




## Article

# Worldviews Complexity in COVID-19 Times: Australian Media Representations of Religion, Spirituality and Non-Religion in 2020

Anna Halafoff <sup>1,\*</sup>, Emily Marriott <sup>1</sup>, Geraldine Smith <sup>2</sup>, Enqi Weng <sup>3</sup> and Gary Bouma <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia; esmarrio@deakin.edu.au

<sup>2</sup> School of Social Sciences, University of Tasmania, Hobart, TAS 7005, Australia; geraldine.smith@utas.edu.au

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia; enqi.weng@deakin.edu.au

<sup>4</sup> School of Social Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, VIC 3800, Australia; gary.bouma@monash.edu.au

\* Correspondence: anna.halafoff@deakin.edu.au

**Abstract:** In 2020, as infections of COVID-19 began to rise, Australia, alongside many other nations, closed its international borders and implemented lockdown measures across the country. The city of Melbourne was hardest hit during the pandemic and experienced the strictest and longest lockdown worldwide. Religious and spiritual groups were especially affected, given the prohibition of gatherings of people for religious services and yoga classes with a spiritual orientation, for example. Fault lines in socio-economic differences were also pronounced, with low-wage and casual workers often from cultural and religious minorities being particularly vulnerable to the virus in their often precarious workplaces. In addition, some religious and spiritual individuals and groups did not comply and actively resisted restrictions at times. By contrast, the pandemic also resulted in a positive re-engagement with religion and spirituality, as lockdown measures served to accelerate a digital push with activities shifting to online platforms. Religious and spiritual efforts were initiated online and offline to promote wellbeing and to serve those most in need. This article presents an analysis of media representations of religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Melbourne, Australia, from January to August 2020, including two periods of lockdown. It applies a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative thematic approach, using targeted keywords identified in previous international and Australian media research. In so doing, it provides insights into Melbourne's worldview complexity, and also of the changing place of religion, spirituality and non-religion in the Australian public sphere in COVID times.

**Keywords:** religion; worldviews; spirituality; non-religion; secular; media; COVID; pandemic; Melbourne; Australia



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## 1. Introduction

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia was identified in Melbourne, the capital city of the state of Victoria, on the 25 January 2020, in a returned traveller from Wuhan, China ([Department of Health 2020](#)). Australia closed its international borders in March 2020 ([Burke 2020](#)), and various lockdown measures were implemented across its states and territories during 2020 and 2021. The southern state of Victoria was hardest hit by the pandemic in 2020, with an initial two-month lockdown in Melbourne from 31 March to 31 May 2020, with restrictions beginning to ease in mid-May ([Premier of Victoria 2020](#); [ABC News 2020](#)). A sharp second wave of infections in Melbourne saw the city locked down again on the 9 July 2020 for three and a half months. The lockdown was meant to end on the 16 August, but was extended until 28 October 2020. It was the longest, and strictest lockdown recorded worldwide at that time ([BBC News 2020](#)).

Melbourne's entire population, including its religiously diverse communities and spiritual groups, were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in its first year. While research into the long-lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still unfolding, [Baker et al. \(2020\)](#) have argued that new health practices such as physical distancing and the disruption of rituals such as death and mourning as a result of restrictions have meant that the coronavirus outbreak is 'significantly altering the expression of [religious] traditions' ([Baker et al. 2020](#), p. 358). In Australia, religious and spiritual groups, such as yoga studios with a spiritual orientation<sup>1</sup> and conscious dancers<sup>2</sup>, were especially affected by the pandemic, given the prohibition of gatherings of people. However, neither the communities nor their social activities ceased. Instead, lockdown measures served to accelerate innovation in the form of a digital push, with activities shifting to online platforms, and this digital transition providing unexpected benefits ([Halafoff et al. 2020a](#); [Campbell 2020](#); [Baker et al. 2020](#); [Robin 2020](#)).

Most religious groups adhered to health regulations and implemented necessary measures to prevent risk of further infection. However, some groups defied these messages in the name of religious freedom ([Baker et al. 2020](#)). A reactionary and sceptical 'conspirituality' ([Ward and Voas 2011](#)) also emerged within some spiritual movements, with protest activities linked to a plethora of conspiracy theories including those blaming 5G networks and Bill Gates for the pandemic, and anti-vax claims that vaccination is a means of surveillance ([Halafoff et al. 2020b](#)).

The pandemic also revealed fault lines in socio-economic differences, as people on temporary visas, international students, low-wage and casual workers from Melbourne's culturally and religiously diverse communities were made particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, this was exacerbated as those who were not Australian citizens did not qualify for government support during the crisis, such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments that kept many people and businesses afloat. As a result many community groups, such as Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and Christian social services, stepped up to provide food and resources to those who were hardest hit by this crisis ([Coe and McCleery 2020](#); [Weng et al. forthcoming a, forthcoming b](#)). Religious organisations have also long been key sources of social and economic support in times of disasters ([Bouma et al. 2007](#); [Baker et al. 2020](#)), and have traditionally played the role of being first responders in times of emergency and need ([McLaughlin 2020](#), p. 16). This was certainly the case during the pandemic (see below and [Weng et al. forthcoming a, forthcoming b](#)).

Australian research has also demonstrated that global crisis events and political and media discourses about race and religion can have significant negative effects on intercultural and interreligious relations in Australia ([Bouma et al. 2007](#); [Weng et al. forthcoming a, forthcoming b](#)). The events of 11 September 2001, for example, resulted in negative stereotyping of and a corresponding rise of discrimination against Muslims in Australia ([Bouma et al. 2007](#)). In more recent years, African diaspora communities in Australia, including Muslims and Christians, have similarly suffered from sensationalised media coverage ([Weng and Mansouri 2021](#); [Weng et al. forthcoming a](#)). Racism against indentured labourers and immigrants, and notably Chinese Australians, dates back to the mid-19th Century Gold Rush. The Chinese diaspora in Australia has again been targeted during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Weng et al. forthcoming a, forthcoming b](#)).

Underlying racism, as well as white and Christian privileging, remain persistent problems in Australia, despite parallel messaging on the strengths and benefits of multicultural and multifaith societies emanating particularly from Melbourne's diverse communities and the Victorian state government ([Bouma et al. 2007](#); [Halafoff 2015](#)). Previous media analysis, conducted in 2013, 2014 and 2015, (described in more detail below) has also revealed how media reporting of religion, spirituality and non-religion<sup>3</sup> in Melbourne newspapers does not adequately reflect the actual lived religious, spiritual and non-religious diversity and complexity of this city ([Weng and Halafoff 2020](#)). Five years on, and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, similar and different trends in media representations of religion have emerged, which further strengthens calls, made by authors Enqi Weng and Anna Halafoff

in 2020, for more religious literacy programs for journalists and politicians and in Australian schools, in order to increase understanding of religious and worldview complexity (Furseth 2018; Bouma et al. forthcoming; Weng and Wake 2021).

