

PEOPLE AND PLACE

INCREASING DIVERSITY IN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION IN AUSTRALIA: COMPARING 1947, 1991 AND 1996 CENSUS REPORTS

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A comparison of the 1996 census data on religion with that of 1991 reveals a number of trends: the proportion of Australians reporting that they have 'no religion' continues to grow; mainstream Christianity, apart from the Catholics, continues to decline as a proportion of the population; and many small religious groups are flourishing. As well as 4.8 million Catholics, 500,000 Orthodox and 201,000 Muslims, Australia has 12,000 Sikhs, 3,000 Taoists, 8,000 Spiritualists and 2,000 Satanists.

Once again the latest 1996 census figures reveal significant change in the religious composition of Australian society.¹ Muslims and Buddhists, at 200,000 each, have joined the 'over one-per cent' group while, somewhat to my surprise given earlier growth patterns, the Pentecostals have not. Between 1991 and 1996 Anglicans lost over 100,000 adherents while Catholics grew by a similar number. Jehovah's Witnesses are now larger than the Salvationists and the Churches of Christ. There has been a substantial increase in the 'nones', those declaring no religion, while the number and proportion of those not responding to the 'religion question' have declined.

The proportion of Australians who identified with some religious group is 74.35 per cent. While the number of those identifying with a Christian group grew by 120,000, the percentage Christian declined from 73.98 per cent to 70.88 per cent. All other major religious groups grew. The population of Australia grew by 5.36 per cent from 1991 to 1996. Only four Christian groups listed in Table 1 grew at a greater rate. The fastest growing Christian group were the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) at 18.42 per cent.

Table 1 compares the 1996 census figures with those from 1947 and 1991. The 1947 census is selected as it provides a very useful 'benchmark' against which to note the post-war changes in Australian society. Since 1947 the religious dimension of Australian society has been transformed through migration, conversion and profound changes in the relations between religious groups and Australian society.² From being monoculturally British and having hegemonically Anglo-protestant religious institutions, Australia has become religiously plural. As a result of these changes it now takes more than two religious groups to reach 50 per cent of the Australian population. The ten largest religious groups in Australia now include both Muslims and Buddhists.

Following a discussion of changes at the national level, this paper presents a comparison of Sydney and Melbourne because such a comparison helps to form a picture of the diversity of religious groups in these cities where over half of Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish Australians reside. Finally, the recent changes in the classification of religious groups will be described using results from the most detailed 1996 census data available. Among other things this analysis reveals that 556 Australians identify themselves as Druids and shows that nature-based religions are by far the fastest growing religious groups in Australia.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS OVER 20 PER CENT

The only groups encompassing over 20 per cent of the population in 1996 are the Catholics and Anglicans. Anglicans have continued their decline as a percentage of the population. In 1991 over four million Australians identified themselves as Anglicans, the largest number of Anglicans ever

recorded in Australia.

Table 1: The standing of selected religious groups in the 1947, 1991 and 1996 Censuses								
Religious Identification ^a	1947		1991		1996		1991-96 growth rate (%)	Rank in 1996
	'000s	%	'000s	%	'000s	%		
CHRISTIAN	2,957	39.0	4,019	23.86	3,903	21.99	- 2.89	2
Anglican	114	1.5	280	1.66	295	1.66	+ 5.36	6
Baptist	13	0.2	24	0.14	22	0.12	- 8.33	19
Brethren	1,570	20.7	4,607	27.34	4,799	27.03	+ 4.17	1
Catholic	72	1.0	78	0.46	75	0.42	- 3.85	13
Churches of Christ	63	0.8	-	0.45	-	0.47	+10.67	11
Congregational	-		75	0.23	83	0.25	+18.42	17
Jehovah's Witnesses	3	0.9	38	1.49	45	1.41	- 0.00	7
Latter Day Saints	67	11.5	251	0.14	250	0.18	+ 3.48	18
Lutheran	871	0.2	-	2.82	-	2.80	+ 4.63	5
Methodist	-	9.8	23	0.90	31	0.98	+15.89	10
Oriental Christian	17	0.5	475	4.34	497	3.81	- 7.65	4
Orthodox	-	0.2	151	0.43	175	0.42	+ 2.78	14
Pentecostal	744	1.7	732	0.29	676	0.30	+10.42	16
Presbyterian/ Reformed	38	88.0	72	8.24	74	7.52	- 3.82	3
Salvation Army	18		48	1.23	53	1.52	+ 8.74	
Seventh-Day Adventist	-		1,388	73.98	1,335	70.55	+ 0.94	
Uniting	127		206		224			
Other Christian	6,673		12,466		12,583			
Total								
BUDDHISTS	-		140	0.83	200	1.13	+42.86	9
HINDUS	-	0.4	44	0.26	67	0.38	+52.27	15
JEWS	32		74	0.44	80	0.45	+ 8.11	12

