RELIGION AND AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL DIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Religion remains a central part of the identities of a declining majority of Australians. However the politics of religion, intimately related to ethnic and cultural differences, have become a central part of national debates in Australia. While religious change has been characterised by the rapid growth in non-Christian religions, Christian conservatives have become increasingly influential in the development of social policy. Meanwhile the growth of Islamic communities has been driven by immigration from over 60 Muslim countries, and is rapidly changing the makeup of parts of Australia's largest city, Sydney. Arguments over multiculturalism are increasingly being framed by critical perspectives on Islam.

ANDREW JAKUBOWICZ

Andrew Jakubowicz is Professor of Sociology at the University of Technology Sydney. Since the early 1970s he has been involved in action research and race relations, and has been centrally involved in the development of materialist theories of cultural diversity. He has taught at universities in the USA, Europe and Asia, and was the foundation director of the Centre for Multicultural Studies at the University of Wollongong. He has published widely on ethnic diversity issues, disability studies and media studies.

The current context

In August 2005, with the London terrorist bombings still ringing in the corridors of power, Australian Prime Minister John Howard ordered the appearance in the national capital of thirteen hand-picked and government defined Muslim leaders. They had been called to stand by the Prime Minister and denounce terrorism. This they did. At the same time representatives of some fifty Muslim groups who had not been invited to the meeting, possibly because they were defined as either too "extreme" or too low profile, issued a statement calling on the government to recognise the range of legitimate debate that should be allowed in the country on key issues that worried them – especially Australian government support for the American led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For the first time since the First World War ninety years before, when Irish Catholic Australians condemned Australian government involvement in Britain's war against the Prussian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires (but especially against the Irish rebels), every level of Australian politics had become saturated with debates over religion and its place in the secular body politic of the Commonwealth. Whereas a decade before, religion had hardly ruffled the surface of multi-cultural Australia – the 1995 Global Diversity conference had only minor dimensions of discussion of religion and most public interest was ethnographic rather than political – global and local events in the new millennium had located religion firmly in the centre of public concerns. It was not simply the Islamic presence that had driven this concern, but a wider sweeping of the secular polity by activist religious organizations and a national government strongly influenced by the fundamentalist Christian rightwing. Australian modernity was becoming one in which despite declining numbers of self-identifying religious believers, evangelical Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish institutions had become far more extensively enmeshed in the provision of the basic organisational necessities of modern society – education, health, welfare and so on.

Unlike the U.S. with its firm separation of church and state, Australian governments had supported and been supported by religious groups since the foundation of the European settlement; state aid for church schools had become bi-partisan policy in the 1960s. However it was not until the election of the conservative national government in 1996, that government preference for religious provision of services was enshrined as a policy priority. Senior church people became major figures in government policy deliberations, and conservative clerics, such as the Anglican and Catholic primates of Sydney, were increasingly influential with senior political operatives. Meanwhile the rapid rise of evangelical churches, particularly the global Sydney-based Hillsong Church, drew politicians to their national gatherings, and in 2004 delivered a critical Senate seat to the Family First Party, sponsored by a national network of these churches.

The pattern of religious affiliation since Federation in 1901 reveals the decline of religiosity and of Christianity, and the growth of other religions. Even so, identifying non-Christians make up less than one in twenty of the population, while Christians form three in five. The society is thus still very much Christian in its ethos and moral discourse, though overtly secular in its governmentality.

