

Religious denominations in decline

Religion is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions. There are many ways to attempt to quantify its extent, including headline proxy measures.

The most common proxy measure for “religion” is people’s self-declared affiliation with one or other religious institution: the religious denominations. While affiliation is a crude and unsophisticated measure of “religion”, at minimum it provides a simple headline figure that can be tracked over time.

Trends since Federation

Prior to the 1970s, Christian denominations comprehensively dominated Australia’s religious landscape, with a small percentage of Australians electing not to state their religion (Figure 1). “No religion” (NR) made barely an appearance. This was certainly due to high levels of religious affiliation at the time, but also to material methodological bias in the census.

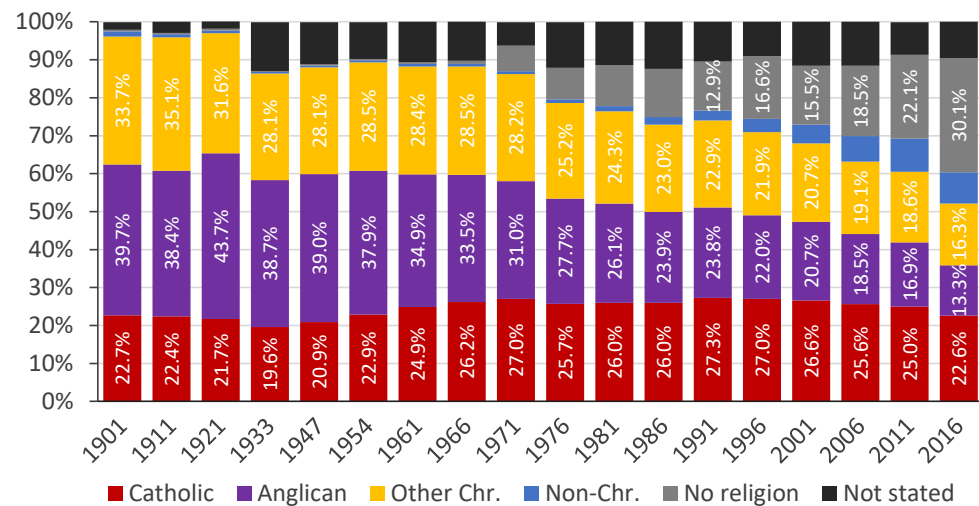


Figure 1: Religious affiliation by census year

Source: ABS census reports. Note: Includes ‘No response’ (“Not stated”)

Up to 1921, the census form asked the person to write down their religion, but didn’t mention either that NR was a possible answer, or that answering the question was optional (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1966). Only from 1933 onwards did the census form state that answering the religion question was optional — but still *presumed* a religion (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1933). The longitudinal data highlights the profound difference that questionnaire design can make to results.

“(11) State the full name of the religious denomination. There is no legal obligation to answer this question.” — ABS Census form 1933.

It wasn't until the 1971 census that the form mentioned NR as a possible answer (Figure 2), and it is from then onwards that “no religion” begins to make a recognisable appearance in the data.^a

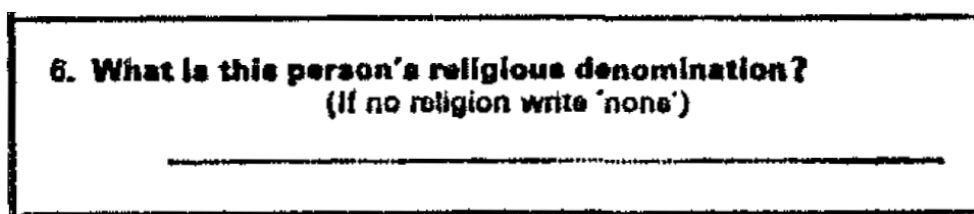


Figure 2: The 1971 census form was the first to mention “no religion” as a possible answer to the religion question

Source: ABS 1971

The proportion of Australians reporting no religion has continued to grow, comprising 30% of census results in 2016: or 33% of those who answered the religion question.

At the same time, both major (Anglican, Catholic) and minor Christian faiths have lost a significant proportion of their flocks, while a small but significant growth has occurred amongst “other” (non-Christian) religions, mostly as a result of immigration (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017a).

^a As further demonstration of historical normative bias, the 1971 census form asked about babies born, *but only within marriage*. Those born outside wedlock were expressly disregarded and invisible, and appalling state of affairs for a *census*.

Recent trends

At the 2016 census, 60% of Australians indicated a religious denomination (and 10% didn't answer the religion question).

