



## Book Review

**Douglas Ezzy, Anna Halafoff,  
Greg Barton and Rebecca Banham  
(eds): *Religious Diversity in Australia: Living Well with Difference*.**  
London: Bloomsbury, 2024, 251 pp.

*Religious Diversity in Australia: Living Well with Difference* is an anthology that examines numerous aspects of contemporary religious diversity, mainly in the Australian states of Victoria and Tasmania. The book is a product of the Religious Diversity in Australia: Strategies to Maintain Social Cohesion Project led by Douglas Ezzy, Anna Halafoff, Greg Barton, and Gary Bouma. Fifteen authors have contributed to the volume, and it is edited by Douglas Ezzy, Anna Halafoff, Greg Barton, and Rebecca Banham. The book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Gary Bouma (1942–2021), who was an internationally renowned scholar of the sociology of religion and a contributor to one article in the book.

The book consists of a brief introduction, nine thematic chapters, and a final evaluative chapter by the Canadian scholar of religion, Professor Lori Beaman from the University of Ottawa. The editors outline their key aims in the introduction. They wish to highlight current religious diversity in a range of Australian social contexts: ‘migration, education, policing, legislation, media, countering violent extremism and interfaith practices’ (p. 1). Moreover, the focus on ‘the diversity of religious diver-

sity’ (p. 2), by which they refer to diversity within religious traditions and ethnic communities, is a welcome perspective, as it brings to light the complex realities in which migrant communities live, illuminating their internal divisions and differing religious integration trajectories. Alongside this, the authors take up issues of ‘power and privilege, and the challenges and constraints on funding and resources’ (p. 2), as well as belonging (p. 3), including its visibility, all of which play a role in the social inclusion that is key for the long-term development of Australian society.

The first substantive chapter examines religious diversity in Melbourne, a city of five million, where more than half the population were born abroad. It applies a super-diversity perspective to the topic, aiming to highlight the complexities of religious belonging and affiliation with various socioeconomic and migration aspects. It also introduces a welcome theoretical development to super-diversity research that they call ‘re-homogenisation’. Whereas debates on super-diversity usually highlight the diversification of diversity in the context of high immigration levels, re-homogenization looks to social reorganization, that is, ‘how emerging combinations of social variables are forming into new group categories with relatively stable boundaries in super-diverse urban contexts’ (p. 16). They do so by examining residential mobility,

for example, identifying different types of new groupings, including 'cosmopolitan hipster villages' (p. 22) with a highly religiously diverse 'gentrifying, young professional and university student population' (p. 22), including many nones. The chapter shows a promising avenue for conducting super-diversity research.

The next two chapters focus on attitudes towards religious diversity and media representations of religion. The first is based on a national survey; the latter on selected newspapers in Melbourne in Victoria and Hobart in Tasmania. They discuss the role of Australian nationalism, and how cultural Christianity is integrated into it. Christianity and Islam emerge as the main poles of the newspaper religion debate, while other religions and spiritualities are less recognized. Christian nationalists are the most antagonistic to religious diversity; the rest of the population is indifferent, ambivalent, or takes a more positive view. The authors also note that religious education tends to play a positive role in how people relate to other religions.

Chapter four on migration and religious diversity starts by pointing to the country's earlier migration-based religious diversity, and how the White Australia Policy affected it, starting with the 1901 Migration Restriction Act and lasting until the 1970s. The policy was targeted at non-British migration and was especially harsh for the Chinese and Japanese communities. The authors

remind us that 'the prevailing myth (...) of a White Christian Nation that still persists in Australian society does not reflect its historical and multifaith reality' (p. 77). The authors are generally quite critical of both historical and contemporary policy restrictions, evincing sensitivity about the injustices the Australian Indigenous population and immigrants have experienced. The chapter then discusses the varying lives of Chinese, Indian, and Afghan migrants in detail, including how the Covid-19 pandemic affected their position in society and transnational relations.