This paper analyses media representations of religion, spirituality and non-religion during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Australian state of Victoria's capital city Melbourne, from the 25 January to the 19 August, 2020. A selection of national and local newspapers read in Melbourne, which reach a broad range of audience demographics, were selected for analysis. These include a national, politically conservative paper *The Australian*, a Melbourne-based left-leaning paper *The Age*, and a Melbourne-based right-leaning paper *The Herald Sun*. A mixed-method thematic quantitative and qualitative approach, using targeted keywords related to religion, spirituality and non-religion identified in previous international (Knott et al. 2013; Poole and Weng forthcoming) and local media analyses (Weng 2019; Weng 2020; Weng and Halafoff 2020), was applied in this study. The findings provide insights into Melbourne media representations of religion, spirituality and non-religion during the pandemic, and religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to COVID-19. They also reveal the changing place of lived religion, spirituality and non-religion in the Australian public sphere as a result of global crisis events.

## 2. Religious Diversity in Victoria and Australia

Australia has always been a religiously diverse society, beginning with cultural and religious diversity and complexity within Indigenous communities throughout the continent, and continuing among waves of immigrants settling in Australia to this present day. The Australian Immigration Restriction Act, known as the 'White Australia Policy', implemented in 1901 until 1973, to stem flows of migration from Asia, created the myth of a white Christian Australia (Bouma and Halafoff 2017; Hage 1998). Australia was reimagined as a multicultural society in the 1970s and 1980s, and the state of Victoria continues to maintain a strong commitment to its multicultural and multifaith identity. This, however, has been somewhat undermined in more recent years by a narrow nationalism and policies of citizenship and social cohesion at the national level, that have also permeated Victoria's policies (see Ezzy et al. 2020).

The state of Victoria is similar to the rest of Australia and Western societies in that mainstream Christianity is declining, while religious diversity and non-religious identification is increasing. In the latest 2016 Census, 47.9% of Victoria's population identified as Christian, 31.9% as having No Religion, 3.3% as Muslims, 3.1% as Buddhists, 2.3% as Hindus, and 0.7% as Jews (Victorian Government n.d.).

The Australia's Generation Z (AGZ) study, conducted in 2016–2018, reflected similar trends along with a significant interest in spirituality. It found six types of worldviews among 13–18 year-olds: 23% as 'this-worldly' / non-religious, 15% as 'indifferent', 18% as 'spiritual but not religious', 8% as 'religious and spiritual', 20% as 'nominally religious' and 17% were 'religiously committed' (Singleton et al. 2020). The AGZ study also found that a large number of Australian teens engaged in spiritual practices and beliefs; 50% believed in karma, 30% had practiced meditation, 30% believed in reincarnation, 22% had practiced yoga and 20% believed in astrology (Singleton et al. 2020).

The AGZ researchers drew on McGuire's (2008) work on 'lived religion' and Furseth's (2018) work on 'religious complexity', to conclude that young Australian's lived religious, spiritual and non-religious worldviews were diverse and complex, but that learning about these worldviews in Australia, including in Victoria's schools, did not reflect this reality. They called for more programs on worldview literacy in Australian schools, informed by empirical research, to remedy this (Halafoff et al. 2019, 2020). In addition, according to Lundby et al. (2018, pp. 238–39), one of the key areas in which religious complexity (Furseth 2018) finds expression in a society is through journalists' treatment of religions. This complexity is evident where mainline religious affiliation to religion is declining, yet religions have a strong presence in news media. Similar trends and findings were revealed by the Melbourne component of the 'Religion on an Ordinary Day' (RoD) study

(Weng and Halafoff 2020) and are further examined in this Worldviews Complexity in COVID-19 Times study.

### 3. Media Representations of Worldviews Pre-COVID-19 Times

Weng and Halafoff (2020) in their study of Melbourne newspapers on September 17, in 2013, 2014 and 2015, as part of the international RoD study, found that Christianity, Islam and Judaism received a high level of media attention in news stories and across genres, thereby reflecting their higher status in Australia, compared to other religions. This news coverage was often sensationalised and focused on controversies related to sexual abuse (Christianity, Judaism) or terrorism (Islam). Weng and Halafoff (2020) observed that this negative treatment of mainstream Abrahamic faiths reflects a recent rise in questioning of religious authority, as a result of its association with abuse of power and both direct and structural violence. References to Christianity also frequently occurred in place and football team names, in sports in general, in the arts, and in quizzes and crosswords. They were also often humorous.

Islam received the most attention of minority religions and much of this, particularly in the more conservative *The Australian* and *Herald Sun* newspapers, was negative. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism received significantly less serious media attention, reflecting their lesser status in Australian society. Weng and Halafoff (2020, p. 343) observed that '[s]ometimes, what is missing is also revealing.' While coverage of Buddhism and Hinduism was more positive, it often displayed exoticism and orientalism in travel pieces, for example.

Light-hearted positive references to spirituality (coded as Common Religion—see research method section below), including to witches, fairies, vampires, ghosts and other supernatural beings, occurred mainly in entertainment, crosswords, and fashion, and were associated often with healing, comfort and support. This provides 'evidence of sustained enchantment in Australian public life' (Weng and Halafoff 2020, p. 344). References to non-religion and the secular (coded as Secular Sacred) were much less frequent, but also tended to be positive, perhaps indicating that they were more socially acceptable than traditional religions. They referred to nature, democracy, human dignity, and football, which were often described as Religion-Like and frequently included Christian references (Weng and Halafoff 2020).

Weng and Halafoff (2020, pp. 343–45), concluded that religion, spirituality, and Christianity in particular, 'play a more pervasive role in the Australian public mind in an everyday way than is often acknowledged in this supposedly secular society,' and in previous studies. At times this was more overt and at others more 'hidden'. They also noted that '[t]he pervasiveness of Christian references throughout the papers suggests its continued influence in Australian public life and culture, whether in politics, or more generally in everyday meaning-making.' The findings of their study, they stated, may thus 'help to explain the prevailing influence that religious groups, and especially Christian groups, have on social and political issues, such as marriage equality, religious instruction in schools, and religious freedom' in Australia. They also argued for more educational programs on religious/worldview literacy for journalists and in schools, 'to develop a better understanding of Australia's lived and complex worldview diversity.'

### 4. Research Method

This Worldviews Complexity in COVID-19 Times (WCCT) study also employed a thematic content quantitative and qualitative media analysis of news articles, from Melbourne broadsheets and tabloids, during the first year of the coronavirus crisis in Australia from the 25 January to the 19 of August 2020. As stated above, Melbourne's second lockdown was meant to end on the 19 August 2020, so this end date was chosen for this study, and helped to keep the volume of data for analysis manageable. The lockdown was subsequently extended and restrictions did not start to ease for Metropolitan Melbourne until the 28 October 2020.

National and local newspapers that cover a wide spectrum of demographics among readers in Melbourne were selected: *The Australian*, *The Age*, and the *Herald Sun*. *The Age* is owned by Nine Entertainment, while the other two are owned by News Corporation (News Corp). *The Age* is a Melbourne-based newspaper, with a more politically left-leaning readership. The *Herald Sun*, also a Melbourne-based newspaper, was selected as it is a daily right-leaning tabloid. *The Australian* is a national newspaper that is widely read in Melbourne mostly by business owners, managers and executives and its contents are politically conservative (Roy Morgan Research 2013).

