

THE IMPACT OF MULTICULTURALISM ON AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines the ambiguous role of religion in multicultural Australia. Despite theoretical commitment to religious pluralism, there are some notable examples that highlight significant flaws in the application of Australia's multicultural ideals. A case study of a contemporary issue relating to Australian Aboriginal religion is provided to demonstrate the difficulty multicultural policies have in recognising the values of non-Christian religions.

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Introduction

This article examines the interrelationship of religion and multiculturalism in the Australian context. It begins with an overview of historical developments that led to the present multicultural situation, and a presentation of statistical information demonstrating the plurality of Australia's religious composition. The ambiguous role of religion in multicultural Australia, particularly how minority religions are recognised and understood at a legal level, is demonstrated through an examination of a contemporary issue relating to Australian Aboriginal religion. Reference is made to the current direction of academic studies on the interrelationship between religious diversity and multiculturalism in Australia and suggestions for further research are provided in the conclusion.

Historical Development of Multiculturalism in Australia

Since the arrival of British settlers in Australia in 1788, Australia's history has been shaped by immigration. Following Federation in 1901, the "White Australia Policy" was adopted as a guide for immigration, effectively excluding non-whites. In 1945, Australia's population was still overwhelmingly of British origin, but now included approximately 8% Europeans, 1% other whites, and 1% non-whites (mainly Aboriginals).<1> Following World War II the exclusionist conditions of the immigration policy were gradually lifted, although the "White Australia Policy" was not officially abolished until 1973. The Whitlam Labour Government introduced the concept of multiculturalism in 1972, although some argue that the new multicultural policy was just a facade for assimilation.<2> Multiculturalism became more prominent in the late 1970s.<3> A 1980 Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs document asserts that multiculturalism in Australia is "a social and demographic fact".<4> Bouma presents evidence that this emphasis had continued: "Australia's federal Labour Government from 1982 to 1996 pursued a deliberate and intentional policy of promoting a view of Australia as a multicultural society. It promoted diversity as desirable, healthy and as essential to the future

success of the nation".<5> The election of the current federal coalition Government in 1996 has seen some reduction in immigration, but the commitment to multiculturalism has remained.

However, the extent to which multicultural ideals are upheld in practice is a matter that is constantly under debate. For example, in 1985, Smolicz claimed: "Closer analysis, however, reveals that support for the principle of multiculturalism is often hedged around with a number of qualifications, or has yet to be put into practice".<6> In 1988, Foster and Stockley contended: "We have reached a time in Australia in which neither of the major political parties has a prime commitment to multiculturalism even though the rhetoric of multiculturalism is a taken-for-granted component of political discourse".<7> In 1997, Jupp declared: "Australian multiculturalism grew out of immigrant settlement, was not concerned with Aborigines, did not follow American affirmative action principles or have the cultural emphasis of Canadian policy and was primarily concerned with social justice and social harmony rather than with the preservation of ethnic differences".<8>

#### Australia's Religious Composition

The majority of Australian citizens are Christians. The number of Christian traditions represented in Australia diversified after World War II with the ensuing increase in immigration. As Table I shows, in the 1970s and 1980s significant numbers of Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus migrated to Australia, and during this period there was a rise in the proportion of the population professing to have no religion.<9>

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See Table I:

Percentage of Australian Population Identifying with Christian and Non-Christian Groups in Selected Years.<10>