The next chapter takes up the role of education, an aspect that features prominently in the book. Despite having a national curriculum since 2008, Australian states differ somewhat in how different religions and worldviews are taught at school. Based on a textual analysis, the chapter compares the differences between the Australian and Victorian curricula. The Victorian curriculum is more sensitive to different worldviews, whereas the Australian one focuses more on the Abrahamic religions. Both curricula still suffer from an old-fashioned world religions perspective that does not sufficiently recognize Aboriginal spiritualities, for example, but the Victorian curriculum is still considered more advanced. The authors conclude, however, that 'a more critical, considered and inclusive approach to learning about diverse worldviews is as yet to be developed and delivered in Australia' (p. 122).

The Multifaith Movement is a significant, yet in public often underestimated, development that fosters local and national interreligious relations and can significantly help overcome various problems arising from increased religious diversity. Chapter six examines 'representational' and 'relational' multifaith bodies (p. 129) in Victoria and Tasmania, focusing on two case studies. The Faith Communities Council of Victoria (FCCV) is a representational umbrella body bringing together various traditional religious organizations. While fostering good local relations, the representatives must balance their official positions with their personal views, also presenting challenges for issues that are tense for one reason or another. Sacred Conversations is a Hobart-based local group, a relational body bringing individuals of different faiths together. It has no representational authority, but attendees can express themselves freely and create stronger individual bonds. The chapters skilfully address the various types of actors involved in multifaith work.

The last three chapters examine legislation, policing, and the prevention of extremism. They all point to the Christian majority's power and privilege, showing how minorities often struggle to be trustworthy in the eyes of the majority. For example, minorities tend to be overrepresented among victims of police violence due to underprivilege and negative stereotypes, including Islamophobia (p. 178). Trust in the police can be a problem for which

various strategies can be used, from staff recruitment to community policing (p. 181). Since 9/11, various counterterrorism policies and measures, as well as those aimed at the prevention of violent extremism, have especially targeted Muslim communities. While addressing real threats to public safety, reactions to religion-based ideologies may also have significant countereffects that harm community relations and societal trust. The chapter on prevention and countering policies explores a series of Australian developments where international learning and local experiences have gradually given way to more constructive policies and practices that foster the building of trust (p. 221).

Lori Beaman's international perspective on religious diversity summarizes the book. She notes that the Australian experiences in many ways resemble developments in Western societies. However, context always matters, so Australian Aboriginal history and the various local circumstances should be noted. Beaman also addresses the enduring power of nationalism, and how nations are imagined. The history of the White Australia Policy and the privilege of certain forms of Christianity have gained new momentum in the 2000s. This begs the question of how to include everyone, and what should be done. Although there is no easy way out, legal development is important, as it sets the national limits of the acceptable and the avoidable. As a final note, Beaman states that 'any living prospect

of living well together in super-diverse nations like Australia depends on the recognition by states, civil societies and religious groups of the harm done and commitment to engaging in reconciliation on Indigenous terms' (p. 238). In my understanding this means that only when we have sorted out our past can we deal with the current times in the optimal manner.

While the individual contributions were all informative reading, I felt the book lacked something. As most of the chapters deal with religious diversity in the states of Victoria and Tasmania, I kept wondering how this was related to the wider Australian situation. I think the book would have benefited from an introductory chapter about the history, regional differences, and overall situation of religion in Australia. An international readership would certainly find this helpful, and it is also what I expected of a book titled 'Religious Diversity in Australia'. I also felt that the urban perspective dominated most chapters, and the states' less diverse areas received less focus. An overt focus on urbanism is a common feature of migration research, but we should not forget that migration also occurs on other sites, and that the related debates and policies tend to be national.

That said, *Religious Diversity in Australia* makes a timely and multifaceted contribution in addressing the numerous central issues of contemporary religious diversity. The book is very systematically

produced, is well edited, and will provide inspiration for other researchers with similar interests. It also includes a wealth of new data, providing an up-to-date picture of religious diversity down under. Despite not illuminating the entire Australian experience, it nevertheless provides a valuable looking glass into a growing multireligious society. The book is suitable reading for courses on religious diversity and religion in Australia, and will be of interest to scholars of migration-related religious diversity.

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