

Not a Western story: the Christian faith and migrant communities in New Zealand

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If Christianity could have ever been called a Western religion, it is certainly not one now. Christianity was born in the Middle East; it reached Africa before it reached England. The vast majority of the world's Christians live in the two-thirds world, in Asia and Africa. When a Christian prays, she is most likely to speak in a language other than English.

It is rarely recognised that Christianity began in a similar pluralist social context to the New Zealand in the third millennium. The Christian voice was a distinct minority and remained so for many centuries. The relative peace that Christians in New Zealand experience is frankly more of a historical exception. Even today, most of the world's Christians endure significant persecution and suffering. The level of religious freedom that exists in New Zealand is unmatched by most countries in the world.

New Zealand's rapidly changing demography, with high levels of immigration from Asia in particular, is seen by some as a threat to Christianity in New Zealand. With the new immigrants comes new ways of seeing, doing and believing. It is hard to conceive that the recent Interfaith Dialogue or the Statement on Religious Diversity would have received the same level of mainstream media coverage or public discourse in the more homogeneous New Zealand society of fifty years ago. With a

diversifying population come a diversified number of religious beliefs.

Some definitional clarifications are needed up-front. While we generally use 'migrant' as a synonym for 'Asian', the majority of immigrants to New Zealand are still coming from the United Kingdom and that there remains a significant amount of movement between Australia and New Zealand. So when we talk of migrants to New Zealand, we need to remember to include our nearest neighbour and our colonial 'Mother Country'. The Pacific communities in New Zealand have also had strong ties with the church. 80% of Pacific peoples in New Zealand are Christian, according to the 2006 Census, and the church plays a central role in Pacific culture and life. With Pacific peoples being such an integral part of New Zealand culture now, we forget that thirty years ago they were the new migrants bringing their styles and culture to New Zealand.

The role that religion, in particular religious communities, plays in the settlement experiences of migrants is well canvassed in international and New Zealand literature.¹ In other Western countries, as in New Zealand, Christian churches, for example, are often non-denominational and are often open to migrants from many different social backgrounds and places of origin. Joining a faith community provides an immediate social network for many migrants and frequently gives migrants a place to belong and a new sense of 'family' and 'home', particularly where they have left those two things behind in another country. My own research has shown that churches play a very significant role in the pastoral care of international students in New Zealand.² Religious beliefs, like migrants' experiences, are transnational: they cross borders, are easily transportable and often access international as well as local and national networks.³

While there is recent significant growth in churches that cater specifically for migrant

groups (though these have always existed in one form or other; the Anglican Chinese Church in Wellington began in 1979), "European" churches also have significant ministries to particular migrant populations. Auckland Baptist Tabernacle, for example, has a large and highly successful ministry to international students.⁵ Christian groups in New Zealand have often seen the provision of support to migrant communities as part of their mission. Specific Christian ministries to migrant communities and international students have existed for many years in New Zealand. For example, OMF (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, formerly the China Inland Mission), which began in New Zealand the early 1890s, has a ministry to Chinese and Japanese diaspora in New Zealand; TSCF (Tertiary Students' Christian Fellowship),⁶ which began in 1937 in New Zealand, has a large ministry to international students at universities, while ISM (International Student Ministries)⁷ provides pastoral care to international students, works closely with education providers, particularly through university chaplaincies, and gives input into government research and policy.

In many respects, then, the Christian church plays a significant social role in the settlement of migrants. Though is this role any different to a role that might be played by a mosque or a synagogue? Is Christianity in New Zealand and amongst migrant communities more than just a social support network?