More granular data from periodic Australian National University (ANU) studies at each federal election (Australian Election Studies: AES) provides a detailed picture across recent years from 2007 to 2019.

Clearly evident is a continued and significant abandonment of mainstream Christian denominations: Catholic, Anglican and Uniting/Methodist, with major increases in NR (Figure 3).

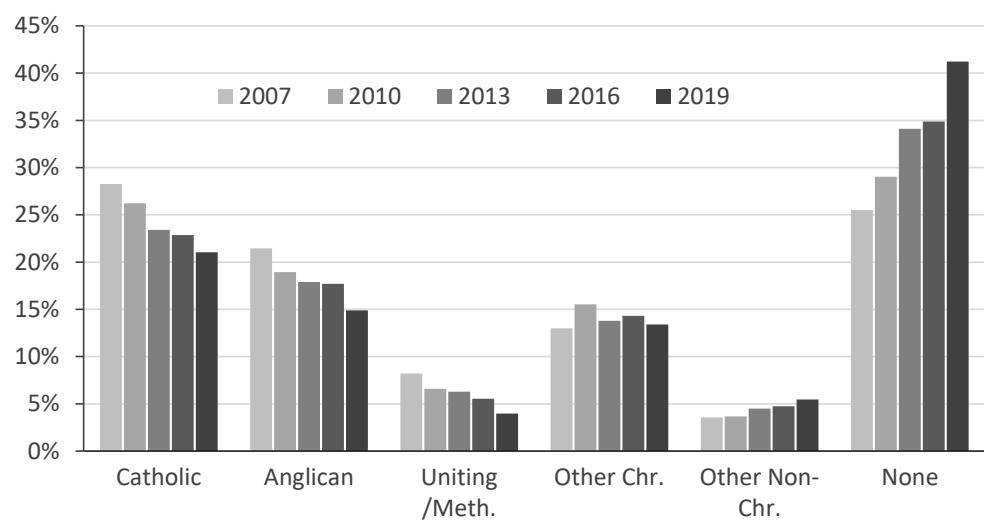


Figure 3: Religious affiliation by year

Source: AES

Note: Despite robust total samples sizes in these ANU studies, smaller individual faiths are not reported separately as their statistics would not be reliable with such small sample sizes. Instead, all minor Christian denominations are grouped together as “Other Christian”, and all non-Christian denominations are grouped together as “Other Non-Christian”.

Over just 12 years, Catholic affiliation dropped from 28% to 21%, a net loss of 26% of its congregation. Anglican affiliation dropped from 21% to 15%, a net congregational loss of 31%. And Uniting/Methodist affiliation dropped from 8% to just 4%, a net congregational loss of 54%.

At the same time, NR has climbed from 26% to 41%, a non-affiliation gain of 62%.

If these kinds of changes continue over the coming decade or more, the Uniting/Methodist church may strain to exist, the Anglican church would be a mere shadow of its former self, and even the Catholic church would struggle.

The net affiliation amongst minor Christian denominations has remained stable at around 13%, while the small rise in non-Christian denominations has also increased to around 5%.

Summary: In the 12 years to 2019, the Catholic church's congregation shrank by 26%, Anglican by 31%, and Uniting/Methodist by 54%. At the same time, the NR base has risen by 62%.

In 2019, NR was 41%, exceeding the proportion of Catholics (21%), Anglicans (15%), and Uniting/Methodists (4%) combined.

Undermeasurement of 'No Religion'

The Australian census and the AES studies are also likely to have continued to underestimate the real incidence of NR as a “denomination” category. There are four main reasons: privacy, wording of the religion prompt, provided answer options, and parents answering for children. There is a further reason — tongue-in-cheek answers like “Jedi” or “Pastafarian” — but these accounted for less than 0.5% of responses to the Religion question in the 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017b).

Privacy

This consideration applies to the census but not ANU polls. Until 2011, all census answers were completed in a single large booklet containing columns for each person present in the household. Anyone in the household could see any answers already completed by others.

A husband was unlikely to risk marital friction by answering “no religion” when his wife expected him to answer “Anglican”. Or vice versa. Or both.

The 2011 census was the first in which some people completed the form privately online. Online completion was more extensive in 2016. It’s likely to be much more extensive still in Census 2021, which would reduce the extent of the problem.

