I’m Not Religious, but I am Spiritual: Inclusive University Chaplaincy
Rev Dr Russell Briese
Coordinator, Chaplaincy, Student Services
Griffith University

Abstract:
This paper explores the potential for university chaplaincy to be inclusive of the whole university community, and not only of those who are religiously inclined. The saying ‘I’m not religious but I am spiritual’ does suggest a recognition that all do have spiritual resources they can draw on as required. Indeed a spiritual revolution has been recognised amongst young Australians. Within the context of a worldwide renewal in interest in spiritual matters, chaplaincy can offer a service to the whole university community. Pivotal will be that it is done from a client-based standpoint.

Keywords
Chaplaincy, spiritual, spirituality, religious, religion, multifaith, inclusive,

Inclusive university chaplaincy
The overarching question dealt with in this paper is whether university chaplaincy is, or can be, inclusive of the whole university community. Does it, or does it have the potential, to provide something for everyone, and serve not only those who profess one or another faith?

Often chaplains are greeted on a university campus with questions like ‘is this just for religious people?’, or ‘is this just for Christians?’ One presumes that the most likely reason that such a response is elicited is that in Western countries, chaplaincy in all sorts of contexts, has for a long time been linked to and staffed by members of Christian denominations.

In the last decades there has been a decisive move from denomination-based chaplaincy to ecumenical and even multifaith models. The change means the emphasis is moving from local churches or religious communities sending their representatives onto university campuses where they ‘have a presence,’ to the universities as a whole taking increasing responsibility for pastoral care of those who make up their community. Hence the emphasis is moving from specific religious communities to the institution as a whole. This means chaplaincy services will be increasingly seen not as outreach from a local church, but as carried out for the well-being of the institution as a whole.

Hence the model where individual churches or other religious bodies are given access to their adherents in recognition of the right of the clientele to practise their religion is in many instances making way for institutions themselves to appoint spiritual carers to be available to meet the spiritual needs of all.

In this sense, chaplains are expected to be there for everyone. Indeed once we enter the realm of funds being expended by the institution, then ideally they should be clearly seen to be used for the benefit of all and not only for a select interest group.

The reality is, however, that chaplains are going to have one world-view or another, so if they are going to be inclusive and serve the whole institution, the primary challenge for individuals as practitioners is to set aside their own convictions and serve the institution from a clearly client-based standpoint.

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In student consultations with chaplains, it may often be only well into a series of visits that it becomes evident which religious community, if any, the client has a present or past relationship with. A client will be treated without fear or favour, and simply on the basis of their needs. Indeed, client-centred integrity is preserved by not asking the question of religious affiliation or local practice, even if the answer might be of interest.

In that sense a multifaith or non-denominational chaplaincy does not mean that various faiths or religious communities must each be represented on the ground, but that each chaplain deals with all clients without fear or favour. At the same time, they are going to regard religious literacy as an important proficiency in order to empathise with a broad client base. This will be married to having significant and meaningful contact with local religious leaders, who can serve for advice and referral.

The assumption is that chaplains are dealing with general issues of life, and hence far more than specific religious needs. That university chaplaincy is, or can be, inclusive of the total university community might be something people could imagine when we consider the commonly used phrase, ‘I’m not religious but I am spiritual.’ The phrase is a handy way for people to fend off over-zealous religious individuals.

**Spiritual but not religious**

In terminology familiar to chaplaincy, as the premise of Brisbane’s Multifaith Academy for Chaplaincy and Community Ministries states, ‘Everyone has spiritual resources’\(^1\). The Academy then bases the importance of training chaplains on the fact that ‘In a time of crisis, everyone may need support to help them draw on their particular spiritual resources.’ Chaplaincy is about helping people tap into their own spiritual resources in order to deal with whatever is confronting them.

