

The 21st century spirituality revolution: Are there implications for migrants?

John Raeburn

According to some pundits, the West is in the throes of a 'spirituality revolution'. Certainly, over the past 40 years, there have been dramatic declines in attendances at places of worship, and also in those claiming any sort of religious affiliation.

Regular attendance is typically defined as weekly. Most Western countries are down to under 10% of the population who are regulars, compared with figures up to 90% in previous decades. Sweden is allegedly down to 2% and Australia, New Zealand and the UK are all around 7 to 8%. Canada is an exception at 18%, with primarily Catholic Quebec going from 88% in the 1950s to 20% today.¹ The US supposedly is supposedly bucking the trends, with most opinion surveys still showing 40% regular attendance. However, the American attendance rates are generally thought to be overstated in surveys (as are self-reported number of sexual partners and amounts given to charity), and the real figures are probably more like 20%.² Regardless of the actual figures, there have been major declines almost everywhere in the West from

the 1950s and 60s, and these declines have accelerated markedly since the 1990s.

The numbers of those giving a religious affiliation (when, say, asked in a census) are declining more slowly – people tend to provide their 'natal religion' more or less out of habit. Also, stopping going to church, synagogue, temple, mosque, etc does not mean someone has rejected their religion – just that it has become less important, or is practiced outside the formal institutions. Whatever, 'old time religion' in the West is in major change and decline. One expert has predicted the demise of Christianity in the UK by 2030.³ In New Zealand, a leading theologian recently asked if we were heading towards a 'churchless' society.⁴

Some say these declines are being offset by a growth in fundamentalism. However, we tend to be misled by the disproportionate publicity given to fundamentalists. At least in the West, their overall numbers are small

1 Catholicism in Canada: Church attendance. CBC News Online, October 2, 2003.
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/catholicism/churchattendance>

2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_the_United_States. They cite evidence from Religious Tolerance.org to support these figures, and also a 2006 Harris poll, which gave a figure of 26% weekly attendance. (Downloaded 3 March, 2007)

3 Bruce, S (2001) Christianity in Britain: RIP. *Sociology of religion*, 62, 32-46

4 Ward, K (2004) Is New Zealand's future churchless? Inaugural Lecture on 23 February, 2004, Knox College, Otago University, Dunedin.

(maybe 5% or so in most populations) and any growth is relatively modest.

What is perhaps surprising is the collapse of religion in most of the West is not more widely discussed and studied. Its implications for society are potentially profound. After all, religion has been a driver of Western society and history for centuries. Striking remnants of this legacy remain, as with the decision to invade Iraq by the religiously motivated George Bush and Tony Blair. Intellectuals like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett continue to attack organized religion. But as far as the West is concerned, it is a spent force, with the possible exception of the US, and there it seems to be in decline too. What is more interesting is what might be taking its place. This is what I believe we should be studying. However, it is a topic still largely neglected.

The default position for most social scientists who try to find reasons for the decline in religion has been something called 'secularization', usually ascribed to something vaguely called 'modernisation'. That is, with the general growth in materialism and consumerism in the West, and also the dominance of science and technology in providing 'meaning' in the world for many people, old-fashioned religion just does not cut it any more. This is also seen to have a social dimension, given that the church has provided 'community' and 'identity' to many in the past. For example, the decline in 'churched religion' has been allied to Robert Putnam's concept of a 'decline in social capital' – the overall loss of people participating in community and civic activities⁵. But recent writings suggest that these various explanations may not be the whole story, and indeed, could be off the mark in important respects.

