

# New Zealand as a Multireligious Society: Recent Census Figures and Some Relevant Implications

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**Let's face it; we are a religiously diverse nation. Over the years there's been much talk and a lot written about our rising cultural diversity, but the significant increases in the horizontal growth of our faith-based communities are little mentioned. We embrace the multicultural dimensions of New Zealand as we sample the cuisine at ethnic restaurants, take yoga and tai chi classes, and attend cultural functions in our public places. We enjoy the fruits of our increasingly cosmopolitan country and, hopefully, become more tolerant of difference. But is tolerance really enough?**

Historically, we think of ourselves as a nation made up of indigenous Māori and immigrant European and Pacific Islanders. This view, however, is not entirely correct as early migrant populations from non-traditional sources (e.g. China, India) certainly helped to build New Zealand in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These early immigrant groups are not well recognized in the writing of New Zealand's history. More recent waves of immigration from Asia, Africa and South America have significantly altered the Māori-Pākehā landscape of New Zealand. This "new wave" has widened the debate from the bicultural discourse that has dominated New Zealand's identity crises since European arrival, to the more layered and complex multiethnic discussions of today. While debates of biculturalism and indigenous rights must continue, one cannot deny that the new demographic picture of New Zealand in the early 21st century is truly multicultural and multireligious.

As our awareness of cultural diversity increases, some become mindful that our nation is also religiously diverse. But many remain largely unacquainted with this shifting religious landscape. New Buddhist temples and stupas rise where warehouses and wool sheds once stood, varied Hindu temples are consecrated where cows once grazed paddocks, and Muslims from around the world work together to build community mosques in both inner cities and suburbs. These new rounded domes and marbled spires represent triumphs for the new immigrant communities. But how might these architectural contributions enhance the social fabric of New Zealand?

To address the issues it is first necessary to quantify the ethnic and religious diversity of New Zealand resulting from our forward-thinking immigration policies. In order to ascertain trends, I have chosen to portray figures from the last four censuses, beginning in 1991 and ending with the recently released 2006 Census figures. I have chosen 1991 as a starting point in order to portray demographic changes since the implementation of a progressive immigration policy introduced in 1987. Fifteen years is also a reasonable length of time in which to measure population growth.

Table 1: Ethnic Groups in New Zealand, by Percent of Population, 1991-2006

| Ethnic group   | 1991 Census | 1996 Census | 2001 Census | 2006 census |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| European       | 83.2%       | 83.1%       | 80%         | 67.6%       |
| Māori          | 13%         | 15.1%       | 14.7%       | 14.6%       |
| Pacific Island | 5%          | 5.8%        | 6.5%        | 6.9%        |
| Asian          | 3%          | 5%          | 6.6%        | 9.2%        |
| MELAA          | 0.2%        | 0.4%        | 0.7%        | 0.9%        |
| New Zealander  | -           | -           | -           | 11.1%       |
| Other          | 0.01%       | 0.01%       | 0.02%       | 0.04%       |

(Sources for data: Statistics New Zealand Censuses for 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006.)

Notes:

1. Percentages are based upon the 'census usually resident population'.
2. Percentages will not total 100 since individuals are allowed to report more than one ethnic group.
3. MELAA is a new term introduced in the 2006 Census to identify people of Middle Eastern, Latin American and African ethnicity.
4. 'New Zealander' was introduced as a new response option for the 2006 Census. Prior to 2006, 'New Zealander' responses were grouped in the 'Other Ethnicity' category. This would account for the drop in the 'European' category in the 2006 Census.

What is interesting to note here is the significant growth in those reporting Asian ethnicity. Over a 15-year period, this population has more than tripled.

Furthermore, recent projections from Statistics New Zealand for the twenty-year period from 2001 to 2021 (released in 2005) show that Māori, Pacific Island and Asian populations are projected to grow at significantly faster rates than the European population, albeit with smaller numbers. While the projections to 2021 forecast the European population to increase by 5%, the Māori population is projected to increase 29% and the Pacific Island population 59%. However, during this same period Asian populations are forecast to grow a remarkable 145%, a growth rate nearly 30 times that of the European population. These

figures assume the usage of mid-range statistical projections for all estimates, rather than the lower or higher extremes. Of significance is that while Māori and Pacific Island population increases are largely expected to be driven by births, growth in Asian populations over the next two decades is expected to be driven by continued inward migration.