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The 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics census provides a detailed analysis of Australia's religious composition: Catholics 27% (4,798,950), Anglicans 22% (3,909,324), Uniting Church 7.5% (1,334,917), Presbyterians and Reformed 4% (675,534), Orthodox 2.5% (474,921), Baptists 1.5% (295,178), Lutherans 1.5% (249,989), Muslims 1.1% (200,885), Buddhists 1.1% (199,812), Pentecostals 1% (174,720), Jehovah's Witnesses 0.5% (83,414), Jews 0.4% (79,805), Churches of Christ 0.4% (75,023), Salvation Army 0.4% (74,145), Hindus 0.4% (67,279), and Seventh-day Adventists 0.3% (52,655). In 1996, there were five religious groups with membership numbers between 10,000 and 50,000: (in decreasing order of size) Latter Day Saints, Oriental Christian Churches, Brethren, Sikhs and Christadelphians. Another twenty-four religious groups had between 1000 and 10,000 members; twelve of these groups were Christian. 8.7% of the population (1,550,585) chose not to answer the religion question on the census form, and 16.6% (2,948,888) ticked the "no religion" box.<11> Several non-Christian religions experienced substantial growth in the period 1991-1996; the number of Buddhists increased by 43% to comprise 1.1% of the Australian population in 1996; Muslims increased 36% to comprise also 1.1% of the population; and Hindus increased 54% to comprise 0.4% of the population.

Bouma identifies three demographic and three social structural factors as key contributors to Australia's success as a multicultural society: the lack of overlap between ethnic and religious difference; the lack of

ghettoisation of religious and ethnic communities; the depoliticisation of religious difference; a long history of non-violent religious/ethnic conflict, which has been resolved largely through legislation and the courts; the existence of effective organisations promoting positive inter-group relations; and the relatively small size of religious minority groups.<12> Bouma argues that there is no population base for a significant challenge to the dominant religious groups, or for significant politicisation of minority religion, as the majority of Australian ethnic groups each total near or significantly less than one percent of the population. He argues further that the fact that many of these non-Christian groups are ethnically diverse further reduces the likelihood of serious challenge.<13>

There have been a number of studies that examine the relationship between religion and ethnic identity, particularly in the context of the migrant experience in Australia. For example, Bouma's 1996 work on religious settlement, identity and cultural diversity in Australia examines religious settlement and the issues inherent in it;<14> and Ata's three volumes (1988) examine the effects of ethnic religious activity on cultural adjustment.<15> Other studies concentrate on ethnic settlement in a particular region or religious group, for example, Ireland (1998) examines collective Australian new religious groups to determine whether they are strengthening or causing disintegration of Australian society;<16> Adam (1995) investigates whether religion provides a source of alienation or a means to integration for Vietnamese Buddhist and Catholic migrants in Western Australia;<17> and Cox (1982) compares the role of religion in migrant welfare in Buddhism and Muslim families from eight different ethnic backgrounds.<18>

#### The Role of Religion in Multicultural Australia

Recognition of the role of religion in multicultural Australia is limited at the political level. Australian multicultural policies always mention religion; for example, the 1989 National Agenda on Multiculturalism identifies three fundamental dimensions of multicultural policy: cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency. Cultural identity was defined as "the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion"; and social justice as "the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth".<19> However, further details on how to apply multicultural ideals to religious issues are difficult to find. Bouma argues that while Australia's multicultural policies have included consideration of religious issues, problems remain:

'A multicultural society is one characterised by religious plurality, a willingness to live and let live among religious organisations, a spirit of respect for religion, and of willing co-operation from governments and their agencies at all levels with religions. Australian state and federal governments and agencies are committed to multicultural policies and to reducing discrimination on the basis of religion. While there is no constitutionally enshrined "Bill of Rights", laws against harassment and discrimination on various bases have been enacted. While much progress has been made there is plenty of room for more. There are cases of harassment, of intimidation, of name-calling, denial of employment, denial of approval to build mosques and temples, and problems with housing or access to services on the bases of religious difference in Australia. However, there is no communally grounded, religiously approved, and openly expressed antipathy toward other groups.'<<20>

While Bouma is largely correct in his analysis of the situation, there are some notable examples that highlight significant flaws in the application of Australia's multicultural ideals. The Hindmarsh Island case (discussed below) demonstrates the difficulty multicultural policies have in recognising the values of non-Christian religions, in this case, indigenous religion.

