

# Atheism and religious diversity

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Efforts to develop understanding and cooperation in New Zealand are concentrating on ethnic and religious groups. The third of the population with non-religious beliefs are mostly ignored and this undermines true acceptance of diversity. We need to widen our horizons beyond the “Interfaith” approach if we are to address problems underlying suspicion and conflict between people of different beliefs.

## Introduction

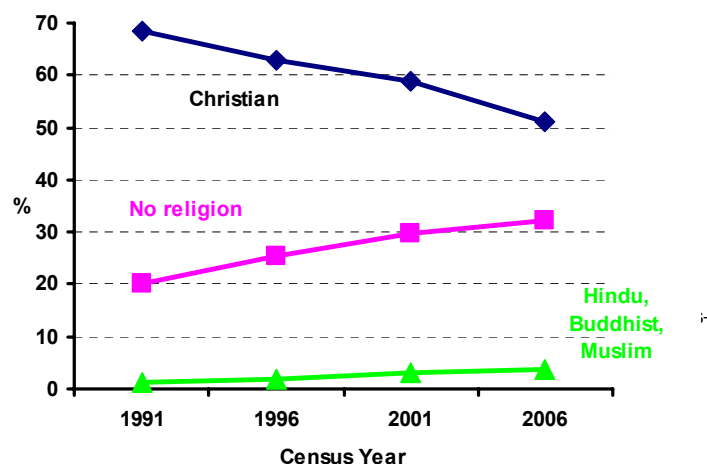
In the 2006 Census about 51% of New Zealanders described themselves as Christian, a total of 3.8% as Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim (the next three largest religions) and 32% declared no religion. <sup>1</sup> This data doesn't accurately describe individual beliefs. For instance, some people declaring no religion may still believe in a god. Similarly there will be people declaring a religion who don't believe in a god. For many, if not most, people religion is an inherited tradition rather than describing a belief. However, the trends over time shown by census results do suggest beliefs are changing in New Zealand (Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>, as they are internationally<sup>3</sup>.

Any true depiction of New Zealand's diversity has to include a large group of non-religious people and recognise a large (even if a minority) group with non-religious beliefs. Otherwise we may be unaware of many problems and tensions arising from our diversity. We also risk supporting customs and policies that undermine true cooperation

<sup>1</sup> New Zealand Census, 2006. (<http://www.staffaffiliation.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> New Zealand Census, 2006 plus 1991 – 2001

<sup>3</sup> See for example Gregory Paul & Phil Zucker (<http://www.edge.org/documents/archive>)



**Figure 1:** Proportion of New Zealanders declaring specific religions in last four census dates (Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim combined for ease of presentation).

between those of different ethnicity and belief in New Zealand.

Yet, non-religious beliefs are often ignored. The National Statement on Religious Diversity<sup>4</sup> is an example. A working group comprised of only religious people managed its discussion and an “Interfaith” Forum formally confirmed it. Yes, the resulting document does extend some of the rights it grants religious people to those with other beliefs, but only as an “extra.” There was no extension of rights to safety and security (clause 3), recognition and accommodation in education and work environments (clause 5), and to building and maintaining relationships with government (clause 8). The document would have been more convincing, and (more importantly) the discussion more valuable if it had dealt with diversity of belief, rather than the subset religious diversity. I believe the Human Rights Commission is wrong to give “Interfaith” groups such an exclusive role on diversity questions. As a secular organisation charged with duties to the nation as a whole the Commission should ensure involvement of representative of all beliefs.

## Why exclude the non-religious?

I can't help feeling some people actively encourage blindness toward, and exclusion of, non-religious beliefs out of intolerance towards atheists and their ideas. Recently, there has been an increase in debate between atheists and theists, particularly in Europe and the North America. This is obvious in the publication of books arguing the case for atheism<sup>5</sup> which have become best-sellers. They have encouraged many atheists to “come out of the cupboard” and argue for their beliefs, to defend them when attacked and to challenge those of many theists.

Religious commentators have responded. Such debate is natural and we should encourage it, even if it is sometimes intemperate. However, I often find resistance to atheist involvement in presentations on religious diversity. Sometimes there are even attempts to deny the legitimacy of an atheist position. Perhaps this helps explain the common exclusion of non-religious beliefs when considering ethnic and belief diversity.

This non-inclusive approach doesn't help us deal with problems arising from our diversity. After all, atheists, non-theists and theists alike can be victims, or perpetrators, of hate crimes and acts of terrorism. I believe that this exclusion could arise from a lack of understanding, or even a fear of atheist beliefs. Possibly this is common among religious people, and may even result from lack of contact with atheists. However, I think these attitudes are wrong. Looked at dispassionately we would find that people of religious and non-religious belief have a lot in common. Perhaps I can show this by describing some common atheist beliefs, ones that are familiar to me.

