



THEME 4: KEEP RELIGION AT HOME

SUMMARY

- There has been a growing tension in Australia that religious groups have overstepped their boundaries and are threatening the secular nature of Australian law
- Muslim communities in particular have been depicted as if they are slowly trying to **smuggle their laws and cultural practices into Australia** in conscious opposition to the Australian way of life
- Religion seems to play an important role in Australian culture, employment, welfare system and legal system
- It is difficult to imagine a functioning liberal subject who is expected to engage and contribute to society - to do so without **moral guidance from the religion they hold most dear**
- This kind of religious freedom has been enshrined as a human right in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which posits **religious freedom as an absolute and unequivocal right**
- Religious groups actually **only want the freedom to privately practice** their religion and to engage in public rituals that do not conflict with Australian law. They are asking for no more

INTRODUCTION: HAS RELIGION OVERSTEPPED ITS BOUNDARIES?

- The recent controversy surrounding Israel Folau's social media statements about homosexuality in the bible have interpellated the discussion around religious freedom and secularism **deep into public consciousness**
- Manifestations of this discussion in relation to Islam have seen the **demonisation of mosques, sharia court scares, calls for banning the niqab**
- It is clear that the discourse around religion in the public sphere is an important one that draws **its links to securitisation, immigration and policy but also speaks to the nature of Australian society on a more fundamental level** in how it treats its religious minorities

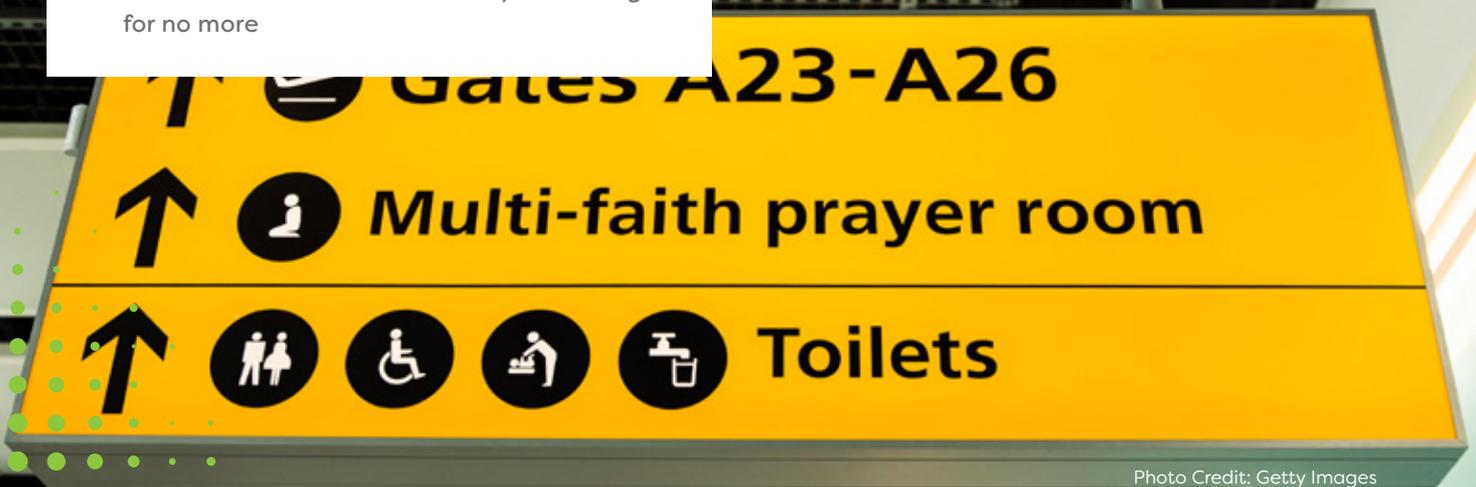


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WHAT RELIGION MEANS TO AUSTRALIANS

- The Census results indicated that **52.1% of the population was Christian**, with the second and third largest faith groups being **Islam at 2.6%** and **Buddhism at 2.4%**.
- The Judeo-Christian heritage of Australia is reflected in numerous aspects of public life that have been taken for granted. This points to the question as to whether the problem has been about religion generally overstepping its bounds, or whether it has been about **minority religious practices appearing in public**.
- It is clear that religion plays an important and **poignant role within Australian life**

HAS RELIGION IN AUSTRALIA BECOME A THREAT TO SECULARISM?

- **Secularism in Australia has meant that there will be no state church**. It has meant giving people a legitimate choice between belief and un-belief and that no particular religion is able to take preference in a democratic contestation of ideas
- The image of a practicing Muslim - donned with either a beard or hijab (scarf) and praying in a public park - has become a **trope for the failure of integration and a failure of secularism**
- The current proposal for the Religious Discrimination Bill draws upon concerns of religious freedom. The Bill will see the **prohibition of direct and indirect discrimination based on religion but also makes exceptions to this in reasonable circumstances**
- If religious citizens are able to engage in public discourse in a rational and democratic way, there should be **no reason to shun them**

WHAT RELIGIOUS GROUPS ACTUALLY WANT

- What religious groups want in the country is not for their values to take over Australian society, but rather to be able to live a comfortable existence in the realm of private practice.
- Religious groups want the opportunity to engage **exercise their freedom of religion that they are afforded by the constitution**. Any perceived conflicts with Australian law have usually been met with reasonable dialogue.
- Much benefit can be derived from a willingness to see beyond the headlines and consider **potential arrangements for different religious groups**. Religious groups that interact with the law may benefit from Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms that consenting parties can engage in and reduce the burden on the court system.