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 a belief in God (for instance, as in the Jewish, Christian or Islamic traditions). Religion also includes an awareness of the sacred, supernatural or divine (as in Buddhism or Hinduism, for example). While religion is often regarded as a path to moral truth or social well-being, non-religious people may aspire to these goals in different ways (for example, via secular humanism). 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

For more than 40,000 years prior to European settlement, Indigenous Australians followed belief systems which were embedded in complex oral traditions and based on the forces of nature, ancestral influence and reverence for the land. Integral to Indigenous belief systems were Creation stories, notably Aboriginal stories of the ‘Dreamtime’, which combined knowledge, customary law and beliefs about the origin of the land and its people. A belief in the interconnectedness of spiritual, human and natural phenomena continues to permeate Indigenous mythology, ceremonial life and artistic traditions. The first known contacts between Indigenous people and outsiders with different belief systems reach back to the sixteenth century, when Muslim fishermen and traders from the east Indonesian archipelago visited mainland Australia.

European settlement in Australia brought with it chaplains of the Church of England (now the Anglican church). Other Christian churches arrived as transportation and immigration continued so that by the early nineteenth century, the various Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Baptist and Methodist faiths were all present in Australia. Christianity has remained the dominant religious tradition in Australia, with sectarian rivalry - notably between Irish Catholics and English Protestants - being a feature of Australian life until the latter part of the twentieth century.

Jewish people first came to Australia aboard the First Fleet in 1788 and many more arrived as refugees after World War II. The first evidence of Buddhist settlement dates to 1848 when Chinese miners arrived in Australia following the discovery of gold. Immigration from South East Asia since the Vietnam War has also increased the numbers of Buddhists in Australia. Muslims and Hindus came to Australia throughout the nineteenth century to work on cotton and sugar plantations and as cameleers, divers and sailors. Muslim numbers have increased steadily in more recent times as a result of civil strife in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan and due to immigration, more generally, from Turkey, Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.

Changing religious affiliations

According to the ABS, in 1901, the year of Federation. 40 per cent of the Australian population identified themselves as Anglican, 23 per cent as Catholic and 34 per cent as ‘other Christian’. Approximately 1 per cent identified themselves as ‘non-Christian’. Similarly, the first census in 1911 showed that 96 per cent of Australians identified themselves as Christian.

After the end of World War II, and with changes to the White Australia policy in that period, there was a flow of migrants from a number of different countries and a considerable diversification of religious affiliation in Australia. Orthodox Christians came from Greece and the Middle East, and Catholics came from Italy, Hungary, Poland and Vietnam. Alongside these churches, Pentecostal, Independent Chinese and other ethnic churches have also emerged. In Melbourne and Sydney today there are churches of every Christian tradition.
Table 1 shows religious affiliations at each census since Federation.

Among the most striking findings of the 2011 Census is the growth in the number of people affiliating with non-Christian religions, which rose from 4.9 per cent of the total population in 2001, to 7.2 per cent in 2011. Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism were the fastest growing of these faiths, with increases of 189, 69 and 48 per cent respectively. These trends reflect changes in the countries of origin of recent immigrants, among whom these religions are more highly represented than in the total population of Australia. It should be noted, however, that religion is often used as an identifying label unrelated to religious practice; for example, people who identify as Jewish may not necessarily be practising Jews.

Other key developments have been the continuation of a long-standing trend of decline in Christian affiliation (from 96 per cent in 1911, to 68 per cent in 2001 and 61 per cent in 2011) and the growing proportion of Australians who identify as having 'no religion' (from 15 per cent in 2001 to 22 per cent in 2011). Among the Christian faiths, Anglicanism recorded the most significant decline, from 21 per cent in 2001 to 17 per cent in 2011, while Pentecostal affiliation rose from 1 to 1.1 per cent in the same period. Young people (aged 15-34) were the most likely to profess no faith, at 28 per cent in 2011.

Table 1: Major Religious Affiliations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>Anglican (Christian)</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total (Christianity)</th>
<th>Other religions</th>
<th>'No religion'</th>
<th>Not stated/ inadequately described</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>96.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>(a)2.0</td>
<td>3,773.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>(a)2.9</td>
<td>4,455.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>(a)1.9</td>
<td>5,435.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>6,629.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>7,579.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>8,986.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
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<td>28.4</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
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<td>28.5</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>11,599.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>27.0</td>
<td>28.2</td>
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<td>0.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>12,755.6</td>
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<td>1976</td>
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<td>25.2</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
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<td>24.3</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
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<td>73.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>22.9</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>27.0</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>17,752.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
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<td>26.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>15.5</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>19,855.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>(a) 9.4</td>
<td>21,507.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Includes respondents who objected to stating their religious affiliation. Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing.

Please note that data for 2011 was sourced from the ABS article Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census.
Constitutional and legislative protection for religious practice

Religious freedom is safeguarded by section 116 of the Australian Constitution, which 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.