MUSLIMS	-	0.1	148	0.88	201	1.13	+35.81	8
OTHER	4	0.5	40	0.24	69	0.39	+72.50	
Total	36		445	2.64	816	3.47	83.37	
Inadequately described	19	0.2	49	0.31	54	0.30	+10.20	
No Religion	26	0.3	2,177	12.92	2,949	16.48	+35.46	
Not Stated	825	10.9	1,712	10.16	1,551	8.67	- 9.40	
National Population	7,579	100.0	16,850	100.00	17,753	100.00	+ 6.18	

^a In 1947 the category Presbyterian did not include the Reformed who had not yet been established in Australia; the category 'Uniting' from 1986 includes 'Methodists'. Source: ABS

The only census years in which Anglicans have lost numerically since 1947 are 1976, when Anglicans lost 200,000 adherents and fell below the 30 per cent mark, 1986 when Anglicans lost 90,000 and fell below 25 per cent and 1996 when they lost over 115,000. Following the 1976 and 1986 censuses there was substantial recovery. However, there are now only 40,000 more Anglicans than there were in 1966 and, if the pattern of a loss of two percentage points per census continues, it is safe to predict that in 2001 Anglicans will be under 20 per cent. Table 1 presents the standing of major religious groups in selected censuses since 1947.

In the past five years Anglicans have literally died off. There has been an absolute decline in the number of the British-born in Australia as those who migrated as adults following the Second World War, and who helped to fill the Anglican and other Anglo-protestant churches, have now begun to die at higher rates. This is the demographic part of the explanation.

Anglicans have also been facing a redefinition of who they are and of how they relate to a society which is no longer British. In the nineteenth century, Anglicanism spread world-wide and enjoyed much growth (and copped much flack) for being associated with Empire. The association with power and legitimacy formally established in England was an informal reality in the Empire and later in the Commonwealth. This is no longer true in Australia and has not been true since the end of the 1960s. While the end of the Menzies era is one marker, the Whitlam era is another and Anglicans suffered their greatest numerical loss in the 1976 census immediately following Whitlam's dismissal.

Meanwhile Catholicism, Australia's largest religious group, continues to grow in numbers but, as its growth rate had been less than that of the population, it has dropped from 27.34 per cent in 1991 to 27.03 per cent. There had been a very substantial growth (550,000) in Catholics from 1986-91 due both to migration and to natural increase. With the current slowing of their growth rate it looks unlikely that Catholics will grow to over 30 per cent. However, they have an unbeatable lead.

THE NONES

Table 2: Changes in the size and proportion of the population of major Australian religious groups					
Major Religious	1947	1966	1976	1986	1996

Groups	000s %	000s %	000s %	000s %	000s %
Anglican	2,957 39.0	3,885 33.5	3,752 27.7	3,723 23.9	3,903 21.9
Catholic	1,570 20.7	3,043 26.2	3,483 27.0	4,064 26.1	4,799 27.0
PMU group ^a	1,687 22.1	2,249 19.4	1,937 14.3	1,832 11.2	2,011 11.2
Other than Christian	32 0.5	77 0.7	129 1.0	316 2.0	616 3.5
No Religion	26 0.3	96 0.8	1,130 8.3	1,977 12.7	2,949 16.5

Source: ABS census reports for various years.

^a The PMU group combines the census figures for Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Uniting to allow the comparison over time of a group with considerable similarities as mainline Anglo-Protestant religious groups.

Only one religious group rates between 10 and 20 per cent, the nones. This group, reported as ‘no religion’, includes those who say they have no religion and ‘rationalists’ (1,377), ‘humanists’ (4,075), ‘atheists’ (7,496), and ‘agnostics’ (8,801). The ‘nones’ have grown significantly between 1991 and 1996 to 16.61 per cent of the population (a growth rate of 35.46 per cent), after being stable between 1986 and 1991 at just over 12 per cent. The ‘nones’ had been at the 0.3 per cent level until 1961, when this group began a sharp growth curve to 6.7 per cent in 1971 and 10.8 per cent in 1981.³ While Anglican (or C.of E.) used to be the ‘default’ religion for those who had none but felt pressured to put something down when entering hospitals, or the military, or other situations where they were asked to state their religion, including the Census, it appears that more people are now recording no religion. The question becomes: when will the ‘nones’ overtake the Anglicans, in 2001 or 2006?

