

Mapping 'No Religion'

Michael Dove & Charles Dove

The religion question in the forthcoming census is one of the most controversial. Some think the question should not be asked at all, while others rely on it to justify demands for ever-increasing government funding.

Many think the wording and placement of the questions introduces a bias that favours the selection of a religion, even though many respondents have, at best, a tenuous relationship with religion.

The most popular single response to the religion question is 'No Religion'. Hence the ABS places this option at the top of the available tick-boxes.

In the 2016 census, 29.6% chose 'No Religion', reflecting a significant increase from the 2011 and 2006 figures of 21.8% and 18.4%, respectively.

But averages conceal considerable variation in different parts of the country.

At the State level in 2016, Tasmania led the States and Territories with almost 38% 'No Religion', while New South Wales recorded just over 25%.

As shown in Figure 1, Hobart, ACT, and Adelaide were our most faithless cities, with Sydney bringing up the rear for all our principal metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

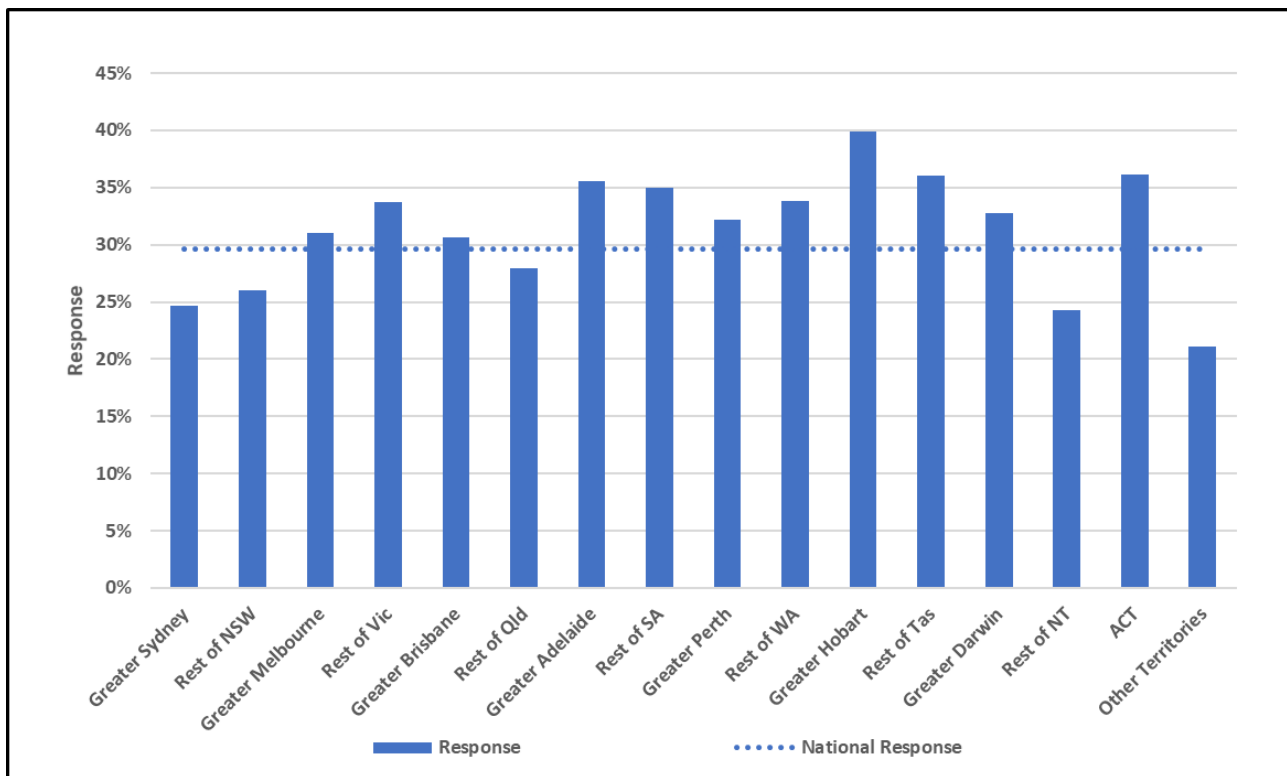


Figure 1 – No Religion in 2016 – by Metro and Non-Metro Statistical Area

Source : ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder

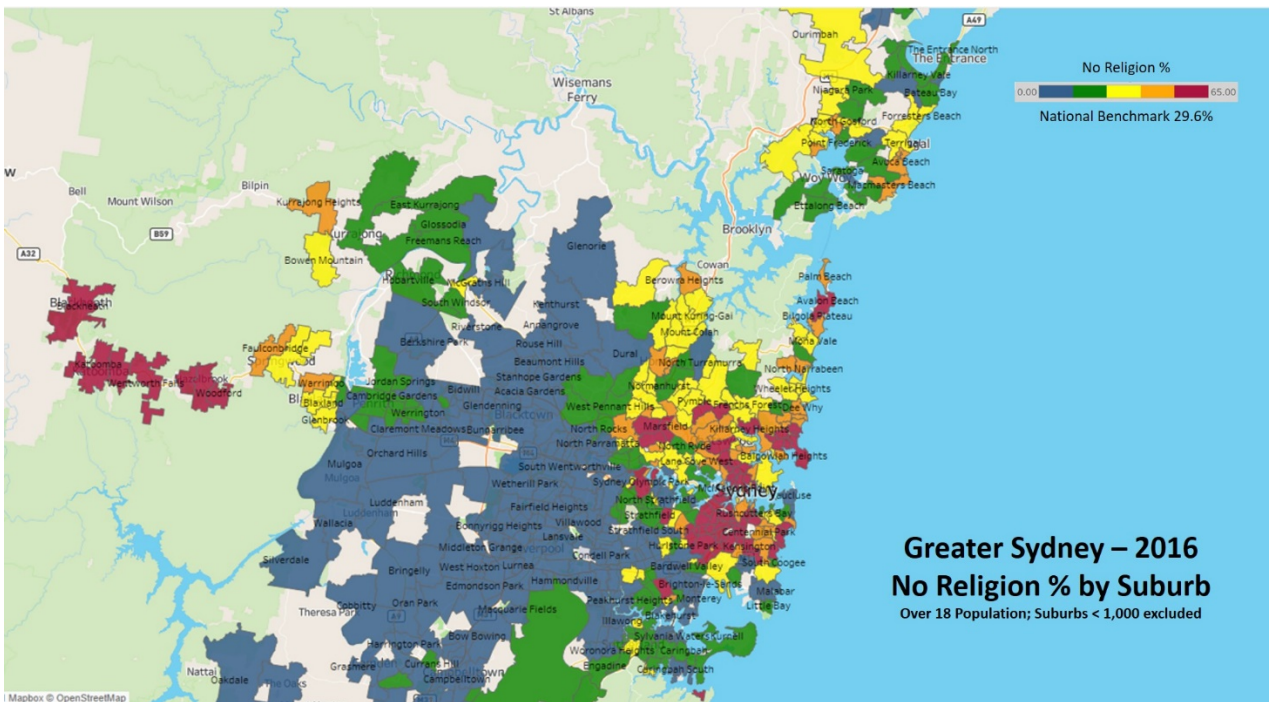
Looking at the suburb level reveals even more significant local variation.

Here we restrict our analysis to the 18+ usually resident population and to suburbs containing a minimum of 1,000 adults.

Despite the overall lower 'No Religion' responses for New South Wales, the suburb of Darlington, close to the University of Sydney, tops the list of national suburbs. Suburbs in the inner south and

inner north, together with outliers in the Blue Mountains and Northern beaches, dominate the highest 'No Religion' areas.

But as the blue and green areas of Map 1 show, there are large swathes of western Sydney recording a significantly lower preference for choosing 'No Religion' – many with less than 10%. These areas, coinciding with some of Australia's most culturally diverse communities, show the greatest attachment to religion.



