RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN NEW ZEALAND

ABSTRACT

New Zealand's religious history has been dominated by cultural and economic connections with the UK/Ireland, Maori religious movements and a concern by the state to limit religious involvement in major societal institutions. Peter Lineham and Paul Spoonley suggest immigrant-derived cultural diversity in the last few decades has also resulted in greater religious diversity. They argue the state, for historical and contemporary political reasons, has been slow to adjust to this diversity.

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Religious Considerations in New Zealand's Policy Framework

The colonisation of New Zealand by the British was reflected in immigration and settlement patterns. From the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between some local Maori chiefs and representatives of the British government in 1840 until major changes to immigration policy in 1987, the majority of immigrants to New Zealand were British or Irish, with the exception of Chinese gold miners invited to the colony in the 1870s. Religious affiliation and the establishment of churches reflected the nature of immigration, with the Irish settlement of the West Coast of the South Island providing the base for Catholicism, the Scottish migration to Otago producing a strong Presbyterianism and the English arrival in places such as Taranaki and Nelson contributing to strong Anglican centres. In short, the central values and institutions, including religion, reflected the dominance of British and Irish immigrants and the economic and cultural connections with Britain as the colonising power. Yet New Zealand was founded in the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the state had recently given full political and social rights to Catholics, and consequently, no form of Christianity was accorded establishment status. Religion was excluded from the schools in 1874 in order to prevent religious sectarianism. While the Church of England retained both the strongest support and a certain social superiority based on its English establishment status, it became an independent denomination in New Zealand.

Perhaps the most significant alternative to these developments came in the form of Maori religious movements (Hill, 1994). Judaeo-Christian traditions were combined with traditional Maori spiritual beliefs and their political ambitions to provide a range of new religious traditions. Not only did variations on Christian belief systems emerge, but in the 1930s, the Ratana movement established an important political alliance with the Labour Party. This was less powerful in determining Maori members of Parliament by the end of the twentieth century, but it is part of a long tradition of Maori-specific religious movements and a political expression of Maori concerns. Maori continue to have a very distinctive range of religious affiliations compared to Pakeha (majority group members of European descent). Of a total population of 495,219 people in the 2001 census, 50.3 per cent belong to the mainstream European denominations (particularly Anglican and Catholic), while 45,174 adhere to Ratana, and another 14,000 to other independent Maori Christian groups (11.7 per cent in all), 9,279 (1.9 per cent) to other religions and 38.8 per cent describe themselves as having no religion or declined to answer the census question on religion.

Religion has played a role in New Zealand history, but the country has experimented from an early stage with political and welfare institutions conceived on a secular basis. A Liberal Government in the 1890s saw the political enfranchisement of women, national systems for mediation between workers and employers and a nascent welfare state. The union movement brought about the formation of the Labour Party in 1916, one of the two dominant political parties of the twentieth century. While many of those involved in these politics and the key institutions have been affiliated to a church, the state and key institutions have tended to be secular and there has been a clear demarcation (with some exceptions – there continue to be schools which are associated with a particular church but these provide education to a minority of New Zealanders) between religion and the state. For example, under the Education Act, religious education in the state education sector can only take place in school hours when the school is

technically closed. However, since 1975 the Integration Act has funded church-based and other schools, so long as 95 per cent of their role is drawn from their distinctive constituency. This Act, originally intended to rescue the Catholic educational system from bankruptcy, has provided a basis for the funding of an ever-increasing variety of religious schools. By the 2001 census, 60.7 per cent of the Pakeha/European population adhered to a Christian denomination (the largest affiliations were Anglican, then Catholic and Presbyterian), while only 1.61 per cent to a non-Christian religion, but 31.8 per cent declared that they had no religion and another 7.1 per cent declined to answer the question. It is the growth of the non-religious which has been the most marked feature of European religious change over the last fifty years. Immigration from South Africa has strengthened Anglican and Presbyterian affiliations, but many other new Europeans have either been secular or Catholic in outlook.

