

Religion across the generations



Since the 1970s, two contrasting trends have shaped Australia's changing religious profile. On one hand, increased multiculturalism has driven the introduction and growth of many new religions. On the other, Australia's growing secularisation has reduced affiliations among most Christian denominations.

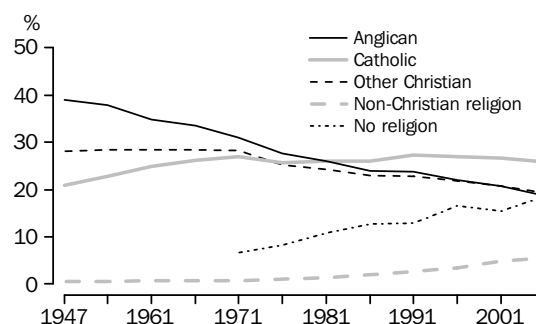
As well as affecting Australia's ethnic composition, migration trends have led to growth in certain religious groups, and a greater diversity of religious affiliations than in previous times. In 2006, 91% of people affiliated with a non-Christian religion were either born overseas (66%) or had at least one overseas-born parent (25%). Of those born overseas, 4 out of 5 were born in Asia², North Africa or the Middle East.

In 2006, over 1.1 million Australians were affiliated with a non-Christian religion. The three main religions were Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism (accounting for 419,000, 340,000 and 148,000 people respectively). Each of these religions has experienced remarkable growth in Australia. Since 1986, the number of Islam affiliates increased 3 times; Buddhists, 5 times; and Hindus, 7 times. Even so, in 2006, non-Christian religions accounted for only 5.6% of the population because of the small base.

Even more striking than the growth of non-Christian religions has been the secularisation of Australian society. Indicative of this trend is that between 1971 and 2006, the proportion of people who stated 'No Religion' increased from 6.7% of the population to 19%. The younger generation is less likely to adopt religious beliefs than their parents or grandparents, and comprise a high proportion of those who stated no religion. Consequently, the main Protestant denominations (that is, Anglican, Presbyterian, and the Uniting Church) have all decreased since 1996, and have older age profiles than the overall population.

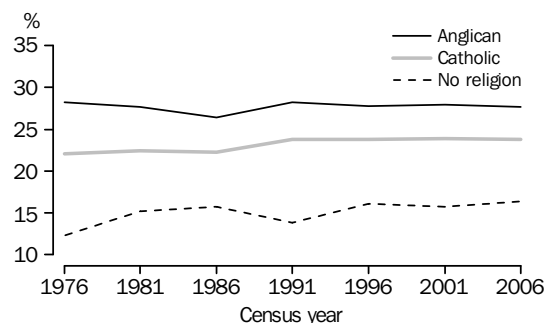
Each generation in Australia has a unique religious profile. This article examines these profiles and discusses the differences between, as well as within, the 5 generation groups presented in this report.

Broad trends in religion over time, 1947–2006



This article's point-in-time analysis assumes that most people do not change their religious affiliation throughout their adult life. This assumption is supported by following the religious affiliation reported by the same group of Baby Boomers at different censuses through their life. The graph below shows the stability of the group's religious affiliation. Changes over the same time amongst other adult generations were even smaller.³

Baby Boomers' religious affiliation, 1976–2006(a)



(a) Australian-born Baby Boomers (aged 50–59 in 2006).

Why the religion question is asked

The census results are drawn on by religious organisations seeking information about religious affiliation in Australia. They and others use the information to assess the need for religious-based hospitals, community services, and schools.

The question does not measure the degree of participation or commitment to religion. Additionally, a response of 'No Religion' does not imply no spirituality but rather that the respondent is not affiliated with any of the formally recognised religious groups.¹ The question has been optional in all Australian censuses. In 2006, 11.2% of the population chose not to respond—the iGeneration had the highest proportion of non-respondents (11.9%), and the Lucky Generation, the lowest (9.7%).

Oldest Generation (aged 80 and over)

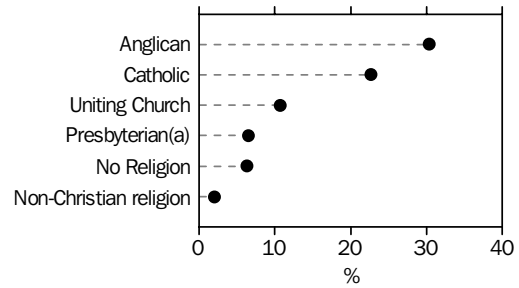
In 2006, 4 out of 5 Oldest Generation members were affiliated with a Christian denomination—the most of all the generations. Of the generation's 727,000 surviving members in 2006, over 220,000 (or 30%) were Anglicans and 165,000 were Catholics (23%). These denominations were followed by the Uniting Church (which accounted for 10.7% of the generation), and the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (6.5%).

