

*Abstract:* Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age: Trends, Challenges, Practices

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Australia's population of a little more than 22 and a half million is a country that enjoys religious freedom as guaranteed by the Constitution, Section 116 which prohibits the Federal government from making any law establishing any religion, imposing any religious observance or prohibiting the free exercise of religion as long as it does not incite religious hatred. Of the population, 64 per cent identify as Christians, and the rest with no religion or a plurality of faiths.

Australia does not maintain a rigid separation of church and state, and religious schools receive substantial Federal funding. Moreover, the Government generously funds chaplaincy in schools. Anti-religion bodies have questioned and legally challenged this recently.

The role of Islam in Australian society has been a source of controversy, particularly in respect to customary practices and the exercise of sharia law, which has operated unofficially. The rapid growth of Islamic schools, which receive substantial Federal government funding, has recently been scrutinized.

The previous (Liberal) Government under Prime Minister John Howard deployed 8 million dollars to the establishment of Centres of Islamic Studies in several universities to promote Muslim engagement with Australian society and values.

Racial and religious vilification has been experienced especially after 9/11 , particularly amongst the Jewish and the Muslim communities. In some cases this has resulted in court cases using religious vilification legislation.

Religious freedom among Aboriginal Australians' practice of 'customary law' has been challenged on the basis of its danger to children and to women, and the use of violence. So far this remains an intractable multi-valent problem.

Religious freedom in Australia has been challenged in cases where cult activities have been seen as damaging to individual adherents and resulting in criminal behavior. This has been the case recently with Scientology, in a sexual abuse case, and in another matter, when Independent Senator, Nick Xenophon, has called for an inquiry into Scientology's religious status.

Sexual abuse cases have been a central issue in the Roman Catholic Church of Australia, and has prompted the consideration of an inquiry into the Church by the Attorney General of Victoria.

Australia is regarded as a fairly secular country and with a low level of protective feeling about its Christian heritage. Yet multiculturalism has come in for some criticism in public forums. Overall however multiculturalism has been endorsed by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard and receives continuing financial support from her Government. Religious freedom is a central pillar of multiculturalism as well as the Aussie spirit of giving everyone 'a fair go'.