#### Recognition of Indigenous Religious Values: Hindmarsh Island Case Study

Multiculturalism requires the development of overarching values that are acceptable to all citizens. In 1989, the National Agenda on Multiculturalism described the core principles of multiculturalism as follows: "Multicultural policies require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society - the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equality, Parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and equality of the sexes".<sup><21></sup> Smolicz argues that although overarching values may derive primarily from one or more groups, if these values are accepted by all then they are no longer just the property of the originating group(s), but the common possession of all citizens.<sup><22></sup> Consequently, overarching values that are based in those of the dominant culture(s) can be acceptable.

Australia certainly emphasises the values of the dominant Anglo-Celtic tradition. As Davidson notes: "It has been difficult for Australia to hand over the power and influence of Anglo-Celtic tradition to minorities. A multicultural Australia incorporated ethnic and cultural experience, but not the legal, political and ethical voices of immigrants".<sup><23></sup> Values such as parliamentary democracy and equality of the sexes are culture specific, not universal.<sup><24></sup> In 1977 the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council commented on this issue, arguing that "because some minority values are totally inconsistent with fundamental values of the dominant Australian culture (e.g. the norm that the family takes the law into its hands to redress a wrong done by one of its members), it would be nonsense to say that multiculturalism means that every culture is equally valued and equally legitimate".<sup><25></sup>

An example of the dominance of Anglo-Celtic values to the detriment of others can be seen in the issue of Aboriginal landrights. Charlesworth writes: "In the contemporary Australian society Aborigines' claims to their land can be made only within the context of British/Australian property law, even though the legal concepts and categories of the latter distort and falsify the whole Aboriginal meaning of land and land ownership".<sup><26></sup> Maddox's examination of South Australia's Hindmarsh Island controversy argues that the findings of the 1996 Federal Inquiry into this issue were based on a definition of religion that was culturally insensitive.

In 1995 the South Australian Government's Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission investigated a claim by the local indigenous people that the construction of a bridge joining Hindmarsh Island to the mainland would desecrate their heritage and consequently contravened indigenous heritage legislation. The Commission concluded that the "secret women's business" upon which the claim centred, was a "deliberate manufacture" for short-term political ends.<sup><27></sup> The Federal Inquiry that followed in 1996, known as the Mathews Inquiry, concluded that a genuine and archaic tradition did exist; however, Justice Mathews found that this tradition's existence was insufficient grounds for a construction ban.<sup><28></sup> However, Maddox questions the validity of the Mathews Inquiry's methods, arguing that Mathews required demonstration of a level of doctrinal elaboration that is common in

Christianity, but unlikely to be found in Aboriginal religious traditions. Maddox similarly criticises the Mathews Inquiry's interpretation of religious belief:

'Beyond privileging doctrine, she [Mathews] invokes a specifically Western, and perhaps specifically English, reification, of "belief" as mental phenomenon which can be isolated and extracted from other elements of a religious tradition. . . . Mathews interpreted the law as demanding that Aboriginal cultural heritage can only be protected if it is enshrined in a system of belief typical (probably exclusively so) of literate, functionally differentiated societies. Further, her interpretation read into this requirement an inflection which suggests that claims for protection should be supported by a kind of religious knowledge closely associated with Anglophone Protestants.'

#### Separation of Religion and State

The idea that elements of a religious tradition can be compartmentalised and understood in isolation is reflected in the ambiguous relationship that exists between religion and state in Australia. In one of the few publications that examine the nexus between multiculturalism and religion in Australia, Habel notes that multiculturalism in Australia seems to have been understood at a secular level, with the religious component of culture considered to be private.<30> However, as Baumann argues, while religion is often seen as private, religion is important at a social level in a multicultural society because of religion's close link with the construction of ethnic identity.<31>

Australian Aboriginals provide again a case in point; religion is a key identifier of authentic ethnicity for Aboriginal Australians, and their sacred relationship with the land provides a political tool in landright claims. According to Maddox, Australia's recognition of indigenous landrights and heritage has involved "a slow and often grudging recognition that the features of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies which confer ownership over land or significance upon certain sites cannot be understood in isolation from a wider cosmology." Maddox continues:

'So, we have a paradox: to achieve recognition and protection of their heritage, people may be required to "prove" - to the satisfaction of secular legal and political institutions - that something is "sacred" according to a belief system which the relevant institutions - by prescription as well as by culture - cannot share. Religious tradition is offered a public, political recognition that appears to contradict the wider society's long-established secularism; but in fulfilling the requirements for recognition, claimants are often compelled to produce evidence in a form which the system making the offer is ill-disposed and ill-equipped to comprehend.'

