



Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand

Professor Paul Morris

Religious Studies, Victoria University of Wellington

Address at the National Interfaith Forum, Hamilton, New Zealand

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TOWARDS A NATIONAL STATEMENT ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY:

Rationale and Background:

The idea for a National Statement on Religious Diversity formed part of the recommendations of the New Zealand Interfaith Delegation upon its return from Yogyakarta in December 2004 in response to religious conflict in our region and around the world. The initial rationale was fourfold:

- (1) The idea of a 'National Statement' was that it would not originate from government and be mandated from above, as it were, rather it would arise as a result of broad discussions among faith and interfaith groups and the wider New Zealand public.
- (2) Around our region there are many instances of religious discrimination and the religious rights of citizens are often not clear, particularly for minority groups. It was felt that our religious rights as New Zealanders, within the framework of democracy and the law, should be articulated alongside the associated responsibilities.
- (3) That while religious diversity was not new in itself, there is a new consciousness of the religious lives of others and religious diversity is increasingly part of our everyday lives in our communities, schools, and workplaces. In many countries this increased diversity has led to conflict, discord and even violence. It was hoped that our responses to New Zealand's radically changing religious demography would be more positive and provide a framework for different religious and other communities to live together in a state of relatively peaceful coexistence.
- (4) That when religious issues did arise (the 'cartoon controversy', the *burqa* affair, the wearing of the *hijāb*, requests for prayer times, religious holidays and the provision of services or facilities) the National Statement would provide a starting point for discussions and offer guidance.

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



Process:

In August last year a draft National Statement was discussed at the Interfaith Forum in Wellington, as part of the Diversity Action Forum. There was wide support for the draft and a Reference Group was established to revise the Statement in the light of the responses and subsequent discussion. The Ministry of Social Development supported the work of this group. The Human Rights Commission undertook the process of consultation with responses called for from around the country by December 15, 2006. My purpose today is to report back on that consultation and to present an analysis of the responses.

Consultation:

Public forums were held around the country, including in Christchurch, Dunedin, Levin, Hamilton, Porirua, Auckland, Wellington and Rotorua. I attended the very different Wellington and Levin meetings and many of you here were at the Wellington Diversity Forum and attended and helped organise these meetings around the country. The Wellington meeting included rationalists, humanists and a Sea of Faith Christian humanist; Buddhists and Bahá'í; Hindus and Muslims; Jews and Sikhs; Māori, both Ratana and Anglican; Unificationists and Latter-Day Saints; and Exclusive Brethren and others.

It was a wonderful meeting with discussions and debates about the place of the Treaty of Waitangi in the document, whether New Zealand is or is not a Christian country, the content of school education about religion and what might constitute 'reasonable steps' in meeting religious demands at work. Other concerns voiced were religious coercion, women's rights, and individual rights for members of faith groups. The meeting at Levin was very different with a variety of different Christians present – the mayor apologised for not being able to rustle up a single non-Christian – again the debate was full on and focussed on immigration, relationships between the churches and between the churches and the state.

The Dunedin consultation included representatives from the Anglicans, the University chaplaincy, Presbyterians, Buddhists, Arya Samāj, Baptists, Catholics, Orthodox, Bahá'í, Jews, Methodists, Combined Community Church, Hindus, Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostal-Elim, Hare Krishnas, local Māori, the Brotherhood of Humanity, Quakers, Qi gong Taoists, Brahma Kumāris and Coptic Christians, along with the City

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



Council and Problem Gambling, and Dunedin Multi-Ethnic Council. Their collective submission was supportive, thoughtful and made a number of useful suggestions that have found their way into the revised statement. Reading the reports and submissions the regional forums were successful and of value to those who attended as well as to the process as a whole.

The responses have been excellent both in terms of the numbers and the wide array of respondents and in terms of the generally high level of the submissions. The issues raised by the draft National Statement do resonate with the public and are of considerable concern and interest to many New Zealanders. They continue to arrive including two over this last weekend. The issue of religious rights, the religious nature of our country and our religious responsibilities are all too rarely debated and discussed and this became an opportunity to do so. The wide range of responses included the Catholics Bishops' Conference, replies from representatives and members of all the major churches, including the Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Quakers. Then there were responses from Bahá'í, Buddhists, Hindus, Jewish responses, Muslim submissions and groups such as the PPTA, the National School Trustees Association, the Council of Women, The Christian Education Commission, Vision Network New Zealand and Destiny Church. Some were short and confined themselves to a single point and others ran for pages and pages. Taken as a whole, the responses reflect the views of more than 600 people as well as a number of large national organisations.

There was also a meeting with officials from different government ministries and departments following their meeting to discuss the draft national Statement.

