



about Australia

religious freedom

- Australia has no official state religion and people are free to practise any religion they choose, as long they obey the law. Australians are also free not to have a religion.

Australia is a predominantly Christian country, with around 64 per cent of all Australians identifying as Christians. However, most other major religious faiths are also practised, reflecting Australia’s culturally diverse society.

Religious freedom is safeguarded by section 116 of the Australian Constitution, which prohibits the federal government from making any law establishing any religion, imposing any religious observance, or prohibiting the free exercise of any religion. Individuals are free to express a diversity of views, as long as they do not incite religious hatred.

The Australian Government is also committed to encouraging mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among different religions and cultures in Australia and across the region. Australia has fostered regional interfaith cooperation through its involvement in the Regional Interfaith Dialogue—a process which Australia co-sponsors with Indonesia, New Zealand and the Philippines. The dialogue brings together leaders from the many faiths in the region to share experiences and identify ways to promote peace and understanding. The first dialogue was held in Indonesia in 2004, and two other dialogues have since been held (in the Philippines in 2006 and New Zealand in 2007). Cambodia will host the fourth Regional Interfaith Dialogue in 2008.

key facts

- Non-Indigenous religions were introduced to Australia with European settlement in 1788.
- Australia is a predominantly Christian country, but it has no official state religion.
- People are free to practise any religion as long as they obey the law.
- Around 64 per cent of all Australians identify as Christians.
- Around 5.6 per cent of Australians are affiliated with non-Christian religions.

Australia’s earliest religions or spiritual beliefs date back to Indigenous Australians, who have inhabited Australia for more than 40 000 years.

There was some early contact with Islam when Muslim fishermen and traders from the east Indonesian archipelago visited mainland Australia as far back as the 16th century to fish and to trade with local Indigenous people.

Non-Indigenous religions were introduced to Australia on a permanent basis with the settlement of Australia by Great Britain in 1788. The first group of British settlers and convicts included people adhering to a range of Christian denominations, although only the

Church of England (Anglican) was formally established in the colony initially. During the 1800s, European settlers continued to bring their traditional churches to Australia, including the Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, Lutheran and Baptist churches.

Subsequent waves of migrants brought non-Christian religions to Australia. For example, the discovery of gold in Victoria and New South Wales in the 1850s attracted a huge influx of new settlers, including many Chinese Buddhists.

However, with the exception of a small but significant Lutheran population of German descent, Australian society in 1901 was still predominantly Anglo-Celtic. At that time, 97 per cent of the population professed to be Christian.

The impact of immigration from Europe after World War II led to increases in representatives of the Orthodox churches, growth in the number of Catholics (mainly from Italian migration) and the creation of ethnic parishes among many other denominations.

In almost 60 years of planned post-war migration, Australia has welcomed more than 6.5 million migrants, including 660 000 refugees.

In the 1960s, 45 per cent of all new arrivals were born in the United Kingdom or Ireland. By the 1990s, this had fallen to 13 per cent, with the number of new settlers increasing from countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Africa and the Middle East. One result has been that non-Christian religions are now growing at a faster rate than Christian religions—in the past 10 years, the number of people affiliated with non-Christian faiths has almost doubled.

In the 2006 Census, 12.7 million reported that they were Christian, compared to around 12.6 million in the 1996 Census. However, as a proportion of the total population, the number of Christians fell from 71 per cent to 64 per cent. During the same period, people affiliated with non-Christian faiths increased from around 600 000 to 1.1 million and collectively accounted for 5.6 per cent of the total population in 2006, compared to 3.5 per cent in 1996.

The biggest Christian denominations continued to be Catholic (25.8 per cent of the population) followed by Anglican (18.7 per cent) and the Uniting Church (5.7 per cent). The biggest non-Christian religions were Buddhism (2.1 per cent), Islam (1.7 per cent) and Hinduism (0.7 per cent).

The number of Australian residents who stated in the Census that they had no religion increased from 2.9 million in 1996 to 3.7 million in 2006—almost 19 per cent of the total population.

Major religious affiliations—Census figures 1996 and 2006					
Religion	1996 ('000)	%	2006 ('000)	%	1996–2006 (change %)
<i>Christian</i>	12 582.8	70.9	12 685.8	63.9	0.8
Catholic	4 799.0	27.0	5 126.9	25.8	6.8
Anglican	3 903.3	22.0	3 718.2	18.7	-4.7
Uniting Church	1 334.9	7.5	1 135.4	5.7	-14.9
Presbyterian and Reformed	675.5	3.8	596.7	3.0	-11.7
Eastern Orthodox	497.0	2.8	544.2	2.7	9.5
<i>Non-Christian</i>	616.4	3.5	1 105.1	5.6	79.3
Buddhism	199.8	1.1	418.8	2.1	109.6
Islam	200.9	1.1	340.4	1.7	69.4
Hinduism	67.3	0.4	148.1	0.7	120.2
Judaism	79.8	0.4	88.8	0.4	11.3
<i>No religion</i>	2 948.9	16.6	3 706.6	18.7	25.7
<i>Not stated</i>	1 550.6	8.7	2 224.0	11.2	43.4

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census figures

Indigenous beliefs

At the time of European settlement, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples followed their own religions and rich spiritual beliefs, which were based on the forces of nature, a reverence for land and the influence of ancestral spiritual beings.

The Dreamtime concept permeates every aspect of Aboriginal cultures and societies and is an integral part of their spirituality. Like the Aboriginal dreamings, the creation stories or legends of the Torres Strait Islander people provide a basis for their identity and spirituality. Indigenous beliefs and spirituality are intrinsically linked to the land, sea and sky. There are many sacred Indigenous sites in Australia.