To locate news articles for this media analysis, selected keywords related to religion, spirituality and non-religion were applied in searches via Factiva, a print and digital newspaper database available through Deakin University's library. These keywords were informed by previous media research and adapted according to the purpose of this paper (Knott et al. 2013; Weng 2019, 2020; Weng and Halafoff 2020). Knott et al. (2013) applied a broad categorisation to the concept of 'religion' in their *Media Portrayals of Religions and the Secular Sacred* study, viewed through three categories of Conventional Religion, Common Religion and the Secular Sacred. Conventional religion refers to religions that are popularly recognised through their institutions and organisations. Common religion captures everyday belief, spirituality and practices that include superstitions, making predictions and leaving decisions to chance. The Secular Sacred refers to beliefs that are generally not religious per se, yet still retain elements of religiosity, such as the fluid concept of the sacred. This framework was slightly adapted by Weng (2019, 2020) in her study of the Australian television program Q&A, and by the investigators of the RoD international study described above (Weng and Halafoff 2020; Poole and Weng forthcoming).

The coding frameworks for the above studies were adapted and simplified for this WCCT study, based on insights gained from Australian census data, the Australian component of the RoD study and the AGZ study. The research team only searched for articles, which excluded crosswords and television guides, etc. The revised keywords searched for were: Conventional Religion—'Religion' (religio\*), 'Christianity' (Christian\*), 'Anglicanism' (Anglican\*), 'Catholicism' (Catholic\*), 'Pentecostalism' (Pentecost\*), 'Islam' (\*, Islam\* OR Muslim\*), 'Judaism' (Judais\* OR Jew\*), 'Buddhism' (Buddh\*), 'Hinduism' (Hindu\*) and 'Sikhism' (Sikh\*); Common Religion—'spirituality' (spiritual\*), 'yoga' (yog\*) and 'meditation' (meditat\*); and Secular Sacred—'secular' (Secular\*) and 'no religion' (non\* religio\*, no religio\*, not\* religio\*). The researchers then undertook the Factiva search for these terms coupled with the terms 'coronavirus\*' and or 'COVID\*'4, and coded the data according to themes.5 The analysis is presented below.

## 5. Melbourne Media Representations of Worldviews in COVID Times

The total number of references coded came to 1418 (Table 1). Each reference was then further coded based on whether: they referred to religion as a main issue or as a passing reference (Table 2); the tone of the reference (positive, neutral, negative or mixed—Table 3); and the genre in which it appeared in (Table 4).

**Table 1.** Number of references coded in each newspaper.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Conventional Religion	496	387	204	1087
Common Religion	89	106	107	302
Secular Sacred	17	10	2	29
Total references				1418

The total of 1418 references were dispersed across the three papers: *The Australian* (n = 602), *The Age* (n = 503) and *The Herald Sun* (n = 313). These include 1087 references for Conventional Religion, 302 for Common Religion and 29 for Secular Sacred (see Table 1).



Similar to previous media analyses described above (see [Weng 2019, 2020](#); [Weng and Halafoff 2020](#)), references to religion tend to appear as passing references (n = 1139) far more than as a main issue (n = 279) (see [Table 2](#)).

**Table 2.** Main issue or passing reference across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Main issue	131	99	49	279
Passing reference	471	404	264	1139
Total references				1418

**Table 3.** Tone of references coded across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Positive	158	129	122	409
Neutral	337	279	158	774
Negative	95	77	33	205
Mixed	12	18	0	30
Total references				1418

**Table 4.** References based on news genre across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Domestic news	190	193	120	503
International news	95	42	15	152
Opinion	122	55	57	234
Feature	98	78	52	228
Letters	30	71	27	128
Entertainment/Travel/Review	47	42	32	121
Sport	20	22	10	52
Total references				1418

Interestingly, while most references were generally neutral in tone (n = 774), more positive references (n = 409) were noted compared to negative references (n = 205) within this study. References that were used in more than one of these tones were coded as mixed (n = 30) (see [Table 3](#)). This contrasted with [Weng's](#) pre-pandemic research (2019, 2020), where references were also mostly neutral, but negative references outweighed positive ones. It is possible to assert that religion and spirituality were more frequently drawn upon for support in person and notably online during the COVID-19 crisis, which led to their re-invigoration in the Australian public mind. This is discussed in more detail below.

In terms of genre, most references appeared in this order: Domestic news (n = 503), Opinion (n = 234), Feature (n = 228), International news (n = 152), Letters (n = 128), Entertainment/Travel/Review (n = 121) and Sport (n = 52) (see [Table 4](#)). This shows that across the papers diverse worldviews are taken seriously, yet also permeated all aspects of Australian life, similarly to what [Weng and Halafoff \(2020\)](#) have observed previously.

### 5.1. Conventional Religion

Conventional Religion (n = 1087) received far more mentions than Common Religion (n = 302) or the Secular Sacred (n = 29) (see [Table 1](#)). They appeared in the following order from largest to smallest number of references: Religion (n = 302); Catholic (n = 277); Islam (n = 207); Christianity (n = 130); Judaism (n = 80); Anglican (n = 49); Buddhist (n = 15); Hindu (n = 12); Pentecostal (n = 8); Sikh (n = 7) (see [Table 5](#)). Catholicism is the largest religious grouping in Australia, so the high number of Catholic references is not surprising. The high number of references to Islam and Judaism do not match their numerical presence in Australia, but does add further evidence of the predominance of Abrahamic faiths in Australian public life, noted by [Weng and Halafoff \(2020\)](#).

**Table 5.** Conventional Religion references across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Religio *	132	108	62	302
Christian *	61	51	18	130
Anglican *	21	18	10	49
Catholic *	109	108	60	277
Pentecost *	1	6	1	8
Islam * OR Muslim *	122	55	30	207
Judais * OR Jew *	34	32	14	80
Buddh *	6	4	5	15
Hindu *	7	2	3	12
Sikh *	3	3	1	7
Total references				1087

Conventional Religion received more coverage as a passing ( $n = 833$ ) than a main ( $n = 254$ ) reference, and it appeared mostly in Domestic news ( $n = 395$ ), Opinion ( $n = 200$ ) and Features ( $n = 149$ ) and International news ( $n = 140$ ), revealing that it is taken seriously, as noted above and by [Weng and Halafoff \(2020\)](#).

#### 5.1.1. Christianity

*The Australian* mentioned Christianity the most in 61 articles. This was followed by *The Age* with 51 mentions, and *The Herald Sun* with 18 (see [Table 5](#)). Out of the Christian denominations Catholicism received by far the most attention ( $n = 277$ ), then Anglicanism ( $n = 49$ ) and Pentecostalism ( $n = 8$ ). *The Australian* and *The Age* had the most in-depth and diverse range of articles on Christianity, across the denominations. *The Herald Sun* had much fewer mentions.

In terms of tone, most Christian references across the three papers were neutral ( $n = 58$ ), along with 52 positive, 17 negative and three mixed. This pattern was also evident in *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*. By contrast, *The Australian* had a significantly higher number of positive references to Christianity ( $n = 32$ ), than neutral ( $n = 24$ ), or negative ( $n = 5$ ) (see [Table 6](#)). This could perhaps reflect a Christian bias present in *The Australian*.

