

Chapter 4: Religion in Australian society

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Chapter 4: Religion in Australian society

Overview

In 2001, a curious incident occurred when the Australian census was conducted. A national census is a survey in which people are asked numerous questions ranging from their occupation to their religion. According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, more than 70 000 Australians listed their religion as 'Jedi'. This mock response was part of a worldwide movement involving citizens of several other countries including Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In case you are unaware, Jedi is not a religion at all. The Jedi are characters from the famous science fiction movie *Star Wars*. Although some people do actually follow a set of beliefs similar to those in the *Star Wars* series, the majority of the 70 000 Australians who identified themselves as Jedi did so merely as a joke.

While it is a funny story, the 2001 Jedi stunt raises interesting questions about religion and its place in Australian society. What are the major religions followed in Australia and why do these patterns exist? You may also wonder what kind of impact religion can have on Australian society and culture. These are some of the questions that will be answered in this topic.



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Weblink

Jedi religion

eBook plus

eLesson

What do we believe?

Watch this video to learn more about the different beliefs held by Australians.

Searchlight ID: ELES-2289

STARTER QUESTIONS

1. Make a list of the religions that you have heard of. Work with the person next to you and place a tick next to the religion if you or your classmate knows someone who practises this religion.
2. What role does religion play in your life?
3. Do you think it matters if governments are religious?
4. Should Jediism be classified as a religion? Explain your answer.

4.1 Judeo-Christian traditions

Since European settlement of Australia, Christianity has been the dominant religion of our country. Before this time, Indigenous Australians worshipped various deities and had a deep spiritual connection to the natural world through their religion. As European influence over Australia spread, so too did that of religion. In this section, we will examine the development of Judeo-Christian traditions in Australia and how they influenced early colonial society.