⁵ Putnam, RD (2000) *Bowling alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster

For example, the term 'secularization' implies that people no longer have any religious or spiritual interest at all, and that we are all turning into materialists, atheists, agnostics, rationalists, humanists, etc, and away from God, supernatural beliefs, spirituality, and so on. But the current evidence is that this simply is not so. In the USA, although at least a fifth of the population do not go to church at all, and perhaps 60-80% do not attend with any regularity, polls show that over 90% of Americans still believe in God⁶. In New Zealand, where it seems that 93% of us do not go to a place of worship with any regularity, and that 45% claim no religious affiliation at all, research cited by the Presbyterian church⁷ showed that 65% of us still believe in God, and another 20% in some Higher Power – that is, 85% believe in Something of a divine or supernatural nature. The 2005 New Zealand Values Study⁸ showed that 61% of kiwis felt spirituality was more important than religion, and a 2007 TVNZ panel survey⁹ had 56% saying 'I see myself more as a spiritual person than a religious person'. (Only 16% said 'I see myself as a religious person').

What seems to be happening is that while people are rejecting 'old time religion' in the package served up to us over the past centuries – and in the largely Christian West, that has usually taken the form of 'going to church' – they are not necessarily rejecting religion or spirituality as such. Church is often seen as boring, and out of touch with people's real lives. Also, increasing democracy and self-determination mean that people no longer want to be told what to

⁶ Gallup, G (1999) *The next American spirituality: Finding God in the twenty-first century*. Colorado Springs: Victor

⁷ www.presbyterian.org.nz/3359.0.html

⁸ Rose, E, Huakau, J, Sweetsur, P and Casswell, S (2005) *Social values. A report from the New Zealand Values Study, 2005*. Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation & Te Ropu Whariki. Auckland: Massey University.

⁹ *Buzz the People Close Up* (TV1) Easter survey 2007.

do by priests and others, especially as many are seen as inept or even corrupt. (As I was writing this, I heard on the news that the Catholic Church in Los Angeles had just paid \$660m to 500 people relating to priestly sexual abuse). So, churches are out, but what is called 'the new spirituality' seems to be in. Indeed, the arrival of this 'new spirituality' is on such a scale, and so fast, that some are calling it a 'revolution'.

Is it a revolution? Although historically there have been signs of loss of the influence of traditional religion at least since the era of The Enlightenment in the 18th century, the really big decline in church-going in the West has been over the past 40 years, and most markedly over only the past 10 to 20 years. Given its speed and scale, this recent decline could probably be called 'revolutionary'. But what is probably more revolutionary is the huge growth in what is taking its place – what has been called 'the new spirituality'. Unfortunately, because this has largely been ignored by the powers that be, including most researchers, it is difficult at this stage to be too certain about the parameters of this, since it has not yet been sufficiently studied.

Some of the 'new spirituality' is simply people continuing a version of the existing religion outside the church, although as we have seen, most (at least in New Zealand) no longer want to be called 'religious'. Some of it is the adoption by the West of Eastern and other religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. (Islam is the fastest growing religion in the US, although this may be a reflection of migration rather than conversion. There are almost a million Euro-American Buddhist 'converts' in the US¹⁰, and in New Zealand, there are an estimated 15,000 Buddhists among non-migrant Kiwis

10 Fuller, RC (2001) *Spiritual but not religious: Understanding unchurched America*. New York: Oxford University Press

11). But mainly, it is neither of these things. Rather, it appears to be a broad array of different spiritual, holistic health, body, personal development, self-help, metaphysical, astrological, occult, and other items to which it is difficult to give a single all-encompassing label. These are sometimes referred to collectively as 'New Age' (possibly a reference to the astrological assertion that we are now in the Age of Aquarius), but most people engaged in these activities do not like or use this term themselves. The best I can come up with for the moment is 'alternative spirituality', or perhaps the 'body-mind-spirit' (BMS) sector.