The difficulties posed to the legal system by the plurality of religions present in Australia are evidenced by other court cases that utilise Anglo-Celtic definitions of religion. The 1983 court case, *The Church of the New Faith v. Commissioner of Pay-roll Tax*, hinged on whether Scientology was a religion, sparking a lengthy debate on religion's definition in which Five High Court justices were called upon to give opinions. It was concluded that Scientology was a religion, but consensus on the definition of religion was limited.<33> According to Hume's examination of the case: "The ultimate conclusion reached about the definition of religion was that, all indicia considered, each case must be determined on the basis of the evidence adduced".<34>

## Conclusion

While Australian multicultural policies purport to recognise and respect religious plurality, this is difficult to achieve in practice. If Australia is to overcome issues such as those raised here, it is necessary to increase understanding in a number of areas that have implications for Religious Studies. First, there is a need for research on the various religions practised in Australia, particularly non-Christian religions. If culturally insensitive definitions of religion are to be avoided, it is vital that the differing types of religious systems that are practised by Australians are understood. Research needs to go beyond description of beliefs and practices to consider the implications of differing modes of religious practice for an understanding of what religion actually is. Second, research on the role of religion in society is required, particularly on the effects of religious plurality on multiculturalism, and the relationship between religious and cultural identity. While questions such as whether religion and state can be separated are of vital importance in constructing a multicultural society, these issues also have ramifications for the way in which religion is comprehended within the discipline of Religious Studies.

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## FOOTNOTES

This article was written when the author was working in the Department of Studies in Religion, University of Queensland, Brisbane' Australia

<1> Lois Foster and David Stockley, *Multiculturalism: The Changing Australian Paradigm*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1984, 26.

<2> *Ibid.*, 56; and Norman Habel, "Introduction." In *Religion and Multiculturalism in Australia: Essays in Honour of Victor Hayes*, ed. Norman Habel, Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1992, 12.

<3> Detailed historical accounts of the development of multiculturalism in Australia are provided by James Jupp, *Understanding Australian Multiculturalism*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996, 3-9; Foster and Stockley, 1984, chapters 2 and 3; and Lois Foster and David Stockley, *Australian Multiculturalism: A Documentary History and Critique*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1988, chapter 2.

<4> Quoted by J. J. Smolicz, "Multiculturalism in Australia: Rhetoric or Reality?" *New Community*, 12 (1985): 455.

<5> Gary D. Bouma, (ed.), *Many Religions, All Australian: Religious Settlement, Identity and Cultural Diversity*. Kew, Victoria: The Christian Research Association, 1996, 103.

<6> Smolicz, 1985: 455.

<7> Foster and Stockley, 1988, 246.

<8> James Jupp, "Tacking into the Wind: Immigration and Multicultural Policy in the 1990s." *Journal of Australian Studies*, 53 (1997): 30.

<9> Gary D. Bouma, "The Emergence of Religious Plurality in Australia: A Multicultural Society." *Sociology of Religion*, 56 (1995): 286.