Oldest Generation members were 3 times less likely than the rest of the population to state 'No Religion' (6.4% compared with 19%). Further, they were more likely than the younger cohorts to be represented in certain Christian denominations: 7.9% of all Presbyterian and Reformed affiliates, and 6.9% of all Uniting Church affiliates were members of the Oldest Generation, compared with 3.7% of the total population.

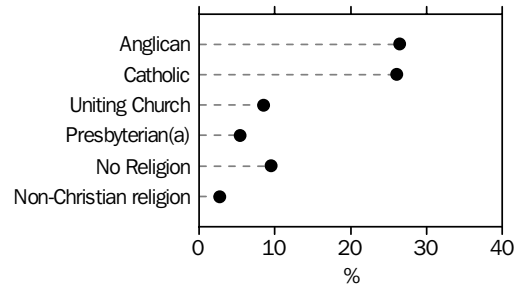
Only 2.1% of the Oldest Generation were affiliated with a non-Christian religion. This was half as many affiliates as the Baby Boomers (5.3% of the cohort), and a third as many as Generation X and Y (7.4%). This reflects the regions in which the generation's migrants were born. Only 10% of the Oldest Generation's overseas-born population were born in Asia, compared with 25% of Baby Boomers, and 42% of Generation X and Y members.

Main responses, 2006

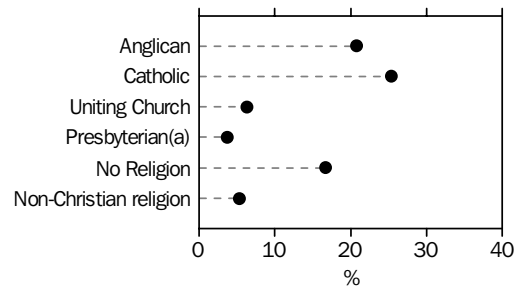
Oldest: Anglicans most common



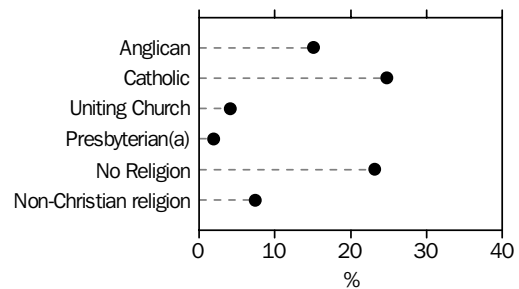
Lucky: Catholics and Anglicans equal



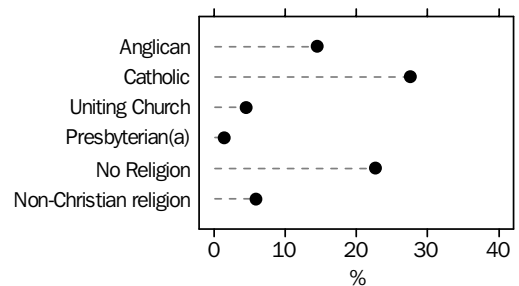
Boomers: Catholics more common



Gen X and Y: 'No Religion' gaining

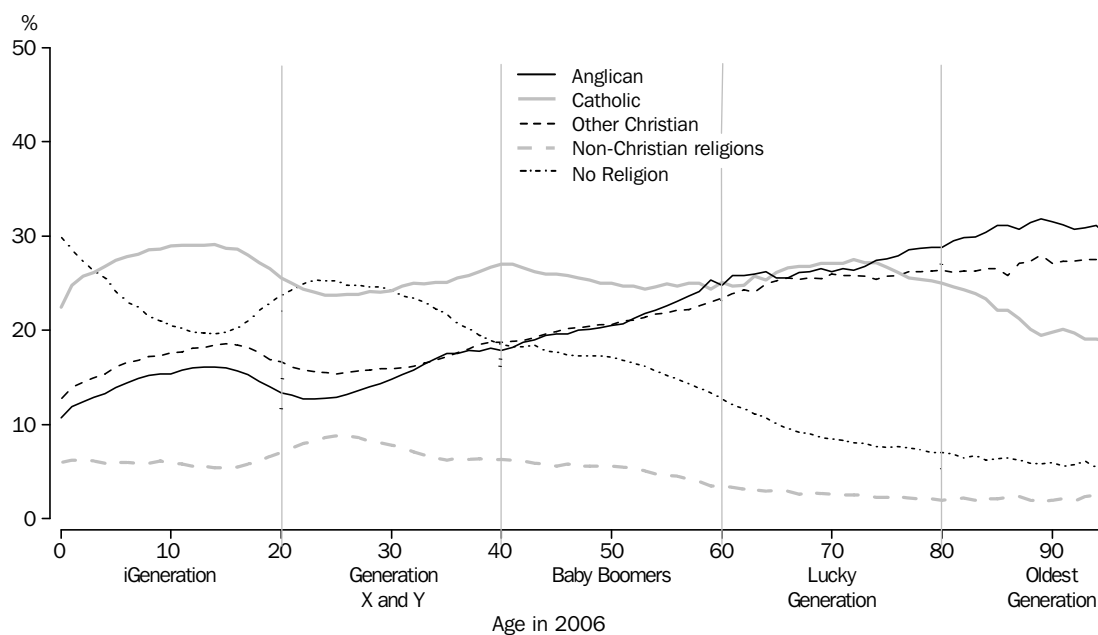


iGeneration: pattern similar to X and Y



(a) Includes affiliates of Christian Reformed Churches.

Religion of the generation groups, by age



Lucky Generation (aged 60–79)

The Lucky Generation are a fairly homogenous cohort in terms of religious affiliation, with only slight variation between the older and younger members. The younger members, born just before or during World War II (1936–1945), were more likely to state ‘No Religion’ than the older members. In 2006, 11.0% of those born during the war (aged 60 to 67) stated ‘No Religion’, compared with 8.0% of the older members of the group (aged 68 to 79).

In 2006, the Lucky Generation had 2.2 million Christian affiliates. This represented a similar proportion of Christians to the Oldest Generation (78% and 79% respectively). However, within these two generations, the distribution of Christian denominations differed. The predominance of Anglicans over Catholics in the Oldest Generation (30% to 23% of the cohort) was not repeated in the Lucky Generation, where there were equal shares (of 26%). The Lucky Generation’s 317,000 overseas-born Catholics (compared with the 175,000 overseas-born Anglicans), contributed to this change.