With the introduction, in the 1991 census, of the tick-a-box plus write-in system of asking the ‘religion question’ the number of those failing to respond to this question has declined. Before 1991 respondents did not have the tick-a-box option and had to write down the name of their religion.

It is not appropriate to combine the ‘not stated’ with the ‘nones’ as there are many reasons not to respond to the question, including an assertion of privacy, failing to understand the question and being a member of a group which prefers not to be enumerated.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS BETWEEN ONE AND TEN PER CENT

Between 1991 and 1996, Baptists (1.66 per cent) grew at the same rate as the population, while Orthodox groups (2.80 per cent) grew at just less, thus maintaining stability in their proportion of the population. Lutherans (1.41 per cent in 1996) were numerically stable. The Uniting Church and Presbyterian/Reformed groups declined at about the same rate from 1991 to 1996 to 7.52 per cent and 3.81 per cent respectively. The ‘other Christian’ group (1.52 per cent in 1996) was the only group in this category to grow faster than the population. This growth is another indicator of the increased diversity of religion in Australia as a variety of highly diverse small groups comprised an increasing proportion of Australia’s Christians. Groups classified in this category include: the Christian & Missionary Alliance, Christian Science, Quakers, Unitarians, Wesleyans, Nazarenes and others.

PENTECOSTALS, MUSLIMS AND BUDDHISTS

One of the more interesting 'horse races' in the religious composition of Australian society as revealed in the responses to the census has been the 'race' between the Pentecostals on the one hand and the Muslims and Buddhists on the other. This contest is of particular interest because it compares two very different sources of growth among religious groups, that due to the arrival of immigrants and the level of fertility and that due to conversion. Each of these three groups, while present in Australia before 1947, represent appreciably novel additions to Australia's religious profile as they have grown from hardly noticeable minorities to substantial religious groups. Moreover, each of the groups has complained about being under-enumerated in the census. In response to the complaints from Pentecostals a careful effort was made in the reconstruction of the Religious Classification system by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 1995⁴ in order to ensure that all known Pentecostal groups were classified as Pentecostal.

Calling the race: in 1981 Pentecostals and Muslims were 'neck and neck' at 0.5 per cent with Buddhists 'trailing' at 0.2 per cent. This pattern continued in 1986 (Muslims and Pentecostals at 0.7 per cent; Buddhists at 0.5 per cent) and in 1991 (Muslims at 0.88 per cent and Pentecostals at 0.90 per cent, with Buddhists closing at 0.83 per cent). I had expected Muslims to move over the one per cent barrier in 1991, basing this expectation on migration and various assessments of the size of Australia's Muslim population. But Muslims did not make it in 1991. The 1996 Census revealed a dramatic change. Both Muslims and Buddhists were at 1.13 per cent. This is not surprising given the pattern of immigration for the period and the relatively higher birthrates of these two groups, both of which tend to be younger than the population as a whole.

Religious Identification	Sydney 1991	1996	Melbourne 1991	1996
CHRISTIANS	74.5	71.4	68.8	66.1
Anglican	24.5	22.1	16.8	14.9
Baptist	1.6	1.7	1.5	1.5
Catholic	31.1	30.7	30.5	30.2
Churches of Christ	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.4
Jehovah's Witnesses	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4
Lutheran	0.6	0.6	0.9	0.8
Orthodox	4.4	4.4	6.2	6.2
Pentecostal	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.7
Presbyterian + Reformed	3.8	3.3	3.8	3.2
Salvation Army	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
Uniting	4.9	4.5	5.8	5.3
Other Christian	2.1	2.2	1.7	2.0

BUDDHISTS	1.5	2.1	1.4	2.0
HINDUS^a	na	0.9	na	0.5
JEWS	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.1
MUSLIMS	2.1	2.6	1.6	2.0
OTHER	0.8	0.4	0.6	0.4
NO RELIGION	10.8	13.5	15.0	19.0

Source: ABS

^a Hindus were not separately reported in 1991, but were included in the 'other religion' category. Given that their national rate of growth was 0.12 percentage points, it is likely that there were about 0.8 per cent in Sydney and 0.4 per cent Melbourne.

