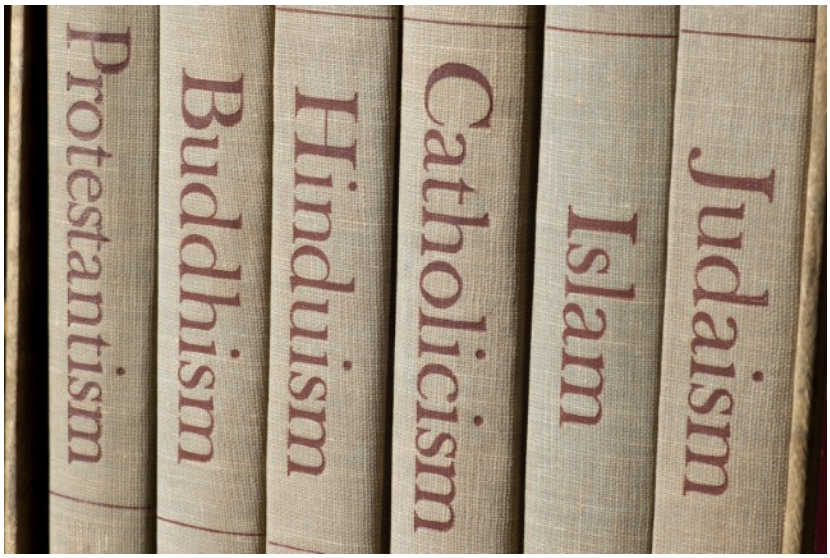
GOSPEL, SOCIETY & Culture

CHRIST AMONG THE 'GODS'

Responding to Religious Plurality Today

Part 1

RESOURCE PAPER 5, 2015



Contemporary religious plurality, and the social marginalisation of Christianity, is an opportunity for Christian mission

Religious plurality in Australia today

Today, Australia is visibly a religiously plural society. Christianity is no longer the 'normal' religion. Religious diversity is the new normal. And we experience that diversity daily. There are enough Muslim women wearing their head coverings in public to cause a social issue. The media has focused a lot on Islam, but Islam is not the only religion that's increasing in Australia. Hindu and Buddhist temples are being built in various parts of our cities. Some people from India walk around with a very prominent red dot on their forehead. That's the *bindi*[1], or *tilak*[2] which is a Hindu religious mark.[3]

Religious diversity is now a social fact. We can't reverse it. These people are Australian citizens. They work, pay tax, and vote. We can't just chase them out of country.

What we **can** do is think about how we **respond** to this diversity. And try to respond in a way that's driven, not by fear and self-protection, but by **love** – love for God and a desire for his honour, and because of that, a love for people who believe these false religions.

This is the first of three articles about responding to religious plurality in Australia. The first article will look at how this religious plurality developed, and how we can respond to it in a Biblical manner. The second article will analyse the contemporary secular view of 'tolerance', and critique it from a Biblical perspective. The third will show you how to engage with people in a way that simultaneously holds to the uniqueness of Jesus and his gospel, and respects people's right to choose whether they're going to follow him or not.

Historically, Australia privileged Christianity as the 'normal' religion

Religious diversity in Australian society is relatively new. For most of Australia's European history, Christianity was accepted as the 'normal' religion. Until recently, even if someone didn't believe in God, it was taken for granted that the God they didn't believe in was nevertheless the Biblical, Christian God. Even if they were not a Christian, their personal values of truth, goodness, and beauty, and their ethics – their sense of right and wrong – would have been heavily influenced, if not determined, by Christian values.

This is because European settlers to Australia brought hundreds of years of Christian culture with them. Early Christianity, from the evidence of the New Testament, was misunderstood, hated and persecuted. But then the Roman Emperor Constantine (reigned 306–337) became a Christian. In 313 he issued the Edict of Milan, making Christianity a recognised religion. This didn't (yet) grant Christianity any particular privileges, but it did stop the persecution, and gave Christianity a certain degree of social respectability. Christianity's special status came when the Imperial Triumvirate of Theodosius I, Gratian, and Valentinian II issued the Edict of Thessalonica in 380. This imperial decree made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire – i.e., of Europe.