The actual population growth over the previous 15-year period is as follows:

Table 2: Change in Ethnic Groups in New Zealand, by Number, 1991-2006

| Ethnic group   | 1991 Census | 2006 census | % change in since 1991 |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|------------------------|
| European       | 2,783,028   | 2,609,592   | -6.2%                  |
| Māori          | 434,847     | 565,329     | +30%                   |
| Pacific Island | 167,070     | 265,974     | +59%                   |
| Asian          | 99,756      | 354,552     | +255%                  |
| MELAA          | 6,330       | 34,746      | +449%                  |
| New Zealander  | 0           | 429,429     |                        |
| Other          | 270         | 1,494       | +453%                  |

(Sources for data: Statistics New Zealand Censuses for 1991 and 2006)

The drop in the 'European' category can mostly be attributed to the creation of the 'New Zealander' category for the 2006 Census. This skews the percent change figure in both categories. As before, what is important to note from these figures is that new immigrant populations are rising at significantly faster rates than European, Māori and Pacific Island populations.

One result of increasing cultural diversity is the rise in religious diversity. It goes without saying that immigrant populations bring novel cultural practices and different belief systems, but in the New Zealand context this is such a recent occurrence that many of us may not even be aware of the new faith-based communities resulting from inward migration. To understand the changes in religious diversity, let us first look at the Christian denominations since it is our largest single religion.

As a way of comparing changes in the Christian population, I have compared figures from the 1991 with the recently released 2006 Census.

Table 3: Percent Change in Populations of Christian Denominations Since 1991

| Religious Affiliation | 1991 Census | 2006 Census | Population |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|

|                                      | number           | percent    | number           | percent      | change |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------|------------------|--------------|--------|
| Adventist                            | 15,675           | 0.5%       | 16,191           | 0.4%         | +3.3%  |
| Anglican                             | 732,048          | 23%        | 554,925          | 15%          | -24.2% |
| Asian Christian                      | 0                | 0%         | 195              | 0.005%       | +195%  |
| Baptist                              | 70,155           | 2.2%       | 56,913           | 1.5%         | -18.9% |
| Brethren                             | 21,915           | 0.7%       | 19,617           | 0.52%        | -10.5% |
| Catholic                             | 498,612          | 15.6%      | 508,437          | 13.6%        | +2%    |
| Church of Christ                     | 4,842            | 0.15%      | 2,988            | 0.08%        | -38.3% |
| Evangelical                          | 5,169            | 0.16%      | 13,836           | 0.37%        | +168%  |
| Jehovah's Witnesses                  | 19,182           | 0.6%       | 17,910           | 0.48%        | -6.6%  |
| Latter-day Saints                    | 48,009           | 1.5%       | 43,539           | 1.2%         | -9.3%  |
| Lutheran                             | 4,965            | 0.16%      | 4,476            | 0.12%        | -9.8%  |
| Methodist                            | 139,494          | 4.4%       | 121,806          | 3.3%         | -12.7% |
| Orthodox                             | 4,263            | 0.13%      | 13,194           | 0.35%        | +210%  |
| Pentecostal                          | 49,596           | 1.6%       | 79,155           | 2.1%         | +59.6% |
| Presbyterian                         | 553,386          | 17.3%      | 400,839          | 10.7%        | -27.6% |
| Protestant                           | 1,785            | 0.06%      | 3,954            | 0.11%        | +122%  |
| Salvation Army                       | 19,992           | 0.63%      | 11,493           | 0.31%        | -42.5% |
| Uniting/Union Church &<br>Ecumenical | 1,026            | 0.03%      | 1,419            | 0.04%        | +38%   |
| Other Christian                      | 3,276            | 0.1%       | 3,798            | 0.1%         | +16%   |
| Christian nfd                        | 79,317           | 2.5%       | 186,234          | 5%           | +135%  |
| <b>TOTAL CHRISTIAN</b>               | <b>2,272,707</b> | <b>71%</b> | <b>2,027,418</b> | <b>54.2%</b> |        |

(Sources: Statistics New Zealand 1991 and 2006 Censuses.)