In Australia, individuals are free to express a diversity of views, as long as they do not incite religious hatred. 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 Australian Human Rights Commission has responsibility for investigating discrimination complaints based on religious (and other) grounds. State legislation (e.g. the Victorian Government’s Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001) provides further protection against religious vilification.

Legislative protections have been invoked in the wake of worldwide terrorist attacks which led to some offensive anti-Muslim reactions in Australia. After the September 11 attacks in the USA in 2001, Islamic religious leaders reported abuse, physical assaults and hate mail against Muslim people in Australia. 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.

The place of religion in Australian society

The decline in formal religious affiliation in Australia over the past half-century has been matched and in some cases exceeded in other Western countries, with the marked exception of the USA.

The Australian Community Survey (1998) revealed that religion is less important to Australians than other identifying markers (such as gender, occupation, income, education and nationality). According to that survey, while 10 per cent of respondents stated 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’.

Studies by the Christian Research Association indicate that over the last twenty years Australia has witnessed aging church congregations and a substantial decline in regular churchgoing, particularly among churches that depend on cultural heritage as the basis for attendance. Conversely, some churches with alternative attendance models and different organisational structures have been growing. These findings suggest that the nature of Christian faith – and perhaps religious faith more broadly – is undergoing a transformation. It may be that many Australians are growing wary of traditional organised religions and their formal institutions.

In 2008 the US-based Search Institute’s Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence published a comparative study on young people’s attitudes towards spirituality in eight countries. Relative to young people in other countries, young Australians were seen to be less dedicated to spiritual development. The study found that 28 per cent of Australian youth – four times the international average – disavowed belief in a spiritual dimension to life. Also, Australian youth were considerably less likely to have had regular conversations with friends about the meaning of life, God, faith, or ‘why we are on earth.’

Despite the above findings, there is some evidence that certain forms of religion and spirituality have recently gained prominence in Australian society. The growth of non-traditional Christian churches such as the Hillsong Church, and the continued expression of diverse forms of non-traditional personal spirituality and spiritual community, have many possible causes, including, globalisation, capitalism and free trade; cultural, ethnic and religious dispersals; the search for identity in a technological world; and increased mobility and communication.

Similarly, the last two decades have seen the proliferation of private or non-government schools in Australia, 90 per cent of which are religious. This growth has been defined by a shift towards low fees and non-traditional faith bases, in particular, towards fundamentalist Christian and Islamic schools. Before the 1980s about 90 per cent of non-government schools were either Catholic or Anglican.
reflecting a long-standing tradition in Australia, whereas by 2006 only 70 per cent of schools were in this category. The growth in this new type of private schooling was enabled by the policies of the Howard Coalition Government (1996-2007), which secured new funding for the private school sector primarily through large scale cuts to Tertiary Education.

Public attitudes to different religious groups and interfaith dialogue

The 2012 report ‘Mapping Social Cohesion’ reviewed findings from a large-scale survey that considered Australian attitudes towards religion. The report indicated that nearly 25 per cent of respondents attested to negative attitudes towards Muslims. By contrast, negative attitudes to other religious groups were far less prevalent, with only 5 and 3 per cent of respondents indicating negative attitudes to Christians and Buddhists respectively.

Encouragingly, there have are increasing efforts to strengthen relationships between different religious groups. The National Council of Churches in Australia represents a collaborative relationship between 19 Christian churches of different denominations. This organisation has come together with the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils and with the Executive Council of Australian Jewry to build understanding and harmony via the National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews. Similarly, the Australian Council of Christians and Jews promotes education and dialogue to improve mutual understanding and to heighten awareness of anti-Semitism and other forms of prejudice. Other significant interfaith organisations have also emerged. The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations facilitates collaborative work among representatives of major faith bodies and national-level multicultural community organisations. The Australian Intercultural Society works to engender community harmony and inclusion and to improve interfaith and intercultural relations. These organisations exemplify the concerted efforts being made to cross religious boundaries and to encourage greater tolerance among religious communities.

Useful sources

Australian Broadcasting Corporation. *Buddhism*, available at: http://www.abc.net.au/religion/stories/s796474.htm This informative article from the ABC Religion archive provides an overview of the origin of Buddhism and its history in Australia. It also sets out the key movements and beliefs that characterise Buddhism.


AuSSA is a biennial survey which began in 2003.


This fact sheet provides a short overview of the history of Jewish people in Australia, together with a set of themed links to related resources held by the National Archives.


The webpage offers a Project Report together with a range of commissioned papers by experts.


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.


*Search Institute Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, available at: http://www.search-institute.org/spiritual-development

This website includes links to NCCA Departments including the Faith & Unity Commission, Social Justice Network and Interfaith Dialogue.

This website publishes research on the role of faith, religion, and ethics, and policy making in Australia.

**Author**

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