



Religious Diversity Centre

Aotearoa New Zealand

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Welcome to the launch of the Religious Diversity Centre in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What is religious diversity? It is used by scholars, adherents and commentators in two distinct ways and it's important to distinguish them. Firstly, it is used descriptively, that is, religious diversity is simply the fact of different religious and non-religious communities. So reflecting our Census realities, New Zealand is a religiously and culturally diverse nation. I'll return to how diverse and the trends in just a moment.

The second way in which religious diversity is used is normatively, that is, the fact of religious diversity is understood to be a good or desirable thing. When we are called on to "celebrate" our religious diversity, this is a normative usage. The research on religious diversity is much more problematic than we might imagine and the value of religious diversity to a particular society is not just a given good but has to be consciously and positively developed. Where the positive values of religious diversity are not developed, diversity can be a threat or challenge to social cohesion and social solidarity rather than being something to celebrate. But when and where the fact of religious diversity is the basis for conscious development, religious diversity turns out to be an enormous positive resource for social harmony and cohesion.

Our New Zealand religious, ethnic and cultural diversities are advanced, we might call it hyper-diversity where ethnicity and immigration patterns intersect with religion to generate a complex map of solidarities, values and global connectedness. But how diverse are we? The Pew Research Centre's recent report "The Global Religious Landscape" is an analysis of national census and demographic data from more than 200 countries and territories to create a database and develop a "Religious Diversity Index" (this is a version of the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index commonly used in environmental and business studies to measure the degree of ecological diversity or market concentration). The main difference is that

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Religious Diversity Index scores are inverted so that higher scores indicate higher diversity. The 10 point scale Religious Diversity Index is divided into four ranges: 7.0+ (top 5%) have a “very high” degree of religious diversity. Countries 5.3 to 6.9 (the next highest 15%) have a “high” level of diversity. Scores 3.1 to 5.2 (the following 20% of scores) indicate “moderate” diversity, while the rest have “low” diversity. The scores are based on the percentage of the population that belong to the world’s largest religious categories: Buddhists, Christians, folk religions, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, other religions considered as a group, and the religiously unaffiliated.

The results for the 232 countries and territories are interesting. The US for example – so often regarded as having a high level of religious diversity actually has a score of 4.1 and is thus placed 68th out of 232. The US has 95% of its population as being either Christian or religiously unaffiliated while the percentage of all other faiths is less than 5%. Again the UK with a score of 5.1 and in spite of oft repeated claims of high religious diversity is actually only moderately diverse. In fact, six of the twelve most highly religiously diverse countries are in our own Asia-Pacific region (Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea, China and Hong Kong).

New Zealand’s 6.2 score makes us the 19th out of the 232 most religiously diverse places, just below Japan and Malaysia and just above France and Nigeria. We are considerably more diverse than Australia, Belgium, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Sweden, Germany, Canada and much more so than Russia Israel, US, India, Spain and Indonesia.

And the trends? In the 1961 New Zealand Census, approximately 90% declared themselves Christian; that figure in 2013 is now around 50%; the number for the non-religious was less than 5.5% and is now getting towards 40%. Regional differences too – we’re here today in “Wellington where more than 45% of those under 45 declare ‘no religion,’ unlike less than 30% in “godly” Auckland! This huge transition is what I call the “new religious diversity.” Christians in 1961 were 93% European and 7% Māori. In 2016, New Zealand’s Christians are from the Pacific Islands, Australia, South Africa, the UK, South America, Korea, Taiwan and the Middle East. That is, the diversity is intra-religious as well as inter-religious. In 1961 there were tiny Jewish, Muslim and Hindu communities. Now there are sizeable Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh

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communities and a nearly a quarter of a million members of non-Christian religions.

Our religious landscape has changed almost beyond recognition. We are becoming ever more religiously, linguistically and culturally diverse as a nation. The new religious diversity reflects both an increasing 'no-religion' sector (although these 'nones' are often deinstitutionalised religiously but in studies, few are Dawkins-type atheists and many claim to be spiritual and often interested in religious issues) alongside this there is evidence that these adherents of religious communities are registering greater commitment.