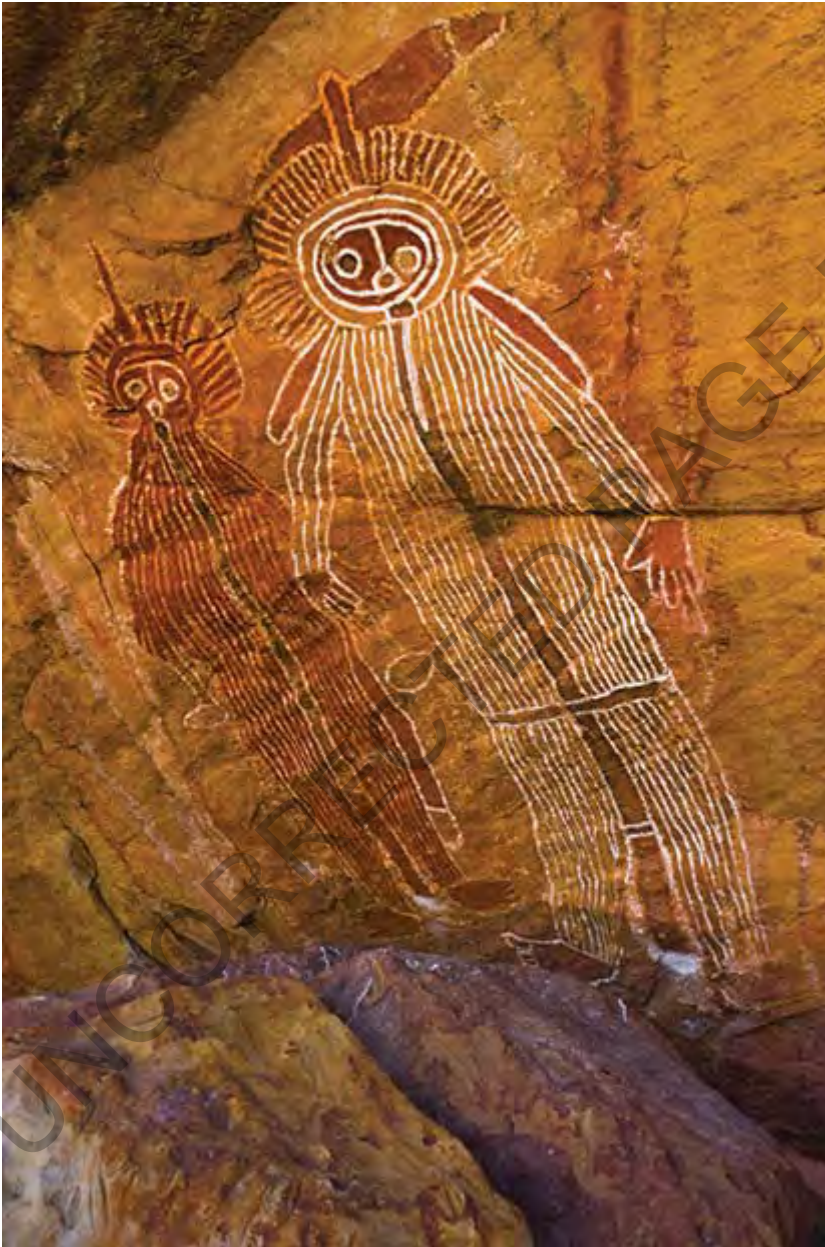


FIGURE 1 Aboriginal rock paintings for the *Lightning Brothers*, who are gods sacred to the Wardaman people

Origins of Judeo-Christian religion in Australia

Unfortunately for historians, convict records did not indicate their religion. The information we do have about the religious **affiliations** of convicts and colonial Australians comes mainly from secondary sources. Despite this limitation, we can still use the information we have to discuss the origins of Judeo-Christian religion in Australia.

The vast majority of convicts and official members of the First Fleet identified themselves as Christian. Specifically, they were Anglican and therefore aligned with the Church of England. So strong was their connection to the Church that all public servants swore an oath to follow its **doctrines**. A small number of Irish Catholic convicts were also on the First Fleet and this **denomination** provided the main alternative to the Church of England. The popularity of Catholicism increased as **transportation** to the colonies continued. The First Fleet also contained **practitioners** of other religions such as Judaism. We will investigate the origins of these other observances later in this topic.



FIGURE 2 St James' Church, Sydney (1856), was an Anglican Church built with convict labour.



FIGURE 3 A government jail gang (1830), by Augustus Earle. The vast majority of convicts were Christian.

Religious activity in colonial Australia

As the presence of religion in colonial Australia increased, so too did its influence. Churches became heavily involved in education and the provision of welfare to convicts and settlers alike. Religious and charitable organisations that still function in modern Australian society have their origins in this historical period. The Sisters of Charity is one such example. The first Catholic nuns in Australia (1838), the Sisters of Charity were concerned with the health and safety of workers in so-called female factories such as the one located in Parramatta. Female convicts and children were forced to work and live in appalling conditions in these factories. The Sisters of Charity fought for better working conditions and for the rights of these convicts. The organisation remains active in Australia today and still fights for social justice. There have been hundreds of religious groups that have played similar roles throughout Australia's history. These groups show how Australia's Judeo-Christian traditions have influenced our communities and the lives of Australians.

ACTIVITIES

REMEMBER

1. Before European settlement, what religion did Indigenous Australians follow?
2. We know a lot about each individual convict from records that were kept. What piece of relevant information was not recorded?

3. How were colonial government officials required to show their allegiance to the Church of England?

EXPLAIN

4. How did religious organisations influence early colonial life? Provide an example.

THINK

5. Choose a religious organisation to study (St Vincent de Paul, The Salvation Army and CARE Australia are some examples). Use the internet to research your organisation's history in Australia and the influence it had on early Australian society.

4.2 Evolution of Australian religion

Many changes in Australian society and culture can be linked to immigration patterns. These may be superficial changes such as the rise in popularity of a particular cuisine, or they can be more meaningful such as the rise in popularity of a religion. Throughout Australia's immigration history, new migrants have brought with them the culture and religion of their homelands. In this section, we will identify the religions practised in contemporary Australia and investigate their development and impact on society.

Immigration and religion



FIGURE 1

The *Hougoumont* was the last convict ship to land in Australia.

Since the first European settlement was established in 1788, new migrant groups have influenced religious observance in Australia. The relationship between immigration and religion can be seen at various times throughout Australia's history. As we have already learned, Christianity and its many denominations were first introduced to Australia by convicts and colonial settlers. Today, 61.1 per cent of Australians identify as being Christian. The introduction of other religions to Australia has followed various immigration trends, which we will now examine.

Judaism



FIGURE 2 The first synagogue in Australia, York Street, New South Wales (1844). It is shown in the far left of the painting.

