

What Australians really think about religion

By Annabel Crabb

Australians firmly believe that religious people are subjected to discrimination in this country.

But all the same, we'd rather the godly kept their views to themselves.

Seventy-one per cent of Australians told the ABC's Australia Talks National Survey that religious discrimination happens "occasionally" or "often" in this country.

Ironically, this is a point on which the devout and the heathen are in agreement.

Even among Australians with no religion, 68 per cent agreed that there is discrimination, as did 74 per cent of Catholics, 72 per cent of Protestants and 74 per cent of "other religions".

Still, we'd rather the devout kept quiet

But a broad majority of Australians — 60 per cent — would prefer that people keep their religious views to themselves.

This was a view held most strongly, as you might imagine, by non-religious respondents, of whom 73 per cent wished not to hear the religious views of others.

But even a slim majority of Catholics — 53 per cent — agreed that it was better to keep religion a private affair.

Protestants were more inclined to support full disclosure; only 39 per cent of them felt religious views should be private.

And people from other faiths were divided on the question: just shy of a majority — 47 per cent — agreed religion should be a hush-hush affair.

If you're wondering why all religious respondents besides Catholics and Protestants are grouped together, it's because only those two faith groups provided a large enough sample to isolate in a statistically reliable fashion.

According to the 2016 Census, 2.6 per cent of Australians follow Islam, 2.4 per cent are Buddhist, 1.9 per cent are Hindu and 0.4 per cent are Jewish.

Catholicism is the leading single religious group, claiming 23 per cent of the population, while 13 per cent identify as Anglican and 16 per cent as "other Christian".

We are not our faith

Australia is not a country in which religious belief is the dominant determinant of identity, social status or indeed even social activity.

When given a list of eight attributes and asked which was most central to the respondent's sense of self and identity, Australians placed religion stone-cold, motherless last.

Respondents were more likely to identify themselves through their political beliefs (this was the top-rating response, scoring 6.4 on a scale of one to ten), gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation than they were through their religious views, which rated 4.7 out of ten.

What not to bring up at a dinner party

Intermingling between religious groups is commonplace in Australia; 84 per cent of respondents said they mixed socially with people of different beliefs to themselves.

But there are some subjects probably best avoided at such ecclesiastically-mixed gatherings.

Climate change, for one; while 80 per cent of atheists think climate is a problem for them personally, only 63 per cent of Protestants agree.

Gender roles, for another; 35 per cent of Protestants believe that Australia would be better off if more women stayed home to look after children, while only 14 per cent of the godless were also of this view.

Would more religion help or hurt?

Overall, Australians are not looking for more religion. Only 15 per cent of respondents thought the country would be better off if more people were religious.

And one of the survey's most striking findings is the poor esteem in which religious leaders are held.

When asked who they trusted, Australians opted for doctors and nurses (trusted by 97 per cent) and scientists (93 per cent) well ahead of their preachers.

Religious leaders were distrusted by a full 70 per cent of the population, with 35 per cent saying they did not trust them "at all".

Even within their own flocks, religious leaders were viewed with some suspicion.

Protestants were the most obedient among the faithful; 58 per cent of them trusted their religious leadership. But only 47 per cent of Catholics had the same level of faith, while other religions came in at 49 per cent.

It seems trust in religious leaders may be a thing of the past; nearly half (47 per cent) of those aged over 75 felt it, but only 23 per cent of those aged 25 to 29.