12.17 Major Religious Affiliations

Census Year	Christianity Anglican	Christianity Catholic	Christianity Other	Total	Other religions	No religion	Not stated/ inadequately described	Total '000
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
1901	39.7	22.7	33.7	96.1	1.4	0.4	(a)2.0	3,773.8
1911	38.4	22.4	35.1	95.9	0.8	0.4	(a)2.9	4,455.0
1921	43.7	21.7	31.6	96.9	0.7	0.5	(a)1.9	5,435.7
1933	38.7	19.6	28.1	86.4	0.4	0.2	12.9	6,629.8
1947	39.0	20.9	28.1	88.0	0.5	0.3	11.1	7,579.4
1954	37.9	22.9	28.5	89.4	0.6	0.3	9.7	8,986.5
1961	34.9	24.9	28.4	88.3	0.7	0.4	10.7	10,508.2
1966	33.5	26.2	28.5	88.2	0.7	0.8	10.3	11,599.5
1971	31.0	27.0	28.2	86.2	0.8	6.7	6.2	12,755.6
1976	27.7	25.7	25.2	78.6	1.0	8.3	11.4	13,548.4
1981	26.1	26.0	24.3	76.4	1.4	10.8	11.4	14,576.3
1986	23.9	26.0	23.0	73.0	2.0	12.7	12.4	15,602.2
1991	23.8	27.3	22.9	74.0	2.6	12.9	10.5	16,850.3
1996	22.0	27.0	21.9	70.9	3.5	16.6	9.0	17,752.8
2001	20.7	26.6	20.7	68.0	4.9	15.5	11.7	18,769.2

(a) Includes 'object to state'. ABS Census of Population and Housing.

How then does religious revivalism engage with the cultural pluralism of an avowedly secular modern country? While Christianity has been the dominant force on the religious landscape for two hundred years, three other groups – Muslims, Jews and Buddhists – each carrying a kernel of refugee displacement and the ambivalence in identities such experiences create – have been re-shaping the public discourses of the once self-assertively secular society.

Religious Affiliation

	1996	%	2001	%	Change %
Christianity		70.9		68.0	-1.1
Anglican	3,903.3	22.0	3,881.2	20.7	-0.6
Baptist	295.2	1.7	309.2	1.6	4.8
Catholic	4,799.0	27.0	5,001.6	26.6	4.2
Churches of Christ 75.0	0.4	61.3	0.3	-18.2	
Jehovah's Witness 83.4	0.5	81.1	0.4	-2.8	
Lutheran	250.0	1.4	250.4	1.3	0.2
Orthodox	497.0	2.8	529.4	2.8	6.5
Pentecostal	174.7	1.0	194.6	1.0	11.4
Presbyterian andReformed	675.5	3.8	637.5	3.4	-5.6
Salvation Army	74.1	0.4	71.4	0.4	-3.7
Uniting Church	1,334.9	7.5	1,248.7	6.7	-6.5
Other Christian	420.6	2.4	497.9	2.7	18.4
Buddhism	199.8	1.1	357.8	1.9	79.1
Hinduism	67.3	0.4	95.5	0.5	41.9
Islam	200.9	1.1	281.6	1.5	40.2
Judaism	79.8	0.4	84.0	0.4	5.2
Other religions	68.6	0.4	92.4	0.5	34.6
No religion	2,948.9	16.6	2,906.0	15.5	-1.5
Not stated/ nadequately described	1,604.7	9.0	2,187.7	11.7	36.3
Total	17,752.8	100.0	18,769.2	100.0	5.7

Source: ABS Census.

Christian Diversity

As the Australian colonies settled into place fifty years after the British first invaded the southern continent and claimed it for themselves, a hundred year long contestation began that would affect Australian politics in critical ways. The English and Scots who dominated the political and economic life of the colonies also faced the alienation of the Irish, many of them political prisoners from various uprisings against British rule. Catholicism then always carried this political quality. The Catholic ascendancy reached its height in early 1996, with a Catholic Prime Minister, Chief Justice, and Governor General, the first time such a triumvirate had come together – and it lasted for just three months (until the Catholic Prime Minister lost the general election).

Most recently conservative Christians in national politics have formed a coalition to press for Christian values in government policy. This coalition, known as the Lyons group, formed the heartland of support for John Howard in his challenge to the far more liberal John Hewson for party leadership in the early 1990s. Howard succeeded, and became Prime Minister in 1996 – delivering to his supporters through dramatic increases in funding for Christian schools, the appointment of key Christian advisors, and the transfer of major public sector services to Christian service organizations.