Together with Christianity, Judaism was one of the first religions practised in colonial Australia. Approximately 8 to 16 convicts on the First Fleet were Jewish, and the first Jewish free settlers arrived in the early nineteenth century. The number of Jewish immigrants continued to increase, with the majority initially coming from Britain and later from Germany. In 1844, the first Australian synagogue was built in Sydney (see figure 2), with places of worship in Hobart, Melbourne and Adelaide soon to follow. As with many migrant groups, the Jewish population in Australia increased during the gold rush. However, the biggest period of Jewish immigration occurred during and directly after World War II. Australia was one of the main countries of destination for Jews fleeing the atrocities of Nazi Germany. In fact, outside of Israel, Melbourne has the largest population of [Holocaust](#) survivors in the world. Today, Australian Jewish communities are small yet vibrant, with only 0.5 per cent of all Australians identifying themselves as being Jewish.

Buddhism



FIGURE 3 The Nan Tien Temple in Wollongong, New South Wales

The first Buddhists in Australia were Chinese immigrants who arrived during the gold rush. Although many of these people returned home after the mines were exhausted, some remained in Australia and continued to actively practise Buddhism. A second wave of early Buddhist immigration occurred in the 1870s with Sri Lankan nationals arriving to work in the sugar plantations of northern Queensland. Permanent Buddhist communities were established during this time, but it was not until nearly a hundred years later that the popularity of Buddhism began to explode. From the 1970s, Australia witnessed huge increases in Asian immigration. Many of these new immigrants were practitioners of Buddhism. In contemporary Australia, Buddhism is our country's fastest growing religion with 2.5 per cent of Australians practising this religion.

Islam



FIGURE 4 A camel being lifted off a boat in Port Augusta, South Australia, in 1920

It is likely that Australia has been known to the Islamic world for hundreds of years. There is even evidence to suggest that Islamic scholars knew about Australia as early as 820 CE! We know for certain that Indigenous Australians traded with the Macassans (from what is now Indonesia) who had converted to Islam in the seventeenth century. While there are records of a small number of Islamic convicts, the main period of Islamic immigration occurred with the arrival of the Afghan cameleers in the 1860s. With their expert knowledge of desert conditions, the cameleers were heavily involved in major construction projects across rural Australia. Despite its early success, Muslim immigration was severely restricted by the **White Australia** policy of the twentieth century. Since the official removal of this policy in 1973, Muslim immigration and the practice of Islam have steadily increased in Australia. Today, approximately 2.2 per cent of Australia's population is Muslim and 62 per cent of these people were born overseas.

Hinduism

Hinduism is the oldest major religion in the world and has been practised for more than 5000 years. Hinduism in Australia, however, only began in the mid nineteenth century. Although there is evidence of Hindu crews trading with the First Fleet, the first major period of Hindu immigration occurred well after the establishment of the Australian colonies. Hindu immigrants undertook several roles in early Australian society – as labourers, camel drivers, domestic staff and merchants. By 1911, there were over 1000 people in Australia who were affiliated with the Hindu faith. However, as with Islam, the growth of Hinduism in Australia was negatively affected by the White Australia policy. Today, Hinduism is a popular religion especially among Indian, Sri Lanka, Fijian and South African immigrants. According to the 2011 Australian census, Hindu practitioners accounted for 1.3 per cent of the population.

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Weblink

Hindu Council

Atheism

Religion is not a significant part of life for all Australians. An atheist is someone who does not believe in the existence of god and therefore in the need for religion. Approximately 15.5 per cent of Australians describe themselves as being atheists or as having no religion.

ACTIVITIES

REMEMBER

1. When did the largest period of Jewish immigration take place?
2. There were two early waves of Buddhist immigration. During the first, Chinese migrants came to seek their fortune in the goldfields. Where did Sri Lankan Buddhists work upon their arrival?

EXPLAIN

3. Explain how the White Australia policy influenced the expansion of Islam and Hinduism in Australia.
4. Every paragraph in this section states the percentage of Australians who follow the religion being discussed. (For example, 2.2 per cent of Australians identify as being Muslim.) Use these percentages to create a graph of your choice showing the main religions followed by Australians today.

THINK

5. The number of Australians who call themselves atheists is increasing. Why do you think this is occurring?

4.3 The influence of religion on Australian society

According to our [Constitution](#), Australia is a secular country. This means that our governments are not allowed to officially promote religious observance or affiliations. Despite this, religion has had (and continues to have) a major influence on Australian people and culture. Unfortunately, this influence has not always been positive. In this section, we will investigate the influence of Australian Judeo-Christian traditions on our society.