**Table 6.** Christianity—tone of references coded across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Positive	32	14	6	52
Neutral	24	23	11	58
Negative	5	11	1	17
Mixed	0	3	0	3
Total references				130

Most mentions of any Christian category in all four papers related to Christian educational institutions, such as Christian schools, Catholic education peak bodies, or the Australian Catholic University (ACU) closing, re-opening, or being otherwise affected by COVID-19 outbreaks. Faith-based and Catholic education in particular, have a significant presence in Australia ([Halafoff et al. 2019](#)). A large portion of mentions of Christianity also referred to COVID-19 restrictions to church services, particularly during Easter, funerals, weddings, and shifts of these rituals online. Articles also focused on Christian authority, deviance, religious identity, sport, and The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Christian authority figures, including educational peak bodies, Christian welfare institutions, priests, pastors, archbishops, and ACU academics, were frequently deferred to for advice, expert opinion, or encouragement during the first waves of the pandemic. This is a product of the systematic nature in which many public services are outsourced to religious institutions, the large proportion of Christian schools in Australia, and also of a cultural privileging of Christian ideas as a source of morality, meaning, and service,

particularly by more conservative news sources. This was evident across all papers, and mostly in *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun*.

*The Australian* was most explicit in depicting Christian institutions as responsible protectors during the pandemic, who were taking pre-emptive steps such as negotiating the closure of schools and enforcing restrictions in church services and moving them online. They were presented positively, as custodians who negotiated with the state on the behalf of the people. For example, a news article in *The Australian* discussed how the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference released a statement pre-lockdown listing ‘restrictions and advice’ on how churches should deal with coronavirus including that: ‘Holy water should be temporarily removed from stoops at the doors of churches to reduce the possibility of transmission of the virus’ (Johnstone 2020, p. 8). *The Australian* also reported how Sydney ‘Archbishop Fisher urged congregations to . . . view regular “mass for you at home broadcasts” on TV, watch live-streamed online services available from certain parishes or find ways to “pray from home”’ (Norington 2020).

As Easter occurred during the first lockdown, many articles that mentioned Christianity were related to this religious observance. This ranged from light-hearted quips about eating hot cross buns, to stories about COVID restrictions for churches, to the online streaming of services, and messages of ‘hope, faith and patience’ from Christian leaders during these hard times, such as from The Queen, The Pope and Australian Cardinal George Pell (Reid 2020, p. 7). This further emphasises how Christian voices hold special authority in Australian newspapers, exhibiting their role of pastoral carers by providing messages of encouragement and support. In a news article, *The Australian* (2020b, p. 21) also reported Pentecostal Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s Easter message, ‘filmed beside a striking image of a 6th-century icon of Christ’, in which he stated that ‘Australians of faith . . . will live out their beliefs over the long weekend by doing the right thing. That includes staying home, checking on neighbours and supporting communities, families and friends—at a safe distance.’ Easter articles also commented on the challenges faced by Christian congregations as a result of pandemic restrictions and the resilience of Christian churches during the crisis, through their adaptation to streaming online.

By contrast, *The Australian* and *The Age* reported on the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia as deviant, as opposed to the exemplary pre-emptive restrictions enforced by the Catholic Church:

If coronavirus fears have led to holy water being removed from Roman Catholic churches, and a ban on drinking from the chalice or priests placing the communion wafer on the tongue, no such hygiene measures apply to the Greek Orthodox Church . . . worshippers sip wine from a spoon dipped into the same chalice cup. The spoon is dipped back into the cup for the next person. The communion wafer is also delivered via the same spoon into the mouths of between 80 and 100 worshippers a week . . . The highest ranks of the Roman Catholic Church have taken a different tack, curtailing all rituals that risk infection. (Laurie 2020, p. 3)

*The Age* also highlighted the deviancy of Shincheonji, a ‘Secretive cult behind Korean outbreak,’ with branches in Australia, due to ‘forbidding of face masks’ and flouting of other restrictions (Fowler 2020, p. 10). This demonstrates the prevalence of the myth of a virtuous white Christian Australia, and a deep seeded suspicion to the ethnic ‘other’, even if they are Christian.

Morrison’s Pentecostal Christian identity was also frequently discussed across the papers with regard to ‘What drives him, what are his core values and beliefs?’ (Bramston 2020, p. 10). His religious identity was often discussed alongside his devotion to football, as an opinion piece in *The Australian* described:

[Morrison] listed his personal interests thus: “Church (Hillsong Church, Waterloo), Family, Politics, Reading (biography, travel, history, Australian fiction), Kayaking, Waratahs [NSW rugby union team], AFL [Australian Football League]



(Western Bulldogs).” Both the order and content were instructive. His religion came first and that other Aussie religion last. (Savva 2020b, p. 10)

This reflects a prevailing underlying mistrust of close and overt religion and state relations in Australia, and a deeper faith in the less threatening ‘religion’ of football.

Substantive discussion of the exoneration of Australian Cardinal George Pell, who was controversially cleared of sexual abuse charges uncovered by The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, featured in all papers particularly in *The Australian* and *The Age*. Most of these articles did not focus primarily on the coronavirus; however, several articles discussed Pell in relation to COVID-19. *The Australian*, was most empathetic toward him. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, anger towards Pell and/or the Catholic Church’s response to sexual abuse of children emerged in the public’s Letters to the Editor in *The Herald Sun* and *The Age*, rather than in articles, perhaps reflecting the grip of church authority over media institutions more than over the population.

### 5.1.2. Religion

Religion was mentioned more frequently than Christianity, across the papers with 302 mentions in total. *The Australian* mentioned it 132 times, *The Age* 108 times and *The Herald Sun* 62 (see Table 5). Most mentions of religion were neutral in tone in all newspapers. *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun* had more positive mentions of religion than negative ones; however, *The Age* had more negative mentions of religion than positive mentions (see Table 7).

**Table 7.** Religion (general)—tone of references coded across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Positive	34	20	14	68
Neutral	84	59	43	186
Negative	14	26	5	45
Mixed	0	3	0	3
Total references				302

Religion was discussed as a potential source of strength and comfort during the COVID-19 crisis. Religion was also often discussed in relation to a range of political issues, such as Australia’s Religious Freedom Bill, Australia’s relations with China, Black Lives Matter, identity politics, racism and diversity, with mainly passing mentions of coronavirus. Notably, each newspaper focused on different political issues. Religion was also often mentioned in relation to sport.

Religion was quite often discussed as a source of strength and something to turn to during the difficult times of the pandemic, interestingly alongside more non-religious/secular resources, particularly in *The Australian* and *The Age*. This reflects the fact that religion continues to play a significant role in Australia, alongside other worldviews. By contrast, other mentions lamented that religious leadership was lacking in response to the pandemic in secular times. An opinion piece in *The Australian* by conservative commentator Peta Credlin stressed that people were less prepared to face mortality due to their lack of religious faith (Credlin 2020a, p. 60), and a letter in *The Age* queried ‘Where are the messages of hope and resilience? Where are the voices of religious and spiritual leaders?’ in this crisis (The Age 2020h, p. 22).

*The Age* focused mainly on discussion of the proposed Religious Freedom legislation, in letters to the editor, that mostly opposed the legislation. *The Australian* included a piece by conservative media commentator Alan Jones expressed strong anti-Chinese sentiments that ‘COVID-19 is rightly, as Donald Trump asserts, a China virus . . . The Chinese communist regime is responsible for your business going broke and closing down’ in an article that also referenced the Chinese ‘Book of Changes’ as ‘providing inspiration to the worlds of religion’ (Jones 2020, p. 26).

The *Herald Sun* focused on outrage against the Black Lives Matter protests and was highly critical of the message of the movement and resistant to acknowledging the persistence of racism in Australia. These mentions only referred to religion in passing, as an example of other diversities that intersect with race. For example, an opinion piece stated that ‘[e]very one’s life matters regardless of colour, age, gender or religion’ (Kennett 2020, p. 20).