This *didn't* mean that everyone in Europe became a Christian. It *did* mean that Christianity, and Christian values, became socially 'normal'. This *cultural Christianity* has been termed 'Christendom'. When European settlers arrived in Australia, they brought 1400 years of Christian social normality with them. Unsurprisingly, they created a country where Christian values were taken for granted. Not everyone believed that Jesus is God, that he died for their sins, and rose again. But people generally believed that it was good to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12); that marriage was between one man and one woman; that telling the truth is good, and lying bad; and, if a God existed, he (the masculine pronoun is deliberate) would be something like the Biblical God. Believers gathered in church buildings (not mosques or temples), wearing their 'Sunday best' (not hijabs, or the orange robes of Buddhism).

But notice: while Christendom is *informed* by Christianity, it's *not* the *same* as Christianity. It's merely secular culture. In itself, it's from the world, not from God. Living by Christian morality doesn't make you Christian; it just makes you morally conservative. Christians are people who have accepted that they are themselves sinners, under God's condemnation. And because of that, they put their trust in the Jesus who came to call, not the righteous, but sinners (Matt 9:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32).

Global Christendom declined in the late 20th century

Christendom began to crumble in the second half of the 20th century. The 20th century saw the 'Christian' West tear itself apart in three wars – World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. Sixteen hundred years of 'Christian' morality seemed to have culminated in the mass slaughter of God's historical people, the Jews; the threat of global nuclear holocaust; and environmental degradation. In the West, Christendom's home, 'Christian' cultural morality no longer had credibility. People started searching for new things to believe, and new ways to shape their lives.[4]

The latter half of the 20th century also saw global 'decolonisation'. In the 16th and 17th centuries, European nations explored the world and built vast international empires. England controlled India and Sri Lanka; the Dutch ruled what is now Indonesia (the 'Dutch East Indies'); the French controlled what is now Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam ('French Indo-China'); etc. After WWII, these colonies steadily threw off European rule and reasserted their national independence. This independent nationalism was frequently accompanied by a renewal of traditional religions. Christianity was associated with imperial oppression, whereas traditional religion was associated with ethnic identity and nationalism.

Christendom, which had existed for some 1600 years, appeared to crumble almost overnight. 'Christian' cultural morality was discredited in the West and had never really taken root in the 'colonies'. With the collapse of Western imperialism came a surge of both native nationalism and traditional religiosity.

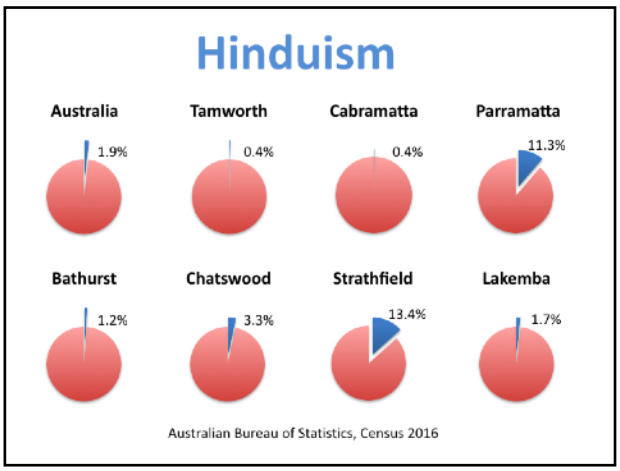
In one generation, Christianity's social status became exactly reversed: not merely 'from hero to zero', but from 'hero' to 'villain'! In the past, everyone assumed that a decent, morally upright person was a Christian – or at least lived by Christian