Certainly, it is hard to overestimate the sheer power and force of the BMS sector from a commercial point of view. We are constantly told that we are quintessentially a consumer society, and there is no doubt that the BMS industry is thriving. Indeed, it assails us at every turn – in bookshops, in chemist shops, in supermarkets, in a myriad of specialty shops, and even in schools and doctors' surgeries. People like Oprah Winfrey are part of this whole new phenomenon, together with the gigantic self-help movement. In the US, in 2003 there were over 3,500 new self-help book titles, with the value of this industry in the US predicted to rise to \$12 billion by 2008¹². One American commentator says that bookstores such as Borders are now the most important centres of unchurched spirituality, and that they are 'the virtual synagogues of spiritual instruction'.¹³

This huge BMS beast seems largely to focus on personal wellbeing. Here, there are issues about whether this is a good thing – at least the old churches (at their best) had

11 Walker, V (2007) *The Buddha boom*. Canvas (New Zealand Weekend Herald magazine) July 21, 2007, 8-11

12 Salerno, S (2006) *SHAM: Self-Help and Actualization Movement: How the gurus of the self-help movement make us helpless*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey

13 Fuller (2001) *op cit*, p155

a strong orientation to the public good, and to doing one's duty to society and others. Now the focus is much more on me, and my welfare. This is not to say that this is the only form that the new spirituality takes. No doubt there are many who are choosing to take their own path to enlightenment and salvation, following 'serious' spiritual practices that require discipline and effort, but we still have yet to find out properly what is going on, especially in New Zealand. The presence of a strong sense of spirituality in the Maori world in Aotearoa is a major factor in making our own situation unique here. There are also other unique kiwi factors, like an historically low rate of church-going compared with other Western countries, and the overall 'newness' of New Zealand society in international terms.

Notwithstanding our relative lack of knowledge, it does seem that there is a major change going on in New Zealand and in Western society generally with regard to religion and spirituality. It may even be a revolution! It is hard to know where it will end, but my prediction is that for many decades, the spirituality sector will take the form of a very wide variety of self-determined activities and beliefs, and these are unlikely to be under the aegis of institutions like churches. Much of it is likely to be driven by what is available commercially and through the media and internet, which in turn drive the commercial dimension in a self-perpetuating cycle. In terms of its social dimensions, most of it is likely to take place on an individual basis, or in the context of small groups. Already, American research suggests that 40% of Americans meet in small groups to discuss important life issues, mainly religious and spiritual in nature (this includes both church and 'unchurched' groups), which inevitably are less formal and more personal than full-congregation events¹⁴. Many BMS activities

of the self-help, personal development and healing variety also take place in small groups. (This suggests that 'social capital' may not be disappearing in this sector – rather, it is taking on new forms).

There is no doubt that various gurus, popular movements and best-selling books will continue to attract large numbers and to influence the cultural trends in spirituality. The significant crowds that the Dalai Lama can reliably attract in New Zealand show that new bigger groupings could easily coalesce in the future – maybe even becoming new 'churches' of a sort.

The role of the internet and other new communication technologies could also influence the social and cultural dimension of what is going on. Internet chat groups, YouTube and other such phenomena are powerful mechanisms for the exchange of new ideas, forms of socialising and cultural trends. There is now the opportunity for rapidly forming global networks around spiritual ideas, and some of these could well survive over the years, and grow into cyber-institutions. In due course, I would not be surprised to see actual spiritualities emerge based on IT-type concepts, since spiritual traditions and religions have always reflected the cultural and technological zeitgeist in which they are embedded.

I hope I have said enough to show that religion and spirituality in Western society are undergoing radical and probably irreversible change. It is not rocket science to figure out that this is going to have an impact on migrants coming to Western countries. So I am going to spend the rest of this article on this aspect.

This is not an area to which I have yet given much thought, so what I say here are just a few ideas. But I think it is an important matter to address. Significant migration is a major fact of life in New Zealand, and will continue to be for many years. Migrants come from almost every possible cultural