Sport was reported to be a unifier in Australia among diverse groups, including religious groups. A news article in *The Australian* noted that ‘footy is the social fabric of regional towns’, as a ‘small town is made up of many groups. There’ll be the historical society, the cemetery trust, the religious groups, the environmental group, and the local farming group’ and ‘[w]hat pulls them all together is the Football [the] Netball Club’ (Lunn 2020, p. 2). Once again, it’s noteworthy here that religious groups are listed among many other types of non-religious groups. There were also some complaints raised regarding sporting events being allowed more people than religious gatherings (Penberthy 2020b, p. 53).

### 5.1.3. Minority Religions

*The Australian* had the most articles referencing minority religions, with 172 overall mentions. This was followed, not very closely, by *The Age* with 96 articles, and *The Herald Sun* with 53 articles (see Table 8). There was a strong emphasis on the handling of the COVID-19 crisis in reporting on minority religions across all three of the papers. Similarly to mentions related to Christianity and Catholicism, this theme was particularly prominent when discussing school closures due to COVID-19, in this case Jewish and Islamic schools. This coverage was mainly neutral or positive. The papers also focused on the spread, and countering the spread, of COVID-19 in minority faith religious gatherings. This coverage was often mixed, blaming some religious minority groups for worsening outbreaks and commending others for closing places of worship and transitioning to online delivery in response to the pandemic.

**Table 8.** Minority Religion references across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Islam * OR Muslim *	122	55	30	207
Judais * OR Jew *	34	32	14	80
Buddh *	6	4	5	15
Hindu *	7	2	3	12
Sikh *	3	3	1	7
	Total references			321

Differences and divides between minority faith communities and mainstream Christian and/or non-religious communities was another main theme. This reporting was particularly focused on Muslim communities in the lead up to and during the second lockdown after clusters of cases occurred at the Al-Taqwa Islamic College and in public housing towers in Melbourne. Most of this coverage was negative or mixed toward Muslim communities. Articles that discussed differences in relation to Judaism or other minority groups by contrast were mostly neutral.

### 5.1.4. Islam

Islam received the most coverage of minority faiths in articles that mentioned the pandemic, across all of the newspapers, with 207 references in total. These were mostly neutral (n = 130) and then negative (n = 58), with far less positive (n = 17) and mixed (n = 2) references (see Table 9). Most of the negative and mixed coverage on minority faiths handling of COVID-19, including increasing and countering the spread of the virus, was focused on Muslim communities.

**Table 9.** Islam OR Muslim—tone of references coded across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Positive	4	10	3	17
Neutral	78	34	18	130
Negative	38	11	9	58
Mixed	2	0	0	2
Total references				207

The reporting in *The Australian*, had the highest number of neutral ( $n = 78$ ) and negative Islam/Muslim references ( $n = 38$ ), with very few positive ones ( $n = 4$ ). For example, a Domestic news article in *The Australian* reported how: ‘A family Eid celebration that broke public health restrictions has emerged as the cause of one of Victoria’s biggest family clusters.’ It also stated that, ‘[a]t the time, Victorians were prohibited from having more than five guests in their homes . . . The Coburg Eid breach occurred despite a campaign by the Islamic community and Andrew’s government to inform people about dangers of the virus’ (Baxendale and Ferguson 2020, p. 5).

By contrast, *The Age* discussed the challenges facing Muslims in Victoria in celebrating the holy month of Ramadan during a pandemic, yet chose to highlight the more positive opportunities that at home and online celebrations and acts of service presented for the Muslim community. It had 34 neutral, 11 negative and 10 positive Islam/Muslim references and was far more balanced. For example, a Domestic news article paraphrased Islamic Council of Victoria vice-president Adel Salman highlighting that: ‘Ramadan will continue to be the month of giving, with Muslims donating directly to charities and food agencies to support communities in need, including those who may have lost their jobs due to the pandemic’ (Topsfield and Rosa 2020, p. 11). Later in the year, Salman was again called upon by *The Age* to comment on the outbreak in public housing towers. He explained that while ‘more could have been done to engage people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families before the crisis escalated . . . the increased efforts of the government and health authorities’ to ‘speak more directly with people from CALD backgrounds’ was ‘definitely welcome[d]’ (Tomazin 2020, p. 4).

*The Herald Sun* also featured higher numbers of neutral ( $n = 18$ ) and negative Islam/Muslim references ( $n = 9$ ), with few positive ones ( $n = 3$ ). *The Herald Sun* conservative media commentator Andrew Bolt used this call by Muslim community leaders for better messaging about the coronavirus to stress divides between communities. In an opinion piece he highlighted how major outbreaks have occurred in communities with high numbers of immigrants and Muslims in particular:

And now look. Is it coincidence that the three worst virus hotspots in Victoria have been seven public housing commission towers (145 cases), the al-Taqwa college (142) and the Cedar Meats abattoir (111)? Many of the people in those towers are immigrants, often from Africa; the al-Taqwa community is Muslim, many immigrants; and Cedar Meats, is a Labor-donating company that employs many immigrants . . . In fact, some are illiterate even in their own language. The Muslim Women Australia group suggested simpler messaging, perhaps using pictures. (Bolt 2020, p. 21)

*The Age* again included a response from a Muslim community leader, Omar Hallak, principal and founder of the Al-Taqwa Islamic College, who commented on the impact this kind of negative reporting was having on Muslim communities in Melbourne: ‘There is a lot of worry and fear in the Victorian community at the moment and we understand this . . . Sadly, some people with extreme views have sent ugly messages to the college and posted on social media. Our families see these things and it gives them pain’ (Le Grand 2020, p. 1).

Other articles that mentioned Islam and Muslims were mainly negative and mixed, and centred on issues of terrorism and extremism, critiques of China and Black Lives Mat-

ters. Articles on China during the pandemic included empathetic concerns regarding the human rights abuse of Muslim Uyghurs and the Muslim “re-education” camps in Xinjiang. A letter to the editor in *The Herald Sun* during the lockdowns that mentioned Muslims and other minorities, but was not primarily focused on the coronavirus, problematically argued for the denial of differences and the silencing of dissent in the face of division in the name of unity, at the time of Black Lives Matter protests in the US and Australia:

Too much division “WE the people” is the opening line of the United States constitution. This means “everyone”. I’m an old man and it saddens me to see so much division in society. Black, white, yellow, brown, Muslim, Christian, Jew, gay, straight... who cares? Why do we need to have a label? Get over yourself. Just be a human. ([The Herald Sun 2020b](#), p. 47)

#### 5.1.5. Judaism

Of the other minority religions, Judaism was featured the most across all four newspapers with 80 articles across the research period. Discussion of Judaism focused mainly on handling of the pandemic and transitions to online or digital religious practices. Most articles across the three papers were neutral (n = 61), along with 15 negative, four positive and one mixed. *The Australian* did not include any positive mentions of Judaism, only 28 neutral and 6 negative. A mixed tone Domestic news article in *The Age* described how ‘[p]olice raided an ultra-Orthodox Jewish prayer group in Melbourne’s inner-east’ where ‘at least 10 men were praying in contravention of social-distancing rules.’ The same article also highlighted how this deviance was not commonplace in Jewish communities, as Jewish leaders had closed their synagogues ‘well in advance of government bans on attending places of worship’ and how ‘[m]any Jewish people are gathering online for prayers to avoid face-to-face contact, or not gathering at all’ ([Sakkal 2020](#), p. 7).

