

# Religion in Australia

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 organization that frame their attitudes to life as a whole.

In Australia, religion is usually associated with belief in God (most commonly in Jewish, Christian or Islamic terms). Religion also includes an awareness of the sacred, supernatural or divine (e.g. Buddhism or Hinduism). 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 (e.g. 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 religious or spiritual belief systems 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.

As far back as the 16th century, Muslim fishermen and traders from the east Indonesian archipelago visited mainland Australia and made contact with local Indigenous people.

European settlement in Australia brought with it chaplains of the Church of England (now the Anglican church). Other churches arrived as transportation and immigration continued and by the early 19th century many Christian groups were represented including Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Baptist and Methodist. Christianity has remained the dominant religious tradition in Australia, despite sectarian rivalry - notably between Irish Catholics and English Protestants - affecting Australian life until the latter part of the 20th century.

Jews first came to Australia aboard the First Fleet in 1788 and after World War II, many more arrived as refugees. The first evidence of Buddhist settlement dates to 1848 when, following the discovery of gold, Chinese miners arrived in their thousands. 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 19th century to work on cotton and sugar plantations and as cameleers, divers and sailors. Muslim numbers have increased steadily in the wake of civil strife in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan and due to immigration from Turkey, Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.

## Changing Religious Affiliations

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

The change in the White Australia policy after the end of World War II led to a flow of migrants from different countries and to considerable diversification of religious affiliations in Australia. Orthodox Christians came

from Greece and the Middle East, and Catholics came from Italy, Hungary, Poland and Vietnam. Alongside these churches have emerged Pentecostal churches as well as Independent Chinese and other ethnic churches. In Melbourne and Sydney today there are churches of every Christian tradition.

Among the most striking changes that have taken place in the period between the last two censuses (2001 and 2006) are the increased numbers of people affiliating as Hindu, Islamic and Buddhist. Although these religions represent only a small proportion of the Australian population (0.8, 1.7 and 2.1 per cent respectively), Hindu affiliation has increased by 55 per cent, Islamic affiliation by 21 per cent and Buddhist affiliation by 17 per cent. 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.

Another striking development is the growing proportion of Australians who identify as having 'no religion', a category that includes agnosticism, atheism, humanism and rationalism. This reflects a steady growth in secularism over the past forty years, culminating in almost 19 per cent of the population stating that they had 'no religion' on the 2006 Census. The increase in secularism correlates with a steady decline in the proportion of Australians who affiliate with many established Christian religious denominations or organizations. Catholicism, however, has maintained a relatively consistent following of about 26 per cent of the population over the years.

### **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 proven their value in the wake of worldwide terrorist attacks which have 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 organizational 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 organized religions and their formal institutions.