Sometimes chaplains do only seem to appear at a time of crisis. No wonder people in hospital might be alarmed to see a chaplain, since this could be a bad omen. Yet being spiritual is not only about recognising that you have resources to deal with crises. In the university context, while chaplaincy does at times deal with students in crisis, in the first instance chaplains take their place in adding to the student experience and making it as good as possible. In this vein, Griffith University’s Student Services motto is ‘aspiration – well being – development.’ This broadens the field from having something to hold on to in times of crisis to finding meaning in general and being conversant with a world-view in particular. It thus adds quality to your life in the here and now, and indeed inspires you into the future. That is exactly where chaplaincy fits in the scheme of things.

Indeed in a best case scenario, spirituality should not be an escape from the world but a positive engagement with it. Precisely in the university context, one would expect a critical engagement of people and ideas. Yet we note that it is not uncommon for many people to so ‘compartmentalise’ their lives that they do not engage with views and ideas conflicting with their own, and even in a real sense remove themselves from the discussion, effectively opting out of conversation with others on any number of topics. In religious circles such behaviours belong to so-called cults or sects, where who you mix with and what ideas you are allowed to brush up against are controlled. Of course the religious do not have a monopoly on closed-

\(^1\) This is a type of motto, and as such is a footer on the Academy’s bulletins: http://www.chaplaincyacademy.com/files/e-learning%20bulletins.html

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mindedness or bigotry.

Digging into the phrase I am not religious but I am spiritual, it is important to differentiate between religion and spirituality. Being religious is something more specific than being spiritual. Spirituality may be determined or coloured by formal religion, of which there are a decent number in our world, and which are indeed represented in our university communities. Yet amongst the plethora of religious options, with our consumerist mindset, people do feel quite free to pick and choose which parts of their preferred religion they wish to subscribe to.

Further, being spiritual without reference to any specific religion is also a recognised part of the landscape of a modern secular democracy like ours.

To get a more technical take on this, American theologian Sandra Schneiders insists that spirituality is a term which ‘has broadened to connote the whole of the life of faith and even the life of the person as a whole, including its bodily, psychological, social, and political dimensions.’ (Schneiders, 1989, p.679). She is suggesting spirituality is no longer the pursuit of a religious elite, but is ‘the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms … of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives,’ and so includes potentially any spirituality, Christian or non-Christian, religious or secular. (Schneiders, p.684) How far this terminology has changed is clear by contrasting this to the Roman Catholic tradition, where to ask ‘are you a religious?’ actually means ‘are you a member of a religious order,’ i.e. a monk (priest or brother) or a nun? (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, paragraphs pp.925 – 927)

What religion and spirituality have in common is that they seek to bring meaning to personal existence. It is all about finding meaning in life and making sense of why we are here and what life is about, or at worst somehow coming to terms with the apparent meaningless of it all.

An Australian spiritual revolution

The assertion that many people see themselves as spiritual but not religious is manifesting itself in a spiritual revival happening on our shores, a spiritual revolution according to David Tacey, author of books such as The Spirituality Revolution, and Re-Enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality. He says people are literally taking spirituality into their own hands. That is, people are interested in spiritual things, but are not necessarily taking the cue or direction from religious institutions in this regard.

I am now going to explore some of the areas where this new spirituality is showing itself in Australia. If indeed it is a matter of individuals taking authority into their own hands, i.e. a spirituality from below, not imposed from above, these things may resonate with our own experience.

I undertake this exploration with the view that chaplaincy can then connect and work with these senses of spirituality.

Yes, even the humble Aussie is thinking things spiritual. Goodness knows, their sources are varied and sometimes dubious. To whet our appetite, the previously-mentioned Multifaith Academy brings together a list: movies, soapies, social media, nature programs on television, visiting natural wonders, practising meditation, reading good literature, and enjoying the
company of others\textsuperscript{2}. All and more of these are no doubt able to contribute to a sense of transcendence and ultimate values.

