Abandoning God: Christianity plummets as ‘non-religious’ surges in census

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**KEY POINTS**

* Forty-four per cent of Australians identify as Christian, down from 61 per cent a decade ago.
* The share of people ticking the “no religion” box grew from 22 per cent in 2011 to 39 per cent in 2021.
* The number of people in Australia who identify as Hindu surged by 55 per cent over the past five years.

Australia has become strikingly more godless over the past decade, with the latest census data showing the proportion of self-identified Christians dropping below 50 per cent for the first time and a soaring number of people describing themselves as “non-religious”.

The first tranche of data from the 2021 census, released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on Tuesday, shows that just 44 per cent of Australians now identify as Christian, down from 52 per cent five years earlier and 61 per cent in 2011.

When the first census was conducted in 1911, 96 per cent of Australians listed a form of Christianity as their religion.

The proportion of Australians identifying as Catholic declined from 23 to 20 per cent over the past five years while self-identified Anglicans dropped from 13 to 10 per cent.

By contrast, the share of Australians identifying as “non-religious” has surged.

Thirty-nine per cent of Australians now identify as non-religious, up from 30 per cent in 2016 and almost double the 22 per cent of Australians who ticked the “no religion” box a decade ago.

The first batch of 2021 census data has been released. Here's what is says about the nation.

In the mid-1960s, less than 1 per cent of people in Australia identified as having no religion.

Based on current trends, non-believers could overtake Christians as the biggest religious bloc in Australia by the time the next census is conducted in 2026.

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The move away from Christianity accelerated rapidly over the past decade after previously being in a steady long-term decline.

Sydney student Alexandra Wright, 24, exemplifies the national drift away from Christianity.

As a child growing up in Sydney’s eastern suburbs, Wright was raised in a devout Irish Catholic family whose members attended church every Sunday.

Wright felt so connected to her faith that she insisted on attending a Catholic high school, St Vincent’s College in Potts Point.

[At 18, I did not see any light for my future. Then I found faith](https://www.smh.com.au/national/victoria/at-18-i-did-not-see-any-light-for-my-future-then-i-found-faith-20220616-p5aubk.html)

By age 15, however, she began to have an “inkling” that religion was no longer for her; a few years later she no longer identified as Catholic.

When filling out last year’s census, she chose “no religion” without hesitation.

Wright said religion undoubtedly had a “beautiful” side, as seen in the comfort her grandfather drew from the promise of an afterlife before he died. But she had seen a more negative side too

“There is the corruption in the church, the power-tripping of priests,” she said.

Wright said her siblings and many friends had moved away from religion as they grew up.

“It’s this generation,” she said. “We all grew up with religion but when you start living your life you realise you don’t identify with it.”

[**Census**](https://www.smh.com.au/topic/census-5vo)

[OK, Boomers, move aside for the Millennials’ reign](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/ok-boomers-move-aside-for-the-millennials-reign-20220627-p5awte.html)

The Church’s socially conservative teachings on same-sex marriage and sex before wedlock seem outdated to most young people today, she said.

The census results show that some non-Christian religions are growing in strength - even as they continue to make up a small share of the national population.

The number of people who identified as Hindu in the census surged by 55 per cent over the past five years, reflecting an influx of migrants from countries such as India and Nepal.

Around 684,000 people in Australia, or 2.7 per cent of the population, identify with Hinduism.

Islam’s share of the national population has grown to 3.2 per cent, up from 2.6 per cent in 2016. Around 813,000 people in Australia identify with Islam.

**Analysis**

[**Census**](https://www.smh.com.au/topic/census-5vo)

[Caravans, childcare and migration: How COVID changed the nation](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/caravans-childcare-and-migration-how-covid-changed-the-nation-20220627-p5awti.html)

Australian Statistician David Gruen said the religion question holds a “special place” in the census because it is one of a few topics that has featured in all 18 censuses and is the only question that is voluntary.

Despite being voluntary, the proportion of people answering the question rose from 91 per cent in 2016 to 93 per cent in 2021