1 For example, see, Frank Pieke, *Community and Identity in the New Chinese Migration Order*, Centre of Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford, Working Paper No, 24, 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publications/Working%20papers/Frank%20Pieke%20WP0524.pdf>; Nyíri, Pál, *New Chinese Migrants in Europe: The Case of the Chinese Community in Hungary*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999; Macpherson, Cluny, *From Pacific Islanders to Pacific People and Beyond* in P. Spoonley, C. MacPherson and D. Pearson (eds) *Tangata Tangata: The Changing Ethnic Contours of New Zealand*. South Bank, Thomson: 135-56, 2005; Clive Pearson (ed) *Doing theology in Oceania: partners in dialogue*. Proceedings of the Theology in Oceania conference, Dunedin, 17-21 September, 2000 Dunedin, Centre for Contextual Theology, Knox College. For a full annotated bibliography see Neil Darragh, *Theology in Aotearoa New Zealand An Annotated Bibliography under Subject Headings* <http://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/2292/447/1/ANZ-AnnotBib-07.pdf>, 2007

2 Butcher, A., Lim, L-H., McGrath, T., & Revis, L. (2002) *Nga Tangata: Partnership in Providing Services to International Students*. Auckland, Asia Pacific Migration Research Network; McGrath, T.M., & Butcher, A. (2004), *Campus-Community Linkages in the Pastoral Care of International Students with specific reference to Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch*, for the Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand.

3 see Pieke, 2004

4 Stephen Young, 'Politics and Culture' retrieved from <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/politics/politicsandculture.htm>

5 www.tabernacle.org.nz

6 www.tscf.org.nz

7 www.ism.org.nz

The statistics

A look at some figures is instructive here. The latest Census data illustrates an overall decline in the number of people identifying themselves as Christian, from 60.6 percent in 2001 to fewer than 50 percent in 2006. While the traditional Christian denominations decreased (Anglican and Presbyterian) or grew only slightly (Catholics and Methodists), there were significant increases for those affiliating with 'Orthodox'; 'Evangelical', 'Born Again' and 'Fundamentalist'; and 'Pentecostal' religions.⁸ 'Pentecostals' are estimated about 10 percent of nominal Christians, 30 percent of churchgoers, and 3.5 percent of the total population.⁹ By 2011, data suggest, Christians will be a significant minority in New Zealand. Even the current Census figures don't show what percentage of Christians regularly attend church, which can be charitably estimated to be at about 8-10 percent, which does not include those who make an annual church visit at Christmas time.¹⁰

The Census data goes on to show that there has also been an increase in other religions, which is attributed to the increase in migrants from Asia. Notably Chinese migrants identify as having 'no religion' though are often inclined to find religion in New Zealand. There were significant increases in the Sikh religion, Hinduism and Islam, with the vast majority of those who identified themselves in one of these categories born overseas and in Asia. Of Hindus and Muslims, almost half arrived in

New Zealand in the last five years. European New Zealanders and New Zealanders were most likely to state they had no religion at 37.7 percent and 37.6 percent each.¹¹

Of those who identified themselves as Asian, there was an increase of those who identified themselves as Christian from 66,390 in 2001 to 97,809 in 2006.¹² Proportionately, Asians were 4.8% of total Christians in 2006, which was an increase from 3.2% of total Christians in 2001. Compare that to an overall decrease in the number of Christians from 2001 to 2006.¹³

So while the overall Christian population in New Zealand is decreasing, that cannot be attributed entirely to new migrant populations. While the new migrant population is clearly responsible for the increases in other religions, the decrease in Christianity in New Zealand may also be the result of problems of attrition and/or retention amongst New Zealand's non-migrant Christian communities and an increasing number of skeptical European New Zealanders who would state they belong to no religion. We could also infer that the growth in the 'Orthodox', 'Evangelical' and 'Pentecostal' denominations is the result of new migrant populations inasmuch as it can be attributed to 'natural' growth or changing denominations amongst New Zealand Christians.

⁸ What the Census refers to as 'religion' in this context might be better described as 'denomination'.

⁹ Peter Lineham, 'Wanna be in my gang?' New Zealand Listener, 195, 3357, Sep 11-17, 2004, retrieved from http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3357/features/2554/wanna_be_in_my_gang

¹⁰ Dennis Welch, 'Jingle Tills' New Zealand Listener, 206, 3476, Dec 23-29, 2006 retrieved from http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3476/features/7758/jingle_tills.html?sessionid=4597DCC68AA6BC57B40B35522E9C11AB

¹¹ Statistics New Zealand, Quick Stats about Culture and Identity, 2006 Census, retrieved from <http://www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/5F1F873C-5D36-4E54-9405-34503A2C0AF6/0/quickstatsaboutcultureandidentity.pdf>