Many articles and letters to the editor compared the coronavirus lockdowns to the holocaust, as a reminder that the suffering experience during this pandemic was ‘really . . . not that bad’ ([The Age 2020e](#), p. 20) and that this pandemic was not ‘the scariest moment in human history . . . worth reflecting on next time you’re freaking out about the lack of toilet rolls’ ([Penberthy 2020a](#), p. 32). Other articles focused on the Israel–Palestinian conflict, and Anti-Semitism in Turkey and Australia.

#### 5.1.6. Buddhism

Buddhism received only 15 mentions across all of the papers. Most of them were neutral (n = 9) and positive (n = 5), with only one negative one. *The Herald Sun* had more positive (n = 3) than neutral (n = 2) mentions of Buddhism, and no negative ones. Many of the Buddhism articles were related to religious/spiritual acts and symbols, including meditation, images of the Buddha, or mandalas.

Articles in *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun* explained the benefits of meditation during the coronavirus crisis, including calming and clearing the mind to deal with the panic that has ensued in our bodies because of the pandemic ([Davidson 2020](#), p. 3) and reducing stress and slowing down aging ([The Herald Sun 2020a](#), p. 2). Articles in *The Age* focused on Buddhist concepts of stillness and doing nothing ([Joseph 2020](#), p. 23) and chanting om/aum as a way of keeping a sense of calm during the lockdowns and rising global death toll from COVID-19 ([Azzopardi 2020](#), p. 12). The negative article referred to ‘an ethnic Buddhist militia’, and ‘Buddhist villages suspected of sheltering insurgents’ in the ‘brutal Myanmar “genocide”’ ([Hodge 2020b](#), p. 8).

#### 5.1.7. Hinduism

There were 12 references to Hinduism across the newspapers, with most of them neutral (n = 9), and two positive and one negative. The most common theme throughout the articles mentioning Hinduism was religious acts and symbols. Several articles mentioned how world leaders, including WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, were recommending the Hindu greeting of “namaste” instead of handshakes, kissing or elbow

taps to avoid spreading germs (Royall 2020, p. 10; Tadros 2020, p. 23). Other articles also referred to the benefits of meditation (Davidson 2020, p. 3), chanting the sound om/aum (Azzopardi 2020, p. 12). One article in *The Australian* centred on the ‘standout success’ of the Hindu British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, during the COVID-19 crisis for providing communities with financial support (Sheridan 2020, p. 20) and another on the ongoing persecution of religious minorities in Sri Lanka during the pandemic (Hodge 2020c, p. 8).

#### 5.1.8. Sikhism

Sikhism was mentioned seven times across all of the newspapers, most references were neutral (n = 4), in *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun*, and positive (n = 3) in *The Age*. *The Age* mentions were on volunteering and providing food during lockdowns. As a Domestic news article from *The Age* described:

Amanda, a scrub/circulating and anaesthetic nurse, was overwhelmed when a “food fairy” dropped six containers of chicken curry on her front step. “[There was] no note,” she said. “I’m presuming it’s because someone out there knows I’m a nurse and they are saying thank you and have left all this lovely food for us,” tears in her eyes. She later found out it was a group of volunteers from the Sikh community. (Cowie and Precel 2020, p. 12)

The other four neutral references in *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun* were only passing to Sikhs and Sikhism, mainly when discussing someone’s background, for example, a Sikh Uber driver (Haigh 2020, p. 15).

#### 5.2. Common Religion

Common religion, focused on the spiritual, meditation and yoga, was mentioned 302 times across the three papers in total (see Table 1), with 289 passing and only 13 main references. Spirituality (n = 103) and yoga (n = 109) were mentioned more often than meditation (n = 90), but not by much, across all the papers but quite differently. *The Australian* had the most mentions of spiritual (n = 46), which were often related to Christianity (see below), and then yoga (n = 27) and meditation (n = 16). *The Age* had a relatively even coverage across spirituality (n = 39), yoga (n = 34) and meditation (n = 33), whereas *The Herald Sun* had far more mentions of yoga (n = 48) and meditation (n = 41) than the spiritual (n = 18) (see Table 10). In terms of genres, it was mainly referred to in Domestic News (n = 103); Features (n = 68), Entertainment/Travel/Review (n = 53) and Sport (n = 25), reflecting a mixed serious and light-hearted coverage, throughout many aspects of Australian life and culture, as Weng and Halafoff (2020) previously also noted.

**Table 10.** Common religion references across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	Herald Sun	Total
Spiritual *	46	39	18	103
Meditat *	16	33	41	90
Yog *	27	34	48	109
Total references				302

Most references to Common Religion by far were positive (n = 171), with 87 negative and only 25 negative across the three papers, but *The Australian* had less positive (n = 38) and more negative (n = 13) coverage than did *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* (see Table 11).



**Table 11.** Common Religion—tone of references across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	Herald Sun	Total
Positive	38	61	72	171
Neutral	28	30	29	87
Negative	13	6	6	25
Mixed	10	9	0	19
Total references				302

### 5.2.1. Spirituality

Many references to spirituality, across all of the papers, had a Christian and/or other religious focus. These included mentions in *The Australian* of controversy over Morrison's 'spiritual mentor' Brian Houston (Savva 2020a, p. 12) and references to a spiritual vacuum in an increasingly secular society, in which 'God is dead' (McGregor 2020, p. 21). Mentions were also focused on the benefits of online worship and how 'social distancing' need not 'mean distancing ourselves socially or spiritually from each other' (Visontay 2020, p. 5). Spirituality was also often listed alongside other factors important for community wellbeing, such as 'emotional, mental and spiritual care' (Lewis 2020, p. 4) and 'social, economic and spiritual life' (Kelly 2020b, p. 18). Muslim AFL footballer Bachar Houli was cited as saying Ramadan was a time to 'reflect on his spiritual journey' (Ryan 2020, p. 38) in *The Age*. Ramadan was also described as 'a spiritual boot camp' in another *The Age* article (Hope 2020, p. 4). The Buddhist 'Tibetan spiritual leader' the 'Dalai Lama' was also mentioned in *The Australian* (Hodge 2020a, p. 9), as were the Noosa Satanists, who encouraged readers to 'free yourself from spiritual enslavement. Hail Satan!' (Workman 2020, p. 2).

Spirituality was also often mentioned in relation to Indigenous Australians and racial justice. An article in *The Age* at the time of Black Lives Matters Protests stated: 'This is a spiritual crisis. The First Peoples had their country taken from them. No amount of police or prison or welfare reform can address that loss' (Maglalogenis 2020, p. 23). A letter also stated:

As a white person, I grew up with Captain Cook discovering Australia and nothing about the true history of this land. Much has had to be unlearned and continues to be unlearned. It is not enough to discuss racism, justice and spiritual theft, without understanding white privilege. (The Age 2020g, p. 22)

Indigenous sacred places, Uluru and Kata Tjuta, were described as Australia's 'spiritual heart' (Maddison 2020, p. 4) in a piece in *The Australian*. There was another mention of Aboriginal spirituality, in *The Herald Sun* related to hiking in the Northern Territory with trips including 'education about the culture and spirituality of the local Indigenous people', which was described as being perhaps 'helpful for your quest for reflection and growth' during the pandemic (Sutherland 2020, p. 14).

