

## RELIGION: *STUDIES OF RELIGION*

### Changes in Australia's Religious Landscape Post 1945

In the twenty-first-century Australians encounter a world of religious diversity and constant change. Religious belief is an integral part of the fabric of society, and helps shape the world we find ourselves in. Since 1945, Australia's religious landscape has seen great change. This change has come about due to immigration, secularisation, New Age religions, and denominational switching. Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue has also come about as a consequence of these changes. This analysis will describe and analyse the changes in Australia's religious landscape with a focus on these areas.

Immigration could be the factor that has contributed most to the changes in Australia's religious landscape. The impact of migration from Europe after World War II led to an increase in affiliates of the Orthodox Churches, the forming of reformed bodies, and the growth in the number of Catholics, as well as the formation of ethnic parishes in many other denominations. Immigration from South-East Asia, the Middle East and Pacific nations has expanded Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim numbers considerably, while also adding to the ethnic diversity in Christian groups. This is demonstrated in the table below.

12.27 RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

	1996		2001		Change %
	'000	%	'000	%	
Christianity					
Anglican	3,903.3	22.0	3,881.2	20.7	-0.6
Baptist	295.2	1.7	309.2	1.6	4.8
Catholic	4,799.0	27.0	5,001.6	26.6	4.2
Churches of Christ	75.0	0.4	61.3	0.3	-18.2
Jehovah's Witness	83.4	0.5	81.1	0.4	-2.8
Lutheran	250.0	1.4	250.4	1.3	0.2
Orthodox	497.0	2.8	529.4	2.8	6.5
Pentecostal	174.7	1.0	194.6	1.0	11.4
Presbyterian and Reformed	675.5	3.8	637.5	3.4	-5.6
Salvation Army	74.1	0.4	71.4	0.4	-3.7
Uniting Church	1,334.9	7.5	1,248.7	6.7	-6.5
Other Christian	420.6	2.4	497.9	2.7	18.4
Buddhism	199.8	1.1	357.8	1.9	79.1
Hinduism	67.3	0.4	95.5	0.5	41.9
Islam	200.9	1.1	281.6	1.5	40.2
Judaism	79.8	0.4	84.0	0.4	5.2
Other religions	68.6	0.4	92.4	0.5	34.6
No religion	2,948.9	16.6	2,906.0	15.5	-1.5
Not stated/inadequately described	1,604.7	9.0	2,187.7	11.7	36.3
Total	17,752.8	100.0	18,769.2	100.0	5.7

Source: ABS data available on request, 1996 and 2001 Censuses of Population and Housing.

This increase in immigration has caused Australia to evolve into an open and tolerant multicultural multifaith society. Non-Christian religions made up less than 1% of the population until the time of the 1976 census. The emergence of non-Christian religious groups was particularly marked in the period between the 1981 and 1991 census returns, over which time the number reporting a non-Christian religion more than doubled. These changes in religious identity reflect changes in religious communities in Australia. Jews were the first migrant group to break into the secure monoculture of white European Australia. Between 1933 and 1954, the Australian Jewish community doubled in size from 23 000 to 48 000 and radically changed its character, becoming a considerable challenge to the local community. This was because of Polish immigration, which separated the Jewish community into those that supported Zionism and those who opposed it.