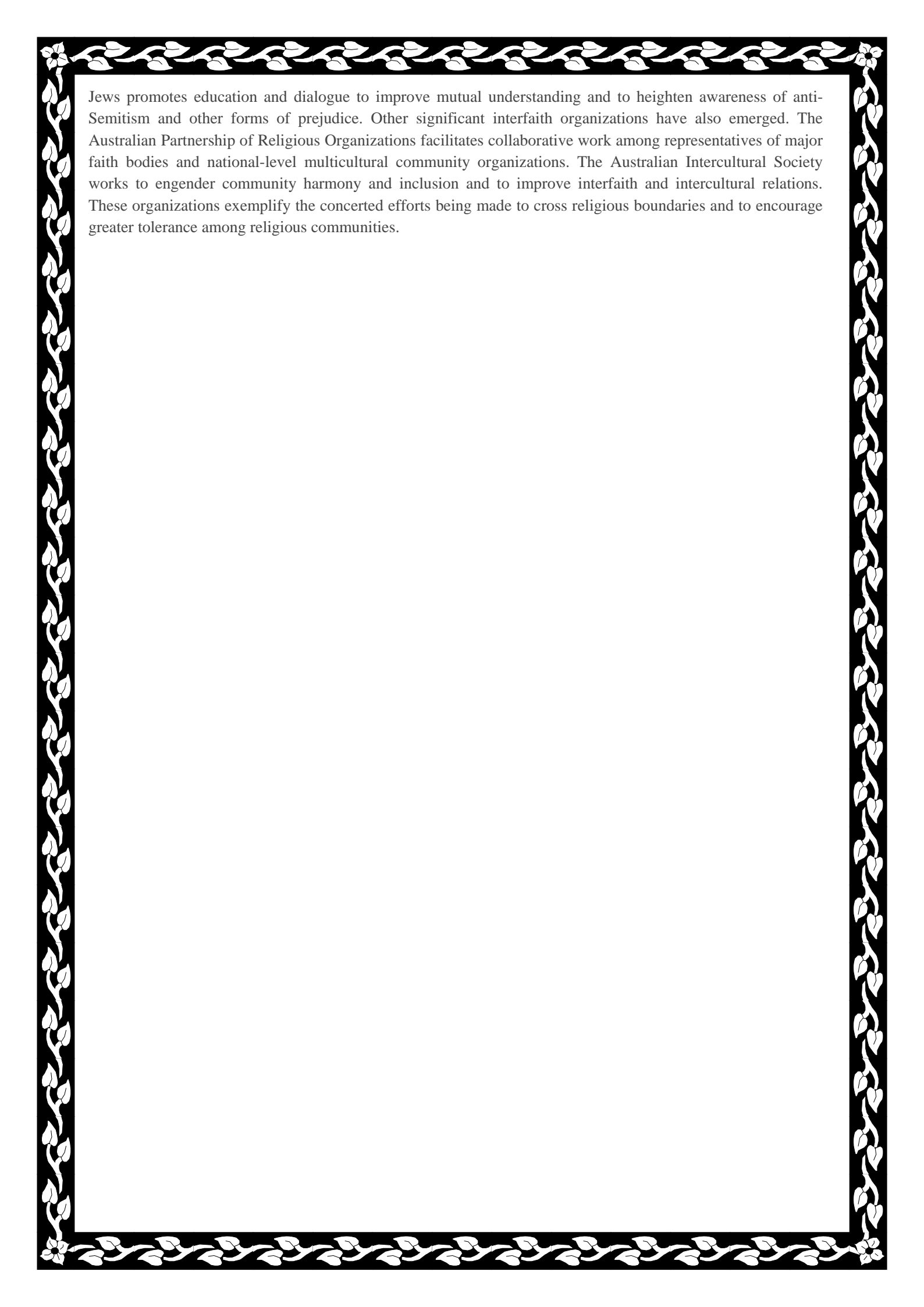
In 2008 the US-based Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence published a comparative study on young people's attitudes towards spirituality in eight countries. Relative to young people in other countries, young Australians were seen to be less dedicated to spiritual 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. What has caused 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, is a matter for speculation. Possible causes may include reactions to globalization, capitalism and free trade; cultural, ethnic and religious dispersals; the search for identity in a technological world; and increased mobility and communication.

## **Attitudes to religious diversity and interfaith dialogue**

The 2010 report 'Mapping Social Cohesion' reviewed findings from a large-scale survey that considered Australian attitudes towards religion. The report indicated that 23.5 per cent of respondents attested to negative attitudes towards Muslims. By contrast, negative attitudes to other religious groups were far less prevalent, with 4 per cent and 5 per cent of respondents indicating negative attitudes to Christians and Buddhists respectively. Encouragingly, there have been many 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 organization 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 organizations have also emerged. The Australian Partnership of Religious Organizations facilitates collaborative work among representatives of major faith bodies and national-level multicultural community organizations. The Australian Intercultural Society works to engender community harmony and inclusion and to improve interfaith and intercultural relations. These organizations exemplify the concerted efforts being made to cross religious boundaries and to encourage greater tolerance among religious communities.