Wording of the religion prompt

The Australian census standard prompt for religion is “*What is the person’s religion?*” The AES prompt is “*What is your religion or faith?*” Both these prompts are highly biased in that they *presume* a religion. Nor does the question elicit whether the person merely comes from a family of that faith history, or whether they see themselves as a meaningful member. This can make a large difference to the results (Figure 4).

The Australian Values Survey (AVS) 2018 asked “*Do you belong to a religion or religious denomination? If yes, which one?*”. The British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) 2018 asked “*Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?*”. Both questions provided a shortlist of significant denominations, with options for “Other” and “No religion”.

The AVS study returned an NR rate at least 11 percentage points higher than the other studies with presumptive wording. The UK BSAS study returned, *in the same year*, an NR rate 13% higher than the Office of National Statistics (ONS) study, with its biased wording “*What is your religion?*”.

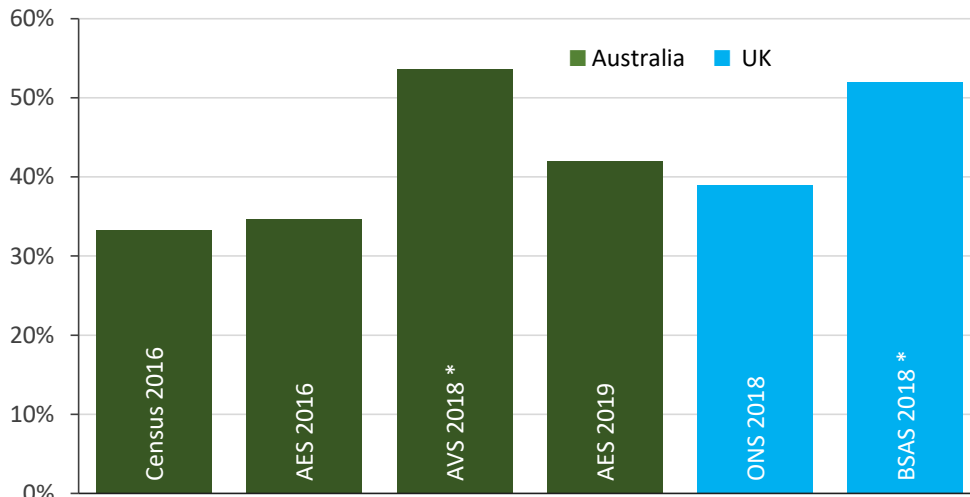


Figure 4: “No religion” result by prompt used
 Source: ABS, AES, ONS, BSAS. * = Neutral, balanced question.

Further evidence establishing a higher rate of real NR in Australia is discussed in *Small minority of real “belonging”* on page 44.

Answer options

As stated earlier, the 1971 census was the first to mention NR as a permissible answer to the religion question. Until 1986, the religion question was open-ended, meaning that the person had to write down their religion. In 1991 this changed to a shortlist of tick-boxes for the most common denominations, plus “No religion”, and “Other”, with space to write down that denomination.

In 2016, in response to earlier growth of the NR group, the “No religion” option was moved from the bottom to the top of the denomination list. This meant that non-religious respondents would be more likely to find and choose NR.

But the question wording still *presumes* a religion, meaning that a respondent whose family has always been Religion X, even though not having practiced or been involved for years, would likely answer Religion X instead of NR for weak cultural or historical, rather than meaningful religious, reasons.

Given the differences in results based on prompt wording and the order of presented options, it’s perhaps unsurprising that at least one senior religionist has called for the return of the “No religion” option to near the *bottom* of the denomination list (Jensen 2020), despite now being by far the largest “denominational” cohort.

Please use CAPITAL letters only. 06 Person 1 Person 2

19 What is the person's religion?

- Answering this question is **OPTIONAL**.
- Examples of 'Other - please specify' are: SALVATION ARMY, HINDUISM, JUDAISM, HUMANISM.
- If no religion, mark the 'No religion' box.
- Remember to mark box like this:

<input type="checkbox"/> Catholic <input type="checkbox"/> Anglican (Church of England) <input type="checkbox"/> Uniting Church <input type="checkbox"/> Presbyterian <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhism <input type="checkbox"/> Greek Orthodox <input type="checkbox"/> Islam <input type="checkbox"/> Baptist <input type="checkbox"/> Lutheran Other - please specify <input type="checkbox"/> No religion	<input type="checkbox"/> Catholic <input type="checkbox"/> Anglican (Church of England) <input type="checkbox"/> Uniting Church <input type="checkbox"/> Presbyterian <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhism <input type="checkbox"/> Greek Orthodox <input type="checkbox"/> Islam <input type="checkbox"/> Baptist <input type="checkbox"/> Lutheran Other - please specify <input type="checkbox"/> No religion
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Figure 5: The 2011 Census household form religion question

Source: ABS. Notes: Columns for multiple people (four more on opposite page not shown). In 2016, ABS moved the "No religion" option, as the largest "denomination" category, from the bottom to the top of the options list.