Notes:

1. Includes only those who stated a religious affiliation.
2. Prior to the 2001 Census, only a single religious affiliation was collected. From 2001 onwards, up to four responses were collected. Where a person recorded more than one religious affiliation they have been counted in each applicable group.
3. Categories in this table follow the New Zealand Standard Classification of Religious Affiliation 1999 and are used in the tabulation of census results.
4. nfd = not further defined.
5. In the 2006 Census, 'Born Again' and 'Fundamentalist' responses are included in the 'Evangelical' category.
6. All figures are for the census usually resident population.

Here, some general trends are observable. Overall, those reporting adherence to a Christian faith have declined from 71% of the population in 1991 to 54% of the population today. Of the largest denominations, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Latter Day Saints populations are all in decline, albeit at different rates. Other denominations show growing populations (e.g. Catholicism, Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Protestant, Ecumenical), but these increases may be a result of changes to the way in which particular denominations may have been classified or grouped together (e.g. Ecumenical, Evangelical, Born Again and Fundamentalist classifications) or perhaps as a result of increased immigration (e.g. Catholicism, Orthodox). Where actual population numbers are small, percent changes may be difficult to compare with larger groups. In the larger picture of reported faiths, population changes in religious affiliation since 1991 are as follows:

Table 4: Population Change in Religious Affiliation Since 1991

| Religious Affiliation | 1991 Census |         | 2006 Census |         | Population change |
|-----------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|-------------------|
|                       | number      | percent | number      | percent |                   |
| Buddhist              | 12,762      | 0.4%    | 52,362      | 1.4%    | +311%             |
| Christian             | 2,272,707   | 71%     | 2,027,418   | 54.2%   | -11%              |
| Hindu                 | 18,036      | 0.6%    | 64,392      | 1.7%    | +257%             |
| Islam                 | 6,096       | 0.2%    | 36,072      | 1%      | +492%             |
| Judaism               | 3,126       | 0.1%    | 6,858       | 0.2%    | +119%             |
| Maori Christian       | 56,055      | 1.8%    | 65,550      | 1.8%    | +17%              |
| Spiritualism/New Age  | 5,196       | 0.2%    | 19,800      | 0.5%    | +281%             |

|                         |         |       |           |        |               |
|-------------------------|---------|-------|-----------|--------|---------------|
| Baha'i                  | 2,865   | 0.09% | 2,772     | 0.07%  | -3%           |
| Chinese religions       | 327     | 0.01% | 912       | 0.02%  | +179%         |
| Jainism                 | 0       | 0%    | 111       | 0.003% | +111%         |
| Japanese religions      | 0       | 0%    | 384       | 0.01%  | +384%         |
| Māori religions         | 318     | 0.01% | 2,412     | 0.06%  | +658%         |
| Sikh                    | 2,061   | 0.06% | 9,507     | 0.25%  | +361%         |
| Theism                  | 0       | 0%    | 2,202     | 0.06%  | +2,202%       |
| Zoroastrianism          | 0       | 0%    | 1,071     | 0.03%  | +1,071%       |
| Unification Church      | 0       | 0%    | 105       | 0.003% | +105%         |
| Other (nfd)             | 0       | 0%    | 4,830     | 0.1%   | +4,830%       |
| Other (nec)             | 14,298  | 0.45% | 258       | 0.007% | -98%          |
| No religion             | 670,455 | 21%   | 1,297,104 | 34.6%  | +93%          |
| Don't know              | 0       | 0%    | 1,743     | 0.05%  | +1,743%       |
| Object to answering     | 251,709 | 7.9%  | 242,610   | 6.5%   | -3.6%         |
| Religion unidentifiable | 0       | 0%    | 10,653    | 0.28%  | +10,653%      |
| Response outside scope  | 0       | 0%    | 30,945    | 0.83%  | +30,945%      |
| Not stated              | 0       | 0%    | 249,711   | 6.7%   | +249,711<br>% |

(Sources: Statistics New Zealand 1991 and 2006 Censuses.)