## A personal perspective

The words atheism and theism are limited descriptions of beliefs as they only define one small aspect – non-belief or belief in a god (Fig. 2). Personal beliefs are of course much more extensive than that – they include this but are not defined by it. So, we cannot characterise or understand the beliefs of all “atheists” by that word alone. I can only give my own perspective, although I believe that many non-theists hold similar beliefs. My beliefs have a strong philosophical alignment with the scientific motivation and method.

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4 National Statement on Religious Diversity in New Zealand ([http://openparachute.files.wordpress.com/2007/06/25-may-2007\\_08-24-50\\_nsrld\\_booklet.pdf](http://openparachute.files.wordpress.com/2007/06/25-may-2007_08-24-50_nsrld_booklet.pdf)).

5 See, for example, Daniel C. Dennett (2006): *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*; Sam Harris (2005): *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, and (2006): *Letter to a Christian Nation*; Richard Dawkins (2006): *The God Delusion*; Christopher Hitchens (2007): *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

Emotionally and spiritually there is a powerful sense of awe at the beauty and complexity of the natural world and our process of understanding it. This stretches from subatomic particles to the cosmos itself. They include an appreciation also of the beauty of humanity's cultural and artistic achievements and a strong appreciation of personal and social values and morals. I discuss these further below.

## The Nature of Belief

Our beliefs about our world vary widely – they can't all be right. Of course, science uses methods to ensure that its theories correspond well to reality and so there is a high degree of agreement about scientific theories. But in practice most of us get by with less exact procedures. The scientific method involves interacting with the world to collect data and using these to build a hypothesis – a model describing the aspect under investigation. From this model we can develop experiments, or search for more data, which will test predictions resulting from the model (to be scientific the hypothesis must be testable). We then accept the model, reject it or change it to agree with the new data. The resulting scientific theory is dynamic, continually being changed or replaced as we collect new data. It is self-correcting. Some people might find this unsatisfactory; preferring to have the comfort of a belief which they feel is “absolutely true”. But while our scientific knowledge gives only an imperfect picture of reality, with time, with more data and experiment, this picture does become more accurate. So we can become so confident of a theory that we may express it as a “law” - for example the thermodynamic laws or evolution. The scientific method is a powerful way of understanding the world as shown by the progress in knowledge and technology it has driven.

We can contrast this with a method which involves starting with a reconceived (or “revealed”) model. We then try to interpret the world according to this model. Any “testing” of the model usually involves selection of data or evidence which accords with our preconceived ideas and ignoring, or reinterpreting, evidence which doesn't accord. This is the way a drunk uses a lamppost – more for support than illumination (Fig. 3). These beliefs may be comforting to the holder as they appear absolute and permanent. However, they are hardly likely to agree with reality, being in essence insulated from reality.

It is tempting to identify the later method with religion and to contrast religious and scientific approaches to knowledge but this would be unkind to most religious believers. In practice we usually acquire our personal beliefs by a mixture of these two methods. In fact, recent investigations suggest the human brain is more comfortable with the later method of interpreting the world. The human brain appears to use preconceived ideas, or maps, to interpret incoming information – we often see more with our brain than with our eyes.<sup>6</sup> This may have evolved as an efficient (if sometimes misleading) way of dealing with our perceptions.

Scientists are human and are not immune to, unconsciously, selecting or interpreting data to support, rather than test, their favourite theory. Fortunately, the scientific method (including statistical analysis of data) and publication procedure help to overcome this and prevent promulgation of discredited theories, at least for long. Also, while many religions have “revealed truths”, in practice most modern adherents have adjusted their beliefs to accommodate scientific discovery and select which parts of historical dogma to keep or reject. However, the willingness to accept scientific knowledge over “revealed” knowledge varies. Attitudes towards evolution are a current example. The conflict between science and religion usually results from these two different ways of gaining knowledge, the scientific method and the “revealed” method.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Shermer gives a very convincing demonstration of the power of pre-conceived ideas in his video “Why People Believe Strange Things”(http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/22)

## Conflict Between Science and Religion?

Some people claim science and religion deal with different spheres of knowledge; they each have their own role and therefore can coexist peacefully. And indeed they do, often within the same person. Many scientists have a personal religion and many (perhaps most) religious people accept scientific knowledge. Sometimes this is because the religious beliefs are no longer those old ones which conflicted with scientific knowledge. But many people are able to hold concurrent beliefs which are not consistent. The physicist Stephen Weinberg mentions meeting an oil man who believed in creation of the earth 6000 years ago. At the same time he held scientific beliefs about the far greater age of the earth which enabled him to explore for and discover oil!<sup>7</sup> I think this is possible because of the emotional commitment that many people have to one or another belief, particularly a religious belief.