Parents answering for children

It's hard to establish a sound case that a child under the age of 5 has a bona fide religion, and contentious that a religious affiliation amongst those under 15 is maturely and independently formed. Nevertheless, significant numbers of parents record a religion for their children on the census form.

According to the ABS, the current peak maternal age for childbirth is the 30-34 year old group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Census data for religion by age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017b) suggests that parents answer on behalf of their children from ages 0-14, by nominating religion at their own rate (circled religion statistics in Figure 6).

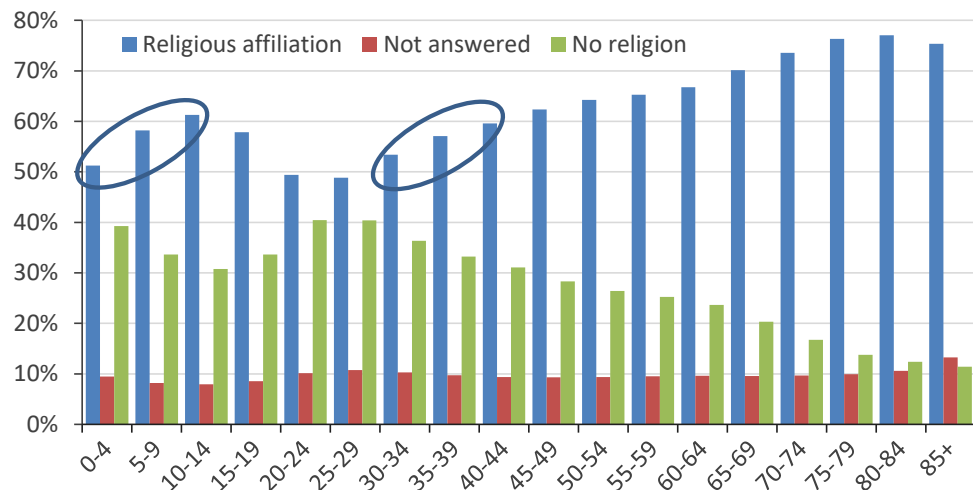


Figure 6: Religious affiliation by age group

Source: ABS Census 2016. Notes: Circled statistics are the current-and-recent peak child-bearing ages for women (right), and the children born relative to the peak age group (left).

By age 15–19 years, some young Australians have rejected the religious views of their parents, and religion in general. By early adulthood (20-24 years) and now less likely to be living under their parents' roof, influence and gaze, more young Australians report no religion.

This suggests that across the 0-19 years age group, religion is significantly overestimated in the census.

Removing serious bias

To eliminate wording bias, the Census 2021 question wording should be changed at the very least to:

What is the person's religion, if any?

This wording recognises that many respondents won't have a religion and shouldn't be pressured into answering that they have one. It also avoids the confusion of listing "No religion" as a religion in a presumptive list of them.

Simply adding "*if any*" to the question strikes the right balance between economically removing bias, and promoting continuity of data comparison with previous census results. It also fits neatly within the space currently allocated for the question on the census form.

The correction is not difficult: some professional research organisations, like Pew Research, have included "*if any*" in their religion prompt for years (Pew Research Center 2018).

Summary: The current Australian census question on religion is biased, leading to undermeasurement of NR. To parsimoniously address the bias, the words "*if any*" should be added to the question.

Religious behaviour in decline

Ticking a religious denomination box on a form says little about a person's real relationship with religion. Mr Jones may tick Anglican even though he doesn't really follow it and hasn't been to services for years. Ms Ng may tick Catholic, but that doesn't indicate whether she thinks Vatican doctrine is binding or to be dismissed. Mrs Benson may tick No religion, but that might disguise the fact that despite no institutional affiliation, she believes in God, and religion is somewhat important in her life.

A key way to gain further insights into people's relationship with religion is to ask about behaviour: their religious *practices*. The most common form of religious behaviour asked in censuses and surveys is religious service attendance.^b

A 2001 National Church Life Survey found that weekly service attendance in Australia was very low amongst the major denominations: Catholic, Anglican, Uniting and Presbyterian/Reformed (Bellamy & Kastle 2004). Conversely, weekly attendance was high amongst some minor denominations including Pentecostals, Churches of Christ, and Seventh-day Adventists (Figure 7).