Notes:

1. All figures are for the census usually resident population.
2. nfd = not further defined; nec = not elsewhere classifiable

Where responses for individual faiths are small (i.e. less than 1% of the total usually resident population), comparisons of percent growth in populations may be problematic, especially where particular categories didn't exist in earlier censuses (e.g. 'Theism', 'Zoroastrianism') or where the classification of particular groups has changed (e.g. 'Other nec'). As before, there are some general trends. While there has been an overall decrease in the numbers of respondents stating adherence to a Christian denomination (a decrease of 11% since 1991), other religions with significant populations are showing substantial gains. Most significant of these population increases over the last 15 years are the growth of Buddhism (+311%), Hinduism (+257%), and Islam (+492%). Percentage changes in populations of other religions with exceedingly small numbers (e.g. those with total populations of less than 5000 adherents (e.g. Baha'i,

Zoroastrian, Jain) are usually difficult to compare with larger denominations as one must take into account the relatively small numbers of followers.

Of considerable interest is the rise of those reporting 'No Religion', with numbers nearly doubling over the past 15 years to where about 1.3 million people, nearly 35% of the New Zealand population, now report no religious affiliation at all. This comprises the largest single category of respondents after Christianity. It should be noted that New Zealand also has one of the highest incidences of 'No religion' responses in the western world. Within an emerging multireligious context, it is especially important to view these respondents as having a belief system that is as equally valid as those that choose adherence to more traditional faith-based beliefs. The absence of religious belief may simply indicate the conscious choice of an individual or group to pursue the principles of an alternate belief system. This might imply a deep conviction in the principles of science, awe of the natural world, or adherence to atheism, agnosticism, humanism, rationalism, or any one of many such moral and/or ethical philosophical ideals.

Numbers of those stating 'Object to answering' appear to be dropping slightly over the same period. This may be a response to the increasing options one now has for reporting religious affiliation or non-affiliation or it may be evidence of a growing sense of comfort about one's beliefs, i.e. the fear of discrimination on the basis of religion may actually be decreasing. Either way, responses of this nature might simply imply that religion is a personal matter not to be divulged, or that it is not the business of government to pry into one's personal life. It is interesting to note however that the number of respondents in this category is larger than the sum of all the non-Christian religions combined, or roughly 6.5% of the total population.

'Religion Unidentifiable' is an interesting classification. According to Statistics New Zealand's 'Glossary and References' for religious affiliation<sup>1</sup>, 'Religion unidentifiable' refers to a response where "it is unclear what the meaning or intent of the response is – this most commonly occurs when the response being classified contains insufficient detail, is ambiguous or vague." It also states that contradictory responses, e.g. where both 'yes' and 'no' boxes may be ticked, are placed in this category. Furthermore, if the response is "clear and seemingly [falls] within the scope of the classification but cannot be coded because no suitable option...exists in the classification or codefile" (particularly if there is no other residual category that applies, like 'not elsewhere classifiable' or 'not further defined'), then the response is placed in this category. Over 10,000 responses were eventually grouped into this category by Statistics New Zealand and possibly includes a variety of nonsensical responses, a few megalomaniacs, and lots of people with bad handwriting.

