

Religious Plurality and Diversity in Australia and Its Common Issues

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"The ultimate goal of historians of religions, is not to point out that there exist a certain number of types or patterns of religious behavior, with their specific symbolologies and theologies, but rather to understanding their meanings." (Mircea Eliade).¹

Background

All non-Aboriginal religious groups have found their way to Australia by migration either by being carried by migrating peoples or by 'migrating as systems of belief and practice transmitted by means of teachers, publications or missionaries. The shape of Australia's religion profile is primarily a function of its migration history and only secondarily a function of conversion or changing religious identification. Many forms of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism are found in Australia because people of these religious traditions have migrated to Australia and have worked to establish religious organizations to enable religious practices not previously found here. Religious groups which have come to Australia by other means than in the hearts of migrating people include Salvation Army, Zen Buddhism, Mormons and Pentecostal Christianity. Religious groups such as these have attracted a following through conversion and in this way have made a place for themselves in Australia's religious profile. Apart from Aboriginal religions there appear to be no religious or significant branches of existing religious traditions with their origins in Australia. The establishment of an 'Australian Church' in the late 19th Century did not produce an organization which survives now.²

Each religious group in Australia will have a story about how it became Australian. Since most religious groups present in Australia are here as a result of some form of migration, each will have a story of settlement in Australia: stories of how they came to be here, how they laid down the foundations of their organizational support structures, how they grew, established and possibly declined, and how they established relationships with other religious groups and with other agencies and structures of Australian society. The stories of the 'religious settlement' of Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Jewish and several other religious groups are part and parcel of the early history of European settlement in Australia. It is interesting, in this context, to compare the history of the Anglican church of Australia which began as a convict church served by chaplains and attended by convicts and jailers alike unwilling with that of the Anglican church of New Zealand which began as a Maori church served by missionaries; only in the 1850s did Pakeha European Anglican outnumber Maori. What is even more interesting is that Samuel Marsden was influential in the early days of both colonies, being derided as the 'whipping parson' in Australia and lauded as the one who brought Christianity to the Maoris.

Stories of religious settlement have again become more apparent in the past few decades as religious groups which were neither Christian nor associated with European migrants have come to Australia. The settlement of Muslims, Buddhist, and Hindus has called to the attention of social analyst and policy-makers the fact that religion makes a difference in the migration and settlement process and in so doing reminds other religious groups of their settlement stories.

Just when policy makers thought they could safely ignore religion it has once again become a salient issue in Australian politics. However, it is different this time. No longer is the focus on sectarian wrangling among the several denominations of Christianity found in Australia. Now the issue is the religious composition of Australian society. Until the late 1960s Australia essentially saw itself as a Christian country and then, with the Whitlam era, it became popular, albeit demographically incorrect, to see Australia as a secular country. Now it is clear that Australia's multicultural plurality extends to religious plurality, a nation of many religions, predominantly Christian religion, but many religions none the less. Moreover the predominantly Christian part of Australia has changed so that it too is nearly unrecognizable by some. Certainly the configuration of Christian religious groups is vastly different from that depicted in the 1947 census. As a result of migration Australia has become a nation of many religions; has become religiously plural.

There is now plurality both within Australian Christian groups and among the many religious groups in Australia. Some of this plurality is due to the immigration of different groups to Australia and some to the arrival in Australia of different ways of being religious which have had their origins overseas and have come here as part of more or less deliberate attempts to mark these approaches.³

The White Australia policy largely had the effect of maintaining the broadly Christian character of Australian culture. It enhanced the Catholic position largely through Irish and Italian immigration. The addition of the Orthodox through Greek migration was more of a challenge. They have stories to tell about negative reactions to their religious practice and their attempts to establish churches and schools that are quite like those now told by Muslim migrants. This increasing diversity was about to take a more dramatic turn.

Increasingly from 1947 to 1973 White Australia policy was honored more in rhetoric than in concrete decisions about immigration. This in part was in response to declines in migration from those areas of the world most like the existing population of Australia. The consequences of the abandonment of the White Australia policy have been dramatic, profound and are now beginning to be felt in their fuller force.

