

# Australia's Religious Profile from the 2011 Census

The 2011 Census revealed changes are occurring in the religious profile of Australia. We can say the overall trend is very clear: a more secular humanist, less Christian and more multifaith Australia, writes Des Cahill, Chair of Religions for Peace Australia.



## AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS PROFILE – 2012 CENSUS PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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The following is a preliminary analysis of the 2011 census results released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on 21 st June 2012 and focused on the religious profile with some emphasis on the profile of the largest religious groups. It is important to emphasize that at this stage we have only the overall results, and as yet we cannot drill deep down into the data though the overall trends are reasonably clear. In particular, we do not have the cross-tabulation, religion X country of birth though we can make educated guesses.

The 2011 census results reinforces the paradoxical trend first identified in the 2001 census in the report Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Religion (Cahill, Bouma, Dellal & Leahy 2004) (available on the website [www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au](http://www.religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au)) sponsored by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Australian society has become more polarized insofar as Australia has simultaneously become more secularist humanist but also more religious but religious in a different way. Whilst neglecting the second aspect, most press reports have emphasized the first aspect by highlighting the rise in the 'no religion' category (includes agnostics, atheists, humanists and rationalists).

This category jumped from 3,706,555 (18.67%) in 2006 to 4,796,785 (22.30%) in 2011 though this is partially offset by the decline in those in the 'not stated' category (from 2,223,957 (11.18%) to 1,839,648 (8.55%) in 2011, a decline of

17.28 per cent. Whilst it is important to underline the point that the two 'no religion' and 'not stated' categories are quite different in their attitude to religion and spirituality, the combined figure in 2011 was 30.85 per cent in 2011 compared to 29.86 per cent in 2006.

It is of note that the 'no religion' category is the largest religious/humanist grouping in every state and territory except, albeit very importantly, for the three largest states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. In Western Australia and the ACT, the 'no religion' category has displaced the Catholics as the largest group and the Anglicans in Tasmania.

## Christian Profile

Regarding the Christian profile, in the five year intercensal period, its proportion has declined from 62.1 per cent to 61.14 per cent. Leaving aside the Uniting Church, which continues to be in sharp decline, the other mainstream churches were surprisingly more numerous than expected. The Anglican Church declined by only 1.00 per cent whereas the Presbyterians increased very marginally. This seems to be a result of the great longevity of the mainstream Australian population. Other churches to show a decline were the Salvation Army (-6.29%) and the Churches of Christ (-9.37%) and there was a big increase in those describing themselves as Christian (+50.37%) and Other Protestant (+14.03%).

Longevity was also one, though limited, factor in the surprising rise in the Catholic population. Its population has increased by 313,017 or by 6.11 per cent though declining proportionally from 25.81 to 25.29 per cent of the total population. The number of Catholics aged over 75 has increased from 254,214 in 2001 to 350,267 in 2011, a fact of critical pastoral importance. However, much more important was the immigration factor in the 2006 – 2011 period led by the Philippines, India, Ireland and Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Viet Nam and, probably also, Indonesia, U.K, New Zealand and possibly Malaysia.

Over the past 15 years since 1996, the Catholic population has increased by 13.38% with State territory increases in NSW (+8.31%), Victoria (+13.21%), Queensland (+23.58%), South Australia (+7.40%), Western Australia (+12.45%), ACT (+4.86%) and the Northern Territory (+7.55%). The only decline in raw numbers was in Tasmania (+0.35%).

## Growth of the Other Religions

Balancing the rise in the no religion/not stated categories and the decline in the numbers of Christian adherents is the rise of Australia's emerging religions, most especially Hinduism which grew from 148,119 in 2006 to 275,536 in 2011, an increase of 86.02 percent and reflecting the huge Indian influx over the past five years. Buddhism as Australia's largest non-Christian religious group grew by 26.32 per cent to 528,977, as did Islam by 39.92 per cent to 476,290. Judaism grew by 9.57 per cent to 97,335 and there was a big growth in the Sikh numbers. Altogether the other religions represent 7.19 per cent of the Australian population, that is, one in fourteen persons, though heavily concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne.