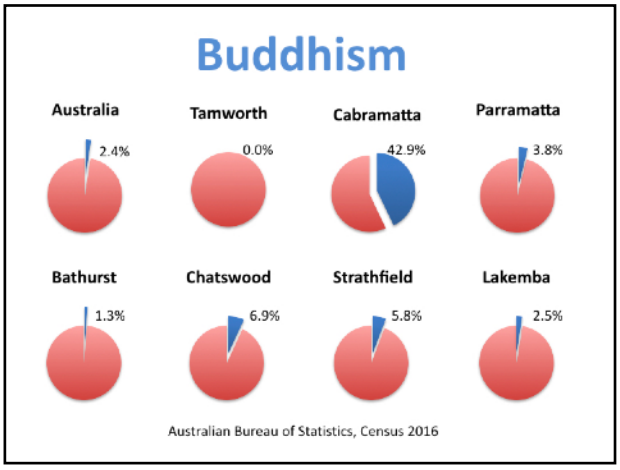
values. Now, no-one assumes that all 'good' people are Christians. In fact, Christianity has gone from apparently being *the* dominant world religion, to being the *one* religion which *no-one*, *anywhere* in the world, takes seriously.

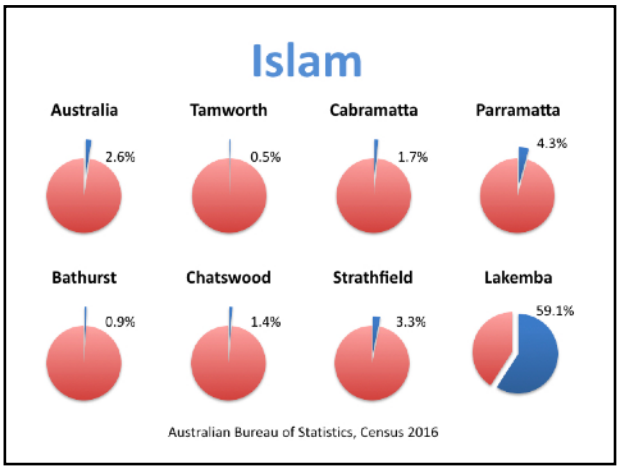
Australian religious plurality today

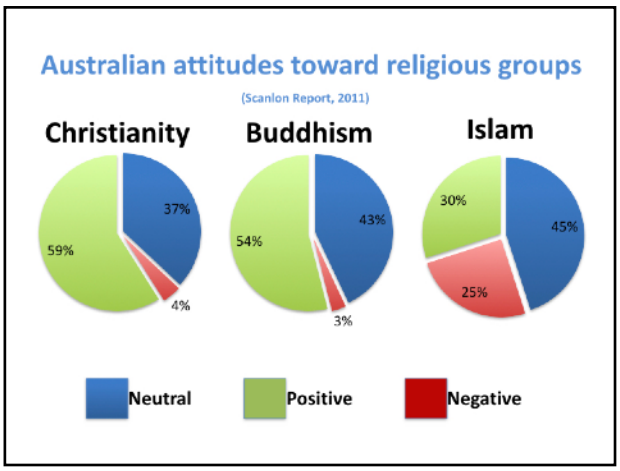
This, then, is the social context for religious diversity in Australia today. Christianity is no longer the socially privileged religion. Other religions are accepted as being at least as valid as Christianity. In fact, in response to its perceived prior social dominance, Christianity seems now be actively socially marginalised in order to 'make room' for these new religions.

But the social impact of non-Christian religions is not uniform. Recent immigration, and the social policy of multiculturalism, has led to the ethnic and religious diversity we mentioned earlier. Immigrants tend to clump together. This is partly the normal human tendency to bond with people that we have some natural connections with. Immigrants find additional strength in community: their









shared cultural heritage provides practical, emotional, and religious support as they seek to establish themselves in a new land. So, certain parts of Australia – usually particular suburbs in the major cities – become characterised by significant numbers of immigrants from a certain ethno-cultural background living there.

Religions are not the same as race. Just because someone comes from the Middle East doesn't automatically make them Muslim; not everyone from India is Hindu; Christianity has been in both of those regions for a long time.[5] It's true to say, however, that certain religions tend to dominate certain parts of the world. So, Islam is the major religion of the Middle East, Pakistan and Bangladesh; Hinduism is the major religion of India. As immigrants from a particular ethno-cultural background move into particular suburbs, those suburbs will become characterised by the visible artefacts of their major religion – temples, mosques, people walking around in traditional religious attire.