As we track some specific themes, it seems appropriate, in deference to the original custodians of our land, to begin with Aboriginal spirituality. Barely a generation ago, there was minimal if any appreciation by the average Australian of Aboriginal spirituality. Such may well have been seen as superstitious and regarded as pre-scientific delusion. But slowly we are learning to appreciate that the Aboriginal people have a strong tie to the land, which is also a deep spiritual tie. It is a spiritual tie, because it is a tie which brings meaning to life and people. The land is the source of life, and so to be cut off from it is death. In a time of ecological awareness, society as a whole is starting to discover that the land is our home and not just our tool. The land is the source of life, and to be cut off from it brings not only physical but also spiritual dislocation.

Aboriginal stories of creation and suffering, reread by Aboriginal people of the Christian faith, and reread in the light of Christian scripture, connect the Rainbow Spirit with God as creator. Their sufferings are experienced and reflected on in the light of the sufferings of Christ. There is an extraordinarily similar experience in many religions of sacred sites as places where rituals are held and prayers are said.

Indeed the Aboriginal sense of deep connection with the past is also something finding resonance with contemporary Australians. We witness a renewed interest in ancestry and people look to explore and find out something about the places their forebears have come from. We draw meaning for our lives from our past. We are, after all, ‘spiritually, emotionally and psychologically the products of our families, our communities and our societies.’ (Tacey, 2000, p 184) Where we come from shapes us.

Last but not least, Tacey rightly notes that the biggest issue for Australian society in regard to the Aboriginal people today is reconciliation, a deeply religious term. Deep in our hearts is a yearning to be at one with all.

Already we have moved in the discussion on Aboriginal spirituality towards another manifestation of contemporary spirituality, that of ecospirituality. That such a term has emerged is significant. There is a growing awareness in our time that the world as we know it could be in danger of no longer being able to sustain the population which inhabits it. Contemporary humanity has the hunger and thirst for more, and increasingly super-efficient tools which could lead to the wholesale destruction of our planet.

The land and environment have been seen simply as something to use for our own purposes. So far, it has been able to bounce back, but now it is showing signs of buckling under the pressure. The materialist mindset keeps us in consumer mode, seeking to grab what we can. People are starting to see that this is a dangerous and even self-destructive path.

On a deeper level we are rediscovering the interconnectedness of the many aspects of our planet, ecosystems, animal chains etc., and humans are starting to realise they are not above and beyond this whole web, but are indeed themselves part of it and have a role to play in it, ensuring its continued equilibrium.

Being in tune with the environment is acknowledgement that we are part of something bigger

\textsuperscript{2} The reader is pointed to the Academy’s website, http://www.chaplaincyacademy.com

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than ourselves. It is noteworthy that religious festivals have developed in congruence with the seasons. The festival of new life at Easter falls in the northern spring, and similarly the light and hope of Christmas coincides with the midst of darkest winter. Of course in this southern hemisphere and in an age of artificial light and heat, they may require a little reimagining.

The Anzac tradition is another space where spirituality is bubbling up to the surface. The recent 2015 centennial year of the event pivotal to the Anzac tradition means it is fresh in our minds. Great numbers of young Australians are making the pilgrimage (and I make use of this religious term knowingly) to a place of war and defeat, a place of suffering and senselessness. Precisely the futility of war is giving people a prompt to ponder questions of death and sacrifice.

While martyrs are honoured in many world religions, they are usually victims rather than combatants. A liberal dose of mythology is common, as is often the case in religion and spirituality. But there is something profound about sacrifice, and when the bugler moves into the hasty ‘rouse’ at the end of the last post, there is a whiff of victory despite the defeat and loss that is so obvious. Its close proximity to Easter each year prompts an identification of some mutual themes.

Sometimes it is joked that Australia’s true religion is sport. No doubt there are parallels between it and organised religion. Ritual is a central part of both, although whether one attends or how often one actively participates in these is another question. Both take us out of ourselves, and connect us to a wider community of people. Both are often held on to in difficult times for the individual, and people often maintain their faith in the institutions even when these institutions fail. Yet sport can probably not qualify as a form of spirituality since it does not inform our sense of meaning and transcendence. Some may disagree.