## Intrusion into each others' spheres

However, any apparent peaceful coexistence cannot be permanent because there is no lasting agreement on spheres of influence. There are some obvious examples of the science/religion conflict today. On the one hand, some religious believers take their beliefs into the scientific sphere. They make powerful and well financed political challenges to reliable scientific knowledge such as evolution or the age of the earth. They try to replace scientifically obtained knowledge with a "revealed" knowledge, thereby undermining the scientific method itself. Around the world today some religious groups demand incorporation of unscientific creationist myths into national science education curricula.

On the other hand humanity does not restrict its investigations (Fig. 4). Today evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists are investigating human values and morals, often claimed by religions as its sphere of influence. Neuroscientists are making exciting new discoveries about human consciousness. One could say that humanity is trying to understand the human "soul". In its investigation of the fundamental nature of reality science is even asking the "why" questions – questions which are sometimes claimed to be in the exclusively religious domain.

I think it unavoidable that this challenge between science and religion will continue because of the nature of these two systems. Inherent in science is the concept of a reality existing independently of our consciousness. A reality capable of interaction and therefore with an internal logic which, in principle, can be perceived and understood. This means that we can study everything; the so-called "supernatural" is just that which we don't yet understand.

While religion continues to make claims about the cosmos, consciousness and human nature it puts these in the realm of science and inevitably exposes them to the possibilities of investigation. These claims cannot be "ring-fenced" or "walled-off". Similarly, investigation of the evolutionary, social and neurological basis of values, morality and ethics brings science into areas actively debated by all of society. This requires open-mindedness, humility and a respectful attitude towards less scientifically informed sections of society.

We just have to accept this ideological conflict and have the debate, because, of course the debate will continue. And we know that it is possible to do this politely and with respect. After all, this goes on all the time within science between adherents of different views and that is how we make progress. If this debate is honest it can only benefit both sides in developing their ideas as no real living knowledge is static. The

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<sup>7</sup> See presentation at Beyond Belief 2006 Conference (<http://beyondbelief2006.org/>)

continuing discussion between western scientists and Tibetan Buddhists, led by the Dalai Lama<sup>8</sup>, are an example of what this debate can achieve.

## Treading on toes – religious sensibility

The sensitivity to criticism of belief is a key issue for prospects of cooperation between people of different ethnicity and belief. Rudeness undermines cooperation but lack of debate and criticism is a false cooperation and limits progress. I think that religious believers often take offence at any criticism of their ideas. As Richard Dawkins says, most people assume that “religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect”.<sup>9</sup> Religion receives a privilege not granted to other beliefs such as those of politics, sport, science or atheism. And this attitude towards criticism of religion is common among the non-religious as well as the religious.<sup>10</sup>

Debate and criticism are essential ingredients to the search for knowledge which is more important than the offence some religious people may take from this knowledge. Charles Darwin held off publication of *On the Origin of Species* for many years because he knew it would offend religious people <sup>11</sup> and recent correspondence also reveals religious pressure on his publishers to prevent publication. <sup>12</sup> But, benefits from evolution theory have been far more important to humanity than the offence taken by some religious people.

## Values, morals, spirituality

Some theists claim their god, and their holy scriptures, as the source of all human values. This argument is often used to justify claiming New Zealand as a Christian country. <sup>13</sup> As a non-theist I find these claims insulting because they imply that personal values require a belief in a god; that atheists cannot be moral. Another common claim is that non-theists are somehow (unconsciously) adopting theist beliefs to produce their values. Christopher Hitchens points out that this attitude is an insult to humanity in his comment on the Old Testament Ten Commandments: “.. however little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft, and perjury were permissible. <sup>14</sup>

Religions and religious teachings have served as a way of proclaiming and teaching values and morals. They have also done this with ideas of social arrangements, laws and myths of origin. This can explain why religion has been such a part of human social evolution. The stories, mythology, commandments and traditions of religious scriptures have helped to pass on and to gain compliance with these ideas when the advantages of modern education and mass communication were not available. However, religions were not the source of these ideas. They resulted from social and historical needs, from human interaction and from human evolution. The work of evolutionary psychologists is helping explain the real source of our values and morals.