Map 1 – No Religion in 2016 – Greater Sydney Suburbs

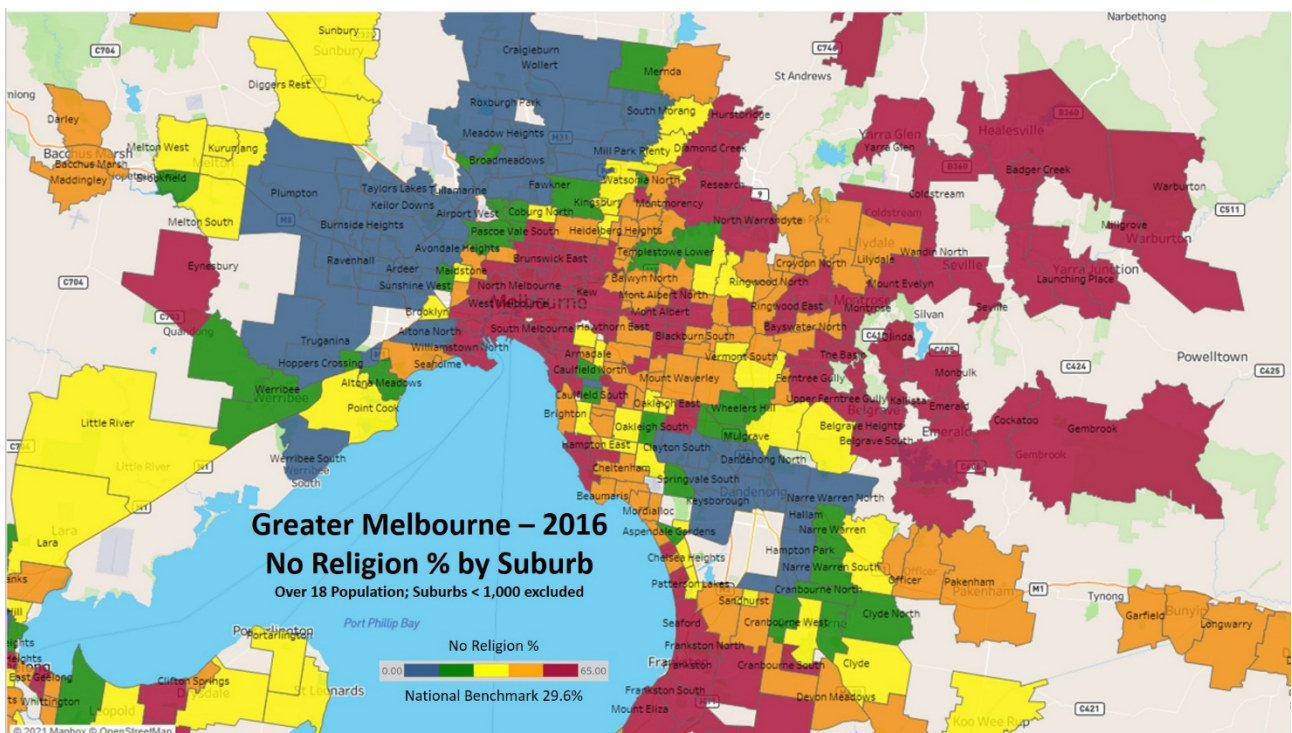
Source : ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder

Looking at Greater Melbourne (Map 2) and using an identical colour legend, also shows marked variation across the city. Red indicates areas returning the highest ‘No Religion’ reading, with the peak suburbs strongly concentrated in the inner north.

There are also significant axes of godlessness stretching out to the north-east, east, and in the

bayside suburbs towards Frankston and beyond.

As with Sydney, the weakest ‘No Religion’ suburbs are generally coincident with Melbourne’s greatest areas of cultural diversity. Much of the northern and western suburbs, together with the area around Dandenong in the south-east, fall in the nation’s lowest category (less than 22%).



Map 2 – No Religion in 2016 – Greater Melbourne Suburbs

Source : ABS Census of Population and Housing, 2016, TableBuilder

An exception to this association can be found in suburbs containing a substantial population of Chinese heritage, such as Box Hill, Doncaster, and the CBD.