Following European settlement of Australia, many Indigenous Australians converted to Christianity. Some adopted other faiths, including Islam.

The Catholic Church

One-tenth of all the convicts who came to Australia in the First Fleet in 1788 were Catholic and at least half of them were born in Ireland. By the time of the 1828 Census, there was a total Catholic population in the new colony of around 10 000. The huge influx of migrants who arrived in Australia after World War II included more than one million Catholics from countries such as Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Germany, Croatia and Hungary, tempering the Irish influence, which had tended to predominate until the 1950s.

Today, the Catholic Church has 32 dioceses in Australia and 1363 parishes. Catholic Social Services Australia is the church's peak national body, delivering social services throughout Australia. Its 63 member organisations help more than a million Australians every year.

Since the first Catholic schools were opened in the colony early in the 19th century, the Catholic education system has grown into the second biggest sector after government

schools, with more than 650 000 students. Catholic schools today account for around 21 per cent of all secondary school enrolments.

The Anglican Church

Travelling with the First Fleet into Sydney Cove in 1788 was a Church of England (later Anglican Church) clergyman who was licensed as chaplain to the fleet and to the settlement. The first Church of England edifice was built in the new colony in 1793.

The Church of England became the biggest denomination in Australia, a position it held until 1986 when it was overtaken by the Catholic Church. The church formally adopted the title 'Anglican Church of Australia' in 1981.

Today, the Anglican Church of Australia is organised into 23 dioceses. In addition to its dioceses and parishes, the church has specialist units working in areas such as education, health, missionary work, social welfare and communications. There are around 145 Anglican schools throughout Australia, providing education to more than 105 000 children.

The Uniting Church

The Uniting Church of Australia was formed in 1977 as a union of three churches—the Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia (however, not all Congregational and Presbyterian congregations chose to join the Uniting Church and there is still a continuing Presbyterian Church).

Today, the Uniting Church of Australia is the third largest Christian denomination in Australia with 2800 congregations,

51 presbyteries and seven synods. There are around 300 000 Uniting Church members and more than 1.3 million Australians claim an association.

The Uniting Church undertakes extensive community work, particularly in aged care, hospitals, nursing, family support services, youth services and care for the homeless. It also runs a 24-hour telephone counselling service, Lifeline. The church has 48 schools, ranging from long-established ones with large enrolments to small, recently established low-fee schools.

Orthodox Christianity

Following World War II, the impact of migration from Europe led to increases in followers of the Orthodox churches. The Greek, Macedonian, Serbian and Russian Orthodox churches have significant numbers in Australia, and the number of Orthodox Christians in Australia is estimated at around 540 000.

Buddhism

The first Buddhists to come to Australia in large numbers were Chinese labourers who travelled to the goldfields of Victoria and New South Wales in the mid-1850s. According to some estimates, there were up to 27 000 Buddhists in Victoria alone in 1857. However, these numbers dropped significantly by the end of the century when many Chinese returned to their homelands. The number of Buddhists in Australia dropped to just a few hundred in the late 1940s and remained low until the 1960s.

By 1981, when Buddhists were once again identified in the national Census, the number had increased to 35 000. Today, Buddhism

is one of the fastest-growing religions in Australia. While immigration from South-East Asia has been a key factor in this growth, some people of Anglo-Celtic origin have also shown an interest in Buddhism. All three of the main traditions of Buddhism (Theravada, East Asian and Tibetan) are represented in Australia.

Judaism

The beginnings of the Jewish community in Australia date back to the first European settlement in 1788. The first free Jewish settlers arrived in 1821, and there have been several waves of Jewish migration, mainly from Europe, since then.

The Jewish community in Australia currently numbers around 88 800. Their cultural life has evolved to include B'nai B'rith (a service organisation), the Folk Centres for Yiddish Culture, the Jewish Arts and Culture Council, and the Hakoah Club, which has a membership of more than 10 000. Jewish museums in Melbourne and Sydney have greatly broadened the general community's knowledge and understanding of Jewish religion and culture.

Islam

Muslims in Australia have a long and varied history that is thought to pre-date European settlement. Australia's first mosque was built at Marree in South Australia in 1861 following the arrival of camel drivers from Afghanistan in the 1800s (see fact sheet *Muslims in Australia*). Since World War II, increasing numbers of Muslims have settled in Australia from the Middle East, Europe and Asia, including many who have come under Australia's refugee and humanitarian programs.

Today, more than 360,000 people in Australia identify as Muslims. Their diverse communities are concentrated mainly in Sydney and Melbourne. Since the 1970s Australian Muslims have established Islamic schools and more than 100 mosques and prayer centres. Muslims play an important role in the economic and social life of Australia.

Hinduism

Indian crews from the Bay of Bengal are believed to have come to Australia on trading ships soon after 1788 and others came later as labourers on convict ships. During the 19th century, Hindus came to Australia to work on cotton and sugar plantations and as merchants.

By 1911 there were an estimated 1000 Hindus in Australia. Their numbers increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, and more than doubled between 1996 and 2006 to 148 000. Most were born overseas, migrating from countries such as Fiji, India, Sri Lanka and South Africa. There are around 34 Hindu temples in Australia.

Further information

Anglican Church of Australia
www.anglican.org.au

Australian Bureau of Statistics www.abs.gov.au

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils
www.afic.com.au

Buddhist Council of New South Wales
www.buddhistcouncil.org

Catholic Church www.catholic.org.au

Hindu Council of Australia
www.hinducouncil.com.au

Jewish Australia Network
www.jewishaustralia.com

Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination
www.oipc.gov.au

Uniting Church of Australia www.uca.org.au

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