Places known for their natural beauty were described by travel writers as spiritual homes, as were football, tennis, sailing and cricket grounds and/or clubs across the three papers. Spirituality was often mentioned in relation to sport. For example, Kelly Slater, described surfing as 'a spiritual thing for me' (Swanton 2020, p. 28.) Spirituality also appeared in discussions of art, with one piece in *The Australian* stating how art is important for 'reminding us about ultimate realities of our common humanity, the beauty of the world and of spiritual insight' in times of crisis (Allen 2020, p. 10). Gardening was also described as a 'spiritual, soul-nourishing activity' (McManus 2020, p. 4) in *The Age*.

One article in *The Age* was also critical of Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of discredited spiritual gurus and practices (The Age 2020d, p. 8), while another voiced concerns over tennis player Novak Djokovic 'a devout Christian who can invite scorn for his spiritual deep-dives, interests in alternative therapies and questionable narratives about vaccination' and his wife, Jelena, who 'has been known to espouse 5G/coronavirus conspiracies on social media' (Lutton 2020, p. 32).

### 5.2.2. Yoga and Meditation

Two articles in *The Australian* mentioned the risk of yoga classes as potential COVID spreaders in Australia and in Bali ([The Australian 2020a](#), p. 14; [Hodge and Vasandani 2020](#), p. 9), and one in *The Herald Sun* chastised a social media influencer as a ‘deluded Instagrammer’ who highly offensively ‘decided to pop on some Lycra and strike up yoga poses on the Berlin Holocaust memorial stones’ ([O’Brian 2020](#), p. 43). Most other coverage of yoga was positive, as a means of promoting ‘physical and mental wellbeing’ during the crisis. Yoga was also frequently mentioned in a list of non-religious or spiritual activities, such as ‘creative ways to keep fit’ during the pandemic ([Chancellor and Lacy 2020](#), p. 14). Both yoga and meditation were described as being offered in local studios, gyms, schools and workplaces.

Many articles across all three papers also described the benefits of practicing meditation, and meditation apps, as a way to help cope with the stresses of the pandemic, both off and online. Most of these references were general and non-religious, but at times were linked to diverse religions. For example, a piece in *The Age* explained how one yoga studio chose the word “om” in a stress-reduction exercise ‘because it is one of the most frequently chanted sounds worldwide and is commonly used in Buddhism, Hinduism and Yogic traditions’ ([Azzopardi 2020](#), p. 12). Another *The Age* article stated: ‘Travel can recharge our spiritual batteries, especially if we get out into nature . . . Shinto pilgrims have been trotting along forest paths in Japan for a thousand years, meditating and hugging trees’ ([The Age 2020c](#), p. 2), while another likened lockdown with Christian monasticism: ‘Its call is to prayer, meditation or whatever mental reorientation we might call the brightening of the inner self, or the soul’ ([Carroll 2020a](#), p. 27). There was also one mention of ‘Tarawih, a form of Islamic meditation’ ([Topsfield and Rosa 2020](#), p. 11) in *The Age*.

Meditation and yoga were also often cited as techniques used by various athletes, including netballers and ballet dancers, in their training pre and during the pandemic. Meditation and yoga spaces were also included in lists of amenities in upscale suburbs, residences and resorts, and were listed as everyday practices of successful business people and public figures such as former Liberal politician Julie Bishop ([Chancellor 2020](#), p. 14), and actor Hugh Jackman ([Manelis 2020](#), p. 4). Meditation was also mentioned related to the arts, and music in particular, including the contemporary classical song ‘Meditations on Light’ by Andrea Keller ([Jackson 2020](#), p. 12) in *The Australian* and ambient sleep apps ([Clarke 2020](#), p. 16) in *The Age*.

### 5.3. Secular Sacred

The Secular Sacred was rarely mentioned by the newspapers, with 29 mentions in total (see [Table 1](#)). Non-religion received more coverage as a passing (n = 17) than a main (n = 12) reference, and it appeared mostly in Feature (n = 11), Opinion (n = 6), Domestic news (n = 5), and International news (n = 152), revealing that, like Conventional Religion, it is also taken seriously. This coverage mainly appeared in *The Australian* (n = 17) and *The Age* (n = 10), and very rarely in *The Herald Sun* (n = 2) (see [Table 12](#)).

**Table 12.** Secular Sacred—references across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Secular *	8	7	1	16
Non * religio * OR no religio * OR not * religio *	9	3	1	13
Total references				29

Most references to the Secular Sacred by far were neutral (n = 18), with eight negative and three positive. *The Australian* had more neutral (n = 11) and negative (n = 5) than positive (n = 1) references, *The Age* had more neutral (n = 7) and positive (n = 2) than

negative (n = 1) reference and *The Herald Sun* only had two negative references (see Table 13). Articles on the topic of nonreligion ranged from discussions about politics, the proposed Religious Freedom Bill, Scott Morrison, the AGZ study and secularisation.

**Table 13.** Secular Sacred—tone of references across the newspapers.

	The Australian	The Age	The Herald Sun	Total
Positive	1	2	0	3
Neutral	11	7	0	18
Negative	5	1	2	8
Mixed	0	0	0	0
Total references				29

*The Australian* and *The Herald Sun* presented the rise of non-religion and secularism as a worrying trend signifying the decline of Christianity and therefore Western civilisation, with a corresponding decline in morality and social cohesion. For example, an opinion piece in *The Australian* by academic Carroll (2020b, p. 16), described the climate movement as a new religion where God has been replaced by nature. Carroll argued this is morally corrosive because the compulsion to be good has been redirected to ‘nature’ instead of humanity. He also stated that the ‘extraordinarily complex science of climate change has been hijacked by quasi-religious sentiment and guilt, and thereby exploited, distorted and wildly inflated.’

Another opinion piece in *The Australian* pondered whether we would survive the pandemic without the moral compass that once God provided and without a strong religious inner life (Kelly 2020a, p. 20). An article in *The Herald Sun* again positioned ‘woke’ culture of the left as a new religion, that it deemed to be inadequate:

While the woke ideology driving much of the present madness may feel like a heretical retelling of Christianity for our secular age—right down to the original sin of white “privilege”—the fact that it is clearly fulfilling the spiritual needs of many of its adherents is not the real prime mover. (Morrow 2020, p. 36)

In a *Herald Sun* article titled ‘We’re losing faith’, conservative commentator Credlin (2020b, p. 52) also bemoaned the loss of Christian values, and critiqued the Black Lives Matter movement as eroding a sense of common identity.

*The Age’s* articles were more wide-ranging, and presented the non-religious and secular often alongside the religious, in non-problematic ways. For example, an article on Easter described the hot-cross bun as ‘a potent symbol of Christianity co-opted by a secular bunny’ (Dubecki and Lam 2020, p. 4) and a letter in *The Age* pondered on how ‘[p]hilosophers and psychologists tell us that humans seek to make sense of, find a meaning to, their existence’ and that ‘[r]eligious faith and secular science have evolved as two different ways of doing such’ that could be complementary (The Age 2020f, p. 22). There was also some criticism of Prime Minister Morrison’s Christianity. One letter in *The Age* stated: ‘Scott Morrison, I reject your offer of God’s blessings. Please keep it secular’ (The Age 2020b, p. 21).