Religious values

Values and religion can play a similar role in society. Both provide a set of moral and ethical guidelines for people to follow. It is therefore not surprising that strong links exist between Australia's Judeo-Christian traditions and our shared values. The value of [compassion](#) is just one example of this relationship. Judaism and Christianity both contain strong references to compassion. For Jews, the 'thirteen attributes of compassion' are the ways in which God controls the world. According to Christianity, Jesus Christ was 'the father of compassion' and lived his life by demonstrating this value. Understanding the religious origins of compassion allows us to see how Judeo-Christian traditions have influenced modern Australian society.

Religion and the law

Religion and Australian law have always been closely linked according to former High Court Judge Michael Kirby. He argues that 'our law ... was influenced by notions which were shared by Christian churches and belief' (interview on ABC Radio, 16 May 2012). Although there are no direct references to Christianity or its religious customs in Australian law, our legal system has been shaped by Christian values. For example, our criminal law forbids murder and theft, crimes that are condemned in the Ten Commandments. Australia's legal system attempts to provide all its citizens with fair and equal access to human rights. Caring for people in this way is also an element of the Judeo-Christian tradition. More recently and controversially, these traditions have influenced the debate surrounding same-sex marriage. Although there is no official reference to Christianity in the documentation of the Australian Liberal Party, the party remains strongly connected to the religion's values, and same-sex marriage is still prohibited in Australia. This is further evidence of the power that Australia's religious traditions can have over our laws.

Religion and democracy

Religion has influenced the democratic rights of Australian citizens, despite our Constitution prohibiting parliament from discriminating against people because of their religion. Australian governments are officially secular. This means that governments cannot favour one religion over another, and cannot stop people from following the religion of their choice. In this way, a secular government is one that permits religious freedoms, and therefore also permits and encourages democracy. Although secularism is not related to Australia's Judeo-Christian traditions, the freedom of religion provisions in our Constitution have allowed religion to flourish in our communities (see figure 1).

A.D. 1900.	alteration and of repeal in respect of any such law as the Parliament of the Colony had until the Colony became a State.
Inconsistency of laws.	109. When a law of a State is inconsistent with a law of the Commonwealth, the latter shall prevail, and the former shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be invalid.
Provisions referring to Governor.	110. The provisions of this Constitution relating to the Governor of a State extend and apply to the Governor for the time being of the State, or other chief executive officer or administrator of the government of the State.
States may surrender territory.	111. The Parliament of a State may surrender any part of the State to the Commonwealth; and upon such surrender, and the acceptance thereof by the Commonwealth, such part of the State shall become subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the Commonwealth.
States may levy charges for inspection laws.	112. After uniform duties of customs have been imposed, a State may levy on imports or exports, or on goods passing into or out of the State, such charges as may be necessary for executing the inspection laws of the State; but the net produce of all charges so levied shall be for the use of the Commonwealth; and any such inspection laws may be annulled by the Parliament of the Commonwealth.
Intoxicating liquors.	113. All fermented, distilled, or other intoxicating liquors passing into any State or remaining therein for use, consumption, sale, or storage, shall be subject to the laws of the State as if such liquors had been produced in the State.
States may not raise forces. Transfer of property of Commonwealth or State.	114. A State shall not, without the consent of the Parliament of the Commonwealth, raise or maintain any naval or military force, or impose any tax on property of any kind belonging to the Commonwealth, nor shall the Commonwealth impose any tax on property of any kind belonging to a State.
States not to coin money.	115. A State shall not coin money, nor make anything but gold and silver coin a legal tender in payment of debts.
Commonwealth not to legislate in respect of religion.	116. The Commonwealth shall not make any law for 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.
Rights of residents in States.	117. A subject of the Queen, resident in any State, shall not be subject in any other State to any disability or discrimination which would not be equally applicable to him if he were a subject of the Queen resident in such other State.
Recognition of laws, &c. of States.	118. Full faith and credit shall be given, throughout the Commonwealth to the laws, the public Acts and records, and the judicial proceedings of every State.
Protection of States from invasion and violence.	119. The Commonwealth shall protect every State against invasion and, on the application of the Executive Government of the State, against domestic violence.

FIGURE 1

Australia is legally a secular country — section 116 of our Constitution makes it illegal for the Australian government to promote or prohibit religious activity.