Muslims are now 1 per cent of the population, Buddhists are not far behind and at that size twice as numerous as several once substantial Christian groups such as the churches of Christ and the Salvation Army. Hindus as a group are about as numerous as Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are Muslim schools and mosques, Buddhist temples and Hindu places of worship. The skyline has changed not only by the erection of secular skyscrapers but also by minarets, grand temples and mosques. Some buildings once used by traditional Anglo-Celtic Christian religious groups are now used by Christian groups of very different ethnic background or have become mosques, or temples, or are disused. Suburbs have undergone change as the ethnic mix has changed.⁴

Religious Plurality & Diversity

The changes in Australia's religious profile over the last 50 years was very significant and, in particular, the impact of international immigration to Australia on those behaviors.

International migration to Australia over the last 50 years

In the period since 1947 there has been a considerable increase in the ethnic of the Australian population. At the 1991 census there were around 3.69 million overseas born people resident in Australia.

lia and this figure represented 22 per cent of the population compared with 10 per cent in 1947. The census also showed that 13 per cent of the population was born in non-English-speaking country and 14 per cent spoke a language other than English at home.

As immigrants have arrived from various parts of the world, they have formerly communities, particularly in the capital cities and larger regional centers. This has resulted in the establishment of the ethnic community organizations to meet their communities welfare, social, religious, cultural and other needs. Among the earliest and most important of these ethnic community organizations were the churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship.

The international immigration to Australia, the consequent growth of ethnic diversity in the nation and the formation of ethnic communities have led to major changes in Australia's religious profile between 1947 and 1991.⁵

The impact of population changes on Australia's religious profile

A comparison of the 1947 census and the 1991 census shows that Australia's religious profile has changed dramatically in those 44 years as figured 1 shows. Overall proportion of the population identifying with a Christian denomination has declined from 88 per cent to 75 per cent, while the proportions of those identifying with another religion or with no religion has risen. At the same time the diversity of Christian denominations has increased with 'Other Christians' growing from 7 to 11 per cent of the population.

Migration has brought a greater diversity of religions to Australia. In particular, there has been a rapid increase in the numbers of Buddhist, Muslims and Hindus, so that all three of these major world religions have become securely established in Australia. They have joined Judaism to constitute the four largest religions after Christianity in Australia. Many other religions, although smaller in size, are now also represented among Australia's religious communities. Examples of these are the Sikh, the Druse, the Baha'i, Taoist and Caoadaists.

Migration has also brought a greater diversity among Christian denominations to Australia. Perhaps the best example has been the growth in numbers and diversity among Orthodox churches established in the capital cities by early Greek and Lebanese immigrants. By 1991 the Orthodox churches have grown in size and diversity to become significant parts of Australia's religious profile.⁶

A third consequence of migration has been a greater diversity within the Christian groups in Australia. Thus, all of the major de-

nominations have non-English speaking groups associated with them. This is true in the Anglican, Uniting and Baptist denominations, for example. It is specially true for the Catholics who have seen an enormous influx of people from a great variety of countries around the world. A number of ways of accommodating this influx have been used in various sections of the Catholic church.

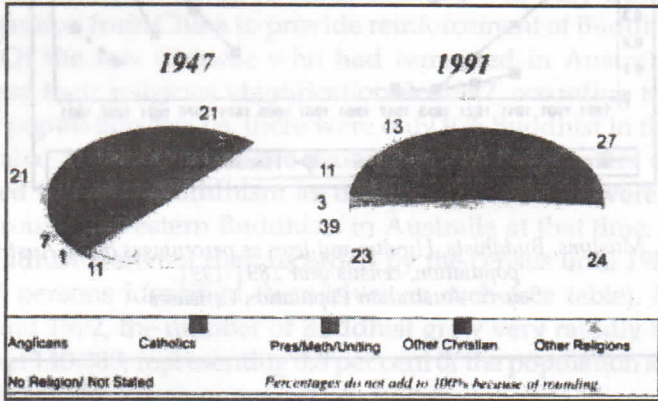


Figure 1. Religious identification of the Australian population, 1947 and 1991 (per cent). Source: Australian Population Censuses

Table: People identifying with religions other than Christianity, 1881-1991.