## The Age Profile and Australia's Religious Future

Professor Gary Bouma of Monash University has provided an analysis of the age profile of Australia's population. This is useful because it enables us to peer into the future and make empirically based predictions, and it enables us to assess the amount of decline that may be occurring. The following tables which he has developed are useful. Table One looks at the figures for the main religious groups for those aged 0 – 14, whereas Table Two focuses on the 0 – 34 age group.

**Table One: Selected Religious Cohorts for 0 -14 Year Range for 2001-2011 Censuses**

Religious Group	2001 Census	2006 Census	2011 Census	% difference 2001- 2011
Catholic	1,112,729	707,855	677,935	-39.07%
Anglican	631,826	379,743	339,359	-39.90%
Presbyterian/Reformed	83,393	44,922	44,552	-46.58%
Buddhist	63,803	66,375	98,605	+54.55%
Muslim	86,766	63,495	98,943	+14.05%
Hindus	20,786	25,569	94,722	+355.705%

Jewish	14,452	10,601	11,094	-23.24%
No Religion	737,676	619,968	849,674	+15.18%
Not Stated	448,566	479,422	365,323	-18.56%

In the 0 – 14 age group, the decrease is occurring in all the mainstream Christian groups, especially in the 2001 – 2006 period, and in the not stated group, which rose in the first intercensal period, but dropped massively in the 2006 – 2011 period. In the 0 -34 age group (Table Two), the trends are similar with the exception of the Catholics who have maintained their numbers after a dip at the 2006 census, suggesting the benefit of migration in the last five years. Both tables highlight the massive rise in the Hindu numbers as had been anticipated and in the Muslim numbers, especially in the 15 – 34 age group.

**Table Two: Selected Religious Cohorts for 0 – 34 Year Range for 2001 – 2011 Censuses**

Religious Group	2001 Census	2006 Census	2011 Census	% difference 2001-2011
Catholic	2,523,441	2,440,814	2,521,603	-0.01%
Anglican	1,545,400	1,340,783	1,235,516	-20.05%
Presbyterian/Reformed	183,584	151,900	145,319	-20.84%
Buddhist	188,777	209,010	254,822	+34.99%
Muslim	190,608	229,031	320,270	+68.03%
Hindus	55,846	91,776	183,639	+228.83%
Jewish	34,481	36,392	38,814	+12.57%
No Religion	1,756,848	2,175,796	2,758,003	+56.99%
Not Stated	971,273	1,119,098	894,155	-7.94%

In conclusion, quite clear changes are occurring in the religious profile of Australia. Until, we gain more detailed figures, we will not be able to make definitive conclusions but the overall trend is very clear: a more secular

humanist, less Christian and more multifaith Australia in a more polarised society with history on the side of a multifaith Australia if Australia continues to accept more immigrants and refugees. The cultural and political implications are indeed quite profound.



*Map of Australia with religion symbols*

Professor Desmond Cahill, OAM.

Prof. Des Cahill, OAM, Chair of Religions for Peace Australia has been an active participant in interfaith activities and has been the Chair of Religions for Peace for 11 years. He is also Professor at the School of Global Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Educated in Australia and Italy, Des Cahill, Professor of Intercultural Studies at RMIT University, has been a world leading researcher and teacher in the areas of immigrant, cross-cultural and international studies for more than three decades.

Since the events of September 11th 2001, he has played a major role in researching and bringing together the various faith communities in Australia and across the world through his research and community activities. He currently chairs the Australian chapter of Religions for Peace International, the world's largest interfaith organization, and represents Australia on the



executive committee of the Religions for Peace Asia – in October 2008, he was elected its Deputy Moderator by the Governing Board representing the 18 member nations including Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and the two Koreas. He is a member of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) and of the Victoria Police Multifaith Advisory Council.

In 2006, he led Melbourne's successful bid, in competition against Delhi and Singapore, to host the Parliament of the World's Religions during 3rd – 9th December 2009, the world's largest interfaith gathering. As a consequence, he has been made an Ambassador for Club Melbourne, a group of 100 leading scientists and academics, to promote the image of Melbourne around the world.

In the 2010 Queen's Birthday Honours List, he was awarded the Order of the Medal of Australia for "services to Intercultural Education and to the Interfaith Movement". Professor Cahill is Chair, Religions for Peace Australia.