So our values and morals have natural, rather than supernatural, origins and we proclaim and teach them using social and secular ways as well as religions. They are common to people of all beliefs. This viewpoint

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example Daniel Goleman (2004): *Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama*.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Dawkins (2006): *The God Delusion*

<sup>10</sup> See for example an atheist review of *The God Delusion* (NZ Listener, Vol 207 No 3485, 2007: No Doubt by David Larsen)

<sup>11</sup> Charles Darwin (1859): *On the origin of Species*, Introduction.

<sup>12</sup> Times Online, April 25, 2007 ([http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article1701409.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1701409.ece))

<sup>13</sup> See “Your Views” New Zealand Herald: ([http://www.nzherald.co.nz/feature/story.cfm?c\\_id=1501154&objectid=10443080](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/feature/story.cfm?c_id=1501154&objectid=10443080)).

<sup>14</sup> ; Christopher Hitchens (2007): *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

is important because it provides grounds for cooperation, despite our diversity. It also excludes any ground some religious believers have for thinking that cooperation with non-theists is impossible. There is no basis for theists to fear cooperation with non-theists.

## “Interfaith” limits?

There are several “Interfaith” organisations in New Zealand, and groups in other countries use the same term. As these have been given a central role in consideration of New Zealand’s diversity I believe it is important to evaluate the fitness of these organisations for this role.

These are usually umbrella groups containing representatives of organised religions. But why should groups intending to promote cooperation between peoples of widely different beliefs limit themselves in this way? I guess they use the word “faith” as a synonym for “religion” which usually includes belief in a god. But this belief is not necessary for Buddhists, who the “Interfaith” groups include. So we may ask, if these groups already contain such a wide diversity of belief why exclude non-religious organisations? And how do we define religious or “faith” organisations, anyway?

So again we have this problem of ignoring a large section of the community. Why is religious plurality limited to plurality of religious organisations, or a plurality of ways in believing in a god? Too often diversity of belief is similarly restricted. Such limits are a major hindrance to developing true cooperation between people’s of different ethnicity and beliefs. Surely religious diversity also includes those beliefs which are not religious. We could take a lesson from Norway where the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities, equivalent to our “Interfaith” groups, includes Humanists in its organisation. Similarly, the United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief includes people of different beliefs, including the President Matt Cherry who is a Humanist. This committee oversees international treaties on freedom of religion and belief. Such an inclusive approach to religious diversity would be more consistent with our own human rights legislation which recognises international treaties and is therefore careful not to raise religious belief over non-religious belief. In this sense the National Statement on Religious Diversity is not as inclusive as existing New Zealand legislation! If we aim to build understanding, tolerance and respect for each other’s beliefs we have to move away from this current arbitrary and exclusive idea of belief and cooperation.

## Common values – common action

Cooperation requires respect and tolerance. However, respect and tolerance shouldn’t violate the rights of others or prevent humanity’s search for understanding and knowledge. In the following I quote dictionary definitions. We need tolerance in the sense of “acceptance of the differing views of other people .... in religious or political matters, and fairness towards the people who hold these different views.” But not tolerance in the sense of “putting up with something or somebody irritating or otherwise unpleasant” - this violates the rights of others. Similarly, respect in the sense of “consideration or thoughtfulness” to people is acceptable but not in the sense of “admiring or being deferential” to something we personally find absurd, or of preventing or limiting healthy debate. With these understandings, “religious diversity” includes people with non-religious beliefs and freedom of religion must include freedom from religion. Non-religious people have the right to be free from interference by religious people and organisations, freedom from proselytising, and freedom from imposition of values, morality and practice. I don’t think religious people should see this as in any way violating their rights. If anything, it helps preserve the sacredness of their beliefs –imposition on others degrades a belief.

Fortunately, impositions of religious customs and traditions in New Zealand have declined with the increasing secularisation of society. There are still some residues such as the national anthem assuming a belief in a god, and Christian prayers in Parliament and some local body council. Similarly, Christians sometimes impose prayers inappropriately in work and other social situations. I believe this is insulting to people of different beliefs. Of course, removal of these residues is a continuing process, although the recent debates over parliamentary prayers and the concept of a Christian nation, and the current campaign to legislate this,<sup>15</sup> suggest that it is not irreversible. I think we should also challenge incorporation of Christian prayers into ceremonies based on Maori customs, such as powhiri and karakia, which we use today in secular situations. These can offend New Zealanders who otherwise accept these ceremonies. Yet objection is difficult because this can be taken as cultural intolerance rather than a request for respect of other beliefs.

## Conclusion

As a nation our values morals and ethics precede any religious belief (theist, non-theist or atheist). This gives us common interests and enables us to act together to overcome any problems arising from our cultural and religious diversity.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example the Destiny Church's Christian Nation website (<http://www.christiannation.org.nz/>)

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