

NEW ZEALAND: THE MOST SECULAR STATE IN THE WORLD?

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NEW ZEALAND has been described as the most secular state in the world. Evidence of this secularism lies in such recent events as the introduction of Sunday racing and Sunday shopping, and in the latest census returns, which show a large increase in those declaring 'no religious affiliation'.

More broadly, the current reshaping of New Zealanders' values seems to many to disregard Christian values foundational for New Zealand society.

But is this impression of radical secularism correct? One way of assessing this is to compare New Zea-

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landers' religious behaviour and attitudes towards religion with those of people in other countries with a shared heritage. Two such countries are Great Britain and the United States of America.

We are enabled to explore this issue by means of the 1991 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), directed in New Zealand by the Department of Marketing at Massey University. The ISSP involves 18 countries in an annual survey of a topic of social interest, using the same questionnaire in each country. In 1991 the topic was religion.

New Zealand and Great Britain NOT SURPRISINGLY, given the history of British settlement and gov-

ernment in New Zealand, religious beliefs in New Zealand and Great Britain are very similar (see Table).

Belief in heaven, hell, and religious miracles are equally prevalent in the two countries, though both confident belief in God and a personal religious turning-point in life are more common in New Zealand than in Great Britain.

The practice of prayer is also similar in the two countries, with nearly two-thirds of respondents in both countries praying at least once a year, and just over a quarter praying at least once a week.

In contrast to these broadly comparable results are widely divergent attitudes towards daily prayers in state schools.

While 43% of New Zealanders favour prayers in schools, this falls far short of the 72% who favour them in Britain. Does this contrast reflect a marked difference in perceptions about the role of religion in the two countries, or does it merely reflect respondents' own experience of schooling in their respective countries?

This result, together with the latest census returns (which show that many 'nominal' Christians in New Zealand are now becoming ready to declare 'no religious allegiance') suggests that the secular spirit of New Zealand society compared to Great Britain may lie less in the relative prevalence of belief than in a heightened perception of belief and non-belief as options between which indi-

viduals must make a personal choice.

Another contrast lies in respondents' appraisal of the power of churches. The view that the churches hold too much power is almost twice as common in Great Britain (28%) as in New Zealand (15%). Perhaps this reflects the established status of the Church of England, which has bishops sitting in the Upper Chamber of Parliament.

Confidence in the churches is slightly greater in New Zealand than in Great Britain. This is in dramatic contrast to levels of confidence in parliament and government departments: in these New Zealanders place only half the confidence of their British counterparts.

New Zealand and the USA

WHILE IN MANY respects religious patterns in New Zealand and Great

Britain are comparable, those in the United States show some striking divergencies. In fact, on all measures of religiosity, the United States scores more highly than New Zealand.

Thus, compared to a New Zealander, an American is rather more likely to believe in heaven, hell or religious miracles, and is twice as likely to have confident belief in God or to pray at least weekly.

The biggest contrast between the United States and New Zealand is found in attitudes to the Bible. Belief that the Bible is the literal word of God is three times as common in the United States: a belief held by one third of the population.

This is important because it bears closely upon on what it *means* to 'believe in God'. How far does belief properly equate with conforming to specified doctrines and codes of be-

haviour, and how far with reflective, creative life in personal relationship to God and to other human beings? And how far can these be separated?

This is the stuff of theology; it also bears closely upon what is properly meant by a 'secular' society.

An American visitor recently remarked that his home country was far more 'secular' than New Zealand! By implication, perhaps New Zealand's secularism is not so much spiritual impoverishment as social conformity to popular secularist doctrines and codes of behaviour.

Conclusion

BY CONVENTIONAL criteria, religiosity in New Zealand is broadly comparable with that in Great Britain, but significantly lower than in the United States. However, unre-

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solved issues surround the notion of 'secularism'.

New Zealanders may be more secular than the British in their view of belief as a private choice. The same may be true also of Americans (judging by their attitudes to prayers in schools). Indeed, we have suggested the apparently paradoxical possibility that high religiosity among Americans may not preclude strong secularism.

So while there is good reason to describe New Zealand as a secular state, it would seem premature (at least on the basis of this present study) to describe it as the most secular state in the world.

Religious Beliefs and Behaviour in New Zealand, Great Britain and the United States

Belief or Behaviour	% Affirming		
	New Zealand	Great Britain	United States
Confident belief in God	29	24	64
Made new religious commitment	27	17	47
Believe in heaven	55	54	82
Believe in hell	32	29	68
Believe in religious miracles	44	45	68
Believe Bible is literal word of God	9	7	34
Support daily prayers in state schools	43	72	56
How often do you pray?			
At least once a week	26	28	59
At least once a year (cumulative)	63	63	50
Describe self as religious	39	44	50
Politicians who don't believe in God are unfit for office	12	9	40

	New Zealand	Great Britain	United States
Religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections	71	74	63
Religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions	57	61	50
Churches and religious organisations have too much power	15	28	23
There is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally	41	37	71
Should books and films that attack religions be prohibited by law?	23	31	29
Have confidence in			
Parliament	34	66	73
Government departments	36	65	67
Churches & religious organisations	66	59	81
Courts and legal system	70	71	73
Schools and the educational system	72	68	83
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>1000</i>	<i>1200</i>	<i>800</i>