Articles across all four papers also often referred to secular aspects of society as religion-like, particularly materialism and capitalism, and climate change activism (as mentioned above and below). Religion-like also often carried a negative connotation, of being irrational, hysterical, or zealous. A letter in *The Age* titled ‘Our religion of greed’ stated: ‘To everyone who is appalled by reports of recent behaviour in supermarkets and chemists: remember we have spent just on 40 years worshipping at the altar of neoliberal economics with all its attendant praise of greed and personal ruthlessness’ (The Age 2020a, p. 36). A *Herald Sun* feature article also mentioned a ‘frenzied full-on medieval-style “Climate Change” religious hysteria . . . unleashed’ ‘in the wake of’ the 2019 Australian bushfires (McCrann 2020, p. 49).

## 6. Analysis and Conclusions

As observed during previous global crisis events and in this case the coronavirus pandemic, diverse religious, spiritual and non-religious worldviews were featured in an ambivalent way (Appleby 2000; Halafoff 2013) in media reporting. They were seen both as a force of good and bad; as a source of comfort and strength in times of need, and also as a deviant, negative presence responsible for the virus spreading.

Christianity received the most mentions in news, but also in more everyday, lived realms of sport and education. Christian leaders and institutions were also often referred to as a source of authority in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia and internationally. This, as Weng and Halafoff (2020) previously observed, reflects the pervasiveness of Christianity in overt and more hidden ways, that privileges Christianity in Australia, particularly in the more conservative *The Australian* and *The Herald Sun*. Christian authority, however, was also the subject of critique, with suspicions raised regarding Prime Minister Scott Morrison's outspoken Pentecostal religiosity, and reader's critiques of Cardinal George Pell's exoneration of charges of sexual abuse.

Discussion of religion often appeared alongside discussion of other spiritual and non-religious factors, groups or issues, indicating that not only is 'everything going on at once' in contemporary 'new style' religion (Woodhead 2012), but also a lived worldview complexity (Bouma et al. forthcoming) in Australia, that was also noted in the Worldviews of Australia's Generation Z (AGZ) study (Singleton et al. 2020). Positive and everyday depictions of the non-religious appeared in *The Age*, more than the conservative papers. Spirituality, yoga and meditation, were also frequently cited positively across the papers as helpful for coping with the stresses of coronavirus. They were equated with diverse traditions, spirituality notably with Indigenous Australians, and Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam with all three terms. Yoga and meditation were also often listed with many other secular/non-religious methods of rest and relaxation, again showing an everyday, lived spirituality, where these practices have been simply accepted as a part of Melbourne life. Discussion of religion and sport was also often positive, with sport seen as a unifier in bringing different religious groups together. Sports, such as surfing, were also perceived as spiritual, and particularly football was sacralised in Australian society. Interestingly there was some robust critique emerging of spirituality and yoga, particularly in relation to wellbeing influencers and conspiratoriality. Yoga and meditation were also often equated with economic privileges and elite wealthier places and people.

Islam, Jewish and some ethnic Christian religious minorities by contrast received significant negative media attention and were accused of deviance in not following COVID-19 restrictions. These critiques were often part of broader discourses by cultural warriors, including conservative commentators and letter writers, that lamented the loss of Christian morality, Western traditions, values, and white privileges. The coronavirus, similar to previous crisis events, exposed this deep-seeded racism in Australia, as also observed in previous studies (Hage 1998; Weng and Halafoff 2020). By contrast, *The Age* sought commentary from minority faith leaders to highlight how they were complying with COVID-19 restrictions and stories of Muslim and Sikh communities' service assisting the most vulnerable at the height of the pandemic. This clash between conservatives and progressives further came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the death of George Floyd in the US and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and Australia. It is also evident in discussions around climate change.

Five years on from the findings reported by Weng and Halafoff (2020) in the RoD study, which coded media representations from 2013-2015 on an 'ordinary day', this Worldviews Complexity in COVID-19 Times study reveals very similar themes in terms of a pervasive Christianity, but it is also less 'hidden' in intensifying culture wars, enabled by the rise of the influence of populism and social media (Richards et al. 2021). Religious, spiritual and non-religious leaders and groups involvement in protest movements and their use of the internet and social media also escalated in 2020. Internet use to offer everyday religious and spiritual practices, support, instructions and in some cases rituals, has also expanded

significantly during the COVID-19 crisis. This has re-energised religion and spirituality in Australia, and perhaps altered it forever, making it more accessible and strengthening communities of practitioners online. It has also made Melbournians begin to be more critically reflexive on issues pertaining to whiteness and race, largely as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. There seems also to be a growing interest in Indigenous culture and spirituality through visiting sacred places, alongside a commitment to addressing racial injustice.

Finally, there is also a rising trend evident in a clash between religion/spirituality and secular science, and a corresponding ‘secular privileging’ where religious/spiritual convictions and practice being performed at odds of the dictates of science are condemned as dangerous and deviant. Religious and spiritual worldviews being presented as irrational is not new; however, the recent events of the pandemic, the growing awareness of conspирituality, and increasing numbers and status of the nonreligious, has intensified it. Whether these changes are short or long term, only time will tell. We will endeavour to repeat a similar study again, hopefully in more ordinary post-COVID times in 2025.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yoga can be practiced as a physical exercise, devoid of religious and spiritual references, but many yoga studios in and beyond Australia include a spiritual orientation, with references to yoga philosophy, Hindu and/or Jain symbols and rituals, transformation, inner growth and service to the community (Jain 2014). See for example Power Living, Australia, Available online: <https://www.powerliving.com.au> (accessed on 12 August 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> Conscious dance includes many forms of ‘conscious’/spiritual dance, including 5Rhythms, Ecstatic Dance, Open Floor, Azul, etc. See Conscious Dance Australia, Available online: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ConsciousDanceAustralia/> (accessed on 12 August 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> The authors acknowledge long-standing debates around definitions and categories of religion, spirituality and non-religion, discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article. These three terms are used in this article to broadly align with the three coding groups of Conventional Religion (religion), Common Religion (spirituality) and the Secular Sacred (non-religion), first coined by Knott et al. (2013) and applied by Weng and Halafoff (2020) and this study. They are explained in more detail in 4. Research Methods below.
- <sup>4</sup> The \* denotes the exact search term used. In addition, different variations of these keywords were used to ensure the capture of articles related to them. For instance, ‘Muslim’ was also used for the search term ‘Islam’; ‘non-religious’ and ‘not religious’ were also included to capture the no-religion category (they are presented in Tables 5, 8, 10 and 12). Exclusion criteria were also implemented to make the volume of data more accurate, by excluding articles that had no references to religion. For example, the initial searches included articles where ‘Christian\*’ referred to a person’s name, or the search term ‘Jew\*’ also picked up references to ‘jewellery’. These occurrences were excluded from analysis and reporting. Samples of the data were cross-checked by the researchers to ensure coding reliability.
- <sup>5</sup> Two of the co-authors, research assistants Marriott and Smith, coded the separate sets of the data, while cross-checking to ensure coder reliability. Regular meetings were held with co-author and Research Fellow Weng during the coding process to discuss any discrepancy that arose during the process. Any coding disagreements were discussed and resolved in these meetings. When all the data were coded, Marriott, Smith and Weng cross-checked samples of the data to further ensure coder reliability.



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