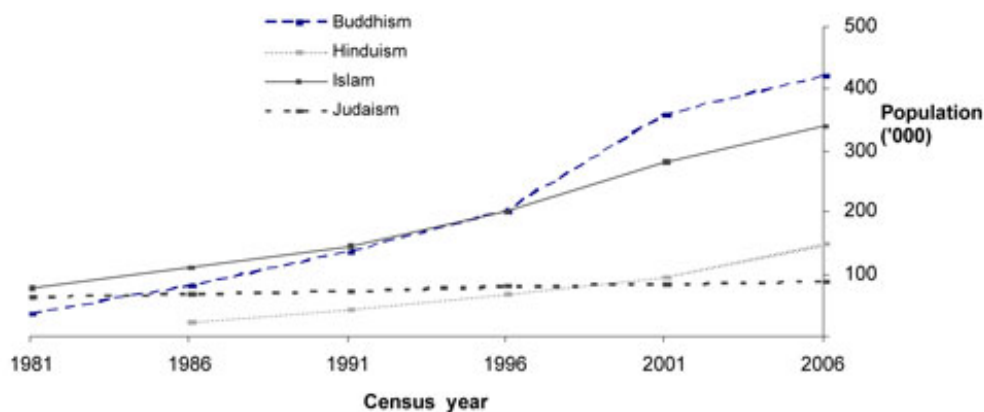
Buddhism and other Eastern religions and their impact on Australia is also determined by immigration. Between 1901, when the Chinese were forced to leave, and 1947, the number of Buddhists in Australia dropped from over 3000 to less than 500.<sup>1</sup> Buddhist societies continued as small groups, but Asian immigration in the 1970s led to the development of a number of ethnic Buddhist communities. In New South Wales alone, these now include Burmese, Chinese, Khmer,

<sup>1</sup> Figures cited by Paul Croucher, *A History of Buddhism in Australia 1848-1988*, Sydney: UNSWP, 1989.

Korean, Lao, multiethnic, Sri Lankan, Thai, Tibetan, and Vietnamese communities, most of who have built an autonomous temple and monastery. Buddhism also continues to attract Westerners, which contributes to the increase in its adherents. Vietnamese Buddhists recognise the superficial attraction of their faith to those that love the exotic, and see this as a way to 'bridge the gap of understanding and communication between the East who are the new settlers, and the West who are the local people'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly to Buddhism, Hindu communities did not occur in Australia until after the relaxation of the White Australia Policy in the mid-1960s. This increase of Hindus in Australia has led to Hindu communities, who have built temple societies and temples which serve as the focus for community identity and a place to nurture traditional culture. The first Hindu shrine in Australia was opened in Auburn in 1979.

Islam is a fast-growing religion in Australia. Between 1947 and 1971, Muslims increased from 2 700 to 22 300. The founding community of Islam in Australia consisted of Afghans, however Muslims have immigrated to Australia from a range of countries, including Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon and Yugoslavia. This is due to several reasons. Lebanese migrants, for example, began arriving in larger numbers after the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975. Mosques play a significant role in both the community identity and the religious practice of Muslims, and since the 1970s Muslim communities have developed many mosques, as well as Islamic centres and schools, and made vibrant contributions to the multicultural fabric of Australian society.

Growth in Australia's non-Christian religions 1981-2006



Post-war immigration also brought changes in the Christian population of Australia. In many ways the most significant of the new Christian arrivals were the Orthodox churches. The Greek Orthodox Church is the largest Orthodox Church in Australia; however Orthodox Christianity struggled in post-war Australia until the 1970s. In 1986 an Orthodox Theological College was established, allowing new Orthodox clergy to be trained. In addition to this, Greeks built and established churches, cultural associations, language schools, regional brotherhoods and other organisations to keep their traditional culture alive. Also, as a result of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa, there is a considerable number of Oriental Christians, which have added to the multicultural religious landscape of Australia. Post-war immigration also impacted the Catholic Church, which is made up of a large number of foreign-born members. The 1986 census counted more than one million overseas-born Catholics, making this the largest overseas-born religious group. Catholics also made up the most ethnically diverse faith, with 22 countries providing at least 1% of the total overseas-born Catholic population, and Italians making up about one quarter of this total.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *United Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation*, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1981–2006 Census of Population and Housing

<sup>4</sup> *Religion In Australia*, 1991, ABS catalogue no. 2510.0, p.7.

This idea of a multicultural and multifaith society has led to the integration of such cultures into religious services. The Middleton Uniting Church, for instance, has undergone great change in the structure of their services from 1965 to 2006, demonstrated by the difference in the church's signs from these years. In 1965 there was one service and one minister, with other gatherings like Ladies Church Aid, a youth group, and Men's Brotherhood, which reveal the monoculture of Australia at the time. In 2006, however, in addition to the "Sunday Service" there is a "Chinese Service" and a "Tongan Service", with three ministers, to demonstrate the integration of other cultures into the church community, and thus the growth of the church because of this multiculturalism.