I am arguing that if we grant that each person has spiritual tools, chaplaincy is able to embrace all of those journeys, and walk with people who seek to consider the questions of life.

**A worldwide renewal in interest in things spiritual**

Taking a step back contextually, what is happening in Australia is in parallel to a general renewal in interest in things religious and spiritual worldwide. A watershed moment in the memory of many was the day of ‘September 11’ and its related events. Religiously motivated, the attacks brought religion and spirituality back on the scene. (Bouma, 2006, p.143) In an incredibly negative way, September 11 showed the ‘power and vitality of religion.’ (Bouma, p.143) In addition to this one event, Gary Bouma gives a whole list of examples of religious revitalisation, around the world and in Australia. He lists the trifecta of the rise of Muslim fundamentalism, the strengthening of the protestant right notably in the United States, and a burgeoning Pentecostal movement in Asia, Latin America and Africa. (Bouma, p.145) On a more local level he sees new religious vitality in the community through public displays of religiosity in such things as wearing religious garb and paraphernalia. This includes the hijab, jewellery in the form of religious symbols, turban, armbands, or even tattoos with religious messages. (I have met people sporting tattoos with rather clear religious messages and symbols, and sometimes the individual has sheepishly confessed that they have changed their perspective in the meantime!).

There is also a revitalisation in civic rites. Anzac Day events are a topic in themselves, as above, but also when tragedy strikes there is a perceived need to ritualise our grief, or at least let our leaders do it for us. Such events might include a national memorial service in times of disaster,
or candlelight vigils at places of tragedy. There is also the rise of mega churches such as Hillsong, and the prominence of high demand religious groups, for example the Roman Catholic Opus Dei movement. Indeed in the university context, student religious groups that are most conspicuous tend to be deeply conservative. The Student Christian Movement, a progressive religious group which is keen to dialogue on anything from gay marriage to science, contrastingly finds its heyday to be over. This is not to mention the deeply individual spiritual expressions that the New Age movement brings, although that movement belongs too now mostly to the past. (Bouma, chapter 7)

So while a few short decades ago it looked like secularisation was going to rule the day, and religion was on the way out, this proved to not be the case. Sociologists saw the onset of secularisation as a natural progression past religion, and religion as a stepping stone along the way to a new enlightenment. We were all going to ‘grow up’ and throw away our crucibles and hocus pocus and live as enlightened people of the 21st century. I am not bold enough to hold this may not still well come to pass, but for the moment something else has happened.

Why the renewal?

Why is there spiritual revitalisation? Science can be cold, and consumerism can be rampant, and maybe leave some asking whether there is something more meaningful than this. People can know all sorts of things about life and death, and how the body works, but what does it all mean? Tacey suggests the rapid shift in social conditions in recent years has led to a crisis of meaning, and names the erosion of public morality, family breakdown, public problems like drugs, crime and suicide as likely culprits. (Tacey, p.5-6) Using a sort of university image, it is almost like a young person who burns out on their new-found freedom.

It could be considered that the last couple of generations becoming less churched has left a hole in people’s lives which has prompted a spiritual search in a different direction. If your parents never dragged you off to church or other worship, goodness knows, now you can do what you like, the thing your parents held in contempt may be precisely something to excite your interest now.

But before the religiously minded get too excited in the hope their edifices are again going to be filled with seekers of new religion, make no mistake: we regularly and rightly speak of our society as being secular. Australia is a secular nation. The cold figures of the most recent census have 25% of people saying they are ‘nones,’ of no religion. Being a secular nation means our society and also our universities can operate quite well without any specific reference to God or religion. Of course it does not mean there is no place for God or religion. In fact part of a secular mindset is that people have a freedom of religion, not only a freedom from religion, depending on individual preference. Holding specific religious allegiance or views are matters of private interest amongst individuals.