Year	Buddhism	Islam	Hinduism	Judaism	Other religions	Total
1891	22 717	na	na	13 809	21 647	58 173
1901	14 665	na	na	15 239	27 607	57 511
1911	11 964	3 908	414	17 287	3 212	36 785
1921	8 348	3 188	na	21 615	6 586	39 737
1933	1 827	1 877	212	23 553	1 001	28 470
1947	926	2 704	244	32 019	669	36 562
1954	na	na	na	48 436	6 381	54 817
1961	na	na	na	59 329	13 322	72 651
1966	na	na	na	63 275	13 647	76 922
1971	na	22 311	na	62 208	14 404	98 923
1976	na	45 206	na	53 441	30 422	129 069
1981	35 073	76 792	na	62 126	23 577	197 568
1986	80 447	109 523	21 455	69 086	35 740	316 251
1991	139 795	147 507	43 580	74 266	39 983	445 131

Source: Australian Population Censuses

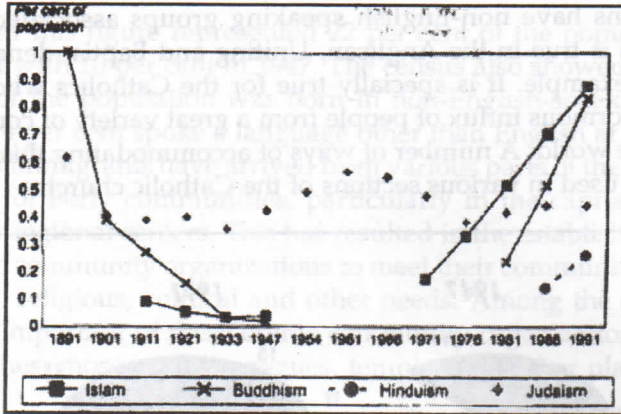


Figure 2. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews as percentages of the Australian population, census year 1891-1991. Source: Australian Population Censuses

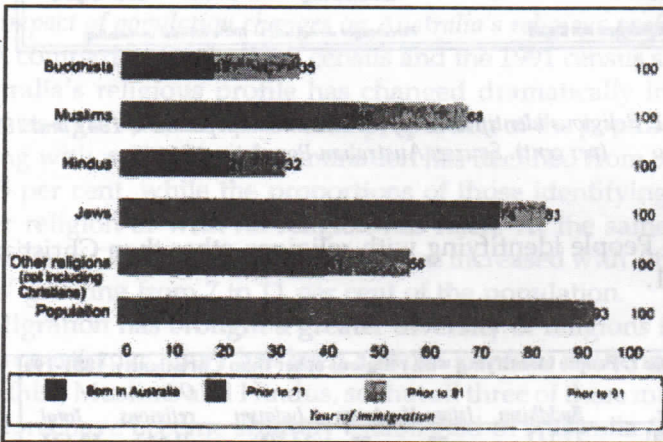


Figure 3. Arrival of immigrants identifying with Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and religions other than Christianity compared with the total Australian population. Source: 1991 Census table PCC0047

Increased diversity of religions

Buddhism

In the days of the gold rushes, in the 1850s, the Chinese brought Buddhism to Australia as well as Confucianism and some others religious practices. The Victorian census of 1857 counted 27.228 Buddhists in Victoria. However, from that time, the number decreased.

Many Chinese who had come to the gold-fields had either died or returned to their homeland. The closure of many gold-fields and the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901 meant that numbers continued to decline. In the national population census of 1911, there were only 1273 Buddhists identified in Victoria, and 11.964 Buddhists in Australia as a whole as shown in table.⁷

These numbers dropped further. There was very little, if any, immigration from China to provide reinforcement of Buddhist numbers. Of the few Chinese who had remained in Australia, most changed their religious identification. In 1947, according to the national population census, there were only 926 Buddhist in the whole Australia. Among them were probably a few westerners who had decided to adopt Buddhism as their religion. There were at least two groups of western Buddhists in Australia at that time.

Buddhist were not then recorded by the census until 1981 when 35.073 persons identified themselves as such (see table). Between 1981 and 1992, the number of Buddhist grew very rapidly to a total of about 140.000, representing 0,8 per cent of the population as shown in figure 2.

Almost all of this increase was due to immigration. The largest group of Buddhists Came from Vietnam and, in 1991, 65 per cent Vietnamese constituted one third of all Buddhist in Australia. Figure 3 show that, in 1991, 65 per cent of all Buddhists living in Australia had arrived had arrived between 1981 and 1991. The second largest groups were immigrants from Malaysia, mostly of Chinese background. Other Chinese Buddhists came directly from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore as well as from China. Buddhists also came from Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and other parts of Asia.