The process itself, in bringing together different people to discuss these issues for what for many was the first time, is so far its greatest success and in my view may well be as important as the National Statement itself. We often think that we are a secular country where there is little concern about religion but reading the submissions would dissuade you of this and instead make you think of New Zealand as a place where religion is debated in public in a serious fashion by informed and articulate atheists, agnostics and believers of all stripes.

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



Analysis:

Generally speaking there was wide support for the Statement and for almost all of the content in the draft. Before looking at the responses in some detail, it is clear that a number of the respondents and commentators did not grasp the nature of the draft statement. There were two principal misunderstandings. First, a minority were concerned that the National Statement on Religious Diversity was a new law to be enacted and binding on all New Zealanders. Of course, this is not the case but this was obviously not made as clear as it might have been and it should have been further stressed that the Statement is the beginning of a dialogue about religious diversity, *a process rather than an end in itself*. As you know, the plan is to discuss the revised Statement here today with the aim of reporting back to the third Regional Interfaith Dialogue to be held in Waitangi in May this year. Associated with this first misunderstanding was the minority view that the NSRD was designed to somehow give the government new controls over religions in New Zealand.

Secondly, what I refer to as the new context for religious diversity, was not appreciated or understood. I deliberately began today's paper with this new context. I consider that this view is supported by overseas examples and our own census (see below).

To the consultation itself: A small number of responses advocated dropping the whole process as the negative answer as to why we need it at all. A minority of respondents wanted to know what the NSRD would add to existing legislation, and again if nothing, then why proceed. Most respondents, in terms of the new context of religious diversity and some of the negative overseas models for dealing with religious diversity or failing to do, appreciated the point of the whole.

A large number of submissions argued that the normative and prescriptive tone of the draft was unhelpful and undermined what they understood as the potential importance of the document. They suggested that 'shall' should be replaced by 'will' and 'should' and thus the National Statement would have a more aspirational tone. I am fully persuaded by this argument and it was supported by the Reference Group. A number of responses questioned whether the terms 'faith group,' 'faith,' 'belief,' 'religious community' and 'religion' had different meanings or are simple synonyms or alternatives. We had used 'belief' as in United Nation's

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



documents in contrast to 'faith,' as in 'ethical belief', referring to non-religious belief. The number of responses that raised this indicates that this terminology is not well known and we have changed this.

Submissions from the rationalist/humanist minority, in terms of the total responses, contended that the non-religious were not given equal place or significant as believers. The Reference Group discussed this concern and it was decided that the Statement should be inclusive of the non – religious although it was noted that this was a statement on religious diversity not on everyone and the focus was necessarily on the religious communities.

There were a number of suggestions for additional clauses. There was support for the right to religion to include the right to propagate one's religious beliefs to others with some arguing that this was a fundamental religious right. Again, the RG were happy to include this. There was support for religious communities to have responsibilities as well as rights, in particular the responsibility 'to build and maintain positive relationships' with other faith communities and to promote 'mutual respect and understanding' and this has been included.

There were concerns from a number of respondents about 'extreme' religious 'cults' and the limits of tolerance or respect. We considered that this was addressed by the rubric, 'under the law' and this, of course, applies to all religious groups. Likewise, the issue of coercion and religious groups restricting the rights of members, especially women and children, falls under existing legislation.

It is impossible to meet all the demands and suggestions for changes, as many of them are mutually exclusive and some contradictory. We received responses that supported the use of 'tolerance' but not 'respect' on the grounds that, as one self-designated atheist put it, 'I cannot respect irrational beliefs.' Another respondent argued exactly the opposite and considered that tolerance was offensive and that respect was required.

The Prologue was generally supported, in particular the Treaty reference. A small number of Christian submissions considered that the paragraph on Christianity was not forceful enough and was too historical, many other expressed satisfaction at the recognition of the special role of

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



Christianity in our history and national life. One submission included a list of forty examples of special Christian privilege.

The phrase, 'reaffirmation of our national commitment to religious diversity' was thought to be problematic by a small number of respondents and has been amended. It was advocated by a number of submissions that New Zealand legislation be included alongside the international treaties mentioned in the fifth paragraph. This has been done.

Finally, there were a very small number of people who were very suspicious of the term 'diversity.' One person was anxious that it was an ideological term that masked an anti-religious viewpoint. In the document we use 'diversity' to simply refer to the fact of there being different faiths. This is consistent with the scholarly literature where 'pluralism' is sometimes used to refer to a positive evaluation of the fact of religious diversity.