Another aspect of the way Australia's religious landscape has changed is the rise of secularisation. The 1960s and 1970s brought a dramatic change in the values and attitudes of Australian society. It was an era of both political and social innovation, and heightened spiritual awareness throughout the West, with great issues of the age like women's liberation, Aboriginal land rights, the sexual revolution, the threat of nuclear weapons, world hunger, and environmental concerns. Widely perceived as out of touch with the mainstream of Australian society, the prominence of Christian churches in their influence on society decreased, being replaced by new voices to speak out on ethical and political issues. Between 1960 and the present all the major denominational traditions in Australia experienced a decline. In 1971, there was a significant number of people who declared themselves to have no religion. In 1966, these people represented 0.8% of the population. In 1971, this grew to 6.7%, and has continually grown since. Not only this, but churchgoers were attending much less frequently, and were no longer sending their children to Sunday school. However, it is argued that, contrary to common belief, Australia is still a religious society. It cannot be said that Australia is essentially secular and irreligious when 57.9% of Australians claim to be religious persons and only 4.5% claim to be atheists, and when 85.6% of Australians identify with some religious group.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it is suggested that the change in churchgoers was not due to outright unbelief, but because by the 1970s belief coupled with a secular lifestyle had become a nonproblematic option in society, leading to an increase in people who choose this option.

In 1996, the novelist John Marsden asked a hundred prominent Australians to describe their beliefs and he published their answers in a book titled *This I Believe*. It showed that Australians hold very diverse beliefs, but with confidence and conviction. Religion was also depicted as another source of personal therapy. A decade later, Marsden produced a sequel entitled *I Believe This*, where he asked another hundred Australians (including some younger people who are not yet eminent) the same question. There was no more consistency among responses in this sequel, and a large focus on 'believing' in untheological ideals, such as Nick Earls, who believes in "the pursuit of happiness", Steven Heathcote, who believes in "the power of belief itself", Francois Klaus, who believes in "a French bulldog's smile", or Scott Hicks, who believes "the rhythm of your own drumbeat is the only one worth following."

This movement away from theological ideals is due to the rise of science and philosophy that had reduced confidence in theistic convictions. Such science and philosophy suggests several things about theism and atheism: that theism is irrational and unreasonable, that theisms and religions are dangerous, that atheism is a sign of human maturity, that theism is one explanation among many, and that there is a preference for agnosticism. This has led to an increase in secular worldviews, shaping Australia's religious landscape into one of both belief and unbelief.

Secularism was not the only consequence of new values and attitudes in Australian society. Once religion had become an open choice, Australians started to experiment with a wide range of beliefs. The growth of meditation and spirituality centres provides evidence of the change and regeneration of Australian religious and spiritual life. This form of spirituality is called 'New Age'. New Age spirituality and religion are often inspired by paganisms and find awesome power that demands respect in the forces and beauty of nature. The number of Australians identifying with 'nature religions' increased by 130% to 23 000 between the 1996 and 2001 censuses, mainly adopted by

---

<sup>5</sup> Bouma, G., Dixon, B. (1986) *The Religious Factor in Australian Life*.

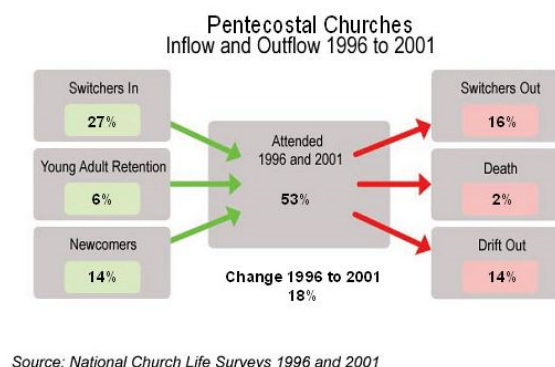
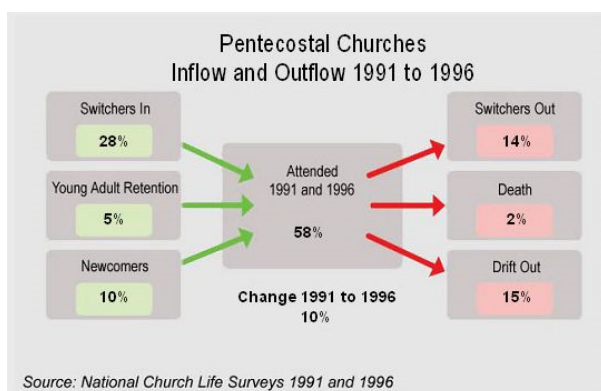
those who rejected the affluent society created by the post-war generation. Such religions have also been particularly attractive to women who are unhappy with the patriarchal paternalism of most forms of organised religion in Australia.