However, in 1996, the Pentecostals were virtually dead in the water moving only from 0.9 per cent to 0.97 per cent. They did not join the over-one-per-cent group. Their numerical growth was 21,000, compared with 47,000 from 1986 to 1991 and 35,000 from 1981 to 1986. This slowing of growth is all the more interesting given that Pentecostals have received quite a bit of positive media coverage in the last five years and have had the boost of the enormously attractive 'Toronto Blessing'⁵ phenomenon. Indeed their lack of 'census' growth may be due to this very success. It is possible that the forms of worship characteristic of Pentecostals have become more widely practised within other Christian groups, such that it is no longer necessary to become a Pentecostal to experience more contemporary, more ecstatic, more 'spirit-filled' forms of worship. It may also be that the movement has reached its saturation point in Australian society, a society which is not as conducive to 'high demand' or 'high temperature' religious groups. Whatever the cause might be, a remarkable period of growth which, to some observers, looked like leading to the formation of a very significant new religious group in Australia, has stalled.

OTHER MINORITY RELIGIOUS GROUPS

A contrary example is provided by one of Australia's least liked religious groups,⁶ the Jehovah's Witnesses, which has steadily grown, while such groups as the Salvation Army and Churches of Christ have steadily declined. In 1986 the Churches of Christ were 0.6 per cent, the Salvationists 0.5 per cent and the Jehovah's Witnesses 0.4 per cent. By 1996 these positions have reversed with Churches of Christ at 0.42 per cent, Salvationists at 0.42 per cent and the Jehovah's Witnesses at 0.47 per cent. Again, this is interesting given that the Churches of Christ and the Salvationists had embarked on massive American style 'church growth' programs while the Jehovah's Witnesses merely continued their traditional door knocking.

The proportion of Jews has varied between 0.4 per cent and 0.5 per cent through this century and, between 1991 and 1996, they have maintained this position rising above their 0.44 per cent in 1991 to 0.45 per cent. This growth is largely attributable to migration. Hindus continue their growth nearly reaching 0.38 per cent in 1996. Given current immigration policies, they are likely to stabilise at about 0.5 per cent.

SYDNEY AND MELBOURNE

Sydney and Melbourne pride themselves in being distinctive. The data presented in Table 3 show

that they are indeed very different in religious composition. Sydney is more 'Christian' than Melbourne, with 71.4 per cent identifying with a Christian Group, compared with 66.1 per cent in Melbourne. The obverse is also true. Melbourne, with 19.0 per cent declaring 'no religion', is less religious than Sydney where only 13.5 per cent do so. Among Christian groups, Catholics are just over 30 per cent in both cities, but Anglicans are 22.1 per cent in Sydney and 14.9 per cent in Melbourne. While Sydney has three times the number of Oriental Christians (21,975) and twice the number of Brethren, Melbourne has twice the proportion of Churches of Christ, nearly half again the proportion of Lutherans and Orthodox, but only about half the proportion of Seventh-day Adventists (0.28 per cent in Sydney) and Mormons (0.27 per cent in Sydney). While Anglicans have always been stronger in Sydney that was for a long time off-set by greater strength among Presbyterians and Methodists in Melbourne. This strength has substantially diminished in 1996, with Melbourne Uniting at 5.3 per cent compared with Sydney at 4.5 per cent and Presbyterians essentially tied.

Sydney has higher percentages of Hindus (0.89 per cent versus 0.51 per cent) and Muslims (2.59 per cent versus 2.03 per cent) while the proportion of Buddhists is very close and Melbourne has a slightly higher proportion of Jews. These differences largely reflect the fact that Sydney has been the destination of a higher percentage of more recently arriving immigrants.

Changes in the national religious profile are reflected differently in Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney has had a higher loss rate among Christian groups. Nearly 75 per cent of Anglican losses occurred in Sydney and Melbourne which together account for just over 70 per cent of Anglicans. Melbourne had a higher loss rate (7.8 per cent) than Sydney (5.4 per cent). However, while Sydney lost equal numbers of men and women, Melbourne lost more males than females. The growth of Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims has been more even between Sydney and Melbourne. Melbourne 'nones' grew by 31.1 per cent to nearly 600,000 making this group much larger than Anglicans (over 450,000), while Sydney 'nones' grew by only 23.8 per cent to 500,000 much smaller than Anglicans (over 800,000).