- <10> Ibid.: 288. The 1996 statistics are from Peter Bentley and Philip J. Hughes. *Australian Life and the Christian Faith: Facts and Figures*. Kew, Victoria, Christian Research Association, 1998, 8.
- <11> These statistics combine information from Philip J. Hughes, *Religion in Australia: Facts and Figures*. Kew, Victoria: Christian Research Association, 1997, 70-72; and Bentley and Hughes, 1998, 10.
- <12> Bouma, 1995: 297.
- <13> Ibid.: 291.
- <14> Bouma, 1996.
- <15> Abe (I) Wade Ata, (ed.), *Religion and Ethnic Identity: An Australian Study*. Richmond, Victoria: Spectrum Publications, 1988.
- <16> Rowan Ireland, "New Religious Groups and Civil Society in Multicultural Australia." Paper presented at the Australian Association for the Study of Religions conference, Brisbane, 2-5 July 1998.
- <17> Enid Adam, *Buddhism in Western Australia*. Perth: The Author, 1995.
- <18> David Cox, *Religion and Welfare: A Study of the Role of Religion in the Provision of Welfare Services to Selected Groups of Immigrants in Melbourne, Australia*. Parkville, Victoria: Department of Social Studies, University of Melbourne, 1982.
- <19> Quoted in National Multicultural Advisory Council. *Multicultural Australia: The Next Steps Towards and Beyond 2000*. Vol. 1. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995, 2.
- <20> Bouma, 1995: 296.
- <21> Quoted in James Gobbo, "Law and Cultural Diversity." In *Multicultural Australia? Ethnic Claims and Religious Values: Proceedings of the Galatians Group Conference August 1995*, ed. Edgar French, Armadale, Victoria: Galatians Group, 1995, 49.
- <22> Smolicz, 1985: 461.
- <23> Alastair Davidson. "Multiculturalism and Citizenship: Silencing the Immigrant Voice." *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 18 (1997): 77.
- <24> This has already been noted by scholars including: Tom Atherton, Nigel Hart and Genia Hart, "Comparative Ethics and Multiculturalism in Australia: A Critique of the Smolicz Model of Multiculturalism." In Habel, 1992, 301.
- <25> Quoted by Jerry Zubrycki, "Beyond Multiculturalism." In French, 1995, 85.
- <26> Max Charlesworth, "Religion and Ethics in a Multicultural Society." In Habel, 1992, 269.
- <27> Marion Maddox, "Sticks and Stones: Religious Freedom, State Neutrality and Indigenous Heritage Protection." In *Australian Political Studies 1997: Proceedings of the 1997 Australian Political Studies Conference*, eds. George Crowder, Haydon Manning, David Scott Mathieson, Andrew Parkin and Leonard Seabrooke, Adelaide: Department of Politics, Flinders University of South Australia, 1997, 637.

<28> Ibid., 646.

<29> Marion Maddox, "Religious Belief in the Hindmarsh Island Controversy." In Cultural Heritage Values and Rights: Edited Proceedings of the 1996 International Conference on Cultural Heritage, eds. George Couvalis, Helen Macdonald and Cheryl Simpson, Adelaide: Centre for Applied Philosophy, 1998, 74-75.

<30> Habel, 1992, 13.

<31> Martin Baumann, "Multiculturalism and the Recognition of Religion." Panel paper presented at the Congress of the History of Religions in Europe, Hildesheim, 22-25 May 1998. See Baumann's contribution to this thematic issue of Diskus.

<32> Marion Maddox, "What is a 'Fabrication'? The Political Status of Religious Belief." Australian Religious Studies Review, 11, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 7.

<33> This is well documented in Lynne Hume, "Witchcraft and the Law in Australia." Journal of Church and State, 37 (Winter 1995): 135-150; and Reid Grant Mortensen, "The Secular Commonwealth: Constitutional Government, Law and Religion." Ph.D. diss., University of Queensland, 1995, 17-24.

<34> Hume, 1995: 141.

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TABLE 1

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Note to DISKUS readers: To view the following table correctly, format the next section in a non-proportionally-spaced font such as Courier or Courier New.  
(You can temporarily delete this note when printing the article.)  
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Table I: Percentage of Australian Population Identifying with Christian and Non-Christian Groups in Selected Years.<10>

Religious Category	Percent of Population in Selected Years							
	1911	1933	1947	1966	1976	1986	1991	1996
Christian	98.5	86.4	88.0	88.2	78.6	73.0	74.0	70.3
Non-Christian	1.0	0.5	0.5	0.7	1.0	2.0	2.6	3.5
No Reply	0.5	13.1	11.1	10.3	12.2	12.3	10.2	8.7
No Religion	-	-	0.3	0.8	8.3	12.7	12.9	16.6

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