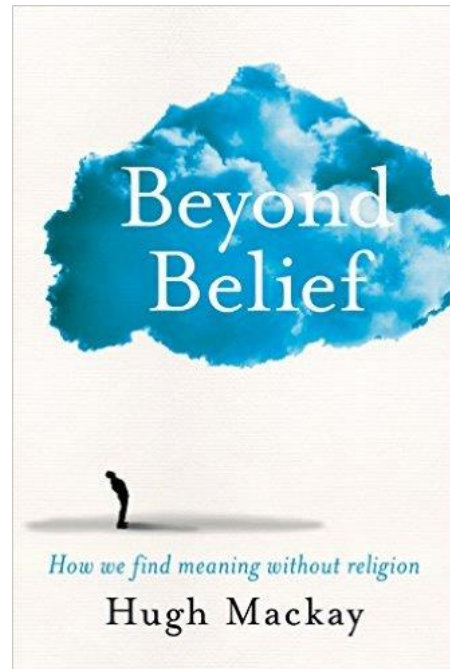


Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief; How we find meaning, with or without religion* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2016) ISBN 978-1-74353-485-4 Paperback, 280 pages. \$33AUD.

Two-thirds of Australians believe in the existence of God or a higher power, yet fewer than one in ten Australians attend church weekly. Even many of us who are involved in church are rethinking our whole approach to faith and belief. What is the nature of our various perspectives on religion and spirituality? What lies at the heart of the dominant ambivalence about the church? Why is the 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR) label increasingly popular? As a Baptist church pastor these are questions that I am curious about. Moreover, as a sincere seeker of truth and God, these are questions I am passionately interested in.



Hugh Mackay's most recent book, *Beyond Belief*, is among the most intriguing books I have read for a long time. As a social researcher, this is Mackay's eleventh book describing and analysing the hearts and souls of Australians and our cultural viewpoints. It is his first book that focuses mainly on Australia's religiosity - or lack thereof - and points in alternate directions that people are exploring. It explores the different things people mean when they refer to 'God', how they read and understand the Bible (or how they are mystified by it), what draws people to belong to church (or more often not), and what other forms of spirituality people pursue to seek meaning or simply cope with life.

For church leaders it is a call to offer authentic community and meaningful ritual, compassionate pastoral care and relevant teaching. There are insightful comments from people who have left church because they found it boring, alien, exclusive, hypocritical, chauvinistic or intellectually insulting. Just as insightful, however, are the experiences of people who identify as SBNR. Mackay describes a smorgasbord of forms of spirituality (yoga, meditation, mindfulness, pilgrimage, retreats) that people experiment with. They often describe their spirituality as inspiring a compassionate life, non-judgmental outlook, and non-dogmatic acceptance of others.

For example, as a boy 'Otto' left a church service in a fit of giggles, but later in life he had profound experiences on a Buddhist retreat and during Yoga that helped him realise his 'oneness' with those around him. He describes the effect he experienced:

A peace that makes you feel connected to everything, so that there is all compassion and no judgment. When you look at people in the

street, their troubles are your troubles - even whether they get across the street safely or whatever - because you feel part of everything. How can there be judgment if there is no separation between us? It is the difference between compassion and pity but more than that: it's to do with interconnectivity of all things.

A large part of the value of the book is that it draws on Mackay's interviews and focus groups of Australians over many years, and offers this kind of snapshot of their experiences and beliefs.

Mackay describes himself as a Christian agnostic - unsure of God's existence but sympathetic to Christian values. In parts the book reads as an apology for healthy, mature agnosticism. But he helpfully suggests three tests of reasonableness for any belief for people in search of something, or wanting to evaluate their own position: (1) Does it make sense? (2) Does it point to a better world? (3) Does it matter, or does its truth make a difference to how we live? He describes how he and others use these questions, and considers how beliefs about God (and more specifically miracles, prayer, creation, resurrection and the afterlife) have changed over the last hundred years.

Mackay offers a high view of human nature and appeals for moral and ethical frameworks that move people beyond materialism and the self-absorbed mind. He concludes that the compassionate mind will help put the stresses of personal ambition, seeking wealth, power and status, and our determination to be always right into proper perspective. The bumper sticker "Loving-kindness is my religion" captures something of the typical ethos of SBNR, but could also describe compassionate Christianity. In fact, Mackay prompted me to wonder whether we could describe our local church's aspirations with the subtext SBNR, perhaps similarly motivated to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for 'religionless Christianity'.

Beyond Belief is not written primarily for Christians who find themselves at home in church nor for committed atheists, yet both may find it interesting reading to help them understand the changing religious landscape of Australians. It is essential reading for church leaders eager to understand the spirituality of probably most people in our communities. Moreover, anyone who considers themselves basically Christian but is unsure about the church or its doctrines is likely to find this is a helpful book to make sense of their search for meaning: "a book about people's quest for meaning in a society that has lost its appetite for conventional religion." (p.3)