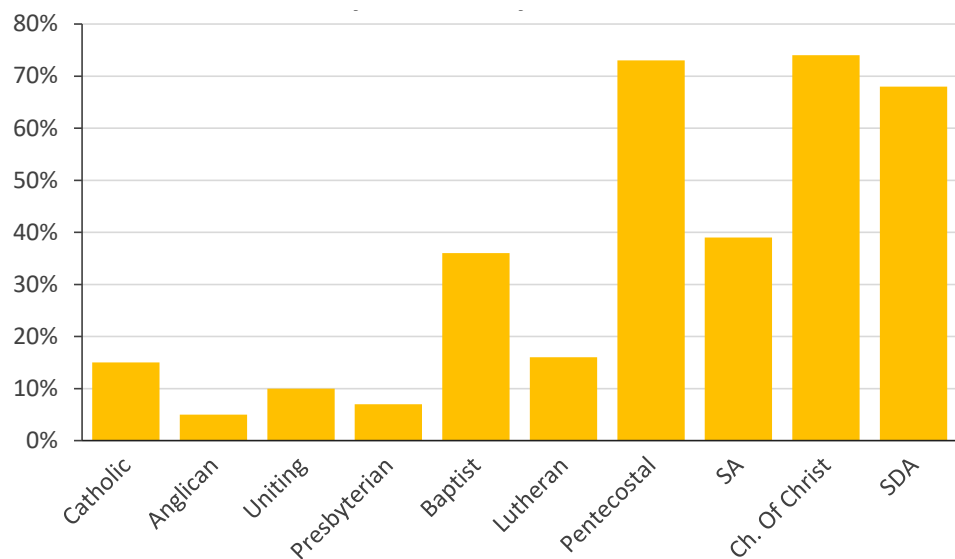


Figure 7: Incidence of weekly religious service attendance in 2001

Source: Bellamy and Kastle 2004. Denominations ordered by proportion of affiliated population in 2001. SA = Salvation Army, SDA = Seventh-day Adventist. Non-Christian faiths not studied.

^b The question is usually asked “*excluding* attendance at weddings, funerals and baptisms”, because even when held at places of worship, these are most likely to be *social support* for loved ones, rather than dedicated religious worship by attendees.

AES data for recent years shows that while the proportion of those who regularly attend religious services (weekly+ and monthly+) has remained stable, those who attended less often are now even more likely to never attend religious services at all (Figure 8).

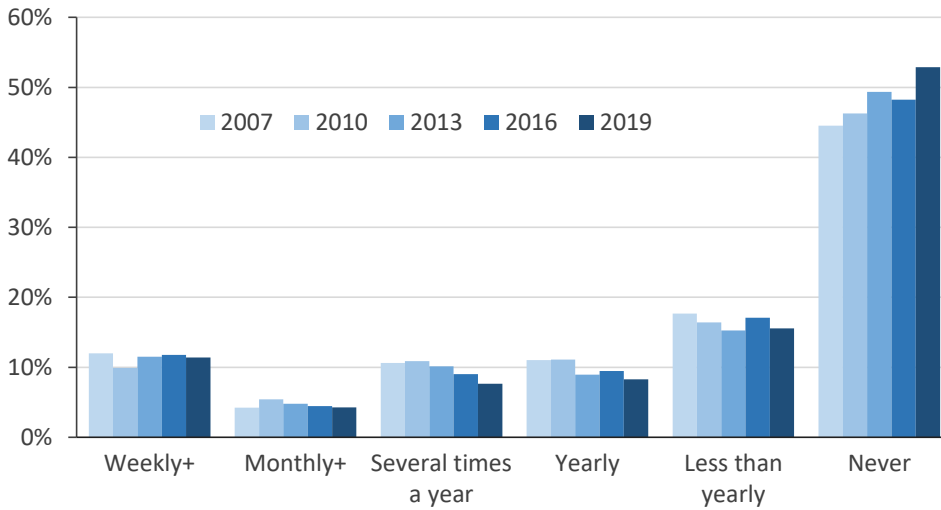


Figure 8: Frequency of religious service attendance
Source: AES. Note: Attendance exclusive of weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

In 12 years since 2007, 8% more Australians report that they *never* attend religious services, with now a majority (53%) staying away completely.

Summary: Religious service attendance in Australia has continued to decline, with a majority (53%) of Australians now *never* attending services.