

Religion in Australia

Matters of faith are again becoming foreground issues in Australia. What are the realities of our religious beliefs?

Who believes what?

Figures from the 2006 census show that the majority of the Australian population – 64% – still identify themselves as Christians; 26% are Roman Catholic, 19% Anglican and other Christian 19%. Non-Christian religions account for 5% of the population. Australia's three most common non-Christian religious affiliations are Buddhism (2.1% of the population), Islam (1.7%) and Hinduism (0.7%). Of these faiths, Hinduism experienced the fastest proportional growth since 1996, more than doubling to 150,000, while the number of Buddhists doubled to 420,000.

When was Christianity introduced?

Officially in 1788, with the arrival of Church of England chaplains on the First Fleet. Other faiths soon followed as transportation continued. These were predominantly Roman Catholics (mainly Irish convicts), and Anglicans among the British convicts and their jailers. Methodists were also represented through the Tolpuddle Martyrs and their sympathisers. During the 1800s European settlers brought their own traditional Christian churches such as the Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Baptist variations. By the beginning of the 20th century Australia was largely Anglo-Celtic and adhered to traditional Christian faiths. In 1901 40% of the population was Anglican, 23% Catholic, 34% "other Christian" and 1% declared non-Christian beliefs. The first national census, conducted by the Commonwealth of Australia in 1911, confirmed 96% of Australians identified themselves as Christian.

When did other religions arrive?

Muslim fishermen from Makassar in Indonesia who visited north-western Australia brought Islam to our shores long before 1788. They dug graves for comrades who'd died on the journey, burying them facing Mecca. The history of Judaism in Australia goes back to the First Fleet, with the transportation of eight Jewish convicts. Hindus and Muslims came to Australia throughout the 19th century to labour in agriculture and as cameleers, divers and sailors. The gold rush of the mid-1800s brought Buddhism with the arrival of thousands of Chinese miners and traders. But it was the immense increase in immigration immediately following WWII that triggered a rapid diversification of religious belief in Australia. Orthodox Christians arrived from Greece; growing numbers of Catholics migrated from Italy; Jewish refugees and "displaced persons" came from across Europe, escaping the Holocaust. After the Vietnam War immigrants from Southeast Asia boosted Buddhist numbers. From the early 1970s, the Muslim population increased in the wake of conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.



Almost half the population doesn't pray

What about the non-believers?

Remarkably, it wasn't until 1971 that the "no religion" option was introduced in the national census. This saw a seven-fold increase from the previous census in the number of Australians stating they held no religious belief whatsoever. That percentage has steadily increased, with the 2006 figures showing 19% of Australians now identify as non-believers. A 2008 survey comparing religious expression in 21 countries found 48% of Australians do not pray, with 52% rarely attending a religious service. A third of Australians said they do not believe in God, or an afterlife.

So which faith prevails?

In theory, none. Australia is a secular democracy, separating church from state and seeking impartiality between faiths. Chapter V (116) of the Constitution states: *The Commonwealth shall not make any law for 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.* Our legal, legislative and administrative processes operate independently of any religion. Officially, no single faith is given primary influence in the structure or administration of Australian society.

But in practice?

Australia is a nation of "Christianised secularism". Our laws and customs are strongly influenced by Christian beliefs, with many public holidays adhering to the Christian calendar. Both chambers of the nation's parliament begin every sitting day with The Lord's Prayer. Last year's World Youth Day – a Catholic festival – received state and federal government funding of about \$140m. A recent Melbourne University study showed religious rhetoric used by federal MPs had increased by 15% between 2000 and 2005, but eased to 13% in 2006. It found that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is the politician who most often cites his Christian beliefs in public speeches. Former prime minister John Howard explicitly identified Australian values with Christian values, saying: "The Christian religion is the greatest force for good and progress, and the dignity of the individual in this nation." In response, Rudd said: "We will not for one moment stand idly by while the Liberals ... assert that God has become some kind of wholly owned subsidiary of political conservatism in this country."

Before the 2007 election, both Howard and Rudd made video appearances at the Hillsong megachurch in Sydney. This demonstrated a firm break with the past, when Australian politicians kept their faith under wraps and were careful to preserve a distance between church and state.

Australia's religious mix

- **Christianity** There are more than 12.5 million Christians in Australia. The largest church groups, in order of membership, are the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Presbyterian and Reformed.
- **Judaism** An estimated 110,000 practising Jews now reside in Australia. Melbourne hosts the largest Jewish population (60,000), followed by Sydney (45,000).
- **Buddhism** Buddhism is the largest non-Christian religion in Australia, with 2% of the population on the path to enlightenment.
- **Hinduism** Followers of Hinduism remain a religious minority in Australia, with around 150,000 adherents of the faith.
- **Islam** There are now about 350,000 Muslims in Australia. Since 9/11 and the Bali bombing, Australia's relationship with Islam has been uneasy, and there have been instances of animosity towards Muslims and "people of Middle Eastern appearance".
- **No religion** Australia is one of the least devout nations, with religion not playing a central part in many people's lives. A survey conducted in 2008 by The Christian Science Monitor ranked young Australians as the least religious in the world.



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