



The Religious State We Are In

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Introduction

New Zealand has a well-developed secular reputation – not only as a secular state, but as a secular nation and society. By many measures, this secularity is well advanced and advancing. Yet, as I have noted recently in *Sacred Histories in Secular New Zealand*,¹ this secular identity can be confusing and at times misleading – not least when secular language devolves into a set of mythologies. My aim here is to highlight something of what recent national census data tells us about religious identification in New Zealand, and to tease out that picture using data from the 20-year national longitudinal study, the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS).

Religious Diversity in New Zealand

Diversity in religion is a given, but the nature of religious diversity has changed and become more apparent in recent decades. It has also become more widely celebrated and authorized. Earlier diversity tended to be intra-religious in nature: it was diversity within Christianity. The 1901 census listed over 100 different religious identifications. About 95% of the people identified as Christian; there were many forms, though most linked to the four major denominations. Yet even within those Big Four, there was considerable diversity; in fact the census folded together many responses under those recognized categories, thus overstating the extent of homogeneity.

Two big stories have been central to the changing shape of religious identification and religious diversity in New Zealand since the Second World War. The first story concerns changes in immigration law and the fostering of non-European migration. The Immigration Act, 1987 – and subsequently, the 1991 Amendment Act – marked the key turning point in terms of the shift from intra-Christian diversity to a broader religious pluralism. From that time, selection of immigrants on the basis of nationality became less favoured; assets and skill contributions were the new priorities, with the result that migration from Asia (and subsequently elsewhere) flourished. Substantial cultural and religious pluralization followed from this policy shift.

The other main shift has been the deinstitutionalisation of religion, and net disaffiliation from the traditional churches. I'll return to this point shortly. Whatever else this pattern indicates, in religious terms it is evidently associated with a greater sense of autonomy, and less and lighter institutional identification.

¹ See Geoffrey Troughton and Stuart Lange, eds. *Sacred Histories in Secular New Zealand*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016.



The Picture in the 2013 Census

The basic story represented in the 2013 census should be fairly well known in some respects, but is worth stating. In broad terms, affiliation breaks down as follows: 45% of the total population state that they are Christians of various kinds (including 1.2% Maori Christians); 38.6% no religion; 2.1% Hindu; 1.4% Buddhist; 1.1% Muslim. The Sikh community is one of the fastest growing groups – it more than doubled in size between 2006 and 2013, but remains at 0.5%.

Between 2006 and 2013, the largest group change was simply a net switch between the Christians and no religionists – the former shrinking from around 52% to 45%, the latter rising from around 32% to 38.6%. The clarity of this switch is misleading. It is a net switch in total identification. There is actually considerable mobility in terms of religious identification – conversion and switching in various directions occurs, but the overall result is reduced religious affiliation.

Among Christians, denominational identification is collapsing. The smaller sectarian and evangelically-oriented groups are largely holding their numbers, as are the Christian NFDs (no further definition) who now represent around 5% of the population. Numerically, this latter group is growing. Ethnic churches, especially of the evangelical and Pentecostal variety, proliferate.

Other religions rose from 5% to 6% between 2006 and 2013. The vast majority of affiliates with the other world religions are migrants rather than converts (usually c. 90% or more), which indicates a very high correlation between religious and cultural diversity in New Zealand.

Notable Ethnic Patterns

The ethnic story is significant, and may not conform to assumptions or widely-held expectations. For example, many people might be surprised to know that there is almost no difference in Maori and European/Pakeha rates of affiliation: Maori identify with Christianity at almost exactly the same rates as Europeans/Pakeha do.

Of those born in Europe and North America, almost all identify either with Christianity or no religion. Despite North America's highly religious reputation, New Zealand migrants from that source are not highly religious – indeed, 44% of census respondents born in North America claim no religion. Among Asians, 31% claim no religion, but the rate of 62% among Chinese lifts this significantly. Of those who claim Asian ethnicity (i.e. compared to the Asian-born), just under 30% are no religionists; nearly the same proportion are Christian. There are three times as many Asian Christians in New Zealand as there are Asian Buddhists.

Christian affiliation is high among some respondents from the Middle East, Latin America and Africa (MELAA) region – notably Africa (60%) and Latin America (75%). Among Iranian respondents, 40% claim to be Muslim, but 25% state no religion. Middle East NFDs are 66% Muslim, and 20% Christian.