Let us now look briefly at each of the eight numbered 'clauses' in turn:

(1) The State and Religion:

This clause was subjected to a great deal of comment. A number of minority religious groups objected to the claim that the State did in fact deal with all faiths equally and highlighted the ways in which Christianity plays a privileged role in our national life. The RG considered this and it was decided that this should be reworded as an aspiration. There were a small number of responses including Vision Network New Zealand and Destiny Church who understood Christianity to be the state religion of New Zealand. Most respondents supported the view expressed in the draft although some called for a stronger statement along the lines of referring to New Zealand as a 'secular' state. Suggestions included replacing 'state religion' with established religion. While it is clear that New Zealand does not have a state religion like the Scandinavian countries or a number of Muslim majority countries nor an established religion like Anglicanism in England, some argued that as the Queen of England is Head of the Church of England and Head of State and is as well Queen of New Zealand, Christianity is a state religion. One respondent propounded this case in relation to the Queen of England being the Head of the Commonwealth, which would make India, a country with more than

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



one billion Hindus and over one hundred million Muslims a Christian country! Further, those that consider Christianity to be the state religion do not want it to be treated equally with other faiths, as this would undercut its especial status.

The revised version reads:

(1) The State seeks to treat all faith communities and those who profess no religion equally before the law. New Zealand has no state religion.

(2) The Right to Religion

There was widespread support from the religious communities and many individual respondents for this clause. Non-religious submissions called for the inclusion of non-religious belief too under this heading, including one who wanted an equal right to have no religion. Many respondents found it useful to have the right to religion clearly articulated. 'Other belief' refers to non-religious beliefs that have the same protection under the law.

The revised version reads:

(2) New Zealand upholds the right to freedom of religion and belief and the right to freedom from discrimination on the grounds of religious or other belief.

(3) The Right to Safety

The feedback on this third clause indicates a clear demarcation line between the migrant and minority religious communities and the mainstream church and Christian responses. Minority communities reported experience with vandalism and damage to places of worship and of issues concerned with personal safety. The clause has been extended to reflect these concerns with 'security of person and property'. Other responses felt that existing laws covered this and every New Zealander has these rights but that no special rights should be accorded to communities. The RG discussed this issue and decided that 'and their members be added' to accommodate this individual right but to keep the clause as it reflects the concerns about safety and security of a number of religious communities.

The revised version reads:

(3) Faith communities and their members have a right to the safety and security of their person and property.

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



(4) The Right of Freedom of Expression

Respondents were anxious about the policing of this and who would be in a position to determine 'responsibility.' There was support for media freedom being balanced with a higher degree of media accountability. References were made to the South Park episode and the Danish cartoon controversy and their publication here. The clause was intended to cover the right of religious people to express themselves and of press freedom. A number of respondents considered that the framework of accountability should extend across a range of media. This was changed accordingly. The final sentence was shortened and rendered aspirational.

The revised version reads:

(4) The right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media are vital for democracy, but should be exercised with responsibility.

(5) Recognition and Accommodation

Respondents were concerned about requests for time off work or school, or expensive demands for special facilities or services and as to what constitutes 'reasonable.' The 'reasonable steps' and 'reasonable accommodation' are taken from existing New Zealand legislation. There was an interesting exchange at the Wellington consultative meeting when a businessman and rationalist voiced his fears that much of the workday would be lost if people who wanted to pray five times were 'accommodated.' A Muslim responded by reporting that he did have three eight minutes periods off each working shift in order to say his prayers and then returned the time by working part of his lunch break. This is clearly to be based on real demand and each case to be decided on its merits and context.

The revised version reads:

(5) Reasonable steps should be taken in educational and work environments and in the delivery of public services to recognise and accommodate diverse religious beliefs and practices.

(6) Education

This clause caused difficulties in both religious and non-religious submissions. The difference between religious instruction as part of formation in faith and learning about religions in the context of the humanities and social sciences was not fully appreciated by a number

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



of respondents. Religious Studies is compulsory in English schools but does not take the form of religious instruction within a particular faith. Even religious schools are required to teach about other faiths and the majority of English school pupils learn about the major religious traditions. Most respondents saw great value in students here learning about the faiths of their fellow New Zealanders and of the faiths of our nearest Asian neighbours. It is important that such teaching (it already takes place in six New Zealand universities) reflect accurately the faiths being taught and is unpartisan in relation to different denominations and tendencies within a faith. One person expressed the view that 'religion had no more place in schools than any other casual subject such as tap dancing or train spotting.' This of course fails to understand the significance of religion to its adherents or its importance in the world we live in.

The point was made that in New Zealand's integrated schools it would be inappropriate to learn about and understand other faiths, on the contrary it is just as vital if not more so in the integrated school sector than in state schools. Integrated schools would still have religious instruction for faith formation but this is quite different from religious studies. In fact, when I attended the NZQA advisory group meetings looking at religious studies syllabuses it was the Catholic and Anglican schools that had the best programmes of study about other faiths.

It is important as was indicated in a number of submissions that religious studies in a school should resonate and reflect the community of which the school is a part. Finally, in 'an impartial manner' caused a number of difficulties and it was decided by the RG to drop this.