In recent years tensions within the mainstream churches over progressive versus conservative directions (over homosexuality, women priests, child abuse – many to do therefore with sexuality and Christian identity), have been exacerbated by the rise of evangelical churches and the increasing presence of diverse Christianities from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

While ethnic Christianities are growing to reflect the pattern of immigration, a new phenomenon is the emergence of consciously multicultural Christian congregations – that is, drawing together the rising culturally diverse middle class in a cross-cultural celebration of faith.

Islam and the Muslim communities of Australia

In the past decade Islam has been one of the fastest growing religions, primarily from Australian-born children of Muslim immigrant parents. In parallel with that growth, strong anti-Muslim sentiment has appeared in older parts of the Anglo-Australian and longer established immigrant communities, exacerbated by international tensions generated by 9/11, asylum seekers from Muslim countries, the growth of Jemaah Islamiha in Indonesia and lethal attacks on Australians, and the various crises in the Middle East. Local factors have also exacerbated inter-communal relations, including a series of so-called "race rapes" by young Lebanese Muslim Australian men in Sydney, and deadly inter-family feuds relating to drug sales and organised crime in the same community.

While there was a Muslim presence in Australia throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the growth in Muslim communities followed

Table 1 – Muslims by birthplace, Australia, 2001

Birthplace	Australia Muslims	Percentage all Muslims
Australia	102566	36.43
Afghanistan	9923	3.52
Bangladesh	7596	2.70
Bosnia & Herzeg.	9892	3.51
Cyprus	3708	1.32
Egypt	3061	1.09
Fiji	5772	2.05
India	2819	1.00
Indonesia	8087	2.87
Iran	6353	2.26
Iraq	7749	2.75
Jordan	1348	0.48
Kuwait	1610	0.57
Lebanon	29321	10.41
Malaysia	2975	1.06
N-W Europe	2668	0.95
Pakistan	9238	3.28
Singapore	2091	0.74
Somalia	3585	1.27
Syria	2261	0.80
Turkey	23479	8.34
Sub-total	246102	87.4
All	281576	

Source: (DIMIA 2003)

Selected source countries with Muslim populations NSW – all nationals	Birthplace 1996	Birthplace 2001	% change
Afghanistan	5826	11296	93.9
Bangladesh	5077	9078	78.8
Bosnia	13610	23848	75.2
Iraq	14004	24832	77.3
Lebanon	27000 (70224)	29300 (71000)	2.0
Pakistan	8358	11917	42.6
Somalia	2055	3713	80.7
Turkey	28869	29821	3.3
Muslims in NSW	102,288	140,907	38

Source: (ABS, 2003)

three different types of decisions regarding population and national interest in the 1960s and 1970s. The first decision reflected the move to end White Australia and the related assumption that such a move would allow Australia to accept members of the global professional classes – doctors, engineers, academics and business people – some of whom would be Muslims. The second decision reflected the immigration crises of the 1960s, and the need to replace the working class immigrants of the 1950s who were returning to their European countries of origin, with other industrial workers – primarily Turks. The third decision reflected Australia's humanitarian policy commitment, and the

response to pressures to admit refugees from the Lebanese civil war, and other Middle East conflagrations during and after the mid-1970s.

Together this created a Muslim population of immigrants and their descendants that as declared in the 2001 Census, numbered some 280,000, or 1.5% of the total population (up from 200,000 or 1.1% in 1996 and 147500 or 0.9% in 1991). Newspaper stories vary – some claiming up to 450,000 Muslims when reporting some community leaders (Chulov The Aust 17 Sep 2001).

While Muslims come from over sixty national backgrounds, the two largest groups are the Lebanese and Turks, most of whom are working class and concentrated in quite tight pockets in south western and western Sydney, and in parts of Melbourne. A Druse minority tend to be based in Adelaide.