Not only is the interest in spirituality evident in the census but also it has spawned an industry and substantial commerce. Spirituality bookstores are now morphing into supermarkets, and spirituality service providers offer literature, candles, incense, art, massages, meditation, or lectures. Advertising space in newspapers once taken by churches is now filled with invitations to meditate, use crystals, practise various forms of alternative health therapies, attend the lectures of gurus, and other services and products designed to improve a person’s religious and spiritual life. In addition to this, there are New Age churches being established. The first Church of Old Religion in Australia was established in 1981, promoted as “a religion which worships the forces of nature”.<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect of changes in religion in Australia is denominational switching. One of the findings of 1991 National Church Life Survey was the high degree to which Protestants in Australia are prepared to switch denominations throughout their lifetime: 29% of the responders in the survey had switched denomination in the last five years. The NCLS identified the key reasons that account for inflow and outflow from the Christian denominations:

- Attenders switching in from other denominations
- Newcomers joining the church for the first time or rejoining after an absence of a number of years
- The birth of children and retention of children in church life
- Switching out to other denominations
- Decreasing their frequency of attendance or ceasing to attend altogether
- Death

Denominational switching implies that the switcher places a high priority on personal spiritual fulfilment and a relatively low priority on denominational loyalty. Some Protestant church leaders fear that this may have a corrosive effect, through neglect, on their various churches’ distinctiveness. However, denominational loyalty is relatively high among Catholics, thought to be due to Australian Catholic Education. Pentecostal Churches have the greatest number of switchers into their denomination. This is demonstrated by the diagrams below.



The pattern of overall growth in attendance is strong and positive, with an increase in the percentage of change. The increase demonstrates that Pentecostal churches are becoming more balanced, however Pentecostalism is still among the highest levels of people who drift out. This could be due to how this denomination is still new, and so when people ‘try it out’ they then find that it isn’t for them. There is evidence of an ongoing strong inflow from other Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal churches. While the outflow of switchers is not as dramatic, it is higher than for a number of other mainstream denominations.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Brass, ‘The witches of Oz’, *Weekend Australian*, May, 1985.



Religion is not a passive recipient of the effects of social and cultural change. The Ecumenical movement came about as a consequence of these changes in Australia's religious landscape. The goals of this movement were to reduce intra-Christian conflict and promote unity. This great religious movement reduced competition among various Christian denominations. Since the 1970s, in particular, there have been many conversations between different groups and denominations dealing with doctrinal matters and areas of cooperation. State Ecumenical Councils, and informal ecumenical initiatives such as Christian Research Association and The National Church Life Survey and the Interchurch Trade Industry Mission are some examples. The formation of the Uniting Church in Australia and the emergence of the National Council of Churches in Australia have been the most significant developments.

As most ecumenism happened in Protestantism, one of the goals of the movement was the reunification of the various Protestant denominations into one organisational structure. In Australia, this took place in the formation of the Uniting Church through amalgamation of most Methodists, nearly all Congregationalists, and about half of the Presbyterians. This is demonstrated in the church signs of Middleton Uniting Church. In 1965 the church went by Middleton Methodist Church, but since then it had changed to the title of the 2006 sign, Middleton Uniting Church. This unity among Christian denominations has influenced Australian values and attitudes. For example, John Howard has said, "I think it's fair to say that ... I come from the Methodist tradition of the Christian church. Although when I do go to church now ... I tend to go to an Anglican church. I don't really care what denomination it is."<sup>7</sup> Today, 1.3 million Australians are members of the Uniting Church in Australia, making it Australia's third largest religious community.