Immigration

British and Irish immigrants dominated immigrant flows to New Zealand until a major review of immigration policy took place in 1986. There were a growing number of migrants from the Pacific Islands from the late 1950s, and they constituted a significant proportion of all migrants. The fact that they were culturally different, and were seen to be a 'threat', developed into a major political response in the 1970s. Ironically, the levels of religious affiliation amongst these Pacific migrants were very high and Christian churches and their ministers are a core part of the life of these communities (see Macpherson, Spoonley and Anae, 2001). By 2001, of the 218,472 Pacific peoples (other than Maori) answering the Census, 83.1 per cent described themselves as Christian (the largest groups were Presbyterian, then Catholic, Methodist and Mormon), 1.4 per cent described themselves as belonging to another religion, while 11.7 per cent declared that they had no religion and 5.1 per cent declined to answer the question. This is a much more traditionally Christian population.

After 1986, immigrants from traditional source countries were replaced by non-traditional sources, notably Asian. Many of these new migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea were also Christian although more recent migrant flows have been dominated by migrants from China and India who are much less likely to be Christian. In addition, New Zealand has an important although relatively small flow of refugees who, in recent years, have tended to come from North Africa (Somalia) or West Asia (Iraq, Iran). There are small but growing Muslim communities. In the 2001 Census, Asian people accounted for 223,359 (six per cent) of people out of the total population. Of these Asian people, 29.72 per cent were Christian (with the Catholic Church the largest affiliation), 15.82 per cent Hindu, 13.36 per cent Buddhist, 5.06 per cent Muslim, while 29.95 per cent declared that they had no religion and another 4.1 per cent declined to respond to the question. However, it should be noted that there has been a signi-ficant proportion of Christian recruiting, especially by the Catholic Church from the non-religious, especially those drawn from the People's Republic of China.

New Zealand, in one of its regular waves of reform, developed a more extensive biculturalism in the 1980s which focussed on relations and policies affecting the dominant Pakeha and Maori. But with a foreign-born population which exceeds (proportionately) that of Canada and is not far behind Àthat of Australia's, New Zealand has yet to develop a multicultural framework. It has developed an extensive set of policies associated with human rights, both in terms of national legal requirements and in terms of the practice of particular institutions (hospitals, schools). But under this legislation, there is no provision for adequately dealing with religious discrimination.

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Religious Politics

The declining numbers of those associated with the major Christian churches has been replaced with a new religious diversity of two key types. The first is the growth of fundamentalist Christian groups as part of a moral right. Since the 1970s, governments of both centre-left and centre-right have introduced a series of liberal measures relating to issues such as women's and gay rights, abortion and education. Yet at the same time, the numbers affiliated to fundamentalist religious groups have grown significantly, particularly Pentecostal, who now number 66,855 (just under two per cent of the population) and they have been prepared to express their views in the political arena. The overall potential conservative Christian community has been estimated as comprising five to seven per cent of the population. When homosexual law reform occurred in 1985, a coalition of the religious right mounted an extensive political campaign in opposition, and eventually two Christian political parties emerged following this campaign. More recently, the Destiny Church, which draws most of its supporters from Maori and Pacific communities, has taken part in public demonstrations and established its own party to contest

the 2005 general election in defence of a particular and conservative Christianity. The expression of their views in the political arena, and that of other morally and religiously conservative groups, has been encouraged not only by what is perceived to be the unnecessarily liberal policies of major political parties, but the arrival of Mixed Member Proportional political representation. This has provided an opportunity for ethnic and religious groups to be represented politically. The number of Members of Parliament from a variety of ethnic groups since MMP was introduced in 1987 almost exactly mirrors the proportion of these groups in the general population. There have also been explicitly religious political parties represented in Parliament, including United Futures, which has adopted a less extreme form of religious conservatism (a focus on the family) and which has been a coalition partner with the centre-left Labour Party in government.