Our personal experience of religious diversity will, then, be different, according to where we live. The graphics at left show how different parts of Australia have been differently impacted by religious diversity. If we live in Cabramatta, we may feel the Buddhists are taking over; if we live in Parramatta, we'll see a lot of Hindus; and in Lakemba, it may seem as if there are Muslims everywhere.

This religious diversity can be confronting. Note the diagram that shows people's attitudes towards three major religions. It indicates that, compared to Christianity and Buddhism, significantly more people are less likely to hold positive sentiments towards Islam.[6] This is hardly surprising, given militant Islam's international profile. People living in rural areas, older people, and those born overseas with English as their first language are less likely to hold positive attitudes toward Muslims.[7]

This plurality and marginalisation is Biblically normal

This new religious diversity, and associated marginalisation of Christianity, has one great advantage: Australian society is now closer to what the Bible considers *normal*.

The people of Israel worshiped the one true God, in the midst of idolatrous nations. That's why the Old Testament is so full of tirades against the idols, and warnings not to follow the nations in their idolatrous worship and consequent decadent behaviour. The people of Israel were to conform their lives to God's written word – his law. As they did so, their lives were meant to reflect the character of God himself. The nations were to see how healthy and wholesome the nation of Israel was – especially in their care of the poor, oppressed, vulnerable and marginalised – and then themselves honour the God of Israel and his written word (Deut 4:5-9; Psalms 96-99; Isaiah 42:1-12; 49:6-7).

But for the nations to 'see' Israel's righteousness, the nation of Israel had to do two things. First, they had to *be* righteous – they had to actually conform their lives to God's revealed written word. Second, they had to do so *in the sight of the nations*. To use Jesus' analogy: they needed to not put their light under a bowl, but let it shine before people, so that they would praise their Father in heaven (Matt 5:15-16).

Jesus fulfils this himself. He fully obeyed God, all the time, in his whole life – even to the extent of dying for his enemies (Rom 5:19; Heb 10:5-10). Christians proclaim not themselves, but Jesus (2 Cor 4:5). When Jesus is "lifted up", and "clearly portrayed as crucified", he will "draw all people to himself" (John 3:14-21; 12:32; Gal 3:1).

As Jesus' people, Christians should expect to be treated the same way he was – that is, we need to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; see also John 15:18-23). Jesus didn't expect his people to be socially powerful and privileged. He blessed those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, and those who are falsely persecuted because of him. These, he said, are the true heirs of the Old Testament prophets (Matt 5:1-12). He did not gather people with social power, but those who were socially outcast and marginalised – sinners, tax collectors and women. Paul said of the Corinthian church that "not many" were, "by human standards", "wise… influential…" or "of noble birth" (1 Cor 1:26). This is true to the nature of the gospel itself, "for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18).

The New Testament church proclaimed the divinity of, and unique salvation wrought by, Jesus Christ, in the midst of Greco-Roman idolatry. Scholars estimate that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest letter written by Paul that we have in the Bible. In it, Paul basically defines the Christian life to be a turning from idols, trusting in the living God, and waiting for Jesus (1 Thess 1:9-10). Paul and other church leaders were regularly attacked, beaten, jailed, and / or chased out of town (Acts 13:50; 14:5, 19; 16:22-24; 17:5-9; 19:29, 33-34; 21:27-36; 22:22-25; 23:12-15; 24:5-6). New Testament churches were relatively small communities in the midst of a culture that despised them. Paul tells Titus to instruct people how to behave so as to "make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive", and "so that those who oppose" Christianity will not be able to "malign the word of God", but will be "ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about" the church (Titus 2:5b, 8b, 10b). Peter warns his readers that their former friends will "think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation [any more], and they [will] heap abuse on you" (1 Peter 4:4).