The 'Religion outside scope' category is also of particular interest. Statistics New Zealand's 'Glossary and References' for religious affiliation states that "this category is used for responses that are positively identified (i.e. the meaning and the intent are clear) but which clearly fall outside the scope of the classification/topic as defined in the standard." Though Statistics New Zealand provides no examples in its definition, this classification addresses our nation's light-sabre wielding Jedi Knights, along with other such similar rejoinders. In 2001, some respondents recorded a protest vote by recording 'Jedi' as their religion of choice. Reporter Alan Perrott wrote in the New Zealand Herald (31 August 2001) that 53,715 New Zealanders had recorded 'Jedi' in the 2001 Census. If these numbers are correct then there were more believers in "The Force" than either adherents of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism for the same year. This phenomenon was also widely reported in Australia (where the Australian Bureau of Statistics issued an official press release on 2 May 2001<sup>2</sup>), as well as in Canada and the UK. Back at home, Perrott reported that a spokesperson for Statistics New Zealand informed him that the 'Jedi' response was

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1 available from < [www.stats.govt.nz/statistical-methods/statistical-standards/religious-affiliation/glossary-and-references.htm](http://www.stats.govt.nz/statistical-methods/statistical-standards/religious-affiliation/glossary-and-references.htm)>, accessed 20 April 2007.

2 <[www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3110124.NSF/0/86429d11c45d4e73ca256a400006af80?OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3110124.NSF/0/86429d11c45d4e73ca256a400006af80?OpenDocument)> accessed 20 April 2007.

assigned the same category as such comparable replies as 'the Church of Elvis,' 'rugby,' 'racing' and 'beer'; that is, they were all lumped together as "responses deemed outside the scope of recognized religions." One can only assume that these types of responses occur in the 2006 Census and that these continue to be reported as 'Religion outside scope'. The recently released 2006 Census figures place nearly 31,000 people in this category. It is relevant to point out that responses of this type have no effect on classification and there is no magic number used to obtain officially recognized status. The words 'Church of Elvis' will never appear on a census form no matter how many responses are received.

It is clear then that there is not only an increase in the number of adherents to an increased diversity of faiths, but there is also an increase in the diversity of faiths themselves. With the degree of our religious diversity established and observable trends identified, we can now focus on the extent of our religious literacy. Like most places, we are essentially a religiously illiterate nation. We may know about our own beliefs, but how much do we really understand about the religions of our neighbours? There is often a lack of understanding about other religions and their forms of practice. In terms of cohesive social policies, religious literacy should be as important a measure of our internal security as are health, education and the unemployment rate. A better understanding of and appreciation for all faith communities may have a positive impact on our race relations. Both as individuals and as members of our larger congregations it is imperative that we devote more attention to understanding the beliefs and practices of our other faiths. This does not mean we must alter our own forms of worship; rather, we need to move to a place beyond mere tolerance of other beliefs into a realm diffused with a deeper understanding of the world's religions.

How are we to do this? Individually, we can begin to gain a better appreciation through a brief personal study of comparative religion. There is much literature that can provide insight into other faiths. Another example is to experience what others do in their places of worship. A friend, neighbour or workmate of different faith can take you to their respective place of worship. These are only two ways to increase individual understanding of other religions and there are countless more. Collectively, our faith communities need to be more actively engaged in interfaith dialogues—active in the sense of promotion and deep connection. For instance, when a single faith reaches out and says "Come join us on our open day" (Islam Awareness Week is one such example), other faith communities must not ignore the appeal—they should respond in kind and organize their members to attend. Multicultural curricula and the teaching about (not of) other religions needs to be a greater part of the classroom experience as teaching understanding, acceptance and respect to children helps build a more tolerant society. These types of activities may motivate us to discard the status quo of indifference in favour of a more practical and appropriate form of active engagement that's worthy of our nascent multicultural and multireligious status.

By now we should know that sustaining solidarity in a culturally and religiously diverse population is one of the foremost challenges facing nation-states today. As inward migration increases, many countries grapple with increasing discrimination, ethnic tensions, racism and violence, while simultaneously struggling to improve health, education, employment and immigration policies that stimulate social cohesion. A robust, culturally diverse population and the freedom of belief can therefore be strong indicators of a nation's internal security. Fostering public policies in support of these initiatives is therefore of utmost importance. Moving beyond mere tolerance of difference and into a sphere of active engagement is not only urgent, but also increasingly vital in today's global social climate as New Zealand manages the myriad issues arising from recent immigration and the continued growth of its cultural and religious diversity. Let's hope that we're up to the challenge.

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