Pacific Island-born census respondents are more diverse than might be expected: 18% are Hindu, and 6% Muslim, reflecting Fijian migrant patterns. While only 3.9% of those claiming Pacific Island ethnic identity claim no religion, this rate is 16.5% among the New Zealand-born.

Migrant religion is therefore changing the religious landscape significantly, but the patterns are variegated.

The Puzzle of Non-Religion

It is well known that levels of 'no religion' in New Zealand are high – very high when compared with other similar nations. In the census, 38.6% of all New Zealanders fit in this category (42% of all who answered the religion question). By comparison, levels in the UK (2011), Canada (2011), and Australia (2011) are 25.1%, 23.5%, and 22.3% respectively. In New Zealand, the rate of census 'no religion' is growing at roughly 1% per year, and shows little sign of abating. In the USA, Pew Forum data suggests that the 'unaffiliated' are now growing at a similar rate – having risen from 16 to 23% of the population between 2007 and 2014.²

It's clear, however, that lack of religious affiliation does not mean a lack of belief or even of practice. The religious 'nones' in the US believe less and practice less frequently, but these dimensions are not absent.

Most of the data we have suggests that there are fewer outright atheists or thorough-going materialists in New Zealand than the rates of 'no religion' might suggest – perhaps between 10-20% of no religionists fit this category (and we should also be cautious about presuming what atheism means in terms of religious commitments).

Interestingly, in one wave of NZAVS data, 42% of respondents claimed no religion; yet 48% believed in 'a God', and 71% in 'some form of spirit or life force'. Unsurprisingly, the more strongly a person identifies with a religion, the stronger their belief in God. Yet there are significant levels of God belief even among those who claim no religious identification; low identification with religion definitely does not indicate a lack of spirit/life force belief.

The Salience of Strength of Religious Identification

One thing that NZAVS data is showing with increasing clarity is that the simple yes/no religious affiliation question tells us very little about the meanings of religion for people – or how religion is mobilized. It is much more revealing to ask people how strongly they identify with the religion they profess. The 'strength of identification' issue carves at a more significant joint in this respect.

A number of examples can be used to illustrate this claim. The NZAVS asks questions about strength of religious identification. Again, some of the findings are curious, and demand not only careful attention, but also further more systematic interpretation.

Secular mythologies tend to characterize religions – and religious commitments – as problematic; they are often viewed as a leading source of tension and intolerance between

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.



communities. Yet there is evidence that strong religious belief can be mobilized in precisely the other way.

For example, a recent study of attitudes to immigrants highlighted that people who identify highly with their religion are slightly more tolerant towards immigrants than others. New Zealanders tend to conflate being Arab with being Muslim. Therefore, one might expect highly identified Christians to be more intolerant of Arabs than other New Zealanders. In fact: 'People who strongly identify with their Christian faith are the most accepting of Arabs. Those who identify with Christianity at low levels, however, are more prejudiced than unaffiliated New Zealanders.'³ Indeed, this pattern extends to those who identify explicitly as Muslim.⁴

There is also evidence that highly religiously identified New Zealanders are more charitable in terms of giving of time and money. In short, strength of religious identification can be seen as promoting a number of values that are widely hailed as pro-social. This observation should not be taken as a claim that religion – and strong religious identification – is always benevolent. The patterns above are 'on average' ones, so there is always variation. There is a shadow side: more highly identified Christians express greater willingness to go to war than other New Zealanders, and greater opposition to homosexual marriage.⁵

Conclusion

So what does all this tell us about the religious state we are in? Clearly, religion and spirituality is in a phase of extraordinary transition at present. So too are our forms of secularity. It would be nice to think that we are progressing towards a more mature form characterized by 'post-secular' openness; that is, a secularity that is marked by respect for diversity, appreciation of the resources of religion, and engagement with diversity, rather than hard-edged repudiation of religion. This may be wishful thinking.

³ John H. Shaver, Chris G. Sibley, and Joseph A. Bulbulia, 'Are Contemporary Christian New Zealanders Committed to Peace?' in *Pursuing Peace: Stories from Godzone*, ed. Geoffrey Troughton and Philip Fountain. Wellington: Victoria University Press, forthcoming.

⁴ Shaver, John H., Geoffrey Troughton, Chris G. Sibley and Joseph A. Bulbulia. 'Religion and the Unmaking of Prejudice towards Muslims: Evidence From a Large National Sample'. *PLOS ONE* (9 March 2016). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0150209

⁵ Shaver et al. 'Contemporary Christian New Zealanders'.