So the situation we face today is, according to the Bible, *not* unusual. The Bible does not expect God's people to be

powerful and influential in this world which rebels against God. We should *not* be surprised when we are misunderstood, mocked, and marginalised. It's *perfectly normal*. The last 1600 years were an anomaly; we're now returning to normal.

Responding to religious plurality and social marginalisation

So, in light of all this: how should we respond to contemporary religious diversity, and the associated social marginalisation of Christianity? What options are open to us?

1. Isolation

We could complain about everyone else, reject them, and isolate ourselves from them. We could try to create 'Christian' ghettos, where we 'Christian' people do our 'Christian' thing.

That may be comfortable and safe for us in the short run. But this kind of isolationism rapidly erodes Christian identity, vitality, and genuine faith. Christianity is a 'universal' and 'public' religion. The God of the Bible created everyone and everything; the once-crucified, now-risen Jesus has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt 28:18; see also Eph 1:20-22; Php 2:10-11; Rev 5:11-14). So to be Biblical Christians, we have to be 'public' about it: we have to live as if Jesus really is Lord over everyone, not just Christians.

Further, this kind of isolationism denies any responsibility for reaching out to people who believe false religions. That's not a Godly attitude. God could have isolated himself from us, not bothered to send Jesus to die and rise to forgive us, and left us to wallow in our own sin. But he didn't. He loved the world in sending his one and only son as a propitiation for sin. If God didn't isolate himself from a world that rejected him, neither should we.

2. 'Tolerance'

We could accept that religious plurality is not just a social norm, but a genuine reality about God. This goes beyond the idea accepting that different people have different understandings of God, and different ways to worship God. We've already talked about that. It would mean accepting that God / the gods / the divine (it's hard to even know what to call him / her / it…!) is, by their very nature, diverse.

To take this position would be to align ourselves with the postmodern idea of 'tolerance'. Our second paper in this series will engage with this important question.

3. Missional engagement

We could follow the model of the New Testament Church: tell people about Jesus, in ways that they comprehend; and persevere in the face of the consequent mockery and hatred.

That will be the topic for the third paper in this series. For now, consider these ideas:

•Evangelical tolerance does not recognise the validity of different view of God, but respects the integrity of an individual's decision whether or not to follow Jesus;

•Interacting with people of different religions does *not* require a thorough knowledge of those religions;

•It *does, however,* require a deep knowledge of the Biblical gospel, so that we can explain it clearly to them;

•It also requires a genuine concern and respect for the people were are talking to, so that we listen attentively to them, and find out what they actually believe. That way, when we explain the gospel to them, we can do so in such a way that they understand. The act of dialogue does not compromise the uniqueness of the Biblical gospel. In fact, it *clarifies* it. If we listen carefully to the person we're talking to, we can clearly explain how the gospel challenges their beliefs, prejudices and presuppositions.

Endnotes

[1] When it's worn by a woman

[2] When it's worn by a man.

[3] A woman may wear it, not for religious reasons, but to signify that she's married – like a wedding ring. Or it could be both a sign of being married, and a religious 'auspicious sign' – an attempt to call down divine blessings upon the marriage. If a man wears it, it's pretty much certain that he's a devout Hindu. He might even be a priest.

[4] Astute readers will see that this decline of Christendom is parallel with the decline of 'modernity' and the shift to 'post-modernity'. They are related, but not identical.

[5] For example, the Syrian Orthodox Church; the Egyptian Orthodox Church; the Indian Mar Thoma Church ("Church of St Thomas").

[6] The survey asked people whether they were likely to be "positive towards" these religions. It didn't ask whether people were "negative" towards them.

[7] Andrew Markus. Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys (2014), http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014-Mapping-Social-Cohesion-Report.pdf . 43.

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The Gospel, Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on social issues expressed by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. They have not been approved by the Assembly and so do not represent the official view of the Presbyterian Church of NSW.

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The research for this Resource Paper was conducted by Kamal Weerakoon and Sheryl Sarkoezy.

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