Almost all the other main Christian denominations had slightly smaller cohort shares than in the Oldest Generation. The only exceptions were the Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal churches, both with nearly double the share of the Oldest Generation. However, these groups remained proportionately small

(accounting for 3.6% and 0.7% of the Lucky Generation respectively).

People affiliated with non-Christian religions accounted for 2.8% of the Lucky Generation (compared with 5.6% of the overall population). This reflects the migration patterns associated with this generation. Of the generation’s top 25 countries of birth in 2006⁴, Viet Nam was the only birthplace group with more non-Christian members than Christians. In contrast, 9 of the 25 most common countries of birth for Generation X and Y members (aged 20–39) had more non-Christian than Christian affiliates in 2006.

Baby Boomers (aged 40–59)

As the first group to be raised with televisions in their homes⁵, Baby Boomers were exposed to world events including the Cold War, the Viet Nam War, the sexual revolution, peace movements and the birth of rock and roll. They are considered more liberal-minded than Australia’s older generations.

In 2006, two thirds of the 5.5 million Baby Boomers were affiliated with a Christian religion (67%). One quarter of the generation was Catholic, one fifth was Anglican and just under one fifth stated ‘No Religion’. However, unlike earlier generations, religious affiliation varied notably by age across the Baby Boomer Generation. The profile of older Baby Boomers (55–59 years) more closely resembled that of

older generations with Catholics (25%) only slightly more numerous than the Anglicans (24%) and all other Christian denominations (22%). In contrast, among the younger Baby Boomers (aged 40–45), Catholics (26%) clearly outnumbered Anglicans and all other Christians (around 19% each).

Affiliation to each of Australia's top 5 Christian denominations was lower for Baby Boomers than Lucky Generation members. The lower proportion of Christians in the Baby Boomer generation was accounted for by the higher proportion who stated 'No Religion' (17%, compared with 9.5% of the Lucky Generation), or who were affiliates of non-Christian religions (5.3%, compared with 2.8%). The only main Christian denomination with a higher generational share was Pentecostals, who accounted for 1.1% of Baby Boomers (compared with less than 1% of Lucky and Oldest Generation members).