People of Chinese heritage register well over 50% 'No Religion'. By some margin, this is the highest of all cultural backgrounds.

'No Religion' – Top and bottom Suburbs by State

Following is a listing of the top and bottom five suburbs in each of the major States.

Top Five Suburbs by State - 2016 No Religion Response													
Over 18s - Suburbs with < 1,000 people excluded													
Victoria		New South Wales		Queensland		South Australia		Western Australia		Tasmania		ACT	
Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %
Carlton North	54.6%	Darlington	60.7%	Kelvin Grove	46.7%	Macclesfield	48.8%	Margaret River	47.9%	Dynnyrne	52.9%	City	52.6%
Clifton Hill	54.0%	Erskineville	54.0%	Petrie Terrace	46.0%	Seaford Meadows	48.2%	South Fremantle	45.1%	West Hobart	52.5%	O'Connor	50.9%
Fitzroy North	53.9%	Newtown	53.0%	Fairfield	45.9%	Port Willunga	48.1%	Leederville	43.4%	North Hobart	50.9%	Braddon	49.9%
Brunswick East	51.5%	Enmore	52.1%	West End	44.6%	Adelaide	47.8%	Fremantle	43.2%	South Hobart	50.1%	Dickson	49.3%
Belgrave	50.3%	Forest Lodge	51.9%	Brisbane City	43.1%	Bridgewater	47.4%	Highgate	43.2%	Battery Point	46.6%	Aranda	49.1%

Bottom Five Suburbs by State - 2016 No Religion Response													
Over 18s - Suburbs with < 1,000 people excluded													
Victoria		New South Wales		Queensland		South Australia		Western Australia		Tasmania		ACT	
Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %	Suburb	NR %
Fawkner	10.4%	Bossley Park	7.0%	Palm Island	8.4%	Fulham Gardens	19.7%	Noranda	18.8%	Deloraine	26.6%	Isabella Plains	28.0%
Meadow Heights	10.4%	Greenacre	6.9%	Yarrabah	7.6%	Kidman Park	19.5%	Mirraboopa	18.3%	Shearwater	26.5%	Nicholls	26.7%
Dallas	9.2%	Berkshire Park	6.6%	Stuart	6.4%	Newton	19.2%	Halls Creek	17.2%	Prospect Vale	25.7%	Monash	26.2%
Roxburgh Park	8.5%	Horsley Park	6.2%	Wacol	5.4%	Moorak	17.7%	Casuarina	14.5%	Queenstown	24.9%	Isaacs	25.4%
Campbellfield	7.1%	Bungarabee	6.1%	Arriga	3.3%	Waterloo Corner	16.9%	Wooroloo	7.6%	Granton	24.0%	Bonner	24.7%

As with the past two censuses, many observers are expecting the religion question to reflect some of the most significant changes in Australian society.

As shown in recent research based on respected ANU surveys - the Australian Election Survey, the Australian Study of Social Values, and the Australian Values Survey – attachment to religion continues to decline.

According to the research report (Francis, 2021), from a range of factors contributing to a sense of personal identity, Australians place religious beliefs as the lowest priority.

As many as 80% of weddings are now conducted by civil celebrants and the majority indicates they would not choose a religious minister to conduct their funeral.¹

In some respects, the census data on 'No Religion' lags most other pointers of social sentiment. This is largely because many people, when confronted with a question with inherent bias, make their

decision based on cultural association rather their actual practices and beliefs.

So, how will your community fare in this year's census?

Further Resources:

Click here for suburb maps of [Adelaide](#), [Brisbane](#), [Perth](#), and the [ACT](#).

[The problem with the census question](#)

[Australians are very sceptical](#)

[The Australian census collects inaccurate data on religion](#)

¹Francis, N 2021, Religiosity in Australia Part 1: Personal faith according to the numbers p1, viewed 16 Jun 2021, <https://www.rationalist.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Executive-Summary-Religiosity-Report-1.pdf>