In 1991, 85,5 per cent of all Buddhists living in Australia had been born overseas. Another 10,5 per cent had one or both parents born overseas. Only 4 per cent had born in Australia of Australian born parents as shown in figure 4. Thus the Buddhists living in Australia were very largely a migrant community with their origin in south east Asia and China.⁸

Islam

The development of the Muslim community in Australia has shown a pattern similar to that of the Buddhists. In the second half of the 19th century, some Muslims emigrated to Australia to become camel drivers. They were known as "Afghan" although some of them were from Pakistan and other parts of western Asia. These Muslims built the first mosques in Australia in places such as Adelaide, Perth, Broken Hill and Alice Springs. We do not know exactly how many there were as in

some of the States, the censuses did not distinguish them from other religious groups. However, in the Federal census of 1911, nearly 4000 Muslims were counted. The numbers, however, decreased in the following decades to 1877 Muslims in 1933. Muslims were not counted in the censuses between 1947 and 1971.

After the second world war, some Muslims arrived in Australia from the former Yugoslavia and Albania. However, a much larger influx of Muslim immigrants arrived in Australia from Turkey after the Turkey-Australia agreement in 1967. In 1971, when the census began to count the number of Muslim again, there were 22,311.

From this time, the number of Muslims in Australia increased rapidly. It had doubled by 1976, and more than doubled again by 1986. In 1991, the Census counted 147,487 as shown in table 1. At that time, Muslims represented around 0.9 per cent of the total population of Australia as portrayed in figure 2. As a result of the influx of Lebanese during the civil war in Lebanon 1976-1990, Lebanon overtook Turkey as the major source of Muslim Immigrants. In 1991, 17 per cent of all Muslim immigrants were born in Lebanon and 15 per cent were born in Turkey. Others had arrived in Australia from a wide variety of places; the former Yugoslavia, Indonesia, Cyprus, Iran, Pakistan, Fiji, Egypt, Malaysia and many other places. Since 1991, waves of Muslim immigrants have come from parts of Africa including Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea.⁹

As in the case of the Buddhists, the Muslim community in Australia is largely a young immigrant community. In 1991, just 39 per cent of all Muslims were born in Australia and the large majority of these had one or both parents born overseas. Only 2 per cent were born in Australia of Australian-born parents as shown in figure 4. Thirty-two per cent of Muslim had arrived in Australia between 1981 and 1991, as shown in figure 3

As in the case of the Buddhists, most Muslims (86 per cent) were living in Victoria and New South Wales, and the majority of these in Sydney and Melbourne. Many had congregated in a few suburbs such as Canterbury and Bankstown in New South Wales, and Broadmeadows in Victoria.

In parts of Sydney and Melbourne, the Muslim presence is clearly visible as mosques have been built and shops offering "*halal food*" items prepared in an acceptable way to Muslim have been opened. Some Muslim women wear dress which is distinctly Islamic. The Muslim presence is also noted through Muslim observance of prayer times and other religious customs such as fasting during Ramadan.¹⁰

In 1991, the Islamic community in Australia was the largest religious group apart from Christianity and was considerably larger in

size than many Christian denominations including the Salvation Army and the Churches of Christ.

Hinduism

Another major world religion with a growing representation in Australia is Hinduism. The story of Hindus in Australia follows the pattern that has been observed among Buddhists and Muslims. A few Hindus arrived in Australia in the 19th century, but virtually disappeared from the census accounts in the first half of the 20th century. New waves of Hindu immigration have arrived since the formal end of the unofficial White Australia policy in 1973.

The few Hindus who came to Australia in the mid-19th century were mainly merchants, hawkers or camel drivers. Others were imported as laborers for cotton and sugar cane plantations in Queensland between 1862 and 1882. In 1880, there were about 3000 Indians living in Australia, many of whom would have been Hindus. However, most did not bring out their wives or marry in Australia so numbers rapidly dwindled early in the twentieth century. Many Hindus returned to their homeland to work there or to retire. The 1991 census counted only 414 Hindus in Australia.