¹² Tables on culture and identity from the 2006 Census, retrieved from <http://www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/F1A5AEF5-198F-4F42-8B86-51419FBA82E3/18595/2006CensusQSCI.xls>

¹³ Tables on culture and identity from the 2001 Census, retrieved from <http://www.stats.govt.nz/NR/rdonlyres/226BAFE2-4B1C-4A84-A2E9-B6D2E3FDB4AA/0/CulturalTable16.xls>

The statistics then would suggest that the reading of migration threatening Christianity in New Zealand is not that simple. Furthermore, these statistics are not unique. Other Western countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom and Germany, are all facing declining church attendance (albeit to different degrees), while in other parts of the world, including the Republic of Korea and China, the Christian church is growing, though is far from a majority religion in these or similar countries.

The stories

However, using Census data remains a very rough guide to measuring Christianity in New Zealand. Statistics are very limiting when trying to gauge the everyday experiences of believers and for that reason we need to be careful that we interpret these data with great care. By the same token, we have to be careful that we don't take the 'public' faces of Christianity in New Zealand and make them representative of all New Zealand Christians. Christians, while confessing the same beliefs, nevertheless practice their faith in very different ways, depending on their context and their culture. The practice of Christianity in many Western churches is far removed from how it was practiced in the first century world amongst its first believers, who themselves practiced it within their particular contexts.

For that reason, any discussion about the Christian faith in New Zealand needs to do more than just sociological analysis; recognition of the Christian theology that underpins the work of the Christian church is also warranted. In particular, the Christian faith makes claims about its uniqueness so that while it may be practiced within a pluralist society, it would not extend to saying that other faith traditions or religious beliefs outside Christian theology are equally efficacious in spiritual or theological terms.

Christian theology confesses particular things about the God who created the world, became incarnate in Jesus Christ, and continues to work in the world in redeeming and restoring it.

There is no doubt that New Zealand's increasingly diverse society is changing how Christianity in New Zealand is practiced. It is this diverse culture, with its bi-cultural foundations; its strong Pacific elements, particularly demonstrated in Pacific people's dedication to their church; and New Zealand's growing Asian population, which makes Christianity in New Zealand unique. A journey New Zealand religious historian Peter Lineham takes down Chapel Road in Auckland conveys this well:

Flatbush has suddenly sprung up in the last five years as an overflow from the huge growth of new housing in the Howick area, primarily accommodating Asian people. The little chapel [that gave Chapel Road its name] still stands, now a joint Anglican-Methodist church half way down the road that takes its name from it, but at the other end is the exotic Botany Downs shopping centre, a Truman-Show like phenomenon, looking like it has dropped as a unit from the sky, a whole plastic town centre modelled on traditional towns. The central focus of Chapel Road is the enormous, almost completed Buddhist Temple. On the other side of the road is a new co-educational Catholic School, reflecting a huge boom in Catholic education and in baptisms into the Catholic Church by Asians concerned at the violent tone of New Zealand. Other sites down the road have been purchased by Baptist churches, and doubtless the fine facilities of the new secular high school are rented out to a Pentecostal Church group on Sundays. It is boom time in Flat Bush and religion is booming there as well, but not in the little chapel. There is a plan for Anglicans and Methodists to build a big new church, but they are struggling to find the money. Meanwhile the Presbyterians have made a separate move. Their old Pakuranga

congregation, famous for its evangelical and conservative tradition, has rebuilt just around the corner from Chapel Street and have attracted a large congregation including many Asian people with a formula that has something of the Pentecostal flavour mixed in.¹⁴

It is then in these images, the stories of its diverse believers, and the support of Christian communities that we can see what the Christian faith in New Zealand is all about. Theologically, Christianity is open to all, whatever colour or creed. To be sure, Christian theology invites that certain confessions be made about a God who creates, redeems and gives life. But it does not demand that believers are white, male and speak English. Christianity is not, after all, a Western religion.

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¹⁴ Peter Lineham, 'Among the believers', Massey News, April 2005, retrieved from http://masseynews.massey.ac.nz/magazine/2005_Apr/stories/thoughts-1.html