Ecumenism is also seen in the emergence of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). In 1946 a national council of churches, the Australian Council of Churches (ACC), was formed. In 1994, the ACC was succeeded by the NCCA and for the first time the Catholic Church was officially part of this ecumenical body. In 1998, the Lutheran Church also joined the NCCA. The NCCA has played a significant role in representing the voice of the Christian Churches in Australia and has created a sense of unity among denominations. For example, the members of the NCCA committed to a document entitled 'Australian Churches: Covenanting Together'. In addition to the NCCA, there are many interdenominational and ecumenical groups operating in Australian society in a range of biblical, educational, missionary, social justice, spiritual, student-focused, and theological endeavours.

As discussed earlier, Australia has become a multicultural and multifaith society, and as a consequence of these changes in Australia's religious landscape a sense of interfaith dialogue and religious harmony has developed. A turning point in interreligious relations in Australia was the holding of the fifth world assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) in Melbourne in 1989. WCRP is a significant force in leading world interfaith dialogue. Another example of the development of interfaith dialogue was the Interfaith Appeal for Peace in Sydney in 2000. This was to stand against religious violence in Indonesia, one of Australia's closest neighbours and home to the world's largest Muslim population. Both the NCCA and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils joined to initiate the event.

There are many groups within Australian society that work to promote interfaith dialogue. For instance, the Catholic Church has a Committee for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, the Council of Christians and Jews holds activities such as annual Holocaust remembrance services and education seminars and courses, The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Dialogue enables dialogue between Christians and Muslims (particularly among women) and sponsors conferences, and the Affinity Intercultural Foundation seeks to develop greater peace and harmony between Muslim communities and their fellow Australians. Many of these groups are reinforced by similar state groups. Such development of interfaith dialogue increases awareness of 'the other' in Australian society and increases the dialogue between religious groups. Those who initiate interfaith

---

<sup>7</sup> Former Prime Minister John Howard, 'Compass', ABC, 3 October 2004.

dialogue and events clearly seek to find peace and harmony among Australia's diverse populous, replacing hatred and contempt with integration, tolerance and understanding.

Since 1945, Australian society has seen incredible changes its religious landscape. Such changes have occurred for a wide array of reasons. Immigration has expanded Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and other religions' numbers considerably and changed the formation and structure of Christian Churches. Secularisation has led to an increase in unbelief and irreligious worldviews and ideals, and hence has led to a decrease religious adherence. New Age religions have developed and presented new ways to experience spiritual fulfilment, increasing the diversity of religion in Australia. Denominational switching and conversion have led to changes in Christianity and shaped the way Christianity impacts the religious landscape. As a response to Australia's changing religious landscape, ecumenism and interfaith dialogue has seen great developments in creating unity and harmony amongst the various denominations and religions that make up this nation's religious landscape. These changes have shaped the Australia that we know today – one of diverse belief and unbelief, one of change and growth, and one of engagement and acceptance.

## **Bibliography**

Bonett, W. (ed.) (2010) *The Australian Book of Atheism*. Scribe, Carlton North.

Bouma, G. (2006) *Australian Soul*. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Carey, H. (1996) *Believing in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, St Leonards.

Frame, T. (2009) *Losing My Religion*. UNSW Press, Sydney.

Marsden, J. (ed.) (2004) *I Believe This*. Random House Australia, Sydney.

Morrissey, J. & others (2005) *Living Religion*, Third edition, Pearson Education, Melbourne.

Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Belknap Harvard, United States of America.

Denominational/Combined Inflow and Outflow (2009), National Church Life Survey, [online] at <http://www.ncls.org.au/8/11/11>

Muslims In Australia (2008), Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [online] at <http://www.dfat.gov.au/8/11/11>

Religious Affiliation (2006), Australian Bureau of Statistics, [online] at <http://www.abs.gov.au/2/11/11>