Baby Boomers represented the mid-point in Australia's religious profile in that older Australians were more likely than Baby Boomers to be Christian and less likely to have no religion. Conversely, younger Australians were less likely than Baby Boomers to be Christian and more likely to have no religion.

Generation X and Y (aged 20–39)

In 2006, members of Generation X and Y belonged to age groups facing many life changes. Younger members were confronting important decisions about post-school study, entering the workforce, and leaving home. Many of the older members, having recently also faced these issues, may have been starting and raising families.

This is also the life stage when many people make a decision about religion, in some cases turning away from family practices. Changing religious affiliation during this transition phase can be illustrated by Australian-born Generation X and Y members aged 25–34. In 2006, 26% identified with no religion—an increase from 20% when they were aged 15–24 in 1996, and 12% when 5–14 in 1986. Over this time period, Christianity among the cohort decreased from 75% in 1986 to 63% in 2006. This was despite the proportion of unrecorded responses to the religion question falling from 12% to 7.1%. This movement away from religion occurred over the ages when most would have left the family home and begun to respond to the question themselves.

Of all generations, Generation X and Y was the least Christian. Just over half the 5.5 million members were Christian (56%) and 7.4% belonged to a non-Christian religion. It was also the first generation (compared to previous, older generations) in which the Anglican denomination was not among the two most common responses. Instead, Anglicans, who accounted for 15% of the generation, were outnumbered by Catholics (25%) and people with no religion (23%). Of other Christian denominations, the Uniting Church (4.2%) and the Eastern Orthodox Church (2.8%) had the most affiliates.

Within the generation, Catholic representation rose slightly across the ages, but Anglicans featured more prominently amongst older members: 17% of 30–39 year olds were Anglican, compared with 13% of 20–29 year olds. Conversely, younger members of the generation were more likely to state 'No Religion' than older members (25% and 22% respectively). Non-Christian religions were also more common at the younger ages (8.1% compared with 6.7%).

Generation X and Y had the largest proportion of people affiliated with non-Christian religions (7.4%). Indeed, it was the only generation in which all three main non-Christian religions featured in the 10 most common religions. Buddhists accounted for 2.7% of the Generation X and Y population (or 149,300 people), followed by Muslims (2.3% or 123,800 people) and Hindus (1.2% or 67,300 people). Although 28% of Australians belonged to Generation X and Y in 2006, 36% of Buddhists and Muslims, and 45% of Hindus belonged to this generation.

Migration patterns help to explain the higher levels of affiliation to non-Christian religions in Generation X and Y. In 2006, 20 birthplace groups in Australia had more than half their members affiliated with non-Christian religions. These countries of birth were located in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Polynesia. Of all the generations, Generation X and Y had the most members born in these countries: 21.7% (of the generation's overseas-born members), compared with 13.0% (Baby Boomers), 6.4% (Lucky Generation), and 4.9% (Oldest Generation).

iGeneration (aged 0–19)

The iGeneration cannot be analysed in the same way as older generations. In many cases, parents and guardians would have reported their child's religion. While some parents may consider religious affiliation to be established upon baptism or at birth, others choose to wait until their children can make the decision themselves. In 2006, 58% of children aged less than 5 had a religion stated for them.

Over half the iGeneration's 5.3 million members were reported as Christian (59%), 23% had no religion, and 5.9% were affiliated with non-Christian religions. Within the generation, the youngest children (aged less than 5) were the most likely to be identified as having no religion (28%). From this youngest age group, affiliation to Christian denominations followed a similar pattern, rising steadily at each year of age and peaking during the early teenage years. As a result, the 11–16 year olds were most likely among this generation to be identified as Christian (63%), and least likely to have no religion (20%).

Endnotes

1 The 2006 Census categorised religions according to the *Australian Standard Classification of Religious Groups (ASCRG)* Second Edition, 2005, cat. no. 1266.0, ABS, Canberra.

2 Comprises North-East Asia, South-East Asia and Southern and Central Asia.

3 Compared with other generations which had adult members in 1976.

4 Excluding Australia.

5 The Australian Online Television Museum, viewed 17 November 2008, <<http://www.austvhistory.com/>>.