The key distinction useful in understanding what is happening is possibly what Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay suggests, namely that the Australian way is spirituality yes, but church no. Regardless of how spiritual we are or are not, the reality is that we are less ‘churched.’ In our multifaith context, we can probably add we are less ‘synagogued,”

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3 An example is a national memorial service in St Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne following a Malaysian Airlines disaster. Brisbane’s Courier Mail had a blaring headline on its front page ‘Pray for him!’ in response to the horrendous injury to cricketer Phillip Hughes which led to his death

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‘mosqued’ or ‘templed’ as well.

Despite this, one of the ironies of modern day multiculturalism is that religion is used as a way to label others or indeed to identify ourselves. There are always many more individuals in a national census that tick a box than are known to the institution the box represents. Huge numbers, but masses less and less engaged with a religion they might be ‘culturally’ attached to. We know the term ‘secular Jew’ as used in the United States, which is strictly speaking a contradiction. We also know the grief that young Muslims who don’t understand their religion except as a form of protest wreak on the world. In both cases there is a cultural allegiance, but limited actual religious engagement.

Yet as we have seen, while we may be less churched, there is an argument to be made that Australians are more spiritual than ever.

**Conclusion**

I now move with some broad strokes towards a conclusion.

I am suggesting that the emergence of contemporary spirituality leaves the door open for chaplaincy to find its niche, and be an inclusive service. Also relevant for the university demographic, Tacey argues that the spiritual search is precisely a young people’s phenomenon. In this regard it can be noted that, unsurprisingly, something like 70% of consultations in Griffith University’s chaplaincy service are with people under 30 years of age. Hence the university context is potentially highly relevant in this renewal.

To be all embracing, chaplaincy must be bigger than promoting services which are ecumenical or even multifaith. Spirituality is bigger than organised religion. Caring for and journeying with adherents of different world religions who find their way through our doors, and maybe helping them connect to local communities of their preferred brand of faith and life, will continue to be a bread and butter task for university chaplaincy. Caring for people of any world-view, whether or not this includes a recognised religion, is just as much a part of the deal.

The issue in universities is to take seriously the phrase ‘I’m not religious but I am spiritual’ and to affirm that ‘Everyone has spiritual resources.’ And to work with them as they desire in their ‘aspiration – well-being – development.’

Chaplaincy is about helping people tap into their own spiritual resources. That many identify with the ‘I’m not religious but I am spiritual’ phrase might suggest chaplaincy in a diverse university context should be clearly seen to be for the benefit of all and not only for a select interest group.

Clearly this must be done from a client-based standpoint. The obvious challenge for chaplains is to set aside their own convictions and serve the institution and its people. As the new spirituality is from the ‘bottom up,’ chaplaincy will be a response to that, listening and fostering the growth of spiritual resources and how they develop in the individual. The chaplain’s role is to walk with the individual in their spiritual journey, help them to identify their own values and develop their sense of meaning for themselves and the universe they inhabit. If it is from the bottom up, responsive to clients, it is not shareholder driven.

Precisely in the university context, one would expect people being empowered to a critical engagement of people and ideas. This means chaplaincy would assist people to have a positive
engagement with their field of study, other disciplines and the world in general from their individual world-view.

For the universities themselves, it will become clear that prayer and reflection space does not belong only in international centres, but is rightly offered equitably to all of the university community. Indeed chaplaincy might be seen as a valued part of university life, and be supported and well-funded in all universities.

There will be some challenges. A rampant individualism is evident, although the desire of many young people to volunteer in places of need is a sign of hope. Fundamentalism is the most obvious danger, and it can come from any number of sources: Christian, Muslim, environmental, atheist. Withdrawal from society, away from dialogue and mutual understanding and respect are always lurking. And as in many areas of life, in spirituality there are many frauds and charlatans.

Religious revitalisation in a secular nation and university opens a space for chaplaincy. It may well be asked ‘is this just for Christians?’ even though the reality is clients are more likely not to be practising Christians or zealous adherents of any particular world religion.

University Chaplaincy can be inclusive to all, and for the well-being and health of the community in which it works.

References:


The author may be contacted:
Russell Briese
r.briese@griffith.edu.au