

Religion in Australia

Religion has been defined by the Australian High Court as “a complex of beliefs and practices which point to a set of values and an understanding of the meaning of existence”. The faith communities that practice religion in Australia exhibit many different structures of belief, practice and organisation that frame their attitudes to life as a whole.

In Australia, religion is usually associated with belief in God (most commonly in Jewish, Christian or Islamic terms). Religion also includes an awareness of the sacred, supernatural or divine (e.g. Buddhism or Hinduism). Others seek a higher truth or social well-being in different ways (e.g. secular humanism or socialism). Sociologists tend to view religion as a social construction designed to give meaning to the causes, consequences and purpose of existence and to offer comfort in the face of life’s uncertainties.

The development of a multifaith Australia

Prior to European settlement, Indigenous Australians had their own religious or spiritual belief system embedded in a complex oral tradition based on ‘the Dreamtime’. The Dreamtime explains the origin of the land and its people; it embraces creation stories, present day reality and ancestral influence. This spiritual outlook continues to be reflected in Indigenous mythology, ceremonial life and artistic traditions.

European settlement in Australia brought with it chaplains of the Church of England (now the Anglican Church). Other churches arrived as transportation and immigration continued and by the early 19th century many Christian groups were represented including Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists. Rivalry, notably between Irish Catholics and English Protestants, affected Australian life until the latter part of the 20th century. Despite these rivalries, Christianity has remained the dominant religious tradition in Australia.

Jews first came to Australia aboard the First Fleet in 1788 and after World War II, many more arrived as refugees. The first evidence of Buddhist settlement dates to 1848 when, following the discovery of gold, Chinese miners arrived in their thousands. Immigration from South East Asia since the Vietnam War has also increased the numbers of Buddhists in Australia. Muslims and Hindus were brought to Australia throughout the 19th century for cotton and sugar plantation and as cameleers, divers and sailors. Muslim numbers have increased steadily in the wake of civil strife in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan and due to immigration from Turkey, Egypt and the Middle East.

Changing religious affiliations

In 1901, 40 per cent of the Australian population identified themselves as Anglican, 23 per cent Catholic and 34 per cent ‘other Christian’. Approximately 1 per cent identified as ‘non-Christian’. The first census in 1911 showed 96 per cent of Australians identified themselves as Christian.

The change in the white Australia policy after the end of World War II led to a flow of migrants from different countries and to considerable diversification of religious affiliations in Australia. Orthodox Christians came from Greece and the Middle East, Catholics from Italy, Hungary, Poland and Vietnam. Alongside these churches, Pentecostal independent Chinese churches have emerged. In Melbourne and Sydney today there are churches of every Christian tradition – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Pentecostal.

Table 1 (on the next page) shows religious affiliations at each census since Federation.

The most striking changes over the last two census periods (1996 and 2001) have been the growth of Hindu (120 per cent), Buddhist (110 per cent) and Islamic (69 per cent) affiliations, though their total numbers remain small. It should be noted that religion is often used as an identifying label unrelated to religious practice; for example,

THE AUSTRALIAN COLLABORATION

Table 1: Major Religious Affiliations

Census year	Christianity				Other religions	'No religion'	Not stated/ inadequately described	Total
	Anglican	Catholic	Other	Total				
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	'000
1901	39.7	22.7	33.7	96.1	1.4	0.4	(a)2.0	3,773.8
1911	38.4	22.4	35.1	95.9	0.8	0.4	(a)2.9	4,455.0
1921	43.7	21.7	31.6	96.9	0.7	0.5	(a)1.9	5,435.7
1933	38.7	19.6	28.1	86.4	0.4	0.2	12.9	6,629.8
1947	39.0	20.9	28.1	88.0	0.5	0.3	11.1	7,579.4
1954	37.9	22.9	28.5	89.4	0.6	0.3	9.7	8,986.5
1961	34.9	24.9	28.4	88.3	0.7	0.4	10.7	10,508.2
1966	33.5	26.2	28.5	88.2	0.7	0.8	10.3	11,599.5
1971	31.0	27.0	28.2	86.2	0.8	6.7	6.2	12,755.6
1976	27.7	25.7	25.2	78.6	1.0	8.3	11.4	13,548.4
1981	26.1	26.0	24.3	76.4	1.4	10.8	11.4	14,576.3
1986	23.9	26.0	23.0	73.0	2.0	12.7	12.4	15,602.2
1991	23.8	27.3	22.9	74.0	2.6	12.9	10.5	16,850.3
1996	22.0	27.0	21.9	70.9	3.5	16.6	9.0	17,752.8
2001	20.7	26.6	20.7	68.0	4.9	15.5	11.7	18,769.2
2006	18.7	25.8	19.3	63.8	5.6	18.7	11.9	19,855.3

(a) Includes 'object to state'.