The Muslim population rose some 40 per cent between 1996 and 2001 (the latest Census years); some communities rose rather more rapidly than this while others remained stable. The most significant increases took place at either ends of the economic ladder – impoverished refugees and well-off professionals and business people. The most significant group of Muslims are those born in Australia who contributed about 50 per cent of the increase – many of whom are the children of the two largest communities, while some are converts.

The Lebanese community was predominantly Christian (Maronite, Melkite and Catholic) until the 1960s. The early Muslim arrivals were Sunnis from northern Lebanon, around Tripoli, who settled in Canterbury in Sydney's inner west. They established the first mosque in Lakemba in the early 1960s. By 1971 about one in seven Lebanese-born residents were Muslims (3,500),five years later one in five (6,500),by 1981 one in three (16,000), by 1996 two in five (27,000), and by 2001 slightly more than that (29,300). In the period 1975 to 1977, some 14,000 Lebanese arrived in Australia from the civil war, being admitted as immigrants rather than as refugees. Nearly three quarters of Muslim Lebanese live in Sydney.

Muslim immigration from the post-1965 period has therefore had dramatic effect on the wider Australian awareness, and in particular has pushed the debate on multiculturalism in the wake of the waves of terror bombings after 2001. The London bombings, revealed as the work of "home-grown" terrorists, has had the greatest impact, leading the prime Minister to hold a controversial summit of selected "moderate" Muslim leaders (August 2005) to stand with him against terror.

One focus of debates about Islam has been the public persona of the so-called "Mufti" of Australia, a Sydney-based Egyptian-born cleric Sheik Al-Hilaly mainly associated with the large Lebanese Muslim community. He has been a controversial figure since his appointment in the 1980s; he has been accused of gross anti-Semitism, support for terrorists, and corruption. On the other hand he has been a major opponent of Wahabi Islamist forces (his mosque may have finally succumbed to them in mid-2005), and has stressed the importance of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. In May 2005 he emerged in the national media as the "arranger" of the release of Douglas Wood, an Australian businessman held by kidnappers in Baghdad. Hilaly had appeared to claim he was the reason that Iraqi troops found Wood and were able to release him. Australian government sources appeared unwilling to either support or undermine his version of events.

Hilaly was also conspicuously out of Australia during the Prime Minister's Muslim summit, apparently because he did not want to be compromised by appearing in it, and did not want to alienate himself from the government by refusing to accept the PM's invitation. For the popular media he remains the weather-vane of the Muslim presence, and a constant target of criticism. The discourses about him reveal much about Australian community disturbance in a period of social unease and fear.

The debate has ballooned into a fairly vigorous argument about Australian values and the demand that Muslim schools in particular be policed to ensure they are serving up the fare demanded by the more populist demagogues and right-wing politicia.

Conclusion

While religious diversity in Australia is far wider than just Christianity and Islam, these religions have been at the heart of most recent debates about multiculturalism. The debate has ballooned into a fairly vigorous argument about Australian values and the demand that Muslim schools in particular be policed to ensure they are serving up the fare demanded by the more populist demagogues and right-wing politicia. At its height one politician demanded that the hijab be banned in public schools – a demand rejected by conservative leaders, though not without sustained pillorying of Islamic schools as centres of un-Australian values.

On the other hand, a few inter-religious coalitions such as those between imams, priests and rabbis to build bridges between school students of the Abrahamic faiths, and initiatives by young westernised Muslims to distance themselves from terror, suggest some areas of autonomous community activity are bearing fruit. Yet the national discourse increasingly aligns multiculturalism with Muslim fundamentalism, and proposes ever more rigid definitions of acceptable behaviour and belief.

The overarching trend suggests that religion has moved back into the mainstream of the political flow, even if the urban elites find it bemusing and possibly pre-modern. Religion has become the central arena of dispute for Australian multiculturalism, the arena most fraught with anxious hostilities.

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