A number of respondents referred to the 1877 Education Act and understood this to prohibit teaching of religions in primary schools but it does not, of course, relate to teaching about religion at all.

The revised version reads:

(6) Schools should teach an understanding of the diversity of religious and spiritual traditions in a manner that reflects the community of which the school is a part.

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



(7) Religious Differences

This was felt by some to be overly negative and it has been represented in a more positive way. Religious diversity is about real differences between people in terms of their values and what they hold to be most important. These deeply held differences will inevitably lead to further tensions within faith communities, between faith communities and between faith communities and those who hold non-religious values. If we cannot stop these differences from occurring it is vital that we do what we can to prevent the descent of disputes into violence and breaches of the law.

The revised version reads:

(7) Debate and disagreement about religious beliefs within faith communities and beyond, will occur and should be exercised within the rule of law and without resort to violence.

(8) Cooperation and understanding

This clause was warmly received except by a minority who were concerned about the role of the government in relation to religious communities. There were submissions debating the merits of 'tolerance' over 'mutual respect' and it was here the RG considered was the appropriate place to delineate the responsibilities of faith communities in relation to government and each other.

The revised version reads:

(8) Government and faith communities have a responsibility to build and maintain positive relationships with each other, and to promote mutual respect and understanding.

It is worth referring to the 2006 Census figures on religion as these appeared after the consultation had ended and serves to reinforce a number of the issues that were raised in relation to the National Statement. The figures recently released show that Christians form a majority at approximately 52% of the nation and this includes, of course, the full spectrum of churches and Christians from the most conservative to the most liberal. When taken as a whole, Christianity is still by far the largest faith. It is significant, however, that of the three largest churches only the Roman Catholics (14.3%) show an increase in the last five years, 508,812 up from 486,015. Anglicans, now 15.7% of the population, and Presbyterians (14.3%) have decreased by nearly 62,000 since 2001. Other

Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand



Christians include 1.4% Ratana, 1.2% LDS, and 0.1% Exclusive Brethren. Hindus are now the largest and fastest growing non-Christian religious group (1.8%) up to 64,557 from 39,867, while Sikhs are up from 5,199 to 95,07. Buddhists are up from 41,661 to 52,392. The Muslim community is now at 1% and numbers 36,150, up from a 2001 figure of 23,634. The total non-Christian sector numbers roughly 200,000 and 0.2% of the population is Jewish.

These figures must, of course, be seen alongside the 1.29 million or 37% of the population who have 'no religion.' In summary, the Christian majority is shrinking and the non-Christian religions are increasing dramatically but not by as much as the loss in Christian numbers. Non-religious numbers are on the rise. The figures raise issues about the role of Christianity and the other religions in our national life and the trends perhaps reinforce the need for us to consider the questions that lie behind the National Statement.

The consultation has been a fascinating experience and unique insight into the religious ideas and concerns of New Zealanders. Most of us it seems are liberal in our orientation and exhibit openness to those of other faiths or none. A minority are less willing to follow this path and consider that either we err in being too liberal or are mistaken in taking faiths seriously at all. The underlying position of the Statement is a simple one. If we want to exercise our right to religion we need to afford that right equally to others. That is, *our rights are dependent upon others having the same rights.*

Finally, after reading the submissions, it is important to note that this is not a theological document debating the relative or absolute merits of one religion over another although some of the respondents took this view. The document is pragmatically concerned with improving how we as different communities can and do live together peacefully. I believe that we can do this without compromising our integrity or unique religious identities. We can do it well or we can do it badly. We can think about it now or take our chances.

We, and our children, are going to have to live together in the future in an increasingly religiously diverse New Zealand. We can do this positively or we can mirror some of the difficulties that face other religiously diverse



Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand

nations where a strict ideology of the separation of church and state or where members of minority faiths are marginalised has led to violent clashes, court cases and draconian legislation restricting the right to religion. We have an opportunity at this time to think forward and create a framework for a forward looking religiously diverse small nation in the South Pacific and I consider the National Statement on Religious Diversity to be a small but significant step forward in this positive direction. Finally, we have the opportunity of working together as the faith communities of New Zealand on a concrete project for all our futures.

Paul Morris
19 February 2007
Hamilton, New Zealand

For more information contact:

Jocelyn Armstrong, Chair
Religious Diversity Centre Trust
religiousdiversitytrust @ gmail.com, 027-521-4367

Todd Nachowitz, PhD
Centre Establishment Coordinator, Religious Diversity Centre
Lecturer, Studies in Religion, University of Waikato
toddnach @ waikato.ac.nz, 027-432-7590

Postal:
Religious Diversity Centre
University of Otago House
PO Box 5543
Auckland 1141
New Zealand

Physical:
Religious Diversity Centre
University of Otago House, Room 4.06
385 Queen Street
Auckland 1010
New Zealand