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing.

people who identify as Jewish may not necessarily be practising Jews.

The table shows that a growing number of Australians do not identify themselves as belonging to a religious institution (approximately 19 per cent state they have 'no religion' in 2006, compared to 16 per cent in 2001), although they may belong to humanist organisations or practise semi-religious activities (e.g. astrology). The Christian Research Association states that this is "indicative that religion is increasingly seen as something which captures the attention and imagination of individuals, not just well-defined and organised communities with long traditions."

Constitutional and legislative protection for religious practice

The Australian Constitution states that: "The Commonwealth of Australia shall not make any law establishing

any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth". This reflects both the protection of religious practice from state interference and a stronger separation of religion from the state than in most other Western nations including the UK and USA.

The Racial Discrimination Act 1975, giving force to the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, makes racial discrimination unlawful in Australia. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) has responsibility for investigating discrimination complaints based on religious (and other) grounds. State legislation provides further protection (e.g. the Victorian Government's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001) against the incitement of hatred against religious groups.

Religion and Australian society

Over the past half-century there has been a decline in formal religious affiliation, a decline matched and sometimes exceeded in other western countries with the marked exception of the USA. The Australian Community Survey (1998) revealed that while 10 per cent of respondents said that 'religion' was the single most important category for describing who they are and a further 11 per cent said that religion was 'extremely important' to their identity, 43 per cent said it was 'not important at all'. Other identifying markers, such as gender, occupation, income, education and nationality have greater importance than 'religion' according to this survey. This does not necessarily reflect a lack of personal spirituality, but may instead indicate suspicion of organised religion and less engagement with churches, synagogues and other religious bodies in Australia.

Three issues stand out today. First, despite the above findings and despite predictions of decline and disappearance, religion and spirituality seem to have gained in prominence in Australia recently, as seen by the growth of the non-traditional Christian churches such as the Hillsong Church. Possible causes might include reactions to globalisation, capitalism and free trade, cultural, ethnic and religious dispersals, the search for identity in a technological world, and increased mobility and communication.

Second, continuing terrorist attacks worldwide have led to some unpleasant anti-Muslim reactions. After the September 11 2001 attacks, religious leaders reported abuse, physical assaults and hate mail against Muslim people. Within a fortnight of the attacks, the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission received over fifty complaints of incidents, such as vandalism, women's *hijabs* being ripped off and Muslims being refused service at banks.

Third and on the positive side, there have been many efforts to strengthen relationships between different religious groupings. The Australian Council of Churches reshaped itself in 1994 as the National Council of Churches in Australia to include the Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches. The Council of Christians and Jews is also helping to improve understanding and to sharpen awareness of anti-Semitism among Christian churches.

The establishment of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils has provided a forum for dialogue between the different streams of Islam and a public voice for Muslim communities. Other inter-faith organisations and networks

such as the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews, the World Conference of Religions for Peace, the Australian Partnership of Ethnic and Religious Organizations and the Council for Multicultural Australia have also emerged. There is therefore a concerted effort being made to cross religious boundaries, and to encourage greater tolerance between religious communities.

Useful sources

Desmond Cahill, Gary Bouma, Hass Dellal and Michael Leahy (2004), *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia*. http://www.amf.net.au/rsch_research_religionDiversityCohesion.shtml This report was produced by the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and the Australian Multicultural Foundation, in association with the World Conference of Religions for Peace, RMIT University and Monash University. It examines the relationship between religion and cultural diversity in Australia.

Jupp, J. (Ed.) (2001). *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Australian Nation, its People and their Origins*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press. This landmark encyclopedia documents the history of Australian settlement, with discussion of religious and cultural diversity.

Pattel-Gray, A. (Ed.) (1996). *Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future*, Blackburn, VIC: HarperCollins. *Aboriginal Spirituality* is a pioneer collection of essays by Indigenous theologians.

Saeed, A., & Akbarzadeh, S. (Eds) (2001). *Muslim Communities in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press. This edited book explores the history of Muslim people in Australia, outlining current challenges for Muslims living in this country.

Thompson, R. (2002). *Religion in Australia: A History*, South Melbourne: Oxford University Press. *Religion in Australia* examines how religious beliefs and institutions have influenced Australian politics and life.

See also the National Council of Churches in Australia and its Faith & Unity Commission, and Social Justice Network <http://www.ncca.org.au/>

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