

20 Official Languages and Religions

Some nations decide to officially proclaim by law that one or more languages are to be used in government administration and the legal system. These are called official languages.

Nations often have more than one official language. This is the case when there are both indigenous languages and languages brought in by people who later occupied the nation.

Other nations have been occupied over time by several invaders from different backgrounds, and people speak different languages as a result.

United Nations Official Languages

The United Nations has six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. All United Nations documents are released in these languages, and interpreters translate all speeches into each of these languages.

Case Study: Canada

Canada was partly occupied by France before the entire region was later occupied by Britain. As a result, most people in some parts of the nation (notably the province of Quebec) speak mainly French, while the rest of the nation speaks mainly English. However, throughout the entire nation there are also many indigenous languages spoken by First Nations peoples.

English and French are the official national languages of Canada. In addition, some provinces and territories have proclaimed official indigenous languages based on the First Nations people who live there.

Some road signs in Canada are written in both French and English. This stop sign includes the French word for stop, "arrêt". The name of the street is also written in two languages- Rue Montalet (French) and Montalet St (English).

State Religions

A number of nations have an official religion, usually called a state religion, that is endorsed by the government. In these nations, religious leaders often play a role in government, and government decisions can be guided by religious beliefs. The role that the religion plays in government is usually set out in the Constitution, the document that defines the laws of a country.

Many Middle Eastern nations proclaim Islam as the state religion. Some European and South American nations (including England and Argentina) nominate Christian denominations as their state religion, and Buddhism is the state religion in a number of Asian nations (including Cambodia and Thailand). Many nations, including Australia, do not have an official religion. In fact, many nations have laws that guarantee the rights of their citizens to practise whatever religion they choose.



This road sign is in both Welsh and English - the two official languages of Wales in the United Kingdom.

Australia's Official Language

Australia is one nation that does not have an official language, although it is widely accepted that English is the de facto official language. This means that English is used in all official documents and speeches, but this is not ordained by law.