Religion in daily life

Australia's Judeo-Christian traditions are represented in many elements of daily life. One of the best examples of these influences can be seen in the opening hours of shops and businesses. It was not too long ago that Sunday trading was completely banned in Australia. As Sunday was the traditional day of rest for Christians, most businesses were not officially allowed to open. Only relatively recently has the ban on Sunday trading been lifted in most Australian states and

territories. Tight restrictions, however, remain in place for religious public holidays such as Good Friday, Easter Monday and Christmas Day. The way in which these holidays are celebrated also shows the influence of religion on Australian society. Christmas decorations begin appearing in supermarkets and shopping centres as early as October. As soon as Christmas is over, these are replaced by Easter eggs and hot cross buns. These cultural items are further evidence of how religious traditions influence Australian life.



Trading Hours	
• Monday	9am - 5pm
• Tuesday	9am - 5pm
• Wednesday	9am - 5pm
• Thursday	9am - 5pm
• Friday	9am - 5pm
• Saturday	9am - 4pm
• Sunday	Closed

FIGURE 2

Some shops and businesses still close on Sundays, a tradition that arose from the Judeo-Christian belief that Sunday was a day for rest.

In the name of religion

It is an unfortunate truth that Australia's Judeo-Christian traditions are also responsible for some darker moments in our history. In 1837, the British Parliament launched an inquiry into the treatment of Indigenous Australians in the colonies. The result of this inquiry was the establishment of 'protectors' whose role it was to manage the welfare of Aboriginal people and communities. These protectors were usually Christian missionaries who attempted to 'civilise' Indigenous culture. This was done directly through the introduction of religious education or indirectly by imposing European ways of life. Though the intentions of these missionaries may have been good, their actions proved otherwise. Christian missionaries were responsible for separating many Indigenous people from their land, culture and families. This example illustrates how Australia's Judeo-Christian traditions have not always been positive.

ACTIVITIES

REMEMBER

1. How are religion and values similar?
2. Describe how Judeo-Christian traditions have influenced the Australian legal system.
3. Why is Sunday trading only a recent addition to Australian life?

DISCOVER

4. Use the **Trading hours** weblink in your Resources section to research and compare the trading hours of your state or territory with the trading hours of another state or territory. What similarities and differences did you find?

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THINK

5. What if our Constitution did not protect our right to freedom of religion? Do you think this would have a good or bad effect? Explain your answer in detail.

SkillBuilder: Deconstruct/reconstruct method

Tell me

Go on, admit it. At some stage in your school life, you've copied someone else's work. (Or if you haven't, you probably know someone who has.) Maybe it was just the answer to one question in a Science class, or perhaps it was part of a History assignment. Copying another person's work without acknowledging the author is plagiarism. For many students, the act of plagiarism occurs simply because they do not know how to read information and then use it appropriately in their own work. The deconstruct/reconstruct method allows you to do exactly this.



Show me

The deconstruct/reconstruct method is a way to use existing information to create original work. This academic technique helps you better understand information and allows you to organise your thoughts more clearly. By implementing this strategy, you will create unique pieces of writing that still have the same meaning as the articles and books you have read in your research.

There are three steps to the deconstruct/reconstruct method.

Step 1: Read

Make sure you read the entire source from start to end. There is no need to highlight or take notes during this stage. You want to simply read and take in the meaning of the author's work.

Step 2: Re-read

The more times you watch a movie, the better you can see the elements that the director wanted you to see. The more times you read a source, the better you can see the elements that the author wanted you to see. When re-reading a source, you should use a table like the one shown below to help you collect information and organise your own thoughts. In the 'Quotes/facts' column, write only factual or statistical information. The 'Notes' section is for any ideas and questions that you might have after reading the quote. You can write this section in dot points or full sentences — whatever makes sense to you. You do not necessarily need to comment on each quote or fact you record; similarly, you may write notes that do not relate to a specific quote. Completing this section is crucial as these notes will form the basis of your writing.

Quotes/facts	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Factual information• Direct quotes from authors or other people• Statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ideas and questions you might think of while reading the source• Dot points and/or whole sentences

Let us use one of the paragraphs from this topic to practise the deconstruct/reconstruct method:

Hinduism is the oldest major religion in the world and has been practised for more than 5000 years. Hinduism in Australia, however, only began in the mid nineteenth century. Although there is evidence of Hindu crews trading with the First Fleet, the first major period of Hindu immigration occurred well after the establishment of the Australian colonies. Hindu immigrants undertook several roles in early Australian society — as labourers, camel drivers, domestic staff and merchants. By 1911, there were over 1000 people in Australia who were affiliated with the Hindu faith. However, as with Islam, the growth of Hinduism in Australia was negatively affected by the White Australia policy. Today, Hinduism is a popular religion especially among Indian, Sri

Lanka, Fijian and South African immigrants. According to the 2011 Australian census, Hindu practitioners accounted for 1.3 per cent of the population.