In the 1970s, Hinduism became significant in Australia through the gurus (teachers or founders of an order) who taught here. Many young people expressed an interest in Hinduism and, particularly, in Yoga and the teaching of some of the Hindu gurus. The devotees of Krishna consciousness became well known as they processed around the city streets. Many westerners took up Hindu forms of meditation, although few of these people considered themselves converts to Hinduism or identified themselves as Hindus in the Census.¹¹

In the 1986, the Census began counting Hindus once again, finding 21,455 living in Australia. This number had more than doubled by 1991 to 43,480 (table 1), rising to almost 0.3 per cent of the population as shown in figure 2. As figure 3 indicates, 69 per cent of all Hindus counted in the 1991 Census had arrived in the previous decade. Of these, almost equal numbers of Hindus were born in India and in Fiji, and they accounted for more than half of all Hindus in Australia. The other major place of origin was Sri Lanka, with smaller numbers from Malaysia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and Singapore. Only 2000 or 5 per cent of Hindus were born in Australia of Australian-born parents, indicating the recent arrival of most Hindus and the small number of Western converts to Hinduism.

The Hindu immigrants have brought new forms of Hinduism to Australia. They have begun building temples in the major cities of

Australia and have introduced some of the traditional Hindu festivals and forms of celebration. While they are not as numerous as the Buddhist, or as visible as the Muslims, they too have contributed to the religious diversity in Australia.¹²

Judaism

Another religion which has a significant place in Australia is Judaism. Its history in Australia, however, is quite different from Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism. Between six and fourteen Jews are believed to have been among the convicts on the first fleet to Australia. The first Jewish free settlers arrive in 1809. The earliest synagogue was found around 1828 in Sydney. By the late 19th century, there were synagogues in all major cities throughout Australia. Most of these Jews came from Britain and were English-speaking. The early synagogues were Anglo-orthodox in orientations and followers of the British United Synagogue.¹³

The Jewish community increased steadily. In the 1911 census, 17287 Jews were identified (see table 1). By the 1947, this number had nearly doubled to 32.019. Between 1933 and 1940, about 10.000 Jewish refugees from Nazism had arrive from Germany and Austria. They not only swelled the numbers of Jews but increased the diversity of Judaism in Australia, bringing with them the Yiddish language and customs.¹⁴

Another 25.000 Jews arrived, mainly from Hungary and Poland, after the second world war. The number of Jews in Australia swelled to almost 60.000 in 1961 (see table 1). At this time the Jews reached their peak as a percentage of the Australian population; 0.56 per cent as shown in figure 2. Since 1961, the number of Jews has continued to increase in absolute terms, with almost 75.000 living in Australia in 1991 but, as a percentage of the population, the have decreased to 0.4 per cent. Figure 4 shows that 46 per cent of Jews were born in Australia, a higher proportion than that of any other religion apart from Christian groups.

As shown in figure 3, a smaller percentage of the Jews in Australia (17 per cent) arrived between 1981 and 1991 compared with many other religious groups. Nevertheless, some Jews did arrive in that period, including around 6000 from South Africa, and some as refugees from Russia and other part of the former USSR.

Judaism differs from Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism in that it has a longer history in Australia and is more established. The Jewish community contains many eminent people in all walks of life in Australia.

Increase in "No Religion"

The changes since the second World War in the profile of religious communities in Australia have been very substantial. However, the greatest change in religious identification over that period has been the increase in people indicating that they have "no religion". In 1947, 26 328 people indicated that they "no religion", compared with 2 176 608 people in the 1991 census. This represented an increase in percentage of the population from 0.3 per cent to 12.0 per cent.

Part of the change has been the explicit invitation to indicate that one has "no religion". In 1971, the census actually invited people to say they had "no religion". In 1991, "no religion" was a box which people could tick. Indeed, the picture is muddled by the fact that the question on the census is optional and many people have chosen not to complete it. Some people have done so because they feel that their religious interests are not a matter which should be revealed to government officers. However, comparison with other surveys indicates that the majority who do not complete it would indicate "no religion" if forced to choose.

In 1974, 10, 9 per cent of the population did not state a religion. This has varied somewhat from one year to the next. In 1991, 10.2 per cent of the population failed to state a religion. Those who did not state a religion, plus those who indicated "no religion", accounted for over 23 per cent of the Australian population as shown in figure 5.¹⁵