The other aspect of diversity is the growing presence of non-Christian religions, typically associated with much more diverse immigration flows. Orthodox and liberal Jewish communities have grown with the arrival of migrants from South Africa and Russia, but the larger growths have been experienced by Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim groups. There are now 23,000 Muslims along with 41,000 Buddhists and 39,000 Hindus. The Islamic community continues to rise rapidly and may soon reach 40,000. As the communities have begun to mature and with this maturation and their size, they have established a variety of religious buildings, their own religious workforce and associated institutions such as educational activities (or schools). They are a much more visible presence, especially in Auckland. This immigrant-associated religious diversity has also impacted on Christian communities. A number of traditional church buildings (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist etc) have been bought by Asian Christian communities and they now host new variants on Christianity. Christian sects, including the Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses, are also potential beneficiaries from the changed circumstances, although it is the Catholic Church which has benefited most, particularly because immigrants prefer to keep their children out of state schools.

The effect is to see declining numbers of those associated with traditional Christian churches and the growth of sects, cults and non-Christian communities. There is a growth in numbers and of diversity. Moreover, some of these communities, especially fundamentalist Christian communities have been prepared to become politically active. Ironically, they largely tend to be politically opposed to religious (and to some extent ethnic) diversity, arguing instead for narrow moral and religious code to be implemented and to be authoritarian on a range of moral and social issues.

New Zealand can be generally described as a liberal democracy with relatively high levels of inter-group tolerance in terms of religious issues and affiliation. But the policy framework has yet to maintain pace with the rapidly changing ethnic and religious diversity that characterises New Zealand in the twenty-first century.

Policy Responses

The score card in terms of how well New Zealand institutions have responded to growing ethnic and religious diversity is mixed. In some respects, the major institutions have adapted. The New Zealand Parliament does reflect contemporary ethnic diversity in terms of who is elected, although some political parties (the anti-immigrant New Zealand First and the conservative opposition of the National and ACT parties to ethnic recognition) have expressed major concerns about the impact of ethnic diversity and opposition to the limited policy responses which have emerged. Religious diversity is also reflected in political representation with some of the more conservative religious communities either seeking to enter Parliament (and some have) or to influence election campaigns and government decision making. The major shift in terms of ethnic recognition has occurred with regard to Maori and biculturalism is now a major part of the policy landscape. Multiculturalism has not been developed as a significant policy. Nor is there adequate recognition of religious discrimination in the human rights legal framework. Here, the policy response is lagging behind the reality of the new cultural and religious diversity of New Zealand.

Two examples of the extent to which religious pluralism has entered the consciousness of New Zealand in the recent past are linked to Islam, which is often portrayed in the popular mind as the most intolerant of religions. Yet New Zealand's only Islamic Member of Parliament voted in favour of civil unions and abstained from voting on the bill which legalized prostitution. Meanwhile, New Zealand's most prominent refugee, an Algerian who had been a member of the democratic government in Algeria, carefully espoused a tolerant form of Islam. The mainstream Christian churches have also carefully embraced tolerance of alternative lifestyles, but the growing and more active forms of churches have tended to be much less tolerant.

New Zealand went through a major period of reform in the 1980s, driven by neo-liberal politics. One aspect of these changes was to recruit immigrants who could contribute to the economic performance of the country. In line with neo-liberalism, it was assumed that having carefully selected skilled and well-educated migrants, that they would then require little or no

post-arrival support. This was also reflected in a general unwillingness to develop policy that more adequately acknowledged the new ethnic and religious diversity of New Zealand. This is not true of the indigenous Maori and their relations with the state, and the policy of biculturalism which has developed (although this has also attracted political opposition). New Zealand can be generally described as a liberal democracy with relatively high levels of inter-group tolerance in terms of religious issues and affiliation. But the policy framework has yet to maintain pace with the rapidly changing ethnic and religious diversity that characterises New Zealand in the twenty-first century.

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