This is what your table could look like:

Quotes	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hinduism is 5000 years old. It began in Australia during the mid nineteenth century. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hinduism was the world's first religion. Where did Hinduism begin? How old are the other religions mentioned in this section?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By 1911, there were over 1000 Hindus in Australia. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Australia had only a small Hindu population at the start of the twentieth century. Which state had the biggest population? Did they feel isolated in this small community?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hindu immigrants undertook several roles in early Australian society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hindu immigrants had a number of different jobs in colonial Australia, many based on the environmental conditions of their home countries.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2011, 1.3 per cent of all Australians practised Hinduism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many people is this in total numbers? What factors have helped Hinduism grow so much in recent years? How does this growth rate compare to other religions?

Step 3: Write

Put away the book, close the website page and rewrite what you have just read. The best way to do this is by using only the table that you created in step 2. The notes column should contain your own interpretation of what the author has said, and the quotes/facts column will provide the evidence you need to support your arguments and assumptions.

Once the table has been completed, you can use the information to create your original piece of writing. The paragraph below has been written using the information summarised in the practice table. Extra research has also been completed to answer some of the questions written in the notes column.

Some of the world's religions have been around for 5000 years. One of these long-standing religions is Hinduism. Although Hinduism is such an old religion, it began in Australia only during the mid nineteenth century. Historically, Hindu communities have been small in size, with only about 1000 Australians identifying themselves as Hindu in 1911. Hindu immigrants had a number of different jobs in colonial Australia, many based on the environmental conditions of their home countries. At the most recent Australian census (2011), the total of Hindu practitioners was 476 300. This figure shows how much the religion has developed in Australia.

As you can see, the meaning of the paragraph created by the deconstruct/reconstruct method and the one upon which it is based is exactly the same. Both paragraphs discuss the early history of Hinduism in Australia, and both paragraphs use similar statistical information to support this discussion. However, because the deconstruct/reconstruct method has been used, the written text itself is completely different. The author has synthesised information and created an original piece of writing.

Let me do it

Now that you have seen how the deconstruct/reconstruct method works, the time has come for you to practise this new skill. Choose any paragraph from this resource and apply the three steps of the process. Remember to set up the 'quotes and notes' table to help you record your own thoughts as well as any important information.

Review and reflect

Review

Much of modern Australian society has its roots in Judeo-Christian traditions. Religion encourages particular values and explores particular themes. Many of these have found their way into our culture, law and communities. As immigration continues, so too will the evolution of religion within Australia. It is likely that these new religions will combine with Judeo-Christian traditions to further influence Australian society.

- Australian society has been shaped by Judeo-Christian traditions.
- Immigration has profoundly influenced the religious beliefs practised in Australia. Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and atheism are all practised in modern Australia.
- Although section 116 of our Constitution prohibits the government from promoting or prohibiting religious activity, Judeo-Christian beliefs have shaped our laws and continue to do so.
- Religion in Australia continues to evolve and reflects demographic changes in Australian society.



Interactivity

Multiple choice

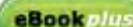
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Interactivity

True/false

Searchlight ID: INT-4308



Interactivity

Crossword

Searchlight ID: INT-5319

Reflect

Government and religion have been officially separated in Australia since our Constitution took effect in 1901. According to this founding document, no government can force people to follow a religion or ban people from following the religion of their choice. Rules such as these give Australia a secular government. As you could imagine, secularism has caused controversy throughout Australia's history. Some people believe it is essential for proper government, while others believe religion can provide an important influence on governments. Imagine that a prime minister with a significant religious background has just been elected. The new prime minister is Catholic and believes that this religion should have a greater influence on Australian society. All references to secularism are to be removed from the Australian Constitution.

1. Do you believe secularism should be included in Australia's Constitution? Explain why.
2. Explain any possible negative or positive benefits of the new prime minister's plan.
3. Investigate the global trends in religious beliefs by following the **World religions map** weblink in your Resources section. Answer the following questions:
 - a. Which countries have similar religious patterns to Australia?
 - b. What do these countries have in common?
 - c. Describe any patterns on this map which you find interesting.