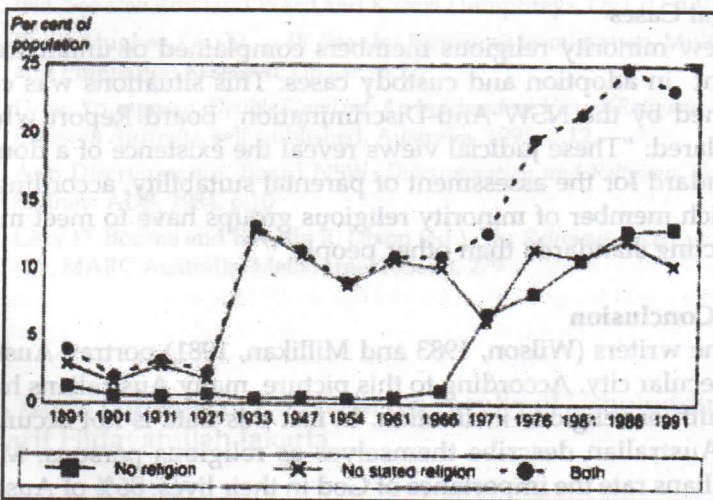


Figure 4. Australians identifying with no religion or not stating a religion, census years 1891-1991. Source: Australian Population Censuses.

Common Issues of Religious Discrimination

The following are common issues of religious discrimination.

1. **Accommodation**
Representatives of some minority religions never mention their religious affiliations when seeking accommodation. From experience this knowledge has resulted in refusals by property owners and managers to rent them desired properties.
2. **Employment in Harassment at Work and Denial of Employment.**
3. **Denial of Right to Celebrate Holy Days**
Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and other non Christians religions have holy days which are different to standardized Christian holidays. Generally they are not permitted to celebrate these holydays when they occur during a working week. Refusal to accommodate this request, particularly when the non Christian is prepared to work weekends of public holidays to make up the time or come to some other arrangement, amounts to religious discrimination.
4. **Denial of Recognition of Charitable or Social Good Works.**
More serious that it sounds. A number of minorities have complain of intensive media coverage of supposed and actual transgressions whilst laudable activities such as assistance to the poor, unemployed, etc, go unnoted and unreported.
5. **Denial of Access to Communication Channels¹⁶**
Minority religionist are at a decided disadvantage when it come to obtaining access to communication channels. Indeed, it is very difficult to locate accurate information on minority religions in Australia.
6. **Legal Cases**
A few minority religious members complained of unfair treatment in adoption and custody cases. This situations was confirmed by the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board Report which declared: "These judicial views reveal the existence of a double standard for the assessment of parental suitability, according to which member of minority religious groups have to meet more exacting standards than other people"¹⁷

Short Conclusion

Some writers (Wilson, 1983 and Millikan, 1981) portray Australia as secular city. According to this picture, many Australians have little faith or religious inclination. In fact this data is not accurate. Most Australian describe themselves as religious persons. Most Australians rate the importance of God in their lives. 86% of Australians identify with some religious group.¹⁸

Endnotes

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2. Gary D Bouma, *An Introduction to Religion Settlement in Australia*, in Gary D Bouma, *Many Religion: All Australian*, The Christian Research Association, Melbourne, 1996, p.9
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5. Philip Hughes, Australia's Religious Profile, in An Introduction to Religion Settlement in Australia, in Gary D Bouma (a), *Op.Cit.*, p.29
6. *Ibid.*
7. Adam, Enid and Philip Hughes, *The Buddhists in Australia*. Canberra: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, 1996, p.126.
8. Philip Hughes, *Op.Cit.*, p.33.
9. Rowland Ward and Robert Humphreys, *Religious Bodies in Australia: A Comprehensive Guide*, wantirna, Vic.: New Melbourne Press, 1995, p.8.
10. Philip Hughes, *Op.Cit.*, p.35. See also Nuim Khaiyath, Indonesian Muslims in Victoria: A Personal Observation, in Abe Ata, *Religion and Ethic Identity: in Australian Study*, vol. III, Spectrum, Victoria, 1990, p.131-132.
11. Australian Bureau of Statistic (ABS), *Religion in Australia*, Cat. No. 2510.0, Canberra: ABS, 1991, p.26
12. Purushottama Bilimoria, *The Hindus and Sikhs in Australia*, Canberra: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, p.113.
13. William D Rubinstein, *Judaism in Australia*, Canberra: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, p.17.
14. *Ibid.* See also Rowland Ward and Robert Humphreys, *Op.Cit.*, p.10
15. Philip Hughes, *Op.Cit.*, p.48. See also Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, *Op.Cit.*, p.17.
16. Drew Youngman, *Double Standard: An Independent View of Religious Discrimination in Australia*, self-published, Australia, 1995, p.12.
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18. Gary D. Bouma and Beverly R. Dixon (ed.), *The Religious Factor in Australia Life*, MARC Australia, Melbourne, 1986, p. 279

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