure A8 shows the proportion of marriages officiated by type of celebrant: religious versus civil.

*Ministers of religion have, relative to 1990, lost more than half their 'business' in officiating weddings in Australia.*



**Figure A8:** Australian marriage by type of celebrant  
 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

In 1991, well over half (58.7%) of Australian weddings were officiated by ministers of religion. By 2015, the proportion had dropped to just a quarter (25.0%), indicating that many Australians' religious affiliations are now more notional than practical.



IBISWorld reports that the average Australian wedding service (only: excluding ‘extras’ such as hair and clothing, cars, photography, reception and accommodation) would cost around \$4,200 in 2016.<sup>c</sup> The average cost multiplies out to total industry revenues of \$500m in 2016.<sup>d</sup> That’s *half a billion* dollars in marriage celebrant revenues.

The drop in *religious* wedding officiation from 1991 to 2015 represents an equivalent annual revenue loss in 2016 of around \$170m. Therefore, many religious institutions have not only experienced a drop in general attendance, but also a substantial drop religious engagement and revenue for special life events.

Added to this, the annual growth rate in marriages (average 0.44% per annum 1991–2015, ABS data) is only around a quarter of the total population growth rate (1.63%). In other words, the proportion of Australians marrying is decreasing, potentially fuelling increased competition amongst marriage service providers.

Coupled with a decreasing death rate and that a majority of Australians now prefer a civil celebrant (58%) to a religious celebrant (42%) at their funeral — and with only 22% believing that it’s important to include a religious component in their funeral — funeral statistics don’t bode well for engagement and officiation revenue for religious institutions, either.<sup>e</sup>

It is also possible that the demand for religious celebrants for marriages, funerals and other special life events will decline further, driven by the public’s shock at the extent of sexual abuse of children within religious institutions, revealed by the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

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*The loss of wedding ceremony ‘business’ by ministers of religion since 1990 equates to \$170m annually in 2016.*

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*A majority of Australians would prefer a civil rather than religious celebrant at their funeral, too, with nearly four out of five believing it’s not important to include a religious component in their funeral.*

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<sup>c</sup> IBISWorld 2012, Industry Report X002 Weddings Australia, (from <https://marriedbyjosh.com/australian-wedding-cost/>). 2016 figure calculated from 2012 with a 3% annual increase.

<sup>d</sup> Estimated at 119,197 services: the average of 2012–15: the ABS hasn’t published 2016 data yet.

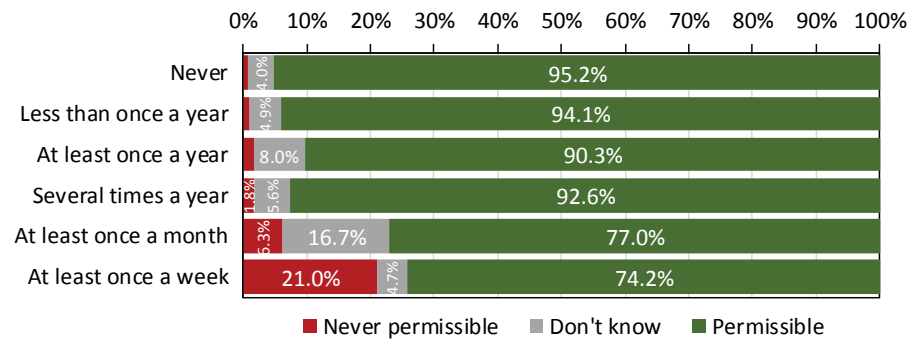
<sup>e</sup> Deaths and funerals in Australia: A statistical snapshot, Mark McCrindle, 2014.

## Appendix B: Other social law reforms — individual charts

### Attitudes toward abortion by religiosity

Figure B1 shows attitudes toward abortion (disagree is in all circumstances), by religiosity (frequency of attending religious services excluding weddings, funerals and baptisms).

*There is a clear correlation between religiosity and opposition to abortion in all circumstances.*



**Figure B1:** Attitudes toward abortion by religiosity in 2016

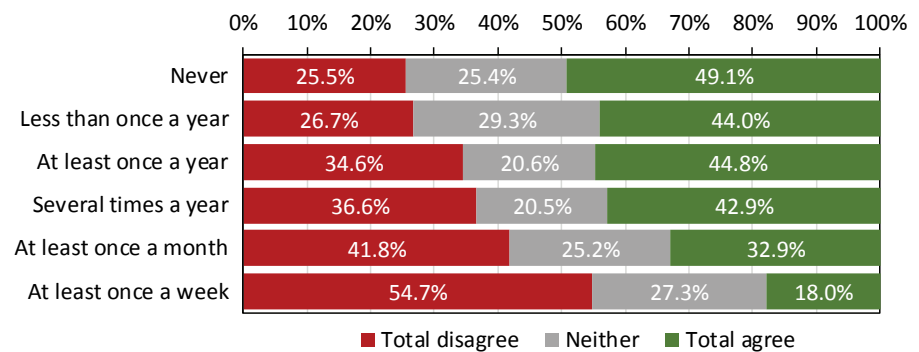
Source: AES 2016

There is a clear correlation between religiosity and opposition to abortion in all circumstances, with particularly high opposition amongst frequent (weekly or more often) religious service attenders.

### Attitudes toward marijuana by religiosity

Figure B2 shows attitudes toward legalised smoking of marijuana, by religiosity.

*There is a clear correlation between religiosity and opposition to the legalisation of smoking marijuana.*



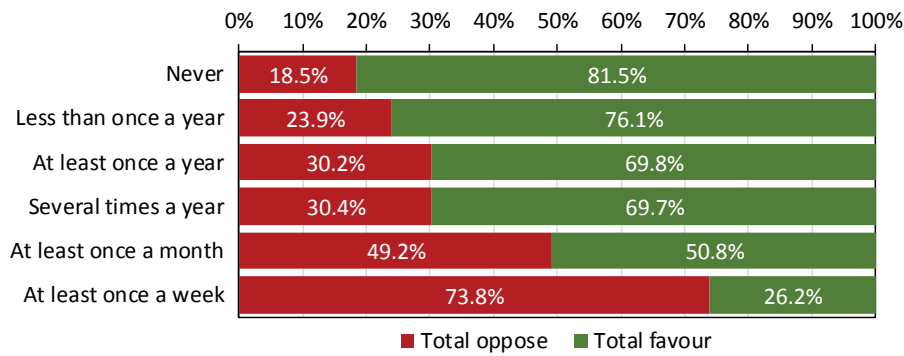
**Figure B2:** Attitudes toward legalised marijuana by religiosity in 2016

Source: AES 2016

There is a clear correlation between religiosity and opposition to legalising the smoking of marijuana, with particularly high opposition amongst frequent (weekly or more often) religious service attenders.

## Attitudes toward marriage equality by religiosity

Figure B3 shows attitudes toward marriage equality, by religiosity.



**Figure B3:** Attitudes toward marriage equality by religiosity in 2016

Source: AES 2016. Note: This question did not have a neutral 'neither/nor' answer option.

There is a clear correlation between religiosity and opposition to marriage equality, with particularly high opposition amongst frequent (weekly or more often) religious service attenders.

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*There is a clear correlation between religiosity and opposition marriage equality.*

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