In 1990 I attended the first meeting of what was to become the Wellington Interfaith Council. I can see some of you here today. The meeting was called to address the issue of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and to foster more positive relationships with the Muslim community. Since then successful and enduring interfaith councils and networks have been established across the country fostering meetings between people of different faith groups and these have allowed for robust relationships to develop at the individual and communal levels; for communities to get to know each other and support each other when one is faced when threatened; and to collectively address matters of shared concern. This critical mass, while highlighting that tolerance and respect are vital, we now need to do something more – the next development.

The new Religious Diversity Centre (RDC) is not designed to replicate the existing interfaith networks but to do something as yet not being systematically undertaken. Why does increasing religious and cultural diversity matter? Religion, which sometimes seems to bring out the very best and worst in people, reflects people's deepest hopes and aspirations, values and commitments, perceptions of security and safety, community and values. Values and commitments that are brought into the individual and communal lives of religious (and non-religious) New Zealanders. Religious diversity impacts on education, health outcomes, in the workplace, on public moral debates, on global linkages and solidarities, on our sense of ourselves. Religious affiliation makes significant differences in people lives that need to be reflected in our local and national policies. Recent work in my department based on the NZAVS survey data for example: members of religious communities are more likely to be open to, and less negative about, those of other faiths than those who do not identify with a religious group. At every level from charitable donations and volunteering to statutory welfare requirements, educational needs, and community building, perception so safety and

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security, and social and community values, religion is a vital ingredient that needs to both recognised and understood. Just as an aside it is the case that religious people are also happier than their secular counterparts!

The EU president recently acknowledged that interreligious and intercultural understanding was at the very top of the 2016 EU agenda along with the related migration and Euro crises. Heiner Bielefeldt, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, insists: “It is the responsibility of the Government to take the lead in developing a more inclusive understanding of national identity.” We need to develop a more inclusive understanding of New Zealand national identity that reflects our bicultural heritage and increasing religious diversities. As Bielefeldt stresses, every nation’s priorities should include “preventing feelings of stigmatization and exclusion among religious minorities” and most importantly “working for more mutual understanding between different religious and non-religious groups and currents in the society.”

Simply, we cannot understand our society without understanding the role that religion plays in our historical and present populations, that is, understand our past and present religious diversity.

What the Religious Diversity Centre will do:

The RDC will firstly engage in new and cutting edge research on religious diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are fortunate in New Zealand in having excellent data bases both historical, longitudinal and contemporary that will increase our understanding of our religious diversity and its implications for our society and all New Zealanders. We will build existing links between the Centre and the leading international religious diversity research centres such as Pew and the Centre for Religious Diversity at the University of Ottawa. We are focussed on research on impact on New Zealand society of our increasing religious diversity. In addition we will give a public voice to those religious minority communities that are part of our national community.

Secondly, this research will inform and undergird our contribution to informed and evidence-based policy recommendations and expert advice based on our unique bicultural and religious diversity context and the best international benchmarking. This will allow our religious diversity to be positively and effectively reflected in our local and national policies, and in our media.



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Thirdly, the Centre will offer high quality religious diversity training and resources for professional training for companies, local and national agencies, unions, media organisations and others. The Centre will also offer educational opportunity in religious diversity for teachers, students, and the general public.

Fourthly, the Centre will work closely with religious communities and interfaith networks engaging them in their research networks and involving them in professional training, and most importantly in promoting inter and intra religious dialogue and co-operation.

Lastly, the Centre will be in a position to offer independent, accurate and informed public comment on issues of religion and religious diversity in the media and more generally in the public sphere.

I want to end by thanking Lloyd Morris, no relation, of Hamilton, the first major donor of the RDC and we hope the first of very many others, for his support of this launch and the Centre, and to try and convey something of how exciting this development is as the first national centre for religious diversity and of the potential significance of its contribution.

Thank you.

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