SOME GREATER DETAIL

Following the changes in Australia's religious profile through the 1980s, changes which were revealed so clearly in the 1991 Census,⁷ the ABS re-examined and revised its classification of religion. This new classification is less dominated by Christian and Western biases and reflects some of the more recently-emerged ways of being religious in Australia.⁸ First, the major categories of religious groups are listed alphabetically and not as Christian and non-Christian as formerly. Secondly, the categories of Christian denominations were carefully re-examined to ensure that they included the appropriate specific organisations. This was particularly a concern for Pentecostal and evangelical Christian groups and for the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) and Orthodox (Chalcedonian) Christian groups. Finally, while most of the major religions of the world were given separate reporting headings of their own, the major category generically termed 'other religions' was re-organised to provide some information on very small groups in Australia.

In 1996, over 30,000 Australians identified with a religious group classified under the secondary headings 'Spiritualism', 'Nature Religions' and 'other religions'. Together these groups accounted for 0.17 per cent of the population, more than the Brethren and just smaller than Oriental Christian, two groups which are regularly reported in the ABS Basic Community Profile.⁹ These new headings provide an opportunity to report in the 1996 Census on such groups as Scientology (1,489), Wiccan and Witchcraft (1,849), Satanism (2,093), Paganism (4,353) and Spiritualism (8,141). Given this level of detail, it is interesting to note that more Australians claim to be spiritualists (8,141) than atheists (7,496). Following developments in these categories will give some insight into the progress of what are often referred to as 'New Age' religious groups.

If the 1991 census data are re-classified to make them comparable with the 1996 figures for similar groups, the exercise reveals a growth in these categories of about 17,000, a growth rate of nearly 150 per cent making this the fastest growing group of religions in Australia. For example, Paganism tripled, nature and earth based religions grew by 130 per cent, while Satanism merely doubled its numbers and Scientology grew by 50 per cent.

The residual category 'other religions' now also includes secondary headings for groups such as Baha'i (8,949, up from 7,848 in 1991), Australian Aboriginal Traditional Religions (7,357, nearly doubled), Chinese Religions of which Taoism is by far the largest at 2,980 (50 per cent growth), Druse (2,044 and stable), and Japanese religions — Mahikari 668, Shinto 524, Tenrikyo 47, each with minimal growth. The 1996 category 'other religions' also includes 12,017 Australians who identify with Sikhism, nearly double the 1991 numbers. Sikhs now comprise 0.067 per cent of the population.

These new categories of reporting will enable useful and more accurate trend analysis of this area of rapid change and growth in Australia's religious life. Given the number of bookshops, fairs, conferences and seminars devoted to many of these ways of expressing and exploring spirituality and religious life, there are serious economic issues to be explored using these data. The wisdom of keeping the 'religion question' in the Australian Census and giving it a serious re-fit are increasingly apparent. It is now hard to believe that there was a serious proposal to drop it from the 1986 and 1991 censuses.

Australia's religious profile continues to become increasingly diverse as groups strengthened by migration become significant minority religious communities, as conversion increases several groups, as Catholics grow while other mainstream Christian groups decline, and as a wide variety of spiritual, nature and alternative religious groups enjoy rapid growth.

References

1 It should be noted that the data reported here include all those enumerated in the census except Overseas Visitors. Thus they include children as well as adults.

2 For a careful analysis of these changes, see G. D. Bouma (Ed.), *Many Religions, All Australian: Religious Settlement, Identity and Cultural Diversity*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1997.

3 For a detailed analysis of the demographic composition and distribution of this and many other major religious groups see P. Hughes, *Religion: A View from the Census*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1993.

4 See *Standard Classification of Religious Groups*, ABS Catalogue No. 1266.0, 1995.

5 The 'Toronto Blessing' refers to an ecstatic religious experience which was made available in many Pentecostal and other churches in the early 1990s. Several congregations reported that hundreds of people came to them for the experience which usually involved falling on the floor and laughing after being prayed for. Most participants reported a feeling of great release and catharsis. In this form it originated in Scarborough, Ontario, a suburb of Toronto.

6 G. D. Bouma, *Religious Tolerance in Australia*, Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1995

7 G. D. Bouma, 'Religious Identification in Australia: 1981-1991', *People and Place* vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 13-17

8 See *Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups*, ABS Catalogue No. 1266.0 and R. Madden, *1996 Census of Population and Housing: ABS Views on Census Classifications*, ABS Catalogue No. 2012.0. p. 72ff.

9 See *Basic Community Profile*, ABS Catalogue No. 2015, table B10, 1996.

Back to [Contents Vol. 5 No. 3](#)

Back to [People and Place Home Page](#)