¹⁴ Wuthnow, R (1996) *Sharing the journey: Support groups and America's new quest for a community*. London: The Free Press

background, including many from non-Western backgrounds. China and South Korea are among our biggest migration sources, and the rest of South East Asia, plus India, Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe all contribute significant numbers of new entrants to this country. Many of these are places where traditional religion is strong. Some of these, as in China and ex-Communist Europe, have been where religion was suppressed for a time, but where it is now undergoing a renaissance. Probably most of whatever growth there is in religions in New Zealand is largely attributable to migration. This is most evident for religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the modest growth in evangelical Christianity may also be partly fuelled by migration. (Although Christianity is in decline in the Western world, it is on the increase in other places, especially in Africa and China, with evangelical/pentecostal religions especially growing). But it is not only these 'new' sources of immigrants who have an impact on the New Zealand church-going scene. The Pacific continues to provide many migrants to New Zealand who are keen supporters of their churches. While Pacific Christian churches are theoretically similar to traditional churches in New Zealand, they tend to take on their own unique Pacific flavour. They appear much more highly regarded than their mainstream counterparts, and better attended, and have clearly played a central role in the success of Pacific migration to New Zealand. Consequently, they are likely to maintain or even grow their numbers for quite a while yet.

For many migrants, religion is a core source of cultural identity, and is taken very seriously. There is no doubt that in the stress of migration, many hold firmly to their religion of origin. At the same time, pressures from the mainstream culture can often run counter to the maintenance of traditional values and practices. In particular, there is often likely to be tension

between parents and their children around religious and spiritual matters, just as there is for traditional food¹⁵. The parents typically want to stay traditional; the kids typically just want to blend in with kiwi society. And just as the availability of fast foods and soft drinks can undermine healthy eating, it follows that the presence of the ubiquitous and highly marketed BMS sector in New Zealand, plus the overall decline of interest in conventional religion in the wider society, is going to pose new challenges for migrants.

Most research shows that the most successful migrants in terms of being happiest and most mentally healthy are those who get the balance right between their traditional culture and the new mainstream. One suspects that religion may well be a component of traditional culture that is very resistant to change. Striking the right balance between their traditional religion and the new world of spirituality they encounter in New Zealand will continue to be interesting for many migrants over the years to come, especially since it is not clear where the 'spirituality revolution' is actually going. One reaction could be to retreat into conservatism, and have a 'not change at any price' mentality. Another could be to continue to embrace the old systems, while allowing them to modify gradually in the light of present realities. The more successful Christian churches appear to be those who have bought into the BMS philosophy (of subjective wellbeing and valuing personal experience) to at least some extent. How the traditional religions of migrant groups are going to deal with these pressures remains to be seen. Certainly, the evidence is that although first generation migrants tend to be more religious than the people of the country to which they migrate, the second generation are less religious than their

¹⁵ Ferroughian, S (2006) From kebab and kufta to fish and chips. Masters thesis, University of Auckland.

parents.¹⁶ Much of what happens will hinge on how well the parent country is felt to accommodate the needs and culture of its new arrivals, and how well the migrants themselves do in terms of material and educational success in the new country. It is axiomatic that the happier people are, the less likely it is that there will be social and personal problems.

In the meantime, the current reality will prevail. The domestic mainstream religious scene will continue to morph into some new and as yet undetermined state, although the signs are that it will continue to be more self-determined and less institutionalised than ever. Migrants will continue to arrive in large numbers, bringing their own religions with them, often holding fast to them, at least initially. One can only reiterate the value that most of us hold for honouring diversity and difference. The way ahead for maximal wellbeing and success for the whole society is to ensure that everyone feels included, has an adequate income and housing, gains a good education, and basically feels that they are living in a just, safe and welcoming society. If any of these is in short supply, religion and every other cultural and social issue will suffer, and we could be in for deep trouble. So let us be committed to respecting and celebrating diversity, and to ensuring that this is a prosperous, participatory and equitable society where everyone benefits according to his or her own capacity. Religion is about the big issues of life (and death). What will happen in this domain in the future New Zealand is not certain. But we have to be aware of what is going on, and to acknowledge that religion and spirituality are issues which we have to take account along with all the other important matters that make up an increasingly 'rainbow' society like ours.

Dr John Raeburn is an Adjunct Professor, AUT University, has extensive experience in Mental Health, health promotion and community development and became a Companion of the Queen's Service Order for Community Service in the New Years Honours for 2006.

¹⁶ e.g. for